

# Don Bosco

**TODAY**

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“When we are about to do something let us see, first of all, whether it is for the greater glory of God. Having made certain of that, go ahead, do not hesitate for your work will be successful.”

Don Bosco

## Welcome to the summer edition of the Don Bosco Today.

I am sitting here at my desk enjoying this beautiful spell of weather that we are having at the moment. There is no doubt, people are walking about with a spring in their step as a consequence of such warmth and beauty around us. Long may it continue (probably until I have to go camping and then it will rain!).

Our magazine leads with the Vocation of a Salesian Cooperator—Mamma Margaret (the mother of Don Bosco) being the first. Fr Gerry, the Salesian Provincial helps us to explore how this vocation is really very ‘prophetic’ in today’s world; we explore what Salesian Cooperators are doing at the moment in Britain, finishing with an article ‘A Vocation Within the Church’ from Jessica Wilkinson, the Provincial Coordinator.

We also include a wide range of other articles for your pleasure—a reflection on Don Bosco’s dream aged nine, Fr Andrew Ebrahim’s visit to Don Bosco Ashalayam in India, and some information on the youth retreat work of Savio House in Bollington—I hope you enjoy them!

Constitution number 5 of the ‘Constitutions and Regulations’ of the Salesians of Don Bosco reads:

Don Bosco inspired the start of a vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young.

He himself founded not only the Society of St Francis de Sales but also the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Association of Salesian Cooperators. These live in communion with each other, share the same spirit and with specifically distinct vocations, continue the mission he began. Together with these groups and with others born later we make up the Salesian Family.

May we continue to spread the word of the Gospel to all the young people we meet.

I wish you all a wonderful summer, and I thank you for all the very generous support you make to all our works.

God bless you all.

**Fr Bob Gardner SDB**

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When I visited Don Bosco Ashalayam in 2007, my initial response was that it was a dreary, stinking place that I couldn’t get out of fast enough! Fast forward to 2016, and I was asking to go and spend a few months of my sabbatical there to teach the boys of the Ashalayam.

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THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR  
Don Ángel Fernández Artime

# ***STABAT MATER.*** **OUR MOTHER IS THERE.** **ALWAYS.**

"It is she who has done everything!" Don Bosco used to say.  
Our holy Mother continues to radiate her motherly tenderness,  
just as she did today in Beirut. I've seen it!



From Beirut to Valdocco, our Blessed Lady is always present!

Greetings to all our readers!

**I'm writing to you from Beirut, Lebanon, on the day after April 1, when we celebrated the Passover of the Lord, Easter Sunday—a very significant day for the Salesian family in more than one way.**

I don't want to miss this opportunity to make reference, before all else, to Don Bosco and his relationship with Easter. It was precisely on the day of the Lord's Resurrection in 1846 that Don Bosco obtained the little Pinaridi shed (today our Pinaridi Chapel in Valdocco), due to the intervention of Divine Providence, after he had suffered a veritable Gethsemane—not knowing where he would be able to gather his 200+ boys on the following Sunday. From that Easter Sunday until today, we have experienced innumerable interventions of Divine Providence and of the Virgin Mary.

It was also an Easter Sunday, a very rainy one, when Don Bosco was proclaimed a saint on April 1, 1934. Also, April 1 this year is the day on which our Lord gave us the gift of celebrating Easter around the world and in all our presences, no matter how different the situations among them. Sometimes we celebrate in a beautiful church, and other times under a tree, as in the refugee camps of Palabek in Uganda or Juba in South Sudan, where Salesian communities share life with the marginalised and the rejected. Let us thank the Lord for these signs of life and of the Resurrection because in their poverty and pain they still feel that they are special to the Lord. It is we humans who are responsible for creating the unjust situations that exist, not God.

And Mary is also always present—whether on the Friday of the Lord's Passion or on the morning of the Resurrection. This is the point I wish to refer to: the captivation that OUR MOTHER awakens in the entire Christian world.

