

### GIOVANNI MELCHIORRE BOSCO "DON BOSCO" (1815- 1888)

*Summer vacations in the 1950s saw my brother and me spending an enjoyable 10 days every summer at one of the two CYO Summer camps in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Our very favorite camp was Camp Don Bosco, nestled in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains near Carnation, Washington. While attending camp, the seminarian-counselors taught us some things about John Bosco. It was not until I was an adult and had moved in 1970 to San Francisco Bay Area to teach at Dominican College that I became more interested in this Saint of 19th Century Italy: the Patron Saint of Youth. As I studied more about the Italian immigrants who settled in the Bay Area (my own paternal grandparents had come to Seattle from Liguria), I learned about Sts. Peter and Paul Church and the work of the Salesians in the Italian-American community of North Beach.*

*Since this August 16th is the close of the year-long celebration in Turin and around the world of the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of Don Bosco ("Don" is an honorific title given to priests in Italy), I thought it would be interesting and informative to do this essay about him. In addition, in June, 2015, Pope Francis will visit Turin to view the Shroud of Turin and to hold a Festival of Youth to celebrate this saint.*



John Bosco was born on August 16, 1815 near the hillside hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti, Piedmont in the Kingdom of Sardinia. The village is located about 12 miles east of Turin and about 16 miles northwest of Asti. He was the youngest son of Francesco Bosco (1784–1817) and Margherita Occhiena Bosco (1788–1856), with an older brother, Giuseppe, and stepbrother, Antonio. The Boscos were a peasant family who farmed for landowners in the area, and also acquired some farmland for themselves as well. John Bosco was born into a time of great shortage and famine in the Piedmontese countryside, following the devastation wrought by the Napoleonic wars and a drought in 1817.

When he was about two years old, John's father died, leaving the support of the three boys to his mother, Margherita. She taught them that they each needed to carry his weight and help with the upkeep of their home and farm. There were chores to do, firewood to cut and gather, fields to plow, and crops to tend. John and his older brother Giuseppe, supervised by their stepbrother Antonio, tackled the endless work with energy. Margherita played a strong role in John's formation and personality, and was an early supporter of his life goals. In 1825, when he was nine, John had the first of a series of dreams which would play an influential role in his outlook and life's work. This first dream "left a profound impression on him for the rest of his life," according to his own memoirs. In the dream, he saw a large group of very poor boys playing and cursing, and also a man, who "appeared, nobly attired, with a manly and imposing bearing." The man said to him: "You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows, but with gentleness and kindness. So begin right now to show them that sin is ugly and virtue beautiful."

Then a woman appeared. Putting her arms around him, she said, "Watch what I do, John." John looked. The boys changed to a pack of snarling wild animals whose growls sent terror to his heart. Then the woman put out her hand. The beasts changed again, to a frolicking flock of lambs. "But what does it all mean? I'm just a farm boy. What can I do?" He burst into tears of frustration.

The Lady's answer came to him, and was to be repeated audibly several times in his life. "This is the field of your work. Be humble, steadfast, and strong!"

The vision urged John to go among the farm boys, not just as a playmate but as a leader. More than once he came home with a black eye, a battered cheek, or torn shirt and in explanation would say to Margherita, “But, Mamma, those boys aren’t really bad. They haven’t got a good mother like I have, and they don’t know their catechism, and their parents don’t take them to church. When I’m with them, they behave better. Please, Mamma, may I go with them?”

He learned magic tricks from traveling showmen. They taught him to juggle and to walk a tightrope. He impressed his ruffian friends with his performances and through these, he became their popular leader. Eventually he opened his own carnival show. Admission to the show was one rosary to be recited by all spectators before the performance began. An added attraction of the show: the Sunday sermon, repeated by the young John himself. The show grounds were the field in front of the house, where Margherita often watched her son perform and wondered what might come of it all.

