

John Bosco

“Don Bosco” redirects here. For other uses, see [Don Bosco \(disambiguation\)](#).

John Bosco (Italian: *Giovanni Melchiorre Bosco*; 16 August 1815^[2] – 31 January 1888^{[3][4]}), popularly known as **Don Bosco**, was an Italian Roman Catholic priest of the Latin Church, educator and writer of the 19th century. While working in Turin, where the population suffered many of the effects of industrialization and urbanization, he dedicated his life to the betterment and education of street children, juvenile delinquents, and other disadvantaged youth. He developed teaching methods based on love rather than punishment, a method that became known as the *Salesian Preventive System*.^[5] A follower of the spirituality and philosophy of *Saint Francis de Sales*, Bosco dedicated his works to him when he founded the *Salesians of Don Bosco*, based in Turin.^[6] Together with *Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, he founded the *Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, a religious congregation of nuns dedicated to the care and education of poor girls.

In 1876 Bosco founded a movement of laity, the *Association of Salesian Cooperators*, with the same educational mission to the poor.^[7] In 1875 he began to publish the *Salesian Bulletin*.^{[8][9]} The *Bulletin* has remained in continuous publication, and is currently published in 50 different editions and 30 languages.^[8]

Bosco established a network of organizations and centres to carry on his work. Following his posthumous beatification in 1929, he was canonized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church by *Pope Pius XI* in 1934.

1 Life

Bosco was born in the evening of 16 August 1815 in the hillside hamlet of *Becchi*, Italy.^[10] He was the youngest son of *Francesco Bosco* (1784–1817) and *Margherita Occhiena*. He had two older brothers, *Antonio* and *Giuseppe* (1813–1862).^[10] The *Boscos* of *Becchi* were farmhands of the *Moglia* Family. 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.^[11]

When he was little more than two years old his father *Francesco* died, leaving the support of three boys to his mother, *Margherita*.^[1] She played a strong role in Bosco's formation and personality,^[12] and was an early supporter

of her son's ideals.^{[13][14]}

In 1825, when he was nine, Bosco had the first of a series of dreams which would play an influential role in his outlook and work.^[15] This first dream “left a profound impression on him for the rest of his life”, according to his own memoirs.^[15] Bosco apparently saw a multitude of very poor boys who play and blaspheme, and a man, who “appeared, nobly attired, with a manly and imposing bearing”.^[15] 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.^[15]

When the traveling entertainers performed at a local feast in the nearby hills, John watched and studied the jugglers' tricks and the acrobats' secrets. Then he would put on shows of his skills as a juggler, magician and acrobat^[16] with prayers before and after the performance.^[17]

Poverty prevented any serious attempt at schooling. John's early years were spent as a shepherd, and he received his first instruction from a parish priest.^[1] his childhood experiences are thought to have inspired him to become a priest.^[18] At the time, being a priest was generally seen as a profession for the privileged classes, rather than farmers, although it was not unknown.^[18] Some biographers portray his older brother *Antonio* as the main obstacle for Bosco's ambition to study, as the brother protested that John was just “a farmer like us!”^[19]

On a cold morning of February 1827, John left his home and went to look for work as a farm-servant. At 12, he found life at home unbearable because of the continuous quarrels with *Antonio*.^[18] Having to face life by himself at such a young age may have developed his later sympathies to help abandoned boys. After begging unsuccessfully for work, Bosco ended up at the wine farm of *Louis Moglia*.^[18] Although Bosco could pursue some studies by himself, he was not able to attend school for two more years. In 1830 he met *Joseph Cafasso*, an elderly priest who identified some natural talent and supported his first schooling.^[20] In 1835 Bosco entered the seminary at *Chieri*. After six years of study, he was ordained priest on the eve of *Trinity Sunday* by *Archbishop Franzoni* of *Turin*.^[1]



Don Bosco

1.1 Priesthood and first apostolates

John Bosco was first called as the chaplain of the Rifugio (“Refuge”), a girls’ boarding school founded in Turin by the Marchioness Giulia di Barolo. His other ministries included visiting prisoners, teaching catechism, and helping out at country parishes.

1.2 Oratory of St. Francis de Sales

At that time the city of Turin had a population of 117,000 inhabitants. It reflected the effects of industrialization and urbanization: numerous poor families lived in the slums of the city, having come from the countryside in search of a better life. 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 means to prevent them ending up here. Because of population growth and migration to the city, Bosco found the traditional methods of parish ministry inefficient. He decided it was necessary to try another form of apostolate, and he began to meet the boys where they worked and gathered in shops, offices, market places. They were pavers, stone-cutters, masons, plasterers who came from far away places, he recalled in his brief *Memoirs*.

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 they stole the blankets; the second 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 in the slums of Valdocco, where he was living with his mother. He and “Mamma Margherita” began taking in orphans. 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.^[21]

Bosco and his oratory moved around town for a number of years; he was turned out of several places in succession. 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 could be turned into a revolution against the government. The group was evicted.^[22]

1.3 Work with apprentices

In the archives of the Salesian Congregation are a contract of apprenticeship 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 used to beat the boys. Don Bosco required them to agree that corrections be made only 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 of the time remained difficult.^[21]

One influential friend was the Piedmontese Justice Minister Urbano Rattazzi. He was anticlerical in his politics, but he saw some value in Bosco’s work.^{[23][24]} While Rattazzi was pushing a bill through the Sardinian legislature to suppress religious orders, he advised Bosco on how to get around the law. He found a religious order to keep the oratory going after its founder’s death.^[23] Bosco had been thinking about that problem, too, and 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 Bosco’s vision was the reigning pope, Blessed Pius IX.^[25]