This afternoon in Beirut found me visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon together with other Salesian confrères. The shrine is in a beautiful place in the mountains where a huge statue of the Virgin Mary holds her arms open wide to embrace the city of Beirut. We went to a small chapel to pray. There was a variety of people there praying. Many were young. This touched me profoundly. My gaze fell on a young mother and her 14-year-old son. The mother was praying with her eyes closed, in deep concentration and devotion. The son stood



at his mother's side. It seemed to me that he was already a little tired of standing there in silence, but he just kept looking at his mum—and I at them because the scene moved me. So much faith. Without a doubt, so many feelings flowed from the heart of that young mother to our other Mother, to Jesus' Mother, the Mother of us all.

I contemplated that scene, as well as many others like it, in my heart—in which the same thing always happens. The Blessed Virgin arouses great tenderness, affection and love in her children throughout the entire world.

In May this year we'll celebrate 150 years since the consecration of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, built by Don Bosco in response to the wish of the Virgin Mary. It's a sacred place, the one that gave concrete form to our Mother's words: "*Hic domus mea—inde gloria mea.*" ("This is my house—hence goes forth my glory.")

And her glory does, indeed, continue to go forth today throughout the entire Salesian world, in 134 nations. The Salesian world is dotted with churches, chapels, Marian shrines and basilicas where our

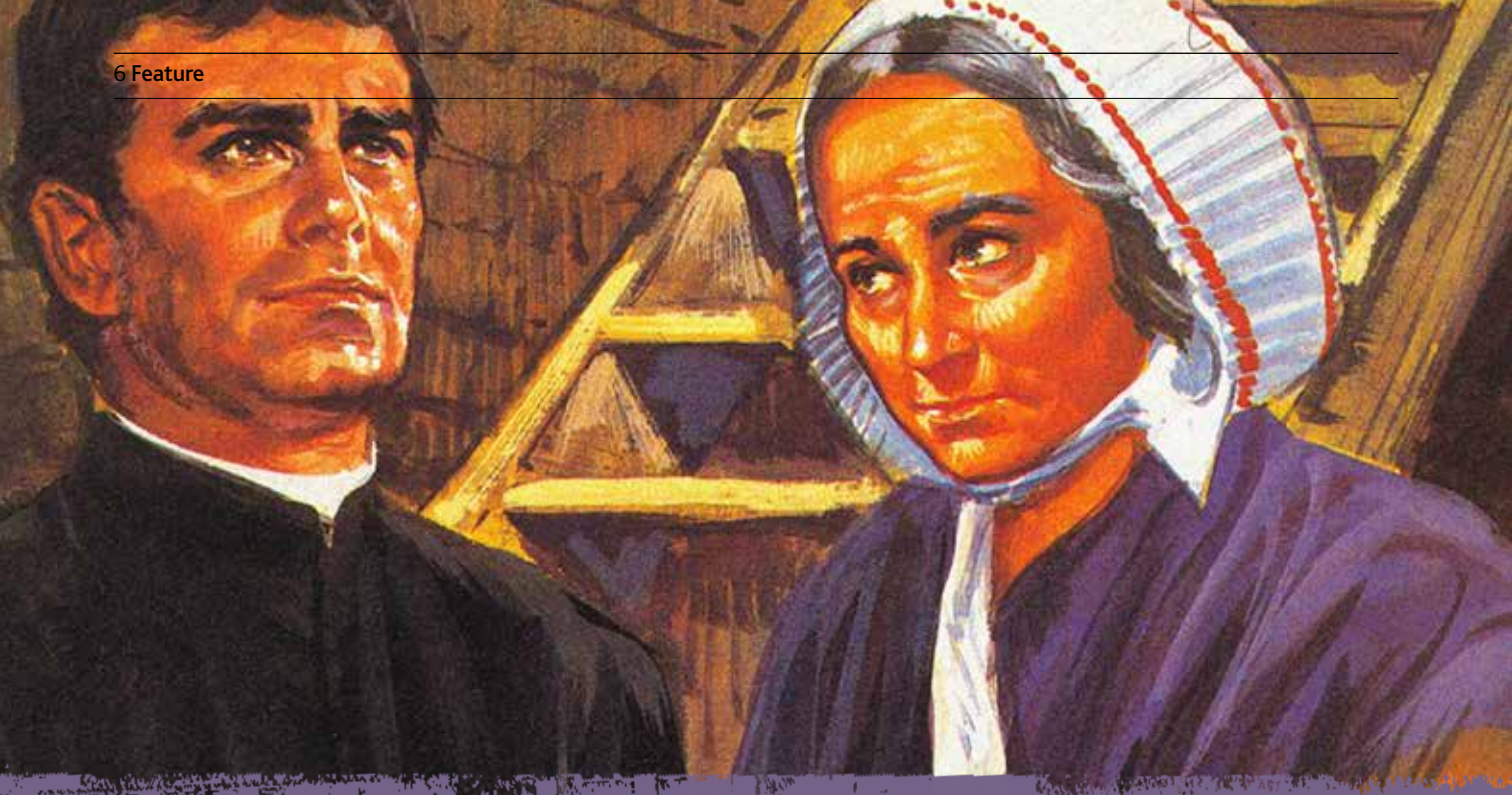
Mother still calls to her children of all cultures and colours to come to her, to encounter her, so that she may hold them in her heart and lead them always to her beloved Son.

