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LIFE AND PLACES OF DON BOSCO

MEETING DON BOSCO IN THE PLACES WHERE HE LIVED. NOT A SIMPLE ITINERARY, BUT A TRUE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

Saint John Bosco, elevated to the honors of the altar by Pius XII in 1934, is honored in the Church, according to the intentions of Pope John Paul II, as "Father and Teacher of Youth." He is the founder of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, now known as the "Salesians of Don Bosco," primarily dedicated to school education, religious education, and professional training of young people. Born in Turin, within a few years, with a missionary spirit, it spread throughout the world.

Today, there are more than 14,000 Salesians worldwide, present in 134 countries across five continents. All are faithful to Don Bosco's educational method called the Preventive System, which is based on "reason, religion, and loving-kindness" and are committed to creating environments characterized by a sense of belonging (home), spirit of faith (parish), dynamic learning (school), and engaged social interaction (playgrounds).

Today, the Salesian family includes 32 officially recognized groups formed by a total of 402,500 members.

The origins. Childhood. The dream at nine years old.

It all begins in a farmhouse of the township **Becchi**, in **Castelnuovo**, on the arid hills of Monferrato, 15 kilometers from a small town, Chieri, 40 kilometers from Turin, the capital of the Kingdom of Savoy.

Here, on August 16, 1815, Giovanni Bosco is born. His father, Francesco, works as a sharecropper. Giovanni's family is a peasant family with few means, but they own a small house in the Becchi hamlet, near the owner's farm. It consists of the father, who was widowed young and remarried to Margherita Occhiena, the paternal grandmother, and Giovanni's two older brothers: Antonio, born from the first marriage, and Giuseppe born in 1814.

The father dies in 1817 from pneumonia when Giovanni is two years old. Margherita begins to provide for the three children alone, helped by her family of origin. She is illiterate but has a good memory. She teaches religion to her children by telling stories from the New and Old Testament, teaches prayers, trust in providence, as she had learned orally from the parish priest and from readings in the stable. Meanwhile, Giovanni becomes a small character in his community: on winter evenings, he reads to the peasants the story of the Royals of France and then makes them pray, repeating stories and sermons heard in church. At village festivals, he stubbornly tries to understand the tricks of jugglers and acrobats and, on Sundays, repeats a small show of games, always as an introduction to religious speeches and prayers.

At 9 years old, in 1824, immersed in this climate of religiosity, he **has a dream that will become foundational in his life**. He dreams of a large crowd of violent boys, many of whom were blaspheming. He rushed to make them stop "with fists and words," but then a man of venerable appearance appeared and admonished him: not with blows, but with meekness and instruction he had to transform those boys. "I will give you a teacher, under whose guidance you can become wise and without whom all wisdom becomes foolishness." Then appeared "a woman of majestic appearance, dressed in a mantle that shone from all sides" who kindly took him by the hand and invited him to look again: in place of the boys, he saw a group of wild and fierce beasts. The woman said, "Here is your field, here is where you must work. Make yourself humble, strong, and robust, and what you see happening to these animals at this moment, you must do for my children." Looking again, Giovanni saw that in place of the fierce animals appeared gentle lambs that were hopping as if for a celebration. Giovanni wakes up crying and confused. He interprets that dream as the announcement that he must become a priest "to approach, speak to, instruct in religion so many of



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my companions who are not bad, but become so because no one takes care of them," as he will say six years later to Don Calosso, his first advisor and tutor.

At 12 years old, his older brother Antonio, considering school a waste of time, demands that he start working, like the others. Giovanni therefore moves as a servant to the Moglia Farm in Moncuoco Torinese.

