

DON BOSCO'S STORY

John Bosco was born on the 16th of August 1815, in Becchi, a hamlet belonging to the municipality of Castelnuovo d'Asti (today Castelnuovo Don Bosco). He came from a family of poor farmers. He lost his father, Francesco, at the age of two.

His mother Margherita raised him with tenderness and energy. She taught him to cultivate the soil and to see God behind the beauty of the heavens, the abundance of the harvest, the rain which showered the vines. Mamma Margherita, in the church, learned to pray, and she taught her children to do the same. For John, to pray meant to speak with God on his knees on the kitchen pavement, to think of him while seated on the grass, gazing at the heavens.

From his mother, John learned to see God also in other faces, those of the poor or those of the miserable ones who came knocking at the door of the house during winter, and to whom Margherita gave hot soup, mended shoes.

The great dream

At the age of nine, Don Bosco had the first, great dream which marked his entire life. He saw a multitude of very poor boys who play and blaspheme. A Man of majestic appearance told him: With meekness and charity you will conquer these your friends; and a Lady just as majestic added: Make yourself humble, strong and robust. At the right time you will understand everything.

The years which followed were given direction by that dream. Son and mother saw in it the indication of a way of life.

John tried immediately to do good for boys. When the visiting performers trumpet announced a local feast in the nearby hills, John went and sat in the front row to watch them. He studied the jugglers, tricks and the acrobats secrets. One Sunday evening, John gave his first performance in front of the kids from the neighbouring houses. He performed balancing miracles with pots and pans on the tip of his nose. Then he jumped up on a rope strung between two trees, and walked on it applauded by the young spectators. Before the grandiose conclusion, he repeated for them the sermon he heard at the morning Mass, and invited all to pray. The games and the Word of God began transforming his little friends, who willingly prayed in his company.

Little John understood that to do good for so many boys he needed to study and become a priest. But his brother Anthony, already 18 and an unlettered peasant, did not want to hear of this... He threw away his books and belted him.

On a cold morning of February 1827, John left his home and went to look for work as a farm-servant. He was only 12 but life at home was unbearable on account of the continuous quarrels with Anthony. He worked on the Moglia farm, near Moncucco, during three years. He led the cattle to pasture, milked the cows, put fresh hay in the manger, plowed the fields with the oxen. During the long nights of winter time and during summer, sitting under the trees while the cows stripped their leaves, he went back to his books and studies.

Anthony married three years later. John returned home and resumed his schooling, first at Castelnuovo and then at Chieri. To provide for his needs he learnt different trades: tailor, blacksmith, barman, and he even coached students after classes.

He was intelligent and brilliant, and the best students of the school flocked around him. He

founded what was known as the Happy Club. At 20 years of age, John Bosco took the most important decision of his life: he entered the Seminary. There followed six years of intense studies after which he was ordained priest.

He becomes Don Bosco

On June 5, 1841, the archbishop of Turin ordained John Bosco a priest. Now Don Bosco (in Italy the family name of the priest is preceded by Don) was finally able to dedicate himself full time to the abandoned boys he had seen in his dreams. He went to look for them in the streets of Turin. On those first Sundays—says young Michael Rua, one of the first boys he met in those first months, Don Bosco went through the city to become aware of the moral conditions of the young. He was shocked. The outskirts of the city were zones of turmoil and revolution, places of desolation. Unemployed, sad and ready to do anything adolescents caused problems on the streets. Don Bosco could see them betting on street corners, their faces hard and determined, as if to get their way at any cost.

Near the city public market (Turin had a population of 117,000 inhabitants at that time) he discovered a real market of young workers. The part near Porta Palazzo, he wrote years later swarmed with peddlers, shoe polishers, stable-boys, vendors of any kind, errand boys: all poor people who barely eked out a living day after day. These boys who roamed the streets of Turin were the wicked effect of an event that was throwing the world into confusion: the industrial revolution. This started in England but it soon crossed the English Channel and made its way to the South. It would bring a sense of well-being unheard of in previous centuries, but it would be at a very high human cost: the labour question and the gathering of great number of families below the poverty line in the slums of the cities, coming in from the countryside in search of a better life.

Boys in prison

But Don Bosco met the most dramatic situation when he entered the prisons. he wrote: To see so many boys, from 12 to 18 years of age, all healthy, strong, intelligent, insect bitten, lacking spiritual and material food, was something that horrified me. In the face of such a situation he made his decision: I must by any available means prevent boys ending up here. There were 16 parishes in Turin. The parish priests were aware of the problem of the young but they were expecting them to go to the sacristies and to the Churches for the required catechism classes. They did not realize that because of population growth and migration to the city this way of doing things was inefficient. It was necessary to try new ways, to invent new schemes, to try another form of apostolate, meeting the boys in shops, offices, market places. Many young priests tried this.

Don Bosco met the first boy on December 8, 1841. He took care of him. Three days later there were nine, three months later twenty five and in summer eighty. They were pavers, stone-cutters, masons, plasterers who came from far away places, he recalled in his brief Memoirs.

Thus was born the youth centre (which he called oratorio). This was not simply a charitable institution, and its activities were not limited to Sundays. For Don Bosco the oratorio became his permanent occupation and he looked for jobs for the ones who were unemployed. He tried to obtain a fairer treatment for those who had jobs, he taught those willing to study after their days work.

But some of his boys did not have sleeping quarters and slept under bridges or in bleak public

dormitories. Twice he tried to provide lodgings in his house. The first time they stole the blankets; the second they even emptied the hay-loft.