I'm convinced that that scene of the mother with her son at her side in Beirut is replicated thousands of times throughout the world every day. While our Mother watches over us, keeping us under her protection and care, we have nothing to fear.

Looking with a Salesian gaze, we recognise, and we continue to say today, just as Don Bosco did in his day, that "It is she who has done everything." And allow me to add that she will continue to do so!

Blessed feast of Mary Help of Christians! On May 23 at Valdocco we will solemnly inaugurate this 150th anniversary celebration. It will be a precious opportunity for us to unite ourselves to all the shrines, chapels, churches and basilicas around the world where she, our holy Mother, continues to radiate her motherly tenderness, just as she did today in Beirut. I've seen it!

**While our Mother watches over us, keeping us under her protection and care, we have nothing to fear.**



# In the beginning was ... a woman

## MAMMA MARGARET, THE FIRST SALESIAN COOPERATOR

**S**he had given him birth, nurtured him physically and spiritually through his childhood, made great sacrifices for his education, encouraged him in his vocation and had the joy of seeing him ordained a priest. Wasn't this enough for the widow Margaret Bosco, mother and support of St John Bosco?

With her sons and stepson settled in life, she, too, had settled down to a life surrounded by her family, loved by her daughters-in-law, a respected matriarch in the small hamlet of Becchi. The rest of her life seemed mapped out for this poor, illiterate but very wise woman. She, like many others in her situation, would live her remaining years in the peace and relative security of her rural existence—but “God’s ways are not our ways.”

In 1846, during his convalescence in Becchi after a long illness, Don Bosco had decided to establish a permanent base for his developing ministry among destitute boys in Turin. He had rented a couple of rooms in Borgo Dora, a far from salubrious location on the edge of the city. There were other lodgers of very dubious character in the house and only a matter of yards away a local Madam ran a ‘hostelry’. It really was no place for a priest living by himself. The only solution was to ask his mother to stay with him. Trusting in Margaret’s faith and piety, he hesitatingly broached the issue. He asked her to sacrifice the tranquillity of her home to join him in the noise, dirt and stench of a city slum. Apart from ensuring his own good reputation, Margaret’s presence would help to provide a family atmosphere for his boys, many of whom

had known little or nothing of a mother's love. They were 'nobody's children'. He was right to trust her. Her reply has been handed down in Salesian lore: "If you think such a move is God's Will, I am ready to go right away." Was she aware, perhaps, of the echoes of Mary's "Let it be done to me according to your Will"? (Lk 1:38) So, at the age of fifty-eight, a good age for a woman of her condition at that time, she packed a few belongings and headed off for a new life.

After a journey of eighteen miles on foot, on a dark, dank November evening, Margaret and John arrived in their new home in Borgo Dora. The news of Don Bosco's return spread quickly among the boys. For many of the early Salesians, including Fr Rua, November 3, 1846 was considered and marked as the real beginning of Don Bosco's work, a work in which he was accompanied by his mother.

