

The festive oratory at Valdocco

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: "He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: "One day... he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, on the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts,

eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind."

Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: "the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall... a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered... As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph's chapel. And again: "This courtyard was of a beautiful length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotta, sack races and a game called pignatte were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe."

Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis' sermon. By now an old man, "Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation... The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation." The solemn feasts ended with a procession and a snack for all: "On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork." Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d'appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was "a small, low room that could hold about twenty people...In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday."

Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella "almost all 'bic', that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings." Others were "apprentice bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths." Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation "at Don Bosco's" (as his

oratory was called): “We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanese [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment.”

Pietro Pons’ memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.

Visit to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome (also in 3D)

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome is a prominent church for the city, located in the Castro Pretorio district, on Via Marsala, across the street from Termini Station. It serves as both a parish church and a cardinal title, with the Central Headquarters of the Salesian Congregation adjacent to it. Its patronal feast is celebrated on the solemnity of the Sacred Heart. Its proximity to Termini makes it a visible landmark for those arriving in the city, with the gilded statue on the bell tower standing out on the horizon as a symbol of blessing for residents and travellers alike.

Origins and History

The idea of building a church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus dates back to Pope Pius IX, who laid the first stone in 1870 for a building initially intended to honour St Joseph. However, by 1871, the pontiff decided to dedicate the new church to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was the second major

church dedicated to the Sacred Heart after the one in Lisbon, Portugal, begun in 1779 and consecrated in 1789, and predating the famous *Sacré-Cœur* in Montmartre, Paris, France, which was started in 1875 and consecrated in 1919.

Construction began under difficult circumstances: with Rome's annexation to the Kingdom of Italy (1870), work halted due to lack of funds. It was only through the intervention of St John Bosco, at the Pope's invitation, that construction definitively resumed in 1880, thanks to his tireless efforts to collect donations across Europe and gather resources for the building's completion. The architect commissioned was Francesco Vespignani, then "Architect of the Sacred Palaces" under Leo XIII, who saw the project through. The consecration took place on 14 May 1887, marking the end of the first construction phase.

From its inception, the church has served a parish function: the parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio was established on 2 February 1879 by the vicarial decree "*Postremis hisce temporibus*". Later, Pope Benedict XV elevated it to the dignity of a minor basilica on 11 February 1921, with the apostolic letter "*Pia societas*". More recently, on 5 February 1965, Pope Paul VI established the cardinal title of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio. Among its titular cardinals are Maximilien de Fürstenberg (1967–1988), Giovanni Saldarini (1991–2011), and Giuseppe Versaldi (from 2012 to the present). The cardinal title strengthens the basilica's ties to the papal Curia, helping to maintain focus on the importance of devotion to the Sacred Heart and Salesian spirituality.

Architecture

The façade is in the Neo-Renaissance style, with sober lines and balanced proportions typical of Renaissance revival in late 19th-century ecclesiastical architecture. The bell tower, conceived in Vespignani's original design, remained incomplete until 1931, when the imposing gilded statue of the Sacred

Heart blessing was placed atop it, donated by Salesian alumni in Argentina. Visible from afar, it serves as an identifying feature of the basilica and a symbol of welcome for those arriving in Rome via the nearby railway station.

The interior follows a Latin cross plan with three naves, separated by eight columns and two grey granite pillars supporting round arches, and includes a transept and central dome. The central nave and side aisles are covered with coffered ceilings, decorated with lacunae in the central register. The proportions are harmonious. The central nave's width of approximately 14 metres and length of 70 metres create a solemn spaciousness, while the granite columns, with their pronounced veining, lend an air of solid grandeur.

The central dome, visible from the interior with its frescoes and lacunae, draws in natural light through base windows and adds verticality to the liturgical space. The side chapels house paintings by the Roman artist Andrea Cherubini, featuring devotional scenes in keeping with the dedication to the Sacred Heart.

Beyond Cherubini's paintings, the basilica preserves various sacred artworks: wooden or marble statues depicting the Virgin Mary, patron saints of the Salesian Congregation, and charismatic figures like St John Bosco.

The Rooms of St John Bosco in Rome

A site of great historical and devotional value is the "Little Rooms of Don Bosco" at the rear of the basilica, where St John Bosco stayed during nine of his twenty visits to Rome. Originally two separate rooms—a study and a bedroom with a portable altar—they were later combined to accommodate pilgrims and prayer groups, forming a living memorial to the founder of the Salesians. Personal items and relics recalling miracles attributed to the saint during that period are preserved here. This space was recently renovated and continues to attract pilgrims, inspiring reflection on Bosco's spirituality and dedication to young people.

The basilica and adjacent buildings are owned by the Salesian Congregation, which has made it one of its key centres in Rome. Since Don Bosco's time, the building next to the church housed the Salesian community and later became home to schools, oratories, and youth services. Today, alongside liturgical activities, the complex hosts significant work with migrants and disadvantaged youth. Since 2017, it has also served as the Central Headquarters of the Salesian Congregation's governance.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart and Liturgical Celebrations

The dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus translates into specific devotional practices. The liturgical feast of the Sacred Heart, celebrated on the Friday following the octave of Corpus Christi, is observed with solemnity in the basilica, featuring novenas, Eucharistic celebrations, Eucharistic adoration, and processions. Popular piety surrounding the Sacred Heart—widespread since the 19th century with its approval by Pius IX and Leo XIII—finds a focal point here in Rome, drawing the faithful for prayers of reparation, entrustment, and thanksgiving.

For the 2025 Jubilee, the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus has been granted the privilege of a plenary indulgence, like all other churches on the *Iter Europaeum*.

We recall that to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the European Union and the Holy See (1970–2020), a project was undertaken by the Delegation of the European Union to the Holy See and the 28 Embassies of individual member States accredited to the Holy See. This project consisted of a liturgical and cultural itinerary in which each Country designated a church or basilica in Rome with which it had a special historical, artistic, or pilgrim hospitality connection. The primary goal was twofold: on one hand, to foster mutual understanding among European citizens and encourage reflection on shared Christian roots; on the other, to offer pilgrims and visitors a means of discovering

lesser-known or particularly meaningful religious spaces, highlighting the Church's connections with all of Europe. Broadening the perspective, the initiative was later revived as part of the jubilee routes linked to the Rome 2025 Jubilee, under the Latin name "*Iter Europaeum*," incorporating the itinerary among the official pilgrim paths of the Holy City. The *Iter Europaeum* includes stops at 28 churches and basilicas in Rome, each "adopted" by an EU member State. The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was "adopted" by [Luxembourg](#). The churches of the *Iter Europaeum* can be viewed [HERE](#).

Visiting the Basilica

The Basilica can be visited in person or virtually.

For a 3D virtual tour, click [HERE](#).

For a guided virtual tour, follow these links:

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [History](#)
3. [Façade](#)
4. [Bell Tower](#)
5. [Central Nave](#)
6. [Inner Façade Wall](#)
7. [Floor](#)
8. [Columns](#)
9. [Central Nave Walls](#)
10. [Ceiling 1](#)
11. [Ceiling 2](#)
12. [Transept](#)
13. [Stained Glass Transept](#)
14. [High Altar](#)
15. [Presbytery](#)
16. [Dome](#)
17. [Don Bosco Choir](#)
18. [Side Naves](#)
19. [Confessionals](#)

20. [Right Side Nave Altars](#)
21. [Side Nave Frescoes](#)
22. [Left Nave Small Domes](#)
23. [Baptistery](#)
24. [Left Side Nave Altars](#)
25. [Left Nave Small Dome Frescoes](#)
26. [Sacristy](#)
27. [Don Bosco's "Little Rooms" \(previous version\)](#)
28. [Don Bosco Museum \(previous version\)](#)

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio is an example of Neo-Renaissance architecture tied to historical events marked by crises and revivals. The combination of artistic, architectural, and historical elements—from granite columns to painted decorations, from the famed bell tower statue to Don Bosco's Little Rooms—makes this site a destination for spiritual and cultural pilgrimage. Its location near Termini Station renders it a welcoming symbol for those arriving in Rome, while pastoral work for the young continues to embody the spirit of St. John Bosco: a heart open to service, formation, and lived spirituality. A must-visit.

The title of Basilica for the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome

On the centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera it was highlighted how the second successor of Don Bosco realised what could be described as a dream of Don Bosco. In fact, thirty-four years after the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, which took place in the presence of the

by now exhausted Don Bosco (May 1887), Pope Benedict XV – the pope of the famous and unheard of definition of the First World War as ‘useless slaughter’ – conferred on the church the title of Minor Basilica (11 February 1921). Don Bosco had “given his soul” (and his body too!) for its construction in the last seven years of his life. He had done the same in the previous twenty years (1865-1868) with the construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, Turin, the first Salesian church elevated to the dignity of a minor basilica on 28 June 1911, in the presence of the new Rector Major Fr Paul Albera.