Bosco disliked the ideals that had been exported by revolutionary France, calling Rousseau and Voltaire “two vicious leaders of incredulity.”^[26] He favoured 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 prop-

erties, Bosco reported a series of dreams about “great funerals at court”, referring to politicians or members of the Savoy court.^[27]

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.^[28] His actions, which had been described by Italian historian **Erberto Petoia** as having “manifest blackmailing intentions”,^[29] 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. 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.^{[27][28]}

Opposition to Bosco and his work came from various quarters. Traditionalist clergy accused him of stealing a lot 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 Bosco’s support for the powers of the papacy. Bosco was interrogated on several occasions, but no charges made. Closure may have been prevented by orders from the king that Bosco was not to be disturbed.^[30]

Several attempts were also made on Bosco’s 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.^[22]

1.4 Foundation of the Salesians of Don Bosco



Basilica Don Bosco in Castelnovo Don Bosco, Asti.

Some of the boys helped by Don Bosco decided to do what he was doing, that is, to work in the service of abandoned boys. And this was the origin of the Salesian Congregation. Among the first members were **Michael Rua**,



St. John Bosco Parish Church, Philippines.

John Cagliero (who later became a Cardinal), and **John Baptist Francesia**.^[21]

In 1859, Bosco selected the experienced priest **Vittorio Alasonatti**, 15 seminarians and one high school boy and formed them into the “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 **estardino, Mary Mazzarello** and a group of girls in the hill town of **Mornese**. 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 like the Daughters and the Salesians, but would not join a religious order.^[31]

The first Salesians departed for the United States of America in 1875. After his ordination, Bosco himself would have become a missionary had not his director, **Joseph Cafasso**, opposed the idea. He nevertheless eagerly read the Italian edition of the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* and used this magazine to illustrate his *Cattolico Provveduto* (1853) and his *Month of May* booklets (1858).

When Bosco founded the Salesian Society, the thought of the missions still obsessed him, though he completely lacked the financial means at that time. Bosco claimed he had another dream where he was 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 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 Bosco, because he tried hard to identify the men and the country of the dream – and for three years collected information about different countries. A request from **Argentina**,

turned him towards the Indians of **Patagonia**, and a study of the people there convinced him that the country and its inhabitants were the ones he had seen in his dream. Towards the end of 1874, John Bosco 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.

Bosco regarded it 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 which missionary efforts were to be launched. Negotiations started after Archbishop Aneiros of **Buenos Aires** had indicated that he would be glad to receive the Salesians. In a ceremony held on 29 January 1875, Bosco was able to convey the great news to the oratory. On 5 February he announced the fact in a circular letter to all Salesians asking volunteers to apply in writing. He proposed that the first missionary departure start in October. There were many volunteers.



Statue of San John Bosco, Ronda, Spain

2 Preventive System

Bosco’s capability to attract numerous boys and adult helpers was connected to his “Preventive System of Education”. He believed education to be a “matter of the heart” and said that the boys must not only be loved, but



Statue of San John Bosco, Makati City, Philippines.

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.

Bosco gained a reputation early on of being a holy man and miracle worker. For this reason, Michael Rua, Giuseppe Buzzetti, Giovanni Cagliero and several others chronicled his sayings and doings. These are preserved in the Salesian archives. Later on they were combined into 77 scrapbooks with oral testimonies and Bosco’s own *Memoirs of the Oratory*. His aim was to write a detailed biography. This project eventually became a nineteen-volume enterprise, carried out by him and two other authors. These are the *Biographical Memoirs*.

3 Death and legacy

Bosco died on 31 January 1888. His funeral was attended by thousands. Soon after there was popular demand to have him canonized. The Archdiocese of Turin investigated and witnesses were called to determine if Bosco was worthy to be declared a saint. The Sale-



Statue of Saint John Bosco, Diocesan Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, Canlubang, Calamba City, Philippines.

sians, Daughters and Cooperators gave supportive testimonies. But many remembered Bosco's controversies in the 1870s with Archbishop Gastaldi and some others high in the Church hierarchy thought him a loose canon and a "wheeler-dealer". In the canonization process, testimony was heard about how he went around 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 were not forgotten. Opponents of Bosco, including some cardinals, were in a position to block his canonization and around 1925 many Salesians feared that they would succeed.

Pope Pius XI had known Bosco and pushed the cause forward. 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".^[32]

While Bosco had been popularly known as the patron saint of illusionists, on 30 January 2002, Silvio Mantelli petitioned Pope John Paul II to formally declare St. John Bosco the Patron of Stage Magicians.^[33] Catholic stage magicians who practice Gospel Magic venerate Bosco by offering free magic shows to underprivileged children on his feast day.

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.

Bosco was the subject of the 1935 biopic *Don Bosco* directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. He was played by the actor Gian Paolo Rosmino.

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5 Further reading

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6 External links

- Dreams (Prophecy) of Don Bosco
- Salesians of Don Bosco Official Website (multi-lingual website)
- Salesians of Don Bosco Official Website (Philippine North)

- Salesians of Don Bosco Official Website (Philippine South)
- Salesians of the UK
- UK Salesian (alumnus) website at the Wayback Machine (archived October 27, 2009)
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- Founder Statue in St Peter's Basilica
- Published Writings (italian)
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- Saint John Bosco: Modern Apostle of Youth by the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary
- – Development office of the Salesian Province of St. Joseph, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, INDIA (INH)
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