Chieri, the years of youth

In 1830, Margherita, after making her older children independent, resumes guiding Giovanni and works to help him continue his studies, even accepting help from the parish priest and wealthy families in Castelnuovo. Thus, Giovanni can leave for Chieri, where there is a gymnasium and a newly opened seminary (where **St. Giuseppe Cafasso** studied and years later **Blessed Giuseppe Allamano**, founder of the Consolata Missionaries, would study). He is a poor student, forced to work to pay for some expenses. He works as a carpenter, shoemaker, pastry chef, and gives tutoring. Meanwhile, at school he is considered a leader: he is popular because he is strong and willing to fight to defend weaker classmates, because he lets others copy homework, for his athletic and magician skills, and for his memory feats. Thus, a group forms around him to which he gives a name, "**the Society of Cheerfulness**," and its rules: to live as good Christians, fulfill one's school and religious duties, and above all... be cheerful! Everyone has the task of organizing games, holding conversations, reading books that contribute to everyone's cheerfulness. Everything that produces melancholy is forbidden, especially disobedience to the Lord's law. This society meets every Sunday at the Church of Sant'Antonio, run by the Jesuit Fathers, in the current **Piazza Cavour**, where a plaque still commemorates it.

In 1833, during his frequentation of the **Jewish ghetto in Chieri**, where he tutors children and borrows books from the bookseller Foa Elia, he forms a strong friendship with a Jewish boy called "**Jonah**," excellent at singing and playing billiards, a regular at Caffè Planta where Giovanni works and lives. Supported in life and instructed in catechism by his friend, Jonah, that is Jacob Levi, decides to convert to the Christian religion, opening a painful conflict with his Israelite family. The other great friendship born in those years is with one of his classmates, **Luigi Comollo**, whom Giovanni chooses as a model for spiritual life. He recognizes in him qualities that he feels he lacks: meekness, constancy in spiritual matters, devotion, "saintly" behavior.

At the end of high school, thanks to Don Cafasso's advice, he decides to continue his studies at the **seminary in Chieri**, where he stays until 1841. These are hard years, marked by discipline, study, work to support himself, the death of his friend Luigi Comollo, and also some periods of illness: Giovanni's health is not strong, although he tends to neglect it. The seminary fee is partly paid by Don Cafasso. Giovanni observes some negative aspects of seminary life, particularly the emotional detachment between teachers, priests very absorbed in their role as scholars and representatives of the Church, and young students; he resolves to "become a priest soon to stay among the youth, to assist them and satisfy them in every need." However, when the time comes to finally leave the Seminary, Giovanni recalls "that separation from a place where I had received education, knowledge, ecclesiastical spirit, and all the signs of kindness and affection one could desire became very painful for me."

Turin: adulthood.

On **June 9, 1841**, in the **Archdiocesan Church of the Immaculate Conception, in Via Arsenale**, the Archbishop of Turin lays his hands on Giovanni's head and consecrates him a priest. He is 26 years old and has become "Don Bosco." He celebrates his first mass in the Turin church of **San Francesco d'Assisi**, at the altar of the Guardian Angel. The first gift he asks the Holy Spirit for, as a priest, is "the effectiveness of the word to be able to do good to souls," because he realizes well how the "ornate" speech they had taught him in the seminary was little understood by the common people, often illiterate. He celebrates the second mass in the **Sanctuary of the Consolata** and the third mass in his



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hometown, Castelnuovo, on the day of Corpus Domini. Here he writes his personal Magnificat: "The evening of that day I returned to my house. When I was near the places where I had lived as a boy, and saw again the place where I had had the dream at nine years old, I could not hold back my emotion. I said: 'How wonderful are the ways of Providence! God has truly lifted a poor child from the earth, to place him among his chosen ones.'"

The Ecclesiastical Boarding School: il Convitto Ecclesiastico

Once again, a choice opens up on which direction to take: he receives job offers, some very advantageous from an economic point of view. In times of great decisions, the most precious treasure is a true friend. And Don Bosco has one. It's Don Cafasso. "What should I do?" he asks. "Don't accept anything. You must study theology and preaching. Forget all these offers. Come here to the Ecclesiastical Boarding School. You will complete your priestly formation..." On November 3, 1841, Don Bosco enters the Boarding School.