Discovery of the request

But how did this result come about? Who was behind it? We now know for sure thanks to the recent discovery of the typewritten draft of the request for this title by Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. It is included in a booklet commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Sacred Heart published in 1905 by the then Rector Fr Francesco Tomasetti (1868-1953). The typescript, dated 17 January 1921, has minimal corrections by the Rector Major but, what is important, bears his handwritten signature.

After describing Don Bosco’s work and the unceasing activity of the parish, probably taken from the old file, Fr Albera addresses the Pope in these terms

“While the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is growing and spreading all over the world, and new Churches are being dedicated to the Divine Heart, also through the noble initiative of the Salesians, as in S. Paolo in Brazil, in La Plata in Argentina, in London, in Barcelona and elsewhere, it seems that the primary Church-Sanctuary dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, where such an important devotion has an affirmation so worthy of the Eternal City, deserves special distinction. The undersigned, therefore, having heard the opinion of the Superior Council of the Pious Salesian Society, humbly begs Your Holiness to deign to grant

the Church-Sanctuary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Castro Pretorio in Rome the Title and Privileges of a Minor Basilica, hoping that this honourable elevation will increase devotion, piety and every catholic beneficial activity”.

The request, in its final draft, signed by Fr Albera, was most likely sent by the procurator Fr Francesco Tomasetti to the Sacred Congregation of the Brevi, which welcomed it. He quickly drew up the draft of the Apostolic Brief to be kept in the Vatican Archives, had it transcribed by expert calligraphers on rich parchment and passed it on to the Secretariat of State for the signature of the the one in charge at the time, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri.

Today, the faithful can admire this original of the granting of the requested title nicely framed in the sacristy of the Basilica (see photo).

We can only be grateful to Dr Patrizia Buccino, a scholar of archaeology and history, and Salesian historian Fr Giorgio Rossi, who spread the news. It is up to them to complete the investigation begun by searching the Vatican Archives for the entire correspondence which will also be made known to the scientific world through the well-known Salesian history magazine “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane”.

Sacred Heart: a national basilica with an international reach

Twenty-six years earlier, on 16 July 1885, at the request of Don Bosco and with the explicit consent of Pope Leo XIII, Archbishop Gaetano Alimonda, Archbishop of Turin, had warmly urged the Italians to participate in the success of the “noble and holy proposal [of the new church] calling it a national vow of the Italians”.

Fr Albera in his request to the pontiff, after recalling Cardinal Alimonda’s pressing appeal, recalled that all the nations of the world had been asked to contribute economically to the construction, decoration of the church and annexed works (including the inevitable Salesian oratory with a hospice!) so that the Church-Sanctuary, as well as a national

vow, had become a “worldwide or international manifestation of devotion to the Sacred Heart”.

In this regard, in a historical and ascetical paper published on the occasion of the 1st Centenary of the Consecration of the Basilica (1987), the scholar Armando Pedrini described it as: “A church that is therefore international because of the catholicity and universality of its message to all peoples”, also in consideration of the Basilica’s “prominent position” adjacent to the acknowledged internationality of the railway station.

Rome-Termini is therefore not only a large railway station with problems of public order and a difficult scene to manage, often mentioned in the newspapers and like many railway stations in many European capitals. But it is also home to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And while in the evening and at night time the area does not convey security to tourists, during the day the Basilica offers peace and serenity to the faithful who enter it, stop there in prayer, receive the sacraments.

Will the pilgrims who will pass through the Termini railway station in the not too distant holy year (2025) remember this? All they have to do is cross the street... and the Sacred Heart of Jesus awaits them.

PS. In Rome there is a second Salesian parish basilica, larger and artistically richer than the Sacred Heart one: it is the Basilica of St John Bosco at Tuscolano, which became such in 1965, a few years after its inauguration (1959). Where is it located? Obviously in the Don Bosco district (a stone’s throw from the famous Cinecittà studios). While the statue on the bell tower of the basilica of the Sacred Heart dominates the square of Termini station, the dome of the basilica of Don Bosco, slightly lower than St. Peter’s, however, overlooks it directly, albeit from two extreme points of the capital. And since there is no two without three, there is a third splendid Salesian parish basilica in Rome: that of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, in the Appio-Tuscolano district, next to the

large Pio XI Institute.

Apostolic Letter entitled *Pia Societas*, dated 11 February 2021, by which His Holiness Benedict XV elevated the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the rank of Basilica.

Ecclesia parochialis SS.mi Cordis Iesu ad Castrum Praetorium
in urbe titulo et privilegiis Basilicae Minoris decoratur.

Benedictus pp. XV

Ad perpetuam rei memoriam.

Pia Societas sancti Francisci Salesii, a venerabili Servo Dei Ioanne Bosco iam Augustae Taurinorum condita atque hodie per dissitas quoque orbis regiones diffusa, omnibus plane cognitum est quanta sibi merita comparaverit non modo incumbendo actuose sollerterque in puerorum, orbitate laborantium, religiosam honestamque institutionem, verum etiam in rei catholicae profectum tum apud christianum populum, tum apud infideles in longinquis et asperrimis Missionibus. Eiusdem Societatis sodalibus est quoque in hac Alma Urbe Nostra ecclesia paroecialis Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicata, in qua, etsi non abhinc multos annos condita, eximii praesertim Praedecessoris Nostri Leonis PP. XIII iussu atque auspiciis, christifideles urbani, eorundem Sodalium opera, adeo ad Dei cultum et virtutum laudem exercentur, ut ea vel cum antiquioribus paroeciis in honoris ac meritorum contentionem veniat. Ipsemet Salesianorum Sodalium fundator, venerabilis Ioannes Bosco, in nova Urbis regione, aere saluberrimo populoque confertissima, quae ad Gastrum Praetorium exstat, exaedificationem inchoavit istius templi, et, quasi illud erigeret ex gentis italicae voto et pietatis testimonio erga Sacratissimum Cor Iesu, stipem praecipue ex Italiae christifidelibus studiose conlegit; verumtamen pii homines ex ceteris nationibus non defuerunt, qui, in exstruendum perficiendumque templum istud, erga Ssmum Cor Iesu amore incensi, largam pecuniae vim contulerint. Anno autem MDCCCLXXXVII sacra ipsa aedes, secundum speciosam formam a Virginio Vespignani architecto delineatam, tandem perfecta

ac sollemniter consecrata dedicataque est. Eamdem vero postea, magna cum sollertia, Sodales Salesianos non modo variis altaribus, imaginibus affabre depictis et statuis, omnique sacro cultui necessaria supellectili exornasse, verum etiam continentibus aedificiis iuventuti, ut tempora nostra postulant, rite instituendae ditasse, iure ac merito Praedecessores Nostri sunt" laetati, et Nos haud minore animi voluptate probamus. Quapropter cum dilectus filius Paulus Albera, hodiernus Piae Societatis sancti Francisci Salesii rector maior, nomine proprio ac religiosorum virorum quibus praeest, quo memorati templi Ssmi Cordi Iesu dicati maxime augeatur decus, eiusdem urbanae paroeciae fidelium fides et pietas foveatur, Nos supplex rogaverit, ut eidem templo dignitatem, titulum et privilegia Basilicae Minoris pro Nostra benignitate impertiri dignemur; Nos, ut magis magisque stimulos fidelibus ipsius paroeciae atque Urbis totius Nostrae ad Sacratissimum Cor Iesu impensius colendum atque adamandum addamus, nec non benevolentiam, qua Sodales Salesianos ob merita sua prosequimur, publice significemus, votis hisce piis annuendum ultro libenterque censemus. Quam ob rem, conlatis consiliis cum VV. FF. NN. S. R. E. Cardinalibus Congregationi Ss. Rituum praepositis, Motu proprio ac de certa scientia et matura deliberatione Nostris, deque apostolicae potestatis plenitudine, praesentium Litterarum tenore perpetuumque in modum, enunciatum templum Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicatum, in hac alma Urbe Nostra atque ad Castrum Praetorium situm, dignitate ac titulo Basilicae Minoris honestamus, cum omnibus et singulis honoribus, praerogativis, privilegiis, indultis quae aliis Minoribus Almae huius Urbis Basilicis de iure competunt. Decernentes praesentes Litteras firmas, validas atque efficaces semper exstare ac permanere, suosque integros effectus sortiri iugiter et obtinere, illisque ad quos pertinent nunc et in posterum plenissime suffragari; sicque rite iudicandum esse ac definiendum, irritumque ex nunc et inane fieri, si quidquam secus super his, a quovis, auctoritate qualibet, scienter sive ignoranter attentari contigerit. Non obstantibus contrariis quibuslibet.