He did not give up though, being the obstinate optimist he was. In the month of May, 1847, he gave shelter to a young lad from Valesia, in one of the three rooms he was renting out in the slums of Valdocco where he was living with his mother. I had three lira when I arrived in Turin said the boy sitting near the fire, but I found no work and no place to sleep.

Money problems

After the youngster from Valsesia, another six boys arrived that same year. In the first months money became a dramatic problem for Don Bosco. It would remain a problem throughout his life. His first benefactor was not a countess but his mother. Margaret (Mamma Margherita), a 59 year old poor peasant, had left her house at Becchi to become mother to these poor boys. To be able to put something on the table, for them to eat, she sold her wedding ring, her earrings and her necklace, things which she had kept jealously until then. The boys sheltered by Don Bosco numbered 36 in 1852, 115 in 1854, 470 in 1860 and 600 in 1861, 800 being the maximum some time later.

Some of these boys decided to do what Don Bosco was doing, that is, to spend their lives in the service of abandoned boys. And this was the origin of the Salesian Congregation. Among the first members we find Michael Rua, John Cagliero (who later became a Cardinal), John Baptist Francesia. In the archives of the Salesian Congregation some extraordinary documents, are to be found, such as: a contract of apprenticeship on ordinary paper, dated November 1851; another one on stamped paper costing 40 cents, dated February 8, 1852; there are others with later dates. These are among the first contracts of apprenticeship to be found in Turin. All of them are signed by the employer, the apprentice and Don Bosco.

In those contracts Don Bosco touched on many sore spots. Some employers made servants and scullery-boys of the apprentices. Don Bosco obliged them to employ them only in their acknowledged trade. Employers used to beat the boys. Don Bosco required of them that corrections be made only through words. He cared for their health, he demanded that they be given rest on feast days, that they be given their annual holidays. But in spite of all the efforts and contracts, the situation of the apprentices of the time remained very difficult.

Bashing leather and pushing an awl

In autumn 1853 Don Bosco came to a decision. He begun shoemaking and tailoring shops in the Oratory at Valdocco. The shoemaking shop was located in a very narrow place near the bell-tower of the first church he had just finished building. There Don Bosco sat at a cobblers bench and in front of four little boys he pounded away at a leather sole. Then he taught them how to manage an awl and pack-thread.

After these shops for shoemakers and tailors, Don Bosco built other shops aimed at training book-binders, carpenters, printers and mechanics; six shops in which the privileged place was reserved for orphans, the poor and totally abandoned boys. To take care of these shops Don Bosco invented a new type of religious: the Coadjutors or Salesian Brothers. Similar shops were very soon built in other Salesian presences outside Turin. The Salesian Brothers have the same dignity and rights as those of the Salesian Priests and clerics, but they are specialized people for professional schools. (At the time of Don Bosco's death, the Salesian professional schools numbered 14 in all. They existed in Italy, France, Spain and Argentina. The number later would

grow to 200 across the world).

Password: At once

In the dialogue between Don Bosco and the first boy (he himself wrote this dialogue) there is the expression at once. It looks like an ordinary expression but in reality it is Don Bosco's password. In fact Don Bosco is drawn to action by the urgent needs of the young and the impossibility of waiting any longer. In the face of the uncertainty of the industrial revolution, in the impossibility of finding good and ready made plans and programmes of action, Don Bosco and the first Salesians used all their energies to do something at once for young people in trouble. What directed their programmes of action were the urgent needs of the youngsters. And young people needed a school and a job that would guarantee a more secure future for them; they needed to feel as if they were really boys, that is, they needed to let loose their desire to run and jump in open green spaces, instead of feeling sad beside city sidewalks; they needed to meet God to discover and live according to their dignity. Bread, catechism, professional training and work protected by a good work contract were the things therefore that Don Bosco and his Salesians tried to offer right away to these youngsters. If you come upon somebody who is dying of hunger, instead of giving him a fish, teach him how to fish, it has rightly been said. But the contrary is also true: If you come upon somebody dying of hunger, give him a fish so that he may have the time to learn how to fish. Immediate intervention is not enough nor is it enough to prepare a different future because meanwhile the poor may die of misery.

I have done nothing

In the following years, Don Bosco, working almost to exhaustion, accomplished many imposing works. Besides the Salesians, he founded the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Salesian Cooperators. He built the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco and founded 59 Salesian houses in six nations. He started the Salesian Missions in Latin America sending there Salesian priests, brothers and sisters. He published a series of popular books for ordinary Christians and for boys. He invented a System of Education founded on three values: Reason, Religion and Loving kindness. Very soon people saw in it an ideal system to educate the young. When somebody would tell Don Bosco the list of the works he performed, he would interrupt the person and immediately say: I have done nothing by myself. It is the Virgin Mary who has done everything. She had traced out his road in the famous dream he had when he was nine. Don Bosco died on January 31, 1888, at dawn. To the Salesians who were keeping vigil around his bed he said in a whisper these last words: Love each other as brothers. Do good to all and evil to none... Tell my boys that I wait for them all in Paradise.

Don Bosco's message

After one hundred years Don Bosco has still a message for any youngster. The following could be his words:

I was a person like you. I tried to give meaning to my life. With God's help I decided against having my own family to become a father, a brother and a friend to those who do not have a father, brothers or friends. If you want to be like me we will walk together sharing our life with people living in South American shanty towns, with lepers in India or with so many poor people living in the slums of an Italian city: people deprived of affection, of meaning in life, poor people who need God and you to go on living. In any case, if you do not feel like living as I did, I still want to remind you of a very important truth: life, this great gift which comes from God, is to be

spent well. You will spend it well if you do not hide egoistically in your shell but open yourself to love, committing yourself to the good of the one who is poorer than you.