John knew his vocation was to be a priest to minister to boys like his peasant friends. But the priesthood meant studies, and there was no money on the Bosco farm. Even school was almost impossible. Because of the goodness of a farmer who had taught him, John had learned to read and write and do sums at the age of eight. His first schooling came the next year, when he hiked some three miles every morning to the country school of a priest. But the increasing hostility of his older stepbrother, Antonio, who was not pacified by John’s attempts to put in extra hours on the farm, made John’s life difficult. Antonio protested loudly that John was just “a peasant like us!”

And so, for the sake of domestic peace, Margherita Bosco divided the paltry estate left by her husband and allowed her youngest son to go to Castelnuovo to attend public school and board with a good family she knew. Alone in the town, John soon learned the hardships of an orphan’s life, which would affect his desire to help orphans in his future ministry. He worked after school to support himself. Though he was only 15, he labored in a blacksmith shop, then as a tailor, a waiter, a pin-boy in a bowling alley, a shoemaker--anything to get a few pennies and ease his mother’s burden.

At school he did exceptionally well. It is true that his teacher and classmates had looked upon him as a country dolt in the beginning, but his brilliant memory and steadfast application to his studies soon won him everyone’s respect. In one year he was ready for secondary studies, and he completed his secondary education in one scholastic year and one summer, something that ordinarily took three years to complete. (One teacher, on finding this husky farm boy in his class, almost dwarfing the smaller town boys, remarked, “What are you, a giant moron or a genius?” Somewhere in between,” was John’s ready answer, “just a pupil who is determined to study hard and learn.”)

Throughout his school years, John did not lose sight of his desire to enter the priesthood. “I’m going to be a priest,” he told his friends, “and I’m going to give my life to the care of boys!”

By 1835, when John was 20, he was ready for the seminary, taking with him an enviable record for excellence in studies, a reputation for solid piety, and the friendship of countless people in many walks of life. Prominent among them was an old priest, Father Cafasso (now St. Joseph Cafasso), John’s confessor, whom John had met in 1830. Fr. Cafasso supported John in his formal education and encouraged him to continue to pursue his dream of becoming a priest. John entered the seminary at Chieri. After six years of study, he was ordained a priest on the eve of Trinity Sunday by Archbishop Franzoni of Turin.

Don Bosco’s first priestly assignment was as the chaplain of the *Rifugio* (“Refuge”), a boarding school for girls founded in Turin by the Marchioness



*St. Joseph Cafasso*

Giulia di Barolo. Other early ministries included visiting prisoners, teaching catechism, and helping out at country parishes.

In the 1840s Turin had a population of 117,000 inhabitants and reflected the effects of industrialization and urbanization. There were numerous poor families who lived in the slums of the city, having come from the countryside in search of a better life. These slums were overrun by the poverty that resulted inevitably from sweatshop factories with their hazardous machinery, child labor, and starvation wages. In visiting the prisons Don Bosco was disturbed to see so many boys from 12 to 18 years of age. He was determined to find a way to prevent them from ending up in prison. Because of the growth of the population and the migration to the city, Don Bosco found the traditional methods of parish ministry inefficient. He decided it was necessary to try another form of apostolate, and he formed the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. (He called it this because he admired the gentle holiness of this saint).

Through his ministry in the Oratory, he began to meet the boys where they worked and gathered in shops and in the marketplace. They were pavers, stone-cutters, masons, plasterers who came from faraway places, he recalled in his brief memoirs.

The Oratory was a term which to his mind suggested prayer and organized recreation. In the beginning it was a floating thing, its membership growing daily in large proportions. There was no one place to meet because in those troublesome times people were afraid of a large group of working boys and, besides, who relishes the uproar of some 200 kids enjoying a day's freedom from the imprisonment of a factory?

Every Sunday they would meet in a different spot, a city church, a cemetery chapel, or an empty lot. Don Bosco would hear their confessions and say Mass for them. An hour of religious instruction would follow, plain, homely talks coming from the heart and embodying the solid truths of the faith. Then he would take his gypsy band into the country for an all-day outing of games. A final talk would close the "Oratory day," and the tired bunch would trail into Turin, scattering to their homes along the way.