Datum Romae apud sanctum Petrum sub annulo
Piscatoris, die XI februarii MCMXXI, Pontificatus Nostri anno
septimo.

P. CARD. GASPARRI, a Secretis Status.

The parish church of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus at Castrum
Praetorium in the city is honoured with the title and
privileges of a Minor Basilica.

Pope Benedict XV

For perpetual remembrance.

The Pious Society of St Francis de Sales, founded in Augusta
Taurinorum by the Venerable Servant of God John Bosco and now
spread throughout diverse regions of the world, is well known
to all for the great merits it has acquired—not only by
diligently and zealously devoting itself to the religious and
moral education of orphaned and labouring children, but also
by advancing the Catholic cause both among Christian
populations and in distant and arduous missions among
unbelievers. In this Our Beloved City, the members of the same
Society also serve the parish church dedicated to the Most
Sacred Heart of Jesus, where, though established not many
years ago by the command and under the auspices of Our
illustrious predecessor Pope Leo XIII, the urban faithful,
through the work of these same members, are so fervently
trained in divine worship and the praise of virtue that it may
even rival older parishes in honour and merit.

The founder of the Salesian Society himself, the Venerable
John Bosco, began the construction of this church in a new
district of the City, renowned for its wholesome air and dense
population, near Castrum Praetorium. As if raising it in
fulfilment of the Italian people's vow and as a testimony of
devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, he diligently
collected funds chiefly from the faithful of Italy; yet pious
individuals from other nations were not lacking, who, inflamed

with love for the Most Sacred Heart, contributed generously to the building and completion of this church. In the year 1887, the sacred edifice, designed according to the splendid plan of the architect Virginio Vespignani, was finally completed and solemnly consecrated and dedicated.

Afterwards, with great diligence, the Salesians adorned it not only with various altars, skilfully painted images and statues, and all the furnishings necessary for sacred worship, but also enriched it with adjoining buildings for the proper education of youth, as our times demand. Our predecessors rightly and justly rejoiced at this, and We too approve with no less satisfaction.

Wherefore, since Our beloved son Paul Albera, the present Superior General of the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales, in his own name and that of the religious under his care, has humbly besought Us that the honour of the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus may be greatly enhanced, and the faith and piety of the faithful of the urban parish may be fostered, and that We may deign in Our kindness to bestow upon the same church the dignity, title, and privileges of a Minor Basilica; We, desiring to further stimulate the faithful of this parish and of Our whole City to more fervent worship and love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to publicly signify the benevolence with which We regard the Salesians for their merits, have willingly and gladly resolved to grant these pious requests.

For this reason, having consulted with Our Venerable Brothers the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church assigned to the Congregation of Sacred Rites, by Our own initiative, with certain knowledge and mature deliberation, and by the fullness of apostolic authority, We, by the tenor of these present Letters and in perpetuity, honour the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, located in this Our Beloved City near Castrum Praetorium, with the dignity and title of a Minor Basilica, together with all and singular the

honours, prerogatives, privileges, and indults which by right belong to other Minor Basilicas of this Beloved City.

We decree that these present Letters shall always be firm, valid, and effective, and shall perpetually obtain their full and complete effects, and shall fully avail those to whom they pertain now and hereafter; and thus it is to be judged and defined in due form, and anything to the contrary, attempted by any authority, knowingly or unknowingly, is hereby declared null and void.

Notwithstanding any contrary provisions.

Given at Rome, at St Peter's, under the Fisherman's Ring, on the 11th day of February 1921, in the seventh year of Our Pontificate.

P. Cardinal Gasparri, Secretary of State.

Fr. Peter Ricaldone is Reborn in Mirabello Monferrato

Fr. Peter Ricaldone (Mirabello Monferrato, 27 April 1870 – Rome, 25 November 1951) was the fourth successor of Don Bosco as leader of the Salesians, a man of vast culture, deep spirituality, and great love for young people. Born and raised amidst the Monferrato hills, he always carried the spirit of that land with him, translating it into a pastoral and educational commitment that would make him a figure of international standing. Today, the people of Mirabello Monferrato wish to bring him back to their lands.

The Don Pietro Ricaldone Committee: Revival of a Legacy (2019)

In 2019, a group of past pupils, historians, and enthusiasts

of local traditions formed the **Don Pietro Ricaldone Committee** in Mirabello Monferrato. The objective – simple yet ambitious – has been from the outset, to restore Don Pietro's figure to the heart of the town and its young people, so that his story and spiritual legacy will not be lost.

To prepare for the 150th anniversary of his birth (1870–2020), the Committee searched the Mirabello Municipal Historical Archive and the Salesian Historical Archive, uncovering letters, notes, and old volumes. From this work, an illustrated biography was created, designed for readers of all ages, in which Ricaldone's personality emerges clearly and engagingly. Collaboration with Fr. Egidio Deiana, a scholar of Salesian history, was fundamental during this phase.

In 2020, a series of events was planned – photographic exhibits, concerts, theatre and circus performances – all centred on remembering Fr. Peter. Although the pandemic forced the rescheduling of many of the celebrations, in July of that year a commemorative event took place, featuring a photographic exhibit on the stages of Ricaldone's life, children's entertainment with creative workshops, and a solemn celebration attended by several Salesian Superiors. That gathering marked the beginning of a new period of focus on the Mirabello area.

Beyond the 150th: The Concert for the 70th Anniversary of His Death

The enthusiasm for reviving the figure of Don Pietro Ricaldone led the Committee to extend its activities beyond the 150th anniversary.

Ahead of the 70th anniversary of his death (25 November 1951), the Committee organised a concert titled "Hasten the radiant dawn of the longed-for day", a phrase taken from Fr. Peter's 1942 circular on Gregorian Chant.

At the height of the Second World War, Fr. Peter – then Rector

Major – wrote a famous circular on Gregorian Chant in which he stressed the importance of music as a special way to lead human hearts back to charity, gentleness, and above all, to God: *‘It may surprise some that, amidst such a clamour of arms, I invite you to engage with music. Yet I believe, even setting aside mythological allusions, that this theme fully meets the needs of the present hour. Everything that can exert an educative influence and lead people back to feelings of charity and gentleness, and above all to God, must be practised by us, diligently and without delay, to hasten the radiant dawn of the longed-for day.’*

Salesian Walks and Roots: The “Don Bosco Walk”

Although established as a tribute to Fr. Ricaldone, the Committee has also ended up promoting the figure of Don Bosco and the entire Salesian tradition, of which Fr. Peter was both an heir and a protagonist.

Since 2021, every second Sunday of October, the Committee has promoted the “Don Bosco Walk”, re-enacting the pilgrimage Don Bosco undertook with the boys from Mirabello to Lu Monferrato between 12th–17th October 1861. During those five days, the details of the first Salesian school outside Turin were planned, entrusted to Blessed Michael Rua, with Fr. Albera among the teachers. Although the initiative does not directly involve Fr. Peter, it highlights his roots and connection to the local Salesian tradition that he himself carried forward.

Hospitality and Cultural Exchanges

The Committee facilitated the welcoming of groups of young people, vocational schools, and Salesian clerics from around the world. Some families offer free hospitality, renewing the fraternity characteristic of Don Bosco and Fr. Peter. In 2023, a large group from the Crocetta visited Mirabello, while every summer, international groups arrive, accompanied by Fr. Egidio Deiana. Each visit is a dialogue between historical memory and the joy of youth.

On 30 March 2025, nearly one hundred Salesian chapter members stopped in Mirabello, visiting the places where Don Bosco opened his first school outside Turin and where Fr. Peter spent his formative years. The Committee, together with the Parish and the *Pro Loco* (local community association), organised the reception and created an informative video about local Salesian history, which was appreciated by all participants.

The initiatives continue, and today the Committee, led by its president, is collaborating on the creation of *Don Bosco's Monferrato Walk*, a spiritual route of approximately 200 km following the autumn paths walked by the Saint. The aim is to obtain official regional recognition, but also to offer pilgrims an experience of formation and evangelisation. Indeed, Don Bosco's youth walks were experiences of formation and evangelisation: the same spirit that Fr. Peter Ricaldone would later defend and promote throughout his time as Rector Major.