This institution was a kind of advanced school where, in Don Bosco's words, "one learned to become a priest". It was located next to the church of San Francesco d'Assisi, it was conceived by the Venerable Theologian Pio Brunone Lanteri, of Jesuit formation, and realized by Theologian Luigi Guala, with the aim of training the clergy. Two lessons in morality were held daily and one learned to preach. Valuable Church historians like Roger Aubert and Giacomo Martina have credited the Boarding School for the Turin clergy in a certain era "standing out among the clergy of all Italy for pastoral zeal, sanctity of customs, and fruitfulness of intelligent initiatives".

Don Bosco remains there for three years, enriching himself culturally and spiritually. Don Cafasso involves him in many pastoral experiences, such as catechism for young masons and chimney sweeps, takes him to prisons, and puts him in contact with other priests who in those years are starting the experience of oratories.

The beginning of the Oratory and the times of the itinerant Oratory

It is at the Boarding School that another important encounter for his life and mission occurs.

"On the **feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary** (December 8, 1841), Don Bosco was preparing to celebrate Mass. The sacristan, seeing a boy in a corner, invited him to serve the Mass. The boy refused, claiming he didn't know how; this infuriated the sacristan, who began to hit him with the cane used to light candles, making him flee. Seeing the scene, Don Bosco became indignant with the sacristan and forced him to chase after the boy to bring him back to church; he spoke to him and convinced him to stay and listen to the Mass, after which he led him to the chapel. Here he had the boy tell his story of being an orphan and proposed to hold a dedicated catechism for him, as the boy, already grown, was ashamed to participate in catechism with younger children who knew more than him."

That same evening, **Bartolomeo Garelli**, this the boy's name, begins his catechism with Don Bosco. Soon other young people join him, some who have just been released from prison. Don Bosco experiences firsthand that young people who regain their freedom, if they find a friend who takes care of them, stays by their side on festive days, finds them work with an honest master, visits them sometimes during the week, forget the past and begin to live well. They become honest citizens and good Christians.

This was the beginning of the Oratory, which was blessed by the Lord and grew as Don Bosco himself would not have imagined.

For the next five years, however, the hundreds of boys who flock to him do not have a fixed home. These are the difficult years of the migrant oratory. Giovanni Bosco initially accepts the proposal to move to the **Refuge that the Marchioness of Barolo** has begun to build and organize in the peripheral district of Valdocco, for the benefit of women released from prison with their children. The Marchioness asks him to be the Spiritual Director of her Work and allows him to use some rooms to welcome the boys of the oratory. The number of Don Bosco's young people grows rapidly week by



week. After only a year, it is necessary to find another place: the boys, at least 200, gather on festive days and after work around Don Bosco and theologian Borel to play, sing, confess, take long walks, but they are too noisy and it is difficult to find a place for them despite Don Bosco trying to rent rooms in surrounding farmhouses.

The Pinardi shed, the first oratory, Saint Domenico Savio

In 1846, don Bosco accepts Mr. Pinardi's offer and rents a house, a shed, and land in the then outskirts of Valdocco. Margherita, now elderly, agrees to come to Turin to help him, and becomes "**Mamma Margherita**" for the boys. Don Bosco begins to shelter homeless orphans. He teaches them a trade and to love the Lord, sings, plays, and prays with them. From the first boys also come the first collaborators to whom he recommends: "Stay with the boys, prevent sin with reason, religion, and loving-kindness".

In a few years, the first real headquarters of the Valdocco oratory is structured, equipped with playgrounds, craft workshops, dormitories, and a chapel (the **Pinardi Chapel**). Thus is born the **Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales in Valdocco**. Don Bosco is inspired by the preaching style and teachings of this 17th-century French archbishop saint, pervaded with understanding and gentleness, full of the firm conviction that human actions are always supported by the providential divine presence.

In 1853, young **Domenico Savio** arrives at the oratory. He walks quickly on the path that Don Bosco advises him to "become a saint", his great dream: cheerfulness, commitment to prayer and study, doing good to others, devotion to Mary. He will die, at the age of almost 15, in 1857, from cholera contracted in service to the sick. His mortal remains are venerated in the Turin Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. He is the patron saint of pueri cantores, as well as altar boys, both liturgical services he actively performed. Equally well-known is his special protection for pregnant women, through the sign of the so-called "little habit", in memory of the miracle with which the saint saved the life of his little sister who was to be born.