Margaret jokingly remarked that she wouldn't have much to do there as the rooms were practically empty. Such was not to be the case. She set up house as best she could with their few belongings and was there to welcome the unnamed, cold and hungry boy who knocked at their door seeking food and shelter from



...at the heart of it all was a mother, known to all as 'Mamma', the first support and cooperator of her son.

the driving rain on a particularly bad night. Tucking him into a makeshift bed, she spoke to him about God's love, about honesty and work. So was born a tradition which exists to this day in Salesian environments, the practice of the 'Goodnight' (or the 'Good morning'), a hallmark of Don Bosco's Preventive System.

Days followed days into months and years as Margaret cared for her son and the hordes of boys who came flocking around him. She cooked, washed and mended their clothes, planted a small vegetable plot to help feed them. Gradually, other women came to help her just as priests and laymen were coming to assist Don Bosco with catechism and basic literacy and numeracy classes, not to mention supervising the boisterous games. Together they were forming an embryonic association of helpers of Don Bosco's Oratory, but at the heart of it all was a mother, known to all as 'Mamma', the first support and cooperator of her son.

The boys and young men, however, were not all angels, and in their youthful and thoughtless exuberance often caused problems for Margaret. Her tiredness and frustration came to a head one evening when, earlier on, the youngsters had trampled over her small vegetable garden and romped through the washing lines, pulling down some of the sheets as Margaret tried in vain to stop them. That evening as she and Don Bosco were mending the clothes that the boys needed for the next day, she laid aside the trousers she was patching and turned to her son, "John, I've had enough! I can't go on! Today your lads ruined the garden; what am I to put in the soup tomorrow, there's nothing left? And the washing—I'll have to wash those sheets all over again! Just let me go home to my grandchildren!"

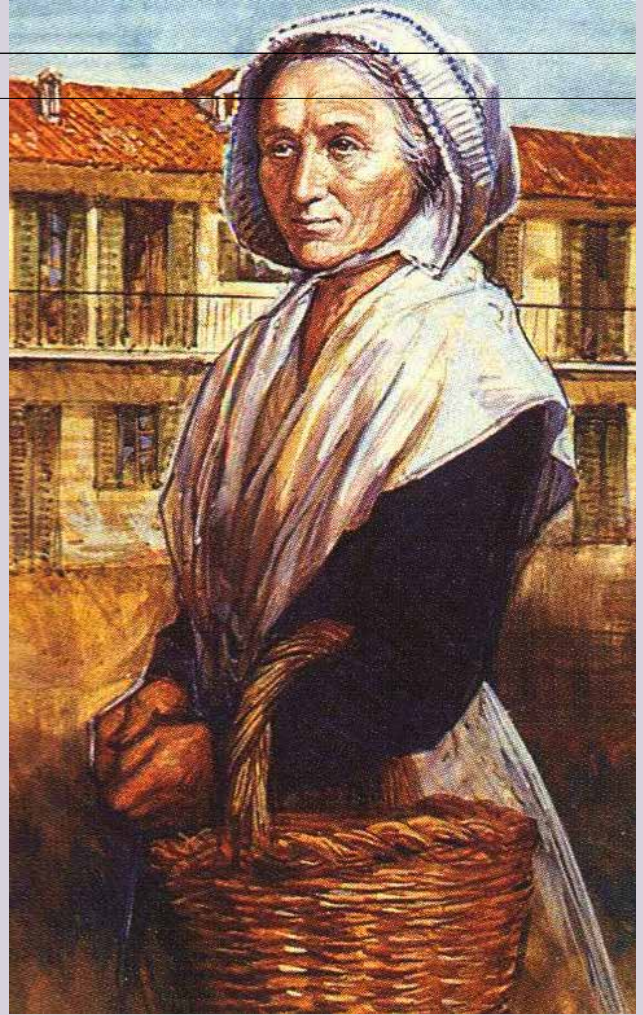


Don Bosco could not reply; he was choked with emotion. He looked at his elderly mother and could only point to the crucifix on the bare wall. In silence Margaret understood, and like Mary before her, she would remain at the foot of the Cross. She picked up the trousers again and would stay until she died in 1856.