The Committee's Mission: Keeping Fr. Peter's Memory Alive

Behind every initiative lies the desire to highlight the educative, pastoral, and cultural work of Fr. Peter Ricaldone. The Committee's founders cherish personal childhood memories and wish to pass on to new generations the values of faith, culture, and solidarity that inspired the priest from Mirabello. In an era when many points of reference are faltering, rediscovering Fr. Peter's path means offering a life model capable of illuminating the present, 'Where Saints pass, God walks with them, and nothing is ever the same again' (Saint John Paul II).

The Fr. Peter Ricaldone Committee acts as a custodian of this legacy, trusting that the memory of a great son of Mirabello will continue to light the way for generations to come, charting a steady path built on faith, culture, and solidarity.

St Dominic Savio. The places of his childhood

Saint Dominic Savio, the “little great saint,” lived his brief but intense childhood among the hills of Piedmont, in places now steeped in memory and spirituality. On the occasion of his beatification in 1950, this young disciple of Don Bosco was celebrated as a symbol of purity, faith, and devotion to the Gospel. We retrace the principal places of his childhood—Riva presso Chieri, Morialdo, and Mondonio—through historical testimonies and vivid accounts, revealing the family, scholastic, and spiritual environment that forged his path to sainthood.

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio was beatified, which took place on 5 March. The 15-year-old disciple of Don Bosco was the first lay saint ‘confessor’ to ascend the altars at such a young age.

On that day, St Peter’s Basilica was packed with young people who bore witness, by their presence in Rome, to a Christian youth entirely open to the most sublime ideals of the Gospel. It was transformed, according to Vatican Radio, into an immense and noisy Salesian Oratory. When the veil covering the figure of the new Blessed fell from Bernini’s rays, a frenzied applause rose from the whole basilica and the echo reached the square, where the tapestry depicting the Blessed was uncovered from the Loggia of Blessings.

Don Bosco’s educational system received its highest recognition on that day. We wanted to revisit the places of Dominic’s childhood after re-reading the detailed information of Fr Michele Molineris in his *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio*, in which he describes with his well-known solid documentation what the biographies of St Dominic Savio

do not say.

At Riva presso Chieri

Here we are, first of all, in [San Giovanni di Riva presso Chieri](#), the hamlet where our “little great Saint” was born on 2 April 1842 to Carlo Savio and Brigida Gaiato, as the second of ten children, inheriting his name and birthright from the first, who survived only 15 days after his birth.

His father, as we know, came from Ranello, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d’Asti, and as a young man had gone to live with his uncle Carlo, a blacksmith in Mondonio, in a house on today’s Via Giunipero, at no. 1, still called ‘ca dèlfré’ or blacksmith’s house. There, from ‘Barba Carlòto’ he had learned the trade. Some time after his marriage, contracted on 2 March 1840, he had become independent, moving to the Gastaldi house in San Giovanni di Riva. He rented accommodation with rooms on the ground floor suitable for a kitchen, storeroom and workshop, and bedrooms on the first floor, reached by an external staircase that has now disappeared.

The Gastaldi heirs then sold the cottage and adjoining farmhouse to the Salesians in 1978. And today a modern youth centre, run by Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators, gives memory and new life to the little house where Dominic was born.

In Morialdo

In November 1843, i.e. when Dominic had not yet reached the age of two, the Savio family, for work reasons, moved to [Morialdo](#), the hamlet of Castelnuovo linked to the name of St John Bosco, who was born at Cascina Biglione, a hamlet in the Becchi district.

In Morialdo, the Savios rented a few small rooms near the entrance porch of the farmstead owned by Viale Giovanna, who had married Stefano Persoglio. The whole farm was later sold by their son, Persoglio Alberto, to Pianta Giuseppe and family.

This farmstead is also now, for the most part, the property of the Salesians who, after restoring it, have used it for meetings for children and adolescents and for visits by pilgrims. Less than 2 km from Colle Don Bosco, it is situated in a country setting, amidst festoons of vines, fertile fields and undulating meadows, with an air of joy in spring and nostalgia in autumn when the yellowing leaves are gilded by the sun's rays, with an enchanting panorama on fine days, when the chain of the Alps stretches out on the horizon from the peak of Monte Rosa near Albugnano, to Gran Paradiso, to Rocciamelone, down as far as Monviso. It is truly a place to visit and to use for days of intense spiritual life, a Don Bosco-style school of holiness.

The Savio family stayed in Morialdo until February 1853, a good nine years and three months. Dominic, who lived only 14 years and eleven months, spent almost two thirds of his short existence there. He can therefore be considered not only Don Bosco's pupil and spiritual son, but also his countryman.

In Mondonio

Why the Savio family left Morialdo is suggested by Fr Molineris. His uncle the blacksmith had died and Dominic's father could inherit not only the tools of the trade but also the clientele in Mondonio. That was probably the reason for the move, which took place, however, not to the house in Via Giunipero, but to the lower part of the village, where they rented the first house to the left of the main village street, from the Bertello brothers. The small house consisted, and still consists today, of a ground floor with two rooms, adapted as a kitchen and workroom, and an upper floor, above the kitchen, with two bedrooms and enough space for a workshop with a door on the street ramp.

We know that Mr and Mrs Savio had ten children, three of whom died at a very young age and three others, including Dominic, did not reach the age of 15. The mother died in 1871 at the age of 51. The father, left alone at home

with his son John, after having taken in the three surviving daughters, asked Don Bosco for hospitality in 1879 and died at Valdocco on 16 December 1891.

Dominic had entered Valdocco on 29 October 1854, remaining there, except for short holiday periods, until 1 March 1857. He died eight days later at [Mondonio](#), in the little room next to the kitchen, on 9 March of that year. His stay at Mondonio was therefore about 20 months in all, at Valdocco 2 years and 4 months.

Memories of Morialdo

From this brief review of the three Savio houses, it is clear that the one in Morialdo must be the richest in memories. San Giovanni di Riva recalls Dominic's birth, and Mondonio a year at school and his holy death, but Morialdo recalls his life in the family, in church and at school. '*Minòt*', as he was called there – how many things he must have heard, seen and learnt from his father and mother, how much faith and love he showed in the little church of San Pietro, how much intelligence and goodness at the school run by Fr Giovanni Zucca, and how much fun and liveliness in the playground with his fellow villagers.

It was in Morialdo that Dominic Savio prepared for his First Communion, which he then made in the parish church of Castelnuovo on 8 April 1849. It was there, when he was only 7 years old, that he wrote his "Reminders", that is, the resolutions for his First Communion:

1. I will go to confession very often and take communion as often as the confessor gives me permission;
2. I want to keep feast days holy;
3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary;
4. Death but not sin.

Memories that were the guide for his actions until the end of his life.

A boy's demeanour, way of thinking and acting reflect the environment in which he lived, and especially the family in which he spent his childhood. So if one wants to

understand something about Dominic, it is always good to reflect on his life in that farmstead in Morialdo.

The family

His was not a farming family. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a seamstress. His parents were not of robust constitution. The signs of fatigue could be seen on his father's face, his mother's face stood out for its delicate lines. Dominic's father was a man of initiative and courage. His mother came from the not too distant Cerreto d'Asti where she kept a dressmaker's shop "and with her skill she made it possible for the local inhabitants to get clothes there rather than go elsewhere." And she was still a seamstress in Morialdo too. Would Don Bosco have known this? His conversation with little Dominic who had gone to look for him at the Becchi was interesting:

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems to me that there is good stuff (in piem.: Eh, m'a smia ch'a-j'sia bon-a stòfa!)."

"What can this fabric be used for?"

"To make a beautiful suit to give to the Lord."

"So, I am the cloth: you be the tailor; take me with you (in piem.: ch'èmpija ansema a chiel) and you can make a beautiful suit for the Lord." (OE XI, 185).

A priceless conversation between two countrymen who understood each other at first sight. And their language was just right for the dressmaker's son.

When their mother died on 14 July 1871, the parish priest of Mondonio, Fr Giovanni Pastrone, said to his weeping daughters, to console them: "Don't cry, because your mother was a holy woman; and now she is already in Paradise."

Her son Dominic, who had preceded her into heaven by several years, had also said to her and to his father, before he passed away: "Do not weep, I already see the Lord and Our Lady with open arms waiting for me." These last words of his, witnessed by his neighbour Anastasia Molino, who was present at the time of his death, were the seal of a joyful

life, the manifest sign of that sanctity that the Church solemnly recognised on 5 March 1950, later giving it definitive confirmation on 12 June 1954 with his canonisation.

Frontispiece photo. The house where Dominic died in 1857. It is a rural dwelling, likely dating from the late 17th century. Rebuilt upon an even older house, it is one of the most cherished landmarks for the people of Mondonio.