During the week, Don Bosco used to tour the city shops, checking on his boys, making sure they had not forgotten his instructions to work hard and work well.

Those were heroic times, "those pioneer days," Don Bosco used to call them. "Days of strenuous work they were, a shiftless existence that threatened to collapse any Sunday, a bankrupt enterprise with no capital and very little funds." Besides this, the city fathers, worried by the new revolutionary cries of "freedom for the working classes," eyed Don Bosco's boys as a dangerous, half-baked army of the "children of the people," headed by an ambitious priest. Actually this tired, penniless priest sought only a chance to bring God's peace and order to the hearts of restless youth.



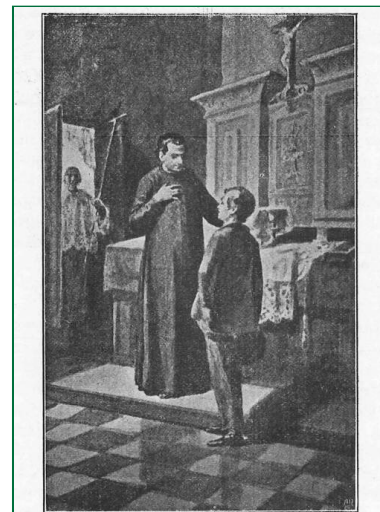
*Statue of John Bosco at Valdocco, Turin*

Don Bosco and his Oratorio moved around town over the years; he was turned out of several places in succession. For instance, after only two months based in the church of St. Martin, the entire neighborhood expressed its annoyance with the noise coming from the boys at play. A formal complaint was lodged against them with the municipality. Rumors also circulated that the meetings conducted by the priest with his boys were dangerous; their recreation might be turned into a revolution against the government. The predictable result: the group was evicted.

In 1846 Don Bosco bought an empty lot and a dilapidated shed in an underdeveloped section of Turin called Valdocco. Although it was true that next door was a saloon and across the street a hotel

of ill-repute, it really didn't matter. The Oratory ground was sacred for, as he later learned in a "dream," it was the burial ground of the Martyrs of Turin. With a roof over his head, Don Bosco now felt his mission was on a positive footing. He dug the ground under the shed deeper and converted it into a chapel, with a tiny anteroom, and every Sunday 500 lads managed quite miraculously to squeeze into it for Mass.

The Oratorio was not simply a charitable institution, and its activities were not limited to Sundays. For Don Bosco it became his permanent occupation. He looked for jobs for the unemployed. Some of the 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 the boys stole blankets; the second time they emptied the hay-loft. He did not give up. In May 1847, he gave shelter to a young boy from Valesia, in one of the three rooms he was renting at the time in the slums of Valdocco, where he was living with his mother. He and "Mamma Margherita" began taking in orphans. By 1852, the boys sheltered by Don Bosco numbered 36; by 1854, there were 115. The numbers continued to grow: 470 in 1860 and 600 in 1861. Sometime later the number reached 800, which was the maximum number.



Don Bosco and Bartolomeo Garelli on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December, 8, 1841

In the archives of the Salesian Congregation is a contract of apprenticeship on ordinary paper, dated November 1851; another one on stamped paper costing 40 cents, dated February 8, 1852; and 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 sensitive issues. Some employers customarily made servants and scullery-boys of the apprentices. Don Bosco obliged them to agree to employ the boys only in their acknowledged trade. Employers had often beaten the boys. Don Bosco required them to agree that corrections would only be made verbally. He cared for their health, and demanded that they be given rest on feast days, and that they be given an annual holiday. But in spite of all the efforts and contracts, the situation of the apprentices still remained difficult.