Margaret's practical presence and hard manual work were essential in the early years of the Oratory, but as she grew older she was joined by her sister, Marianna, whom the boys called 'Auntie', and by other local women, several from the Turin aristocracy, who took upon themselves some of the more onerous tasks which Margaret found increasingly difficult to perform. Don Bosco had long understood the need he had in most areas of the life of the Oratory for the cooperation of dedicated lay people who could not only help in most of the tasks in the Oratory, but who could engage with civil agencies and, above all, carry the spirit of the Oratory into society. He considered such cooperators as real members of his Salesian Society, to the point of including a chapter on them in the drafts of the Salesian Constitutions which he presented for approval to Rome. It was an anticipation of the recognition of the role of the laity in the Church. The time was not ripe for such an innovation; it would not be until 1876 that the Association of Salesian Cooperators was officially established with its own Statutes.

Margaret was long dead by then. Nevertheless, perhaps, more important than her actual work, were the foundations of the Preventive System which Don Bosco learnt in practice from his mother. By word and example, she had introduced her sons to the knowledge and love of God and the practice of the faith in prayer, the sacraments and life of the Church. As they grew up, she had not spared them corrections when necessary but never resorted to physical punishments, preferring to induce an improvement in behaviour based on motives of reason and religion presented in an atmosphere of kindness. This was the sort of nurturing and maternal love that his boys needed.

On October 23, 2006, 150 years after her death, Mamma Margaret's life of heroic sacrifice was recognised by the Church which declared her Venerable. The decree suggests that her life can be a model for all. It states: "The grace of God and the exercise of virtue made Margaret Occhiena a heroic mother, a wise educator and a good counsellor in the formation of the newly born Salesian charism. She is part of the spiritual aristocracy which shines out in



**Mamma Margaret teaches us that one can, and one should "aim high" with courage. The little things of every day are the way to holiness.**

the extraordinary number of holy mothers who live in God's presence and in God, in a union that is the fruit of well-nigh continuous silent prayer." Often what is most simple is forgotten. The "most simple things" that Mamma Margaret continued to repeat through the example of her life is this: holiness is within reach and is for everyone and

consists in faithful obedience to the particular vocation that the Lord entrusts to each one of us. In his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II wrote that holiness is the "high standard of ordinary Christian living" in the apparently commonplace of everyday life like the mountain of washing that Margaret attended to and mended during her busy days. Mamma Margaret teaches us that one can, and one should "aim high" with courage. The little things of every day are the way to holiness.

**Sr Mary Treacy FMA**



# A PROPHETIC WAY

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**The most recent document from the synod on 'Young People, Faith and Discernment'<sup>1</sup> states in its opening paragraph:**

**The young person of today is met with a host of external and internal challenges and opportunities, many of which are specific to their individual contexts and some of which are shared across continents. In light of this, it is necessary for the Church to examine the way in which it thinks about and engages with young people in order to be an effective, relevant and life-giving guide throughout their lives.**

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<sup>1</sup> Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly, *Young People, Faith and Discernment*, Final Document of the Pre Synodal-Meeting of Young People, Rome (March 19–24, 2018).



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Salesian cooperators, whose vocation it is to promote the work and charism of Don Bosco in their own lives, may think the latter half of this statement is addressed to them specifically. By the same token, SDB and FMA may also share the same thought. As those with responsibility for developing and promoting the Salesian charism, the question of how we engage with young people in order to be “an effective and life-giving guide throughout their lives” is an extremely important one.

For some, this question may be answered in part by the fact that they are parents; as such they spend many long hours accompanying their children, acting as guides over a vast range of choices from what to wear, who to choose as friends to what school to attend. For others, it may be answered by their professional calling as youth workers, nurses, teachers, chaplains, social workers and childminders through the opportunities presented by their involvement with young people every day. For others, it may be answered by the voluntary work they do as youth leaders, Scout or Brownie organisers, games coaches or pro bono workers. For others still, it may be answered by the support roles they play such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, older siblings and carers who have taken people under their wing.