The New Headquarters of the Salesians. Rome, Sacro Cuore (Sacred Heart)

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

So often did Don Bosco desire to come to Rome to open a Salesian house. From his first trip in 1858, his goal was to be present in the Eternal City with an educational presence. He came to Rome twenty times, and only on his last trip in 1887 was he able to realise his dream by opening the Sacred Heart house in Castro Pretorio.

The Salesian Work is located in the Esquiline district, established in 1875, after the breach of Porta Pia and the Savoy's need to build the ministries of the Kingdom of Italy in the new capital. The district, also called Umbertino, has Piedmontese architecture. All the streets are named after battles or events related to the Savoy state. In this place that recalls Turin, there had to be a Temple, which was also a parish, built by a Piedmontese, Don Giovanni Bosco. Don Bosco

did not choose the name of the Church, but it was the will of Leo XIII to revive a devotion, more relevant than ever, to the Heart of Jesus.

Today, the Sacred Heart House is completely renovated to meet the needs of the Salesian Central Headquarters. From the time of its foundation to the present day, the house has undergone several transformations. The Work began as a Parish and International Temple for the spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart. From the beginning, Don Bosco's declared goal was to build a home next door to accommodate up to 500 poor children. Fr. Rua completed the Work and opened workshops for artisans (arts and crafts school). In the following years, the middle school and classical high school were opened. For some years, it was also the seat of the university (Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum) and a training house for Salesians who studied at Roman universities and were involved in the school and oratory (among these students there was Fr. Quadrio). It was also the headquarters of the Roman Province first and of the Circumscription of Central Italy from 2008. Since 2017, due to the move from Via della Pisana, it has become the Salesian Central Headquarters. Renovation began in 2022 to adapt the spaces to the function of the Rector Major's house. Don Bosco, Fr. Rua, Cardinal Cagliero (his apartment was located on the first floor of Via Marsala), Zeffirino Namuncurà, Monsignor Versiglia, Artemide Zatti, all the Rectors Major successors of Don Bosco, and Saint John Paul II, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope Francis have lived or passed through this house. Among the directors of the house, Monsignor Giuseppe Cognata served (during his rectorship, in 1930, the statue of the Sacred Heart was placed on the bell tower).

Thanks to the Sacred Heart, the Salesian charism has spread to various neighbourhoods of Rome. In fact, all the other Salesian presences in Rome have been an offshoot of this house: Testaccio, Pio XI, Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco, Don Bosco Cinecittà, Gerini, the Pontifical Salesian University.

Crossroads of Hospitality

From the beginning, there have been two determining characteristics of the Sacred Heart House:

1) *Catholicity*, in that opening a house in Rome has always meant for the founders of religious orders a closeness to the Pope and a broadening of horizons at a universal level. In the first conference to the Salesian Cooperators at the monastery of Tor De' Specchi in Rome in 1874, Don Bosco stated that the Salesians would spread throughout the world and that helping their works meant living the most authentic Catholic spirit;

2) *attention towards poor young people*: the location near the station, a crossroads of arrivals and departures, a place where the poorest have always gathered, is inscribed in the history of the Sacred Heart.

In the beginning, the House took in poor children to teach them a trade, and later, the oratory gathered the children of the neighbourhood. After the war, the shoeshine boys (boys who shined shoes for people leaving the station) were gathered and cared for first in this house and then moved to Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco. During the mid-1980s, with the first immigration to Italy, young immigrants were hosted in collaboration with the nascent Caritas. In the 1990s, a Day Centre gathered children as an alternative to prison and taught them the basics of reading and writing and a trade. Since 2009, an integration project between young refugees and young Italians has seen many initiatives of welcome and evangelisation flourish. The Sacred Heart House has also been the headquarters of the National Centre of Salesian Works of Italy for about 30 years.

The New Beginning

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

First of all, the presence of the Rector Major

with his council and of the confreres who take care of the global dimension indicates the continuum of Catholicity. It is a vocation to welcome many Salesians who come from all over the world and find in the Sacred Heart House a place to feel at home, experience fraternity and meet with Don Bosco's successor. At the same time, it is the place from which the Rector Major animates and governs the Congregation, tracing the lines to be faithful to Don Bosco in the present.

Secondly, there is the presence of a significant Salesian place where Don Bosco wrote the letter from Rome and understood the dream of the nine years. Inside the house there will be the Don Bosco House Museum of Rome, which, distributed on three floors, will tell the story of the Saint's presence in the eternal city. The centrality of education as a "thing of the heart" in his Preventive System, the relationship with the Popes who loved Don Bosco and whom he first loved and served, the Sacred Heart as a place of expansion of the charism throughout the world, the difficult path of approval of the Constitutions, the understanding of the dream of the nine years and his last educational breath in writing the letter from Rome are the thematic elements that, in an immersive multimedia form, will be revealed to those who visit the Museum.

Thirdly, the devotion to the Sacred Heart represents the centre of the charism. Don Bosco, even before receiving the invitation to build the Church of the Sacred Heart, had oriented young people towards this devotion. In *The Companion of Youth* there are prayers and practices of piety addressed to the Heart of Christ. However, with the acceptance of the proposal of Leo XIII he becomes a true apostle of the Sacred Heart. He spares no effort to seek money for the Church. The attention to the smallest details infuses his thought and devotion to the Sacred Heart into the architectural and artistic choices of the Basilica. To support the construction of the Church and the house, he founded the **Pious Work of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, the last of the five foundations created by Don Bosco throughout his life together

with the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians. It **was erected for the perpetual celebration of six daily masses in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome**. All the members, living and deceased, participate through the prayer offered and the good works performed by the Salesians and young people in all their houses.

The vision of the Church that derives from the foundation of the Pious Work is that of a “living body” composed of the living and the dead in communion with each other through the Sacrifice of Jesus, renewed daily in the Eucharistic celebration in service of the poorest young people. The desire of the Heart of Jesus is that all may be one (*ut unum sint*) as He and the Father. The Pious Work connects, through prayer and offerings, the benefactors, living and deceased, the Salesians of the whole world and the young people who live at the Sacred Heart. Only through communion, which has its source in the Eucharist, can benefactors, Salesians and young people contribute to building the Church, to making it shine in its missionary face. The Pious Work also has the task of promoting, spreading, deepening devotion to the Sacred Heart throughout the world and renewing it according to the times and the feeling of the Church.

The central station for evangelising

Finally, attention to poor young people is manifested in the missionary will to reach the young people of all Rome through the Youth Centre open on Via Marsala, right at the exit of Termini station where about 300,000 people pass every day. A place that is home for the many Italian and foreign young people, who visit or live in Rome and are thirsty, sometimes unconsciously, for God. Moreover, various poor people, marked by the fatigue of life, have always crowded around Termini station. It is another open door on Via Marsala, in addition to that of the Youth Centre and the

Basilica, that expresses the desire to respond to the needs of these people with the Heart of Christ. In fact, the glory of His face shines in them.

Don Bosco's prophecy about the Sacred Heart House of April 5, 1880, accompanies and guides the realisation of what has been told:

But Don Bosco looked further into the future. Our own Bishop John Marengo recalled a mysterious remark he made which we should not let time obliterate. On the very day he accepted that burdensome assignment, Don Bosco asked him:

– Do you know why we accepted that house in Rome?

– No, he answered.

– Listen, then. We agreed because one day, when there will be another Pope and he shall be the right one, we shall set up our headquarters there to evangelise the Roman countryside. It will be no less important a task than that of evangelising Patagonia. Then will the Salesians be acknowledged and their glory shine forth! (BM XIV, 474)

don Francesco Marcoccio

Fr Rinaldi at the Becchi

Blessed Don Filippo Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco, is remembered as an extraordinary figure, capable of uniting in himself the qualities of Superior and Father, a distinguished master of spirituality, pedagogy, and social life, as well as an unparalleled spiritual guide. His deep admiration for Don Bosco, whom he had the privilege of knowing personally, made him a living testimony of the founder's charisma. Aware of the spiritual importance of the places

linked to Don Bosco's childhood, Don Rinaldi paid particular attention to visiting them, recognizing their symbolic and formative value. In this article, we retrace some of his visits to Colle Don Bosco, discovering the special bond that connected him to these holy places.

For the shrine of Mary Help of Christians

With the inauguration of the little shrine to Mary Help of Christians, which Fr Paul Albera wanted built opposite Don Bosco's cottage, and precisely from 2 August 1918, when Archbishop Morganti, archbishop of Ravenna, assisted by our Major Superiors, solemnly blessed the church and bells, the permanent presence of the Salesians at the Becchi began. Fr Philip Rinaldi, Prefect General, was also there on that day, and with him Fr Francesco Cottrino, the first rector of the new house.

