



## SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI IN TURIN: THE CHURCH THAT SHAPED THE RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL HISTORY OF THE CITY FROM THE 13TH CENTURY TO DON BOSCO

The church of Saint Francis of Assisi was founded, according to tradition, by Saint Francis during his passage through Turin in 1214, or more likely by a community of Franciscan friars who arrived in the 13th century. They settled in the center of the medieval city, near the Town Hall. From its origins, the friars' convent hosted activities related to civic administration, keeping the municipal treasury and archive and making the refectory available for the meetings of the Council's Wise Men. Moreover, several chapels were patronized by wealthy craft guilds or noble families who, through significant donations, supported the life of the community.

### Architectural restructuring and renovations

The current appearance of the church does not reveal the medieval layout of the building, because in 1608 - during the relaunch of Turin as the capital city of the Duchy of Savoy, the church and convent were almost totally rebuilt, with the intervention of the court and the municipality. The original Gothic structure of the church was replaced by a Renaissance-style three-nave plan, covered by vaults instead of the traditional medieval trusses, with side chapels commissioned by noble families and some professional and craft guilds, such as those of tailors, locksmiths, apothecaries, and lawyers.

From the mid-18th century, the Piedmontese architect Bernardo Antonio Vittone made further transformations, designing the classicist facade, the presbytery with a polychrome altar, the dome, and the choir. These interventions introduced new architectural and decorative solutions, continuously varied to capture light from above or simulate luminosity inside, recognizable in the oval windows above the arches of the central nave, in the round skylights, in the chapels with barrel vaults of the right nave, in the oval window of the choir, and also in the angels and putti flying among clouds, partly painted and partly in stucco in the dome.

### The era of the French Revolution and the Convitto Ecclesiastico

When religious congregations were suppressed during the French Revolution, the friars also had to leave their church, which was subsequently managed by diocesan priests. Some of them left a significant mark on the religious history of Piedmont, such as the theologian Luigi Guala, founder of the Convitto Ecclesiastico started in 1808 for the formation of the clergy and located within the complex of Saint Francis, Saint Joseph Cafasso, and Saint John Bosco.

### Don Bosco and his Oratory

Saint Joseph Cafasso, rector of the Convitto Ecclesiastico and the church of Saint Francis from 1833 to 1849, was the spiritual guide and confessor of Don Bosco. Don Bosco remembered Cafasso thus: "If I have done anything good, I owe it to this worthy ecclesiastic in whose hands I placed every decision, every study, every action of my life."

Inside the church are Cafasso's confessional, the altar of the Guardian Angel where Don Bosco celebrated his first mass in 1841, the sacristy where Don Bosco himself met the orphan Bartholomew Garelli, the first boy of his Oratory ("From that event - Don Bosco recalls - my action in favor of young people derived"); the chapel of Saint Bartholomew which was Don Bosco's first oratory, where he began his mission as an educator of youth ("I made friends - wrote Don Bosco in the Memoirs of the Oratory - with a group of boys in the very first days of my entry to the Convitto. I found them



around me when I had to go out along the boulevards and squares. They followed me also into the sacristy of the Convitto church... I touched with my hand 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 a job with an honest master, visits them a few times during the week, forget the past and begin to live well. They become honest citizens and good Christians") and, next to the chapel, the courtyard of the Oratory.

The church of Saint Francis of Assisi represents an important chapter in the religious and civil history of Turin, reflecting the transformations of the city through the centuries and its crucial role in the education and formation of the clergy and young people, profoundly influencing Piedmontese spirituality.