Don Bosco disliked the ideals that had been exported by revolutionary France in the late 18th century, calling Rousseau and Voltaire "two vicious leaders of incredulity." He favored an ultramontane view of politics that acknowledged the supreme authority of the pope. In 1854, when the Kingdom of Sardinia was about to pass a law suppressing monastic orders and confiscating ecclesiastical properties, Don Bosco reported a series of dreams about "great funerals at court," referring to politicians or members of the Savoy court.

In November 1854, he sent a letter to King Victor Emmanuel II, admonishing him to oppose the confiscation of church property and suppression of the orders, but the King failed to respond. Don Bosco's actions, which have been described by Italian historian Erberto Petoia as having "manifest blackmailing intentions," ended only after the intervention of Prime Minister Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour. The king's family suffered a number of deaths in a short period of time. From January to May 1855, the king's mother (age 54), wife (32), newborn son (Vittorio Emanuele, Count of Genoa; nearly four months old), and his only brother (32) all died.

Opposition to Don Bosco and his work came from various quarters. Traditionalist clergy accused him of stealing a large number of young and old people away from their own parishes. Nationalist politicians (including some clergy) saw his several hundred young men as a recruiting ground for revolution. The Marquis de Cavour, chief of police in Turin, regarded the open-air catechisms as overtly political and a threat to the State, and was highly suspicious of Don Bosco's support for the powers of the papacy. Don Bosco was interrogated on several occasions, but no charges made. Closure of his work may have been prevented by orders from the king that Don Bosco was not to be disturbed.

Several attempts were also made on his life, including a near-stabbing, bludgeoning and a shooting. Early biographers put this down to the growing influence of the Waldensians in opposition to Catholic clergy in various parts of Sardinia and other Italian provinces.

One influential friend was the Piedmontese Justice Minister Urbano Rattazzi. He was anticlerical in his politics, but he saw some value in Don Bosco's work. While Rattazzi was pushing a bill through the Sardinian legislature to suppress religious orders, he advised Don Bosco on how to get around the law. He suggested founding a religious order to keep the Oratory going after its founder's death. Don Bosco had already been thinking about this problem, too. He had been slowly organizing his helpers into a loose "Congregation of St. Francis de Sales." He was also training select older boys for the priesthood. Another supporter of the idea to establish a religious order to carry out Don Bosco's vision was the reigning pope, Pius IX.



*Urbano Rattazzi  
1808-1873*

In 1859, Don Bosco selected the experienced priest Vittorio Alasonatti, 15 seminarians and one high school boy and formed them into the more formal "Society of St. Francis de Sales." This was the nucleus of the Salesians, the religious order that would carry on his work. When the group had their next meeting, they voted on the admission of Joseph Rossi as a lay member, the first Salesian brother. The Salesian Congregation was divided into priests, seminarians and "coadjutors" (the lay brothers).

Next, he worked with Mary Mazzarello and a group of girls in the hill town of Mornese. Here, in 1871, he founded a group of religious sisters to do for girls what the Salesians were doing for boys. They were called the "Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians." In 1874, he founded yet another group, the "Salesian Cooperators." These were mostly lay people who would work for young people similar to what the Daughters and the Salesians were doing, but would not join a religious order.

When Don Bosco founded the Salesian Society, the thought of the missions obsessed him, though he completely lacked the financial means to send missionaries at that time. He claimed he had another dream where he saw himself on a vast plain, inhabited by primitive peoples, who spent their time hunting or fighting among themselves or against soldiers in European uniforms. Along came a band of missionaries, but they were all massacred. A second group appeared which Don Bosco at once recognized as Salesians. Astonished, he witnessed an unexpected change when the fierce savages laid down their arms and listened to the missionaries. It seems the dream made a great impression on him because he tried hard to identify the men and the country of the dream. For three years he collected information about different countries. A request from Argentina turned him towards the Indians of Patagonia, and a study of these people convinced him that the country and its inhabitants were the ones he had seen in his dream. Towards the end of 1874, he received letters from the Argentine consul at Savona requesting that he accept an Italian parish in Buenos Aires and a school for boys at San Nicolas de los Arroyos.