From then on, Fr Rinaldi's visits to the Becchi were repeated every year at a steady pace, a true expression of his great affection for the good Father Don Bosco, and of his keen interest in purchasing and appropriately arranging the memorable places of the Saint's childhood.

From the handful of news items from the Salesian house at the Becchi it is easy to deduce the care and love with which Fr Rinaldi promoted and personally followed the work needed to honour Don Bosco and appropriately serve pilgrims.

So, in 1918, after coming to the Becchi for the blessing of the church, Fr Rinaldi returned there on 6 October together with Cardinal Cagliero for the Feast of the Holy Rosary, and took the opportunity to start negotiations for the purchase of the Cavallo House behind Don Bosco's.

Care for the work on the cottage

In 1919 Fr Rinaldi made two visits to the Becchi: one on 2 June and the other on 28 September, both in view of the restoration work to be carried out in the historic area known as Colle (Don Bosco).

There were three visits in 1920: one on 16-17 June, to negotiate the purchase of the Graglia house and the Bechis brothers' field; one on 11 September to visit the works and the Graglia property; and, finally, one on the 13th of the same month to attend the drafting of the deed for the purchase of the Graglia house.

There were two visits in 1921: on 16 March, with Archbishop Valotti, for the project of a road leading to the Sanctuary and a Colmn and Pilgrims Area on piazzetta; on 12-13 September, with Archbishop Valotti and Cavaliere Melle, for the same purpose.

In 1922 Fr Rinaldi was again at the Becchi twice: on 4 May with Cardinal Cagliero, Fr Ricaldone, Fr Conelli and all the Members of the General Chapter (including Salesian Bishops), to pray at the Casetta after his election as Rector Major; and on 28 September with his closest collaborators.

He then arrived there on 10 June 1923 to celebrate the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. He presided at Vespers in the sanctuary, gave the sermon and imparted the Eucharistic blessing. In the Academy that followed, he presented the Cross "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" to Mr Giovanni Febbraro, our benefactor. He then returned there in October with Cardinal Cagliero for the feast of the Holy Rosary, celebrating Mass at 7 a.m. and carrying the Blessed Sacrament in the Eucharistic procession, which was followed by the blessing imparted by the Cardinal.

On 7 September 1924 Fr Rinaldi led the Pilgrimage of Fathers and Past Pupils from Turin Houses to the Becchi. He celebrated Holy Mass, gave the sermon and then, after breakfast, took part in the concert organised for the occasion. He returned again on 22 October of the same year, together with Fr Ricaldone, and Valotti and Barberis, to resolve the thorny issue of the road to the shrine, which involved difficulties on the part of the owners of the adjacent land.

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi on three occasions in 1925: on 21 May for the unveiling of the plaque to Don Bosco,

and then on 23 July and 19 September, accompanied this time again by Cardinal Cagliero.

On 13 May 1926 Fr Rinaldi led a pilgrimage of about 200 members of the Don Bosco Teachers' Union, celebrating Mass and presiding at their meeting. On 24 July of the same year he returned, together with the whole Superior Chapter, to lead the pilgrimage of Rectors of Houses in Europe; and again on 28 August with the Superior Chapter and the Rectors of Houses in Italy.

Renovation of the historical centre

Three other visits by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi date back to 1927: 30 May with Fr Giraudi and Valotti to determine building works (construction of the portico, etc.); 30 August with Fr Tirone and the Directors of the festive Oratories; and 10 October with Fr Tirone and the young missionaries from Ivrea. On the latter occasion Fr Rinaldi urged the Rector at the time, Fr Fracchia, to place plants behind the Graglia house and in the meadow of the Dream,

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi in 1928 on four occasions: On 12 April with Fr Ricaldone for an examination of the work carried out and work in progress. On 9-10 June with Fr Candela and Fr V. Bettazzi for the Feast of Mary Help of Christians and for the inauguration of the *Pilone del Sogno*. On this occasion there was a sung Holy Mass and, after Vespers and the afternoon Eucharistic Blessing, blessed the *Pilone del Sogno* and the new Portico, addressing everyone from the balcony. In the evening, he attended the light show. On 30 September, he came with Fr Ricaldone and Fr Giraudi to visit the Gaj locality. On 8 October he returned at the head of the annual pilgrimage of young missionaries from Ivrea. It was in that year that Fr Rinaldi expressed his desire to purchase the Damevino villa to use as accommodation for pilgrims or, better still, to assign it to the Sons of Mary aspiring missionaries.

As many as six visits were made to the Becchi in 1929: – The first, on 10 March, with Fr Ricaldone, was to visit the Damevino villa and the Graglia house (the first of

which was later purchased that same year). As Don Bosco's beatification was imminent, Fr Rinaldi also wanted a little altar to the Blessed to be set up in the kitchen of the *Casetta* (which was carried out later, in 1931). – The second, on 2 May, was also a study visit, with Fr Giraudi, Mr Valotti and the painter Prof. Guglielmino. – The third, on 26 May, was to attend the feast of Mary Help of Christians. The fourth, on 16 June, was with the Superior Chapter and all the members of the General Chapter for the Feast of Don Bosco. The fifth, on 27 July, was a short visit with Fr Tirone and Bishop Massa. The sixth, finally, was with Bishop Mederlet and the young missionaries of the Ivrea House, for whom Fr Rinaldi made no secret of his predilections.

In 1930 Fr Rinaldi came twice more to the Becchi: on 26 June for a brief reconnaissance visit of the various localities; and on 6 August, with Fr Ricaldone, Mr Valotti and Cav. Sartorio, to search for water (which Fr Ricaldone then found in two places, 14 and 11 metres away from the spring called Bacolla).

In 1931, which was the year of his death on 5 December, Fr Rinaldi came to the Becchi at least three times: on 19 July, in the afternoon. On that occasion he recommended the commemoration of Don Bosco on the 16th of each month or the following Sunday. On 16 September, when he approved and praised the recreation camp prepared for the young people of the Community. On 25 September, and it was the last, when, with Fr Giraudi and Mr Valotti, he examined the plan for the trees to be planted in the area (it will be carried out later, in 1990, when the project for the planting of 3000 trees on the various slopes of Colle dei Becchi began, precisely in the year of his beatification.).

Not counting any previous visits, there are therefore 41 visits made by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi between 1918 and 1931.

Where was Don Bosco born?

On the first anniversary of Don Bosco's death his Past Pupils wanted to continue to celebrate the Feast of Recognition, as they had done every year on 24 June, organising it for the new Rector Major, Fr Rua.

On 23 June 1889, after placing a memorial stone in the Crypt at Valsalice where Don Bosco was buried, they celebrated Fr Rua at Valdocco on the 24th.

Professor Alessandro Fabre, a past pupil from 1858-66, took the floor and said among other things:

"You will not be disappointed to know, dear Fr Rua, that we have decided to add as an appendix the inauguration on 15 August next of another plaque, the commission for which has already been given and the design is reproduced here. *We will place it on the house where our dear Don Bosco was born and lived for many years*, so that the place where the heart of that great man who was later to fill Europe and the world with his name, his virtues and his admirable institutions might remain a signpost for contemporaries and posterity will remain a place where it first beat for God and for mankind."

As can be seen, the Past Pupils' intention was to place a plaque on the *Casetta* at the Becchi, which everyone believed was Don Bosco's birthplace, because he had always indicated it as *his home*. But then, finding the *Casetta* in ruins, they were encouraged to redo the inscription and place the plaque on Joseph's house nearby, with the following wording dictated by Prof. Fabre himself:

On 11 August, a few days before Don Bosco's birthday, the Past Pupils went to the Becchi to unveil the plaque. Felice Reviglio, Parish Priest at St Augustine's, and one of Don Bosco's very first pupils, gave the speech on the

occasion. Talking about the Casetta he said: "The very house near here where he was born, which is almost completely ruined..." is "a true monument of Don Bosco's evangelical poverty."

The "completely ruined" Casetta had already been mentioned in the Salesian Bulletin in March 1887 (BS 1887, March, p. 31), and Fr Reviglio and the inscription on the plaque ("a house now demolished") were evidently speaking of this situation. The inscription covered the unfortunate fact that the Casetta, not yet Salesian property, now seemed inexorably lost.

But Fr Rua did not give up and in 1901 offered to restore it at the Salesians' expense in the hope of later obtaining it from the heirs of Antonio and Giuseppe Bosco, as happened in 1919 and 1926 respectively.