The Oratory gathers hundreds of boys who, coming from the countryside, begin to crowd the great city of Turin to work in the first factories born from that phenomenon known as the "industrial revolution". These are boys who work many hours a day, all week, with very tiring shifts. Far from their families, their home villages, the traditions of their people, often illiterate, they would easily have abandoned any reference to the Christian faith and would have been sucked into a materialistically conceived life. The Oratory offers them not only a roof and food, but, above all, human and spiritual values and soon becomes, in Don Bosco's project, also a place of school education and professional training. The Saint, in his tireless educational activity, also uses his skills as **a writer** and popularizer: among his publications we remember the periodical Catholic Readings and an Italian Youth Library and also professional texts such as The Italian Enologist, for use by wine producers. Moreover, great importance in his educational method is given to **music and singing**.

The second oratory

However, the Pinardi house fails to contain the multitudes of boys who flock to it. So Don Bosco thinks of a second oratory, in the area between Porta Nuova and the Po, and rents and sets up a small house with a shed and courtyard. On December 8, 1847, a large group of boys, led by Theologian Borel, leaves Valdocco for Porta Nuova, to start the new **St. Louis Oratory**. Twenty-five years later, in 1882, to strengthen the work of this oratory, Don Bosco will build and consecrate the beautiful **church of St. John the Evangelist**.

The Church of Saint Francis de Sales, the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians

The number of boys continues to increase, so don Bosco decides to build a church that can accommodate them all. On June 20, 1852, **the Church of Saint Francis de Sales** was inaugurated, while the Pinardi chapel is used as a study room, recreation room, sometimes even as a dormitory.

Later, as the boys and works increase further, and as a sign of devotion and gratitude to the Madonna, who had helped him so much, don Bosco began the construction of the **Basilica of Mary Help of Christians**.

Once again, the reference is to a dream, had in 1844: the Lady appeared to him and, leading him to a tract of cultivated land, said to him: "In this place where the glorious Martyrs of Turin Adventor, Solutor, and Octavius offered their martyrdom, I want God to be worshipped in a most special way". Saying this, she placed a foot on the place where the martyrdom took place and pointed it out to me with precision... Meanwhile, I saw myself surrounded by an immense and ever-growing number of young people; but looking at the Lady, the means and the place also grew, and I then saw a very large church, precisely in the place where she had shown me, with many buildings all around and with a beautiful monument in the middle." He then saw "the 'wonderful and tall church' with 'inside a white band, with the inscription in huge letters: "**Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea**" Here is my House, from here my glory".

On June 9, 1868, the solemn consecration of the basilica takes place. The dream has become reality. The "wonderful and tall church" is before everyone's eyes, grown as if by miracle. Don Bosco did not attribute any merit to himself: "I am not - he said - the author of the great things you see: it is the Lord, it is the Most Holy Mary, who deigned to use a poor priest to accomplish such works. Of my own, I have put nothing into it. It is Mary who has built her house for herself".

The mature age. Congregations and missions

After building the sanctuary, Don Bosco intensifies his action to spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians, Help of Christians, throughout the world.

In 1859, he founded the **Society of Saint Francis de Sales**, with the aim of training priests and laity committed to youth education according to his charism.

Thirteen years later, in 1872, wanting to extend his apostolate to girls as well, he also creates the **Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians**, born from the example and holiness of **Mother Maria Mazzarello**.

Thanks to his tireless dynamism, Don Bosco does not limit himself to Turin but opens oratories, vocational schools, agricultural institutes, and educational works in many other Italian cities. His fame as a great educator spreads rapidly throughout the peninsula and soon abroad as well. In 1875, he sends the first **Salesian missionaries to Argentina and Uruguay**. In subsequent years, he founded various other works in countries such as **Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay, and in Japan**. Together with his benefactors and committed laity, he gave life to associations of Salesian laity: the **Pious Union of Cooperators** who live in their families and the **Coadjutors** who, without holy orders and ecclesiastical dress, live together with priests, dealing especially with vocational schools for students. **Artemide Zatti** is the first Salesian lay coadjutor proclaimed a saint, in 2022, in recognition of the goodness of his work among the sick in Argentina. We know him by the appellations "relative of the poor", "the holy nurse", "the saint of the bicycle".

It is a time of frantic and intelligent activity, in which Don Bosco's extraordinary gifts and broad visions emerge, despite his progressive physical decline. He maintains contacts with religious and civil authorities, benefactors, and friends, through correspondence and personal meetings. He undertakes frequent trips to Italy (especially to Rome) and France (starting from 1875). Along with the fame of his work, veneration for his charismatic personality spreads. Triumphant are the receptions reserved for him in Paris (1883) and Barcelona (1886): Don Bosco has become a symbol for the sensitivity of the European Catholic world which, subjected to harsh anticlerical attacks, shows attention to supernatural events, consolidates its faith, closes ranks around the figure of the Roman pontiff, and reaches out in social, educational, and pastoral action.

Death

Exhausted by incessant work, he fell seriously ill. In the last days of his life, he said: "...What I have done, I have done for the Lord... More could have been done... But my children will do it... Our Congregation is led by God and protected by Mary Help of Christians". One of his recommendations was this: "Tell the young that I await them in Paradise..."

Don Bosco dies at 72 years old, on January 31, 1888, in Turin. The funeral is celebrated in the church of Mary Help of Christians. "At the solemn funeral procession - Pius XI recalls on the day of canonization - bishops, canons, parish priests, and many priests even from distant countries took part, and a multitude of faithful". More than a funeral, he adds, "it seemed a true triumph or the translation of the relics of a saint". After his death, "the fame of sanctity that he had rightly earned in life" grew day by day. Very many, Pius XI emphasizes in the letter "Geminata Laetitia", began to frequent the tomb both to honor him and in fulfillment of vows, and to invoke his help before God".

Don Bosco's life and the main places associated with his history: SUMMARY

1. Origins (1815-1830):

- * Born on August 16, 1815 in Castelnuovo, in the Monferrato hills
- * Grows up in a poor farming family in the Becchi hamlet
- * Loses his father at 2 years old, raised by his mother Margherita

2. Chieri, the years of youth (1830-1841):

- * Studies at the gymnasium and seminary of Chieri
- * Finds the "Society of Cheerfulness" with his companions
- * Forms important friendships (Jacob Levi, Luigi Comollo)

3. Turin: adulthood (1841-1846):

- * Ordained as a priest on June 9, 1841
- * Begins his work with poor and orphaned youth
- * Period of the "itinerant" oratory without a fixed location

4. The Pinaridi shed and the first oratory (1846-1868):

- * Rents the Pinaridi house in Valdocco, outskirts of Turin
- * Finds the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales
- * Builds the Church of Saint Francis de Sales (1852)
- * Builds the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians (1868)

5. Mature age (1859-1888):

- * Finds the Society of Saint Francis de Sales (1859)
- * Finds the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1872)
- * Sends the first Salesian missionaries to South America (1875)
- * Travels in Italy and Europe spreading his work
- * Finds Salesian lay associations

6. Death (1888):

- * Dies on January 31, 1888 in Turin, at the age of 72
- * Buried in the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Main places:

1. Castelnuovo and Becchi (birthplace and childhood)
2. Chieri (studies and early experiences)
3. Turin (main center of his activity)
4. Valdocco (Turin neighborhood, headquarters of the Oratory)



5. Basilica of Mary Help of Christians (main work and burial place)
6. Various places in Italy, France, Spain (travels and foundations)
7. South America (first Salesian missions)

Don Bosco's life is characterized by a constant commitment to education and support of poor and marginalized youth, the foundation of educational and religious works, and the international spread of his educational method based on "reason, religion, and loving-kindness."