Don Bosco regarded this as a sign of providence and started to prepare a mission. Adopting a way of evangelization that would not expose his missionaries to wild, "uncivilized" tribes, he proposed setting up bases in safe locations from which missionary efforts were to be launched. Negotiations started after Archbishop Aneiros of Buenos Aires indicated that he would be glad to receive the Salesians. In a ceremony held on January 29, 1875, Don Bosco was able to convey the great news to the Oratory. On February 5 he announced the fact in a circular letter to all Salesians asking for volunteers to apply in writing. He proposed that the first missionary departure start in October. There were many volunteers.

**THE “PREVENTIVE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION”**

As Don Bosco’s name became famous, more priests came to help him. These were primarily secular priests released by their bishops for this work. Though they came from different sections of Italy, they soon realized that Don Bosco had an educational system of his own, which he called “the preventive system.”

Essentially it was based on Christian charity and structured to prevent a boy from becoming bad. He believed education was a “matter of the heart” and said that the boys must not only be loved, but know that they are loved. He also pointed to three components of the Preventive System: reason, religion and kindness. Music and games also went into the mix. The purpose of the system was to establish a sense of understanding between teacher and pupil, engendered by daily contact, friendly chats, and an interest that was felt by the young person. It fostered a sense of religion supported by the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

The system was not new, though in Don Bosco’s hands it achieved a freshness all its own. While the system compensated for errors committed by youngsters, who are often changeable and always forgetful, it did not condone the errors. Instead, it used these errors as steppingstones to the formation of a solid character, permeated by principles of Christian character.

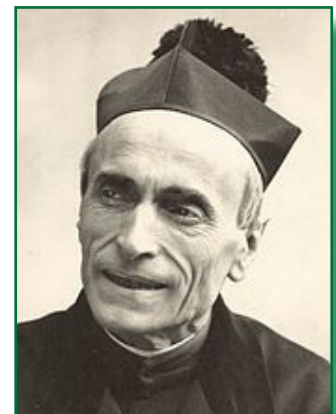
**DEATH AND LEGACY**

Don Giovanni Bosco died on January 31, 1888. His funeral was attended by thousands. Soon after his death, there was popular demand to have him canonized. The Archdiocese of Turin investigated and witnesses were called to determine if Don Bosco was worthy to be declared a saint. The Salesians, Daughters and Cooperators gave supportive testimonies. However, many people remembered Don Bosco’s controversies in the 1870s with Archbishop Gastaldi and some others high in the Church hierarchy who thought him a loose cannon and a “wheeler-dealer.” In the canonization process, testimony was heard about how he had gone around Archbishop Gastaldi to get some of his men ordained and about their lack of academic preparation and ecclesiastical decorum. Political cartoons from the 1860s and later showed him shaking money from the pockets of old ladies or going off to America for the same purpose. These cartoons had not been forgotten. Opponents of Don Bosco, including some cardinals, were in a position to block his canonization for decades, and around 1925 many Salesians feared that his canonization would not happen.

However, Pope Pius XI had known Don Bosco and pushed the cause forward. Don Bosco was declared blessed in 1929 and canonized on Easter Sunday of 1934, when he was given the title of “Father and Teacher of Youth.”

Don Bosco had also been popularly known as the patron saint of illusionists. On January 30, 2002, Silvio Mantelli petitioned Pope St. John Paul II to formally declare St. Giovanni Bosco the Patron of Stage Magicians. Catholic stage magicians who practice Gospel Magic venerate Don Bosco by offering free magic shows to underprivileged children on his feast day.

Don Bosco’s work was carried on by his early pupil, collaborator and companion, Michael Rua, who was appointed Rector Major of the Salesian Society by Pope Leo XIII in 1888.



*Michael Rua,  
Successor to Don Bosco  
1837-1910*

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from Salesians of Don Bosco, Province of St. Andrew in San Francisco, CA website; The Catholic Encyclopedia website; Encyclopedia Britannica website; and Wikipedia.*