When the work was completed a plaque was placed on the Casetta with the following inscription: IN THIS HUMBLE COTTAGE, NOW PIOUSLY RESTORED, FATHER JOHN BOSCO WAS BORN ON 16 AUGUST 1815

Then also the inscription on Joseph's house was corrected as follows: "*Born here in a house now restored...*", and the plaque was replaced.

Then, when the centenary of Don Bosco's birth was celebrated in 1915, the Bulletin published the photo of the Casetta, specifying: "It is the one where the Venerable John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815. It was saved from the ruin to which time had condemned it, with a general repair in the year 1901."

In the 1970s, archival research carried out by Commendatore Secondo Caselle convinced the Salesians that Don Bosco had indeed lived from 1817 to 1831 at the Casetta purchased by his father, his home, as he had always said, but he had been born at the Biglione farmstead, where his father was a share farmer and lived with his family until his death on 11 May 1817, at the top of the hill where the Church to St. John Bosco now stands.

The plaque on Joseph's house had been changed,

while the one on the Casetta was replaced by the current marble inscription: THIS IS MY HOUSE DON BOSCO

The Past Pupils' opinion in 1889, with the words "Born near here in a house now demolished" now took on another meaning; it did not mean the Caasetta at the Becchi.

The place names at Becchi

Did the Bosco family live at Cascina Biglione when John was born?

Some have said that this is in doubt, because they almost certainly lived in another house owned by Biglione at "Meinito". Proof of this would be Francesco Bosco's Will, drawn up by notary C. G. Montalenti on 8 May 1817, where we read: "*... in the house of Signor Biglione inhabited by the testator in the region of the Monastero borgata [hamlet] at Meinito...*". (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e Contadini del Monferrato: i Bosco di Chieri nel secolo XVIII*, Rome, LAS, 1975, p. 94).

What can be said about this opinion?

Today, "Meinito" (or "Mainito") is merely the site of a farmstead located south of Colle Don Bosco, beyond the provincial road that goes from Castelnuovo towards Capriglio, but at one time it indicated a more extensive territory, contiguous to one called *Sbaraneo* (or *Sbaruau*). And *Sbaraneo* was none other than the valley to the east of the Colle.

"Monastery", then, did not only correspond to the current wooded area close to Mainito, but covered a vast area, from Mainito to Barosca, so much so that the Casetta at the Becchi was recorded in 1817 as "region of Cavallo, Monastero" (S. CASELLE, *op. cit.*, p. 96).

At a time when there were not yet any maps with numbered plots, farmsteads and estates were identified on the basis of place names or toponyms, derived from surnames of ancient families or geographical and historical features.

They served as landmarks, but did not correspond to today's meaning of "region" or "hamlet" except very roughly, and were used with much freedom of choice by notaries.

The oldest map of the Castelnovese, preserved in the municipal archives and kindly made available to us, dates back to 1742 and is called the "Napoleonic Map", probably because of its greater use during the French occupation. An extract of this map, edited in 1978 with photographic elaboration of the original text by Mr Polato and Mr Occhiena, who compared the archive documents with the lots numbered on the Napoleonic Map, gives an indication of all the land owned by the Biglione family since 1773 and worked by the Bosco family from 1793 to 1817. From this "Extract" it appears that the Biglione family did not own any land or houses at Mainito. And on the other hand, no other document can be found so far that proves the contrary.

So what meaning can the words "in Mr Biglione's house... in the Monastero region of the hamlet of Meinito" have?

First of all, it is good to know that only nine days later, the same notary who drew up Francesco Bosco's will, wrote in the inventory of his inheritance: "... in the house of Signor Giacinto Biglione inhabited by the unnamed pupils [Francesco's sons] in the region of Meinito...". (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96), thus promoting Mainito from "borgata" to "regione" in just a few days. And then it is curious to note that even the Cascina Biglione proper, in different documents appears as *Sbaconatto*, in *Sbaraneo* or *Monastero*, in *Castellero*, and so on and so forth.

So where are we at? Taking everything into account, it is not difficult to realise that it is always the same area, *the Monastero*, which at its centre had Sbaconatto and Castellerò, to the east the Sbaraneo, and to the south the Mainito. Notary Montalenti chose "Meinito" as others chose "Sbaraneo" or "Sbaconatto" or "Castellero". But the site and the house were always the same!

We know, moreover, that Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina Biglione from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at Scajota and Barosca; but, as local elders assure us, they never owned houses at Mainito. Yet they had bought the properties that the Biglione family had sold to Mr

Giuseppe Chiardi in 1818.

All that remains is to conclude that the document drawn up by notary Montalenti on 8 May 1817, even if it contains no errors, refers to the Cascina Biglione proper, where Don Bosco was born on 16 August 1815, his father died on 11 May 1817 and the grandiose Temple to St John Bosco was built in our days.

The existence, finally, of a fictitious Biglione house inhabited by the Bosco family at Mainito and then demolished whenever or by whoever before 1889, as some have speculated, has (at least so far) no real evidence in its favour. When the Past Pupils the words "Born here at..." in Becchi (see our January article) they certainly could not have been referring to Mainito, which is over a kilometre from Joseph's house!

Cascine, massari and mezzadri

Francesco Bosco, farmer at the Cascina Biglione, wishing to set up his own business, bought land and the Becchi house, but death took him suddenly on 11 May 1817 before he had been able to pay all his debts. In November, his widow, Margaret Occhiena, moved with her children and mother-in-law into the *Casetta*, which had been renovated for the purpose. Before then, the *Casetta*, already contracted by her husband since 1815 but not yet paid for, consisted only of "a croft and adjacent stable, covered with tiles, in poor condition" (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e contadini* [...], p. 96-97), and therefore uninhabitable for a family of five, with animals and tools. By February 1817 the notarial deed of sale had been drawn up, but the debt was still outstanding. Margaret had to resolve the situation as guardian of Anthony, Joseph and John Bosco, by then small owners at the Becchi.

It was not the first time that the Bosco family moved from the status of *massari* to becoming smallholders and vice versa. The late Comm. Secondo Caselle has given us ample documentation of this.

Don Bosco's great-great-grandfather, Giovanni

Pietro, formerly a *massaro* (sharecropper) at the Croce di Pane farmstead, between Chieri and Andezeno, owned by the Barnabite Fathers, in 1724 became a sharecropper at the Cascina di San Silvestro near Chieri, belonging to the Prevostura di San Giorgio. And the fact that he lived in the Cascina di San Silvestro with his family is recorded in the *Registri del Sale* of 1724. His nephew, Filippo Antonio, fatherless and taken in by Giovanni Pietro's eldest son, Giovanni Francesco Bosco, was adopted by a great-uncle, from whom he inherited a house, garden and 2 hectares of land in Castelnuovo. But, due to the critical economic situation he found himself in, he had to sell the house and most of his land and move with his family to the hamlet of Morialdo, as a sharecropper of Cascina Biglione, where he died in 1802.

Paolo, his first-born son, thus became the head of the family and the farmer, as recorded in the 1804 census. But a few years later, he left the farmstead to his half-brother Francesco and went to settle in Castelnuovo after taking his share of the inheritance and buying and selling. It was then that Francesco Bosco, son of Filippo Antonio and Margherita Zucca, became a *massaro* of Cascina Biglione.

What was meant in those days by *cascina*, *massaro* and *mezzadro*?

The word *cascina* (in Piedmontese: *cassin-a*) indicates in itself a farmhouse or the whole of a farm; but in the places we are talking about, the emphasis was on the house, i.e. the farm building used partly as a dwelling and partly as a rustic house for livestock, etc. The *massaro* (in Piedmontese: *massé*) in itself is the tenant of the farmstead and the farms, while the *mezzadro* (in Piedmontese: *masoé*) is only the cultivator of a master's land with whom he shares the crops. But in practice in those places the *massaro* was also a sharecropper and vice versa, so that the word *massé* was not much used, while *masoé* generally indicated the *massaro* as well.

Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina *Bion* or Biglione al Castellero from 1845 to 1929, also owned other

farmsteads, at *Scajota* and *Barosca*, and, as Mr Angelo Agagliate assured us, they had five *massari* or sharecroppers, one at Cascina Biglione, two at Scajota and two at Barosca. Naturally, the various *massari* lived in their own farmstead.

Now, if a farmer was a farmer, e.g., at Cascina Scajota, owned by the Damevino family, he was not called “living in the Damevino house”, but simply “alla Scajota”. If Francesco Bosco had lived in the supposed Biglione house at Mainito, he would not, therefore, have been said to have lived “in Mr Biglione’s house” even if this house had belonged to the Biglione family. If the notary wrote “In Signor Biglione’s house inhabited by the testator below”, it was a sign that Francesco lived with his family at Cascina Biglione proper.