The key Salesian dynamic uniting all these roles is that to offer accompaniment one must be present to, and prepared to engage with, young people. One must also be capable of forming appropriate, stable and non-judgemental

“Young people are looking for authenticity and a lack of judgement from those who guide them; they are not looking for perfection.”

relationships in order to assist them. Young people are looking for authenticity and a lack of judgement from those who guide them; they are not looking for perfection. Similarly, they are looking towards individuals who are happy to walk with them, who are comfortable in their own skin and with their own choices, sharing aspects of their successes and their failures, their trials and tribulations; but they also want to be left free to make up their minds about the choices facing them and the actions they need to take.

Don Bosco wanted young people to be given all of the formation, training and support they needed to grow, so that they were able to make decisions in complete freedom about their future direction and were able to retain that freedom into their adult lives. He wanted them truly to be “good Christians and honest citizens” able to earn their living and to contribute to the building up of society. Once formed, like a good parent, he

was prepared to trust them to use their freedom to make appropriate judgements, to work for the good of society and the salvation of their souls.

In a recent communication, Fr Fabio Attard SDB, the general councillor for youth ministry, stated that the Salesian approach is based on taking young people from the point of freedom that we find them. In other words, we do not bemoan the situation that young people may find themselves in and wish for a better circumstance; in the words of Don Bosco the “better cannot be the enemy of the good.” We accept young people in their current state

of freedom and begin to build relationships. Through our commitment and presence, there may be the possibility of helping them move forward or of simply giving them time and a listening ear.

In the most recent document produced by those engaged in the Synod preparation, young people have highlighted the importance of having a sense of belonging, not just to survive but to flourish. They also mentioned the devastating effect of social exclusion on their identity and sense of self-worth. They have recognised a need for guidance and the role of educators and friends, such as leaders of youth groups, teachers, parish coordinators, who can offer good examples. They spoke of the need to find attractive, coherent and authentic models or mentors.

The document sets out the qualities of such a mentor as a person who:

- is a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world;
- constantly seeks holiness;
- acts as a confidant without judgement;
- actively listens to the needs of young people and responds in kind;
- is deeply loving and self-aware;
- acknowledges their limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey.

An especially important quality is the acknowledgement of their humanity—that they are human beings who make mistakes: not perfect people but forgiven sinners.

The document goes on to explain that mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but “walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey.” Additionally, they should respect the freedom that comes with a young person’s process of discernment and equip them with tools and opportunities to engage in that discernment.

A statement which really stands out, from a Salesian perspective, is that a mentor should believe wholeheartedly in a young person’s ability to participate in the life of the Church.

A mentor should nurture the seeds of faith in young people, without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. This role is not and

cannot be limited to priests and consecrated life, but the **laity should also be empowered to take on such a role**. All such mentors should benefit from being well-formed and engage in ongoing formation (par 13).

This theme continues:

Young people are looking for companions on the journey, to be embraced by faithful men and women who express the truth and allow young people to articulate their understanding of faith and their vocation.

As the document explains, this role of accompanying cannot simply be left to priests and religious. Effective accompaniment involves a multilayered approach which integrates the different aspects of our Salesian mission to maximise the impact experienced by young people. This may be in the more formal structures of parishes and schools or in the less formal settings of retreats and youth centres, points of gathering, training and information exchange including sharing experience and, of course, through social media and published material.

Cooperators have an essential role to play in accompanying the young which I would characterise under three headings:

The first is cooperators **accompanying each other** in a journey of deepening their own relationship with God and knowledge and practice of Salesian spirituality. As SDBs we

are progressively being invited to offer accompaniment to young adults who wish to deepen their spirituality and their understanding of Don Bosco. This is indeed important work which requires us to look at dimensions of our own training and preparation. But this option already exists for individuals who, by making a commitment as a cooperator, involve themselves in a shared journey of accompaniment supported within the Salesian family.

The second is that wherever the opportunity presents itself, either in their parenting, professional or administrative roles, cooperators offer **accompaniment to young people** through giving their time and making themselves available, ensuring young people have a listening ear. By engaging in appropriate networking and training, they also ensure they are empowered and their voices are heard.

The third is **accompaniment through advocacy and prayer** for young people and for those who work with

**A mentor should nurture the seeds of faith in young people, without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit.**

them. Those who are retired and may be senior in years may feel they are less able to offer accompaniment to the young. In many ways, they can accompany young people by holding them in prayer together with those who are engaged in their accompaniment. It is remarkable the number of people who will comment that they felt the support of others' prayers when otherwise they were almost completely isolated.

Our strena (or motto) from the Rector Major for 2018 quotes the words of the woman at the well when she says to Jesus: "Sir, give me this (living) water." In the Gospel story, Jesus has had an open and frank conversation with her; he has not shied away from raising matters of concern, but he has not condemned her. Finally, he has offered her a way forward through accepting the water that does not simply sustain life, but which brings life in all its fullness. Whether Cooperator, FMA or SDB, the sharing of our life in Jesus underpins and sustains our work with and for young people.

I am not sure if we could find a clearer definition of the role of a Salesian Cooperator as an accompanier today than that set out in the Synod document. The world we live in may be complex and full of the apparent connectedness that social media offers. Yet young people in many ways are seeking the same things they have always sought: a sense of belonging and non-judgemental acceptance in their lives with the example and support of trusted mentors to guide them into responsible adulthood.

In the introduction to the book 'A Prophecy's Journey', which explores the history of the Salesian Cooperators from their origins to the second Vatican Council, Noemi Bertola writes:

This is the time in which our Salesian Cooperators of the third millennium ... are called to write new pages, remaining faithful to Salesian spirituality both in prayer and in action, walking with the church, the way of sanctity traced out by Don Bosco, consistent with our mission of charity towards the young and the weak, able to find in each of them, the true face of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The Church and the society in which we live, are in great need of the vocation of the Salesian Cooperator. The young are seeking out those who are prepared to listen without judging. They remind us what is at stake:

As we grapple with these challenges, we need inclusion, welcome, mercy and tenderness from the Church—both as an institution and as a community of faith.

Don Bosco envisioned a movement working for the salvation of young people, especially those at risk. As members of the Salesian family, let us go forward together strengthening our commitment to building up this community of faith! Let us thank God that we have been entrusted with the opportunity of accompanying the young. I pray that each of us may be inspired both spiritually and apostolically, through the guidance of Mary Help of Christians and St John Bosco, to shoulder this responsibility with dignity and wisdom.

**Fr Gerry Briody SDB**

<sup>2</sup> G. Buccellato, P. Santoni and M. Wirth, *A Prophecy's Journey: The History of The Salesian Cooperators From Their Origins to The Threshold of Vatican Council II*, (Turin: Elledici, 2015).



# SALESIAN COOPERATORS

## Today

### Geraldine Feeley

**M**y name is Geraldine Feeley. I was born and brought up in Easterhouse, Glasgow and met the Salesians in 1988. I was impressed by the Salesian family spirit, which made a deep impact on me.

At that time I was struggling in my life. I was searching for something deeper to give me meaning, was exploring the possibility of religious life and was attracted to the Salesian Sisters' way of life.

I looked at different religious orders before making any decision, but it was the Salesian spirit that touched me most. I spent a year with the Sisters in their community in the Milton housing scheme.

That was a real year of discernment for me. Growing in my relationship with God and finding direction for my life, it was a good life experience. And I am deeply grateful to the Sisters who encouraged me at that time in my life, supporting and helping me to realise that community life was not for me.

Since then I have been working with the Salesians in Easterhouse. I have been a Salesian Cooperator for eighteen years and during this time have worked with young people through youth clubs, youth gatherings and children's liturgy. At times this was very challenging but very rewarding. Currently, I am regularly involved with young people through my work in a leisure centre.

In the last few years I wanted to do something different for young people. Thoughts of fostering and sharing my home with the young crossed my mind. By chance, I came across a Channel 4 documentary entitled 'Would You Take In A Stranger?' which featured the work of 'Nightstop', a charity that provides emergency overnight accommodation for young homeless people who are facing the night on the streets or sleeping in unsafe places. I felt drawn to do so. Thinking of the many homeless on the streets, I said

to myself: if I offered my home to someone, I could help to make their life a little better. The documentary was about ordinary people opening