And this is further confirmation of the previous articles that refute the hypothesis of Don Bosco’s birth at Mainito “in a house now demolished”.

In conclusion, one cannot give exclusive importance to the literal meaning of certain expressions, but must examine their true meaning in the local usage of the time. In studies of this kind, the work of the local researcher is complementary to that of the academic historian, and particularly important, because the former, aided by detailed knowledge of the area, can provide the latter with the material needed for general conclusions, and avoid erroneous interpretations.

Exhibition for the 200th anniversary of Don Bosco’s

dream

Dialogue between past, present and future: temporary exhibition for the 200th anniversary of Don Bosco's dream. Don Bosco House Museum

To speak of Don Bosco's life without mentioning the world of dreams is to suppress an important aspect of his identity. The saint's life was marked by the supernatural, by visions and dreams that God sent him from childhood, when between the ages of nine and ten John Bosco had his first dream, which marked him deeply and accompanied him throughout his life.

The dream was considered prophetic because it shed light on his life project, both in his choice of the clerical state and in his total dedication to poor and abandoned youth. Indeed, in a certain sense it marked his path, since it began in the meadows of the Becchi, his home town, came to fruition in Turin when he settled in the Valdocco district and was commemorated in the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, at the Castro Pretorio in Rome, a year before his death. At the same time, from 1875, with the Salesian missions, he embraced several continents of the world, until today, where the Salesian presence works to keep the founder's dream alive.

Two centuries later, aware that Don Bosco's dream is still alive, the museum at the mother house in Valdocco, Turin, the *Museo Casa Don Bosco*, opened a temporary exhibition on 22 May that will remain open until 22 September 2024.

The exhibition, the result of previous research, is divided into several sections that explore the narrative, history and iconography of the dream in the arts and the resonance of the dream today, two hundred years later.

The selection of historical and artistic items on different media helps one discover different moments in Salesian history that recall this crucial event in the life of the saint.

Together with the historical photographs, objects from the period between the beatification (1929) and canonisation (1934), when the representation of the Dream in the arts began: illustrations in books, postcards, commemorative coins, oil and paper paintings, etc.

The exhibition presents an important selection of original prints. Corrado Mezzana (1890-1952), Guido Grilli (1905-1967), Cosimo [Nino] Musio (1933-2017) and Alarico Gattia (1927-2022) are just some of the artists. Comics by Grilli, Musio and Gattia were commissioned by the *Libreria della Dottrina Cristiana* (1941), founded by Don Bosco's fourth successor, Fr Peter Ricaldone (1870-1951). These works, which have been distributed in various publications, media, formats and languages throughout the world, are preserved by the current publishing house Elledici.

The exhibition is completed by seventeen photographs which won the international photography competition held since January 2024 and are promoted by the museum house with the aim of highlighting the artistic and creative talent of the entire Salesian world. The photos are described by their creators in the original language and come from Italy, Mexico, Panama, Slovakia, Spain and Venezuela.

These images involve the past, present and future and make us reflect on how, two centuries later, Don Bosco's Dream has become a reality in Salesian presences around the world.

In addition, the Youth Ministry Sector of the Salesian Congregation is promoting the celebration of the Salesian Youth Synod around the world and, on the occasion of the bicentenary of the dream, has collected more than 200 dreams of young people from all over the world in a publication called *Hidden Diamonds*, some of which are displayed in the exhibition.

Photo: Guido Grilli (1905-1967), Giovannino's Dream, 16.6 x 23

cm, 1952, film D15, picture no. 4. Historical Archive Editrice Elledici.

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Don Bosco and the Consolata

The oldest pillar in the Becchi area appears to date back to 1700. It was erected at the bottom of the plain towards the “Mainito”, where the families who lived in the ancient “Scaiota” used to meet. It then became a Salesian farmstead, which has now been renovated and converted into a youth house that hosts groups of young pilgrims to the Church and the Don Bosco House.

This is the Consolata pillar, with a statue of Our Lady of Consolation, always honoured with country flowers brought by devotees. John Bosco must have passed by that pillar many times, taking off his hat and murmuring a Hail Mary as his mother had taught him.

In 1958, the Salesians restored the old pillar and, with a solemn religious service, began the renewed worship of the community and the population, as recorded in the Chronicle of that year kept in the archives of the “Bernardi Semeria” Institute.

That statue of the Consolata could therefore be the first image of Mary that Don Bosco venerated in his boyhood at his home.

At the "Consolata" in Turin

Already as a student and seminarian in Chieri Don Bosco must have gone to Turin to venerate the Consolata (BM I, 200). But it is certain that, as a new priest, he celebrated his second Holy Mass precisely at the Shrine of the Consolata "to thank the Great Virgin Mary for the innumerable favours she had obtained for me from her Divine Son Jesus." (MO 96).

In the days of the wandering Oratory with no fixed abode, Don Bosco went with his boys to some churches in Turin for Sunday Mass, and mostly they went to the Consolata (BM II, 104, 193).

In May 1846-47, in order to thank Our Lady for having finally given them a stable home, he took his youngsters there to receive Holy Communion while the Oblate Fathers of the Virgin Mary, who officiated at the Shrine, were available to hear their confessions.

When, in the summer of 1846, Don Bosco fell seriously ill, his boys not only showed their grief in tears, but fearing that human means would not suffice for his recovery, they took turns from morning to night at the Shrine of the Consolata to pray to Our Lady to preserve their sick friend and father.

There were those who even made childish vows and those who fasted on bread and water so that Our Lady would hear them. They were heard and Don Bosco promised God that even his last breath would be for them.

The visits of Don Bosco and his boys to the Consolata continued. Invited once to sing Mass in the shrine with his youngsters, he arrived at the appointed time with the improvised "Schola cantorum", bringing with him the score of a "mass" he had composed for the occasion.

The organist there was the famous maestro Bodoira whom Don Bosco invited to play the organ. The latter did not even take a look at Don Bosco's score, but when he was about to play the music, he did not understand it at all and, leaving the organist's post in a huff, he left.

Don Bosco then sat down at the organ and

accompanied the Mass following his composition studded with signs that only he could understand. The young men who had previously been lost trying to follow the famous organist, continued to the end without a cue and their silvery voices attracted the admiration and sympathy of all the faithful at the service.

From 1848 until 1854 Don Bosco accompanied his boys in procession through the streets of Turin to the Consolata. His youngsters sang praises to the Virgin along the way and then participated in the Holy Mass he celebrated.

When Mamma Margaret died on 25 November 1856, Don Bosco went that morning to celebrate the Holy Mass of suffrage in the underground chapel of the Consolata, stopping to pray at length before the image of Our Lady, begging her to be a mother to him and his boys. And Mary fulfilled his prayers (BM V, 374).

Don Bosco at the Shrine of the Consolata not only had occasion to celebrate Holy Mass several times, but one day he also wanted to serve Mass there. Entering the shrine to pay a visit, he heard the signal for Mass to begin and realised that the altar server was missing. He got up, went to the sacristy, took the missal and served Mass with devotion (BM VII, 57).

And Don Bosco's attendance at the Shrine never ceased especially on the occasion of the Novena and the Feast of the Consolata.

Statuette of the Consolata in the Pinardi Chapel

On 2 September 1847 Don Bosco bought a statuette of Our Lady of the Consolata for 27 lire, placing it in the Pinardi Chapel.

In 1856, when the Chapel was being demolished, Fr Francis Giacomelli, a seminary companion and great friend of Don Bosco, wishing to keep for himself what he called the most distinguished monument of the foundation of the Oratory, took the statuette to the family home to Avigliana.

In 1882, his sister had a pillar with a niche

built at the house and placed the precious relic there.

When the Salesians came to know about the pillar in Avigliana, after the Giacomelli family home was being demolished, they managed to get the ancient statuette back. On 12 April 1929 it returned to the Turin Oratory after 73 years from the day Fr Giacomelli had removed it from the first chapel (E. GIRAUDI, *L'Oratorio di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI, 1935, p. 89-90).

Today the historic little statue remains the only reminder of the past in the new Pinardi Chapel, as its dearest and most precious treasure.

Don Bosco, who spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians throughout the world, never forgot his first devotion to the Virgin, venerated from his childhood at the Becchi pillar under the effigy of the "Consolata". When he arrived in Turin as a young diocesan priest, during the heroic period of his "Oratory", he drew light and advice, courage and comfort for the mission that the Lord had entrusted to him from Our Lady of the Consolata in her Sanctuary.

This is also why he is rightly considered one of Turin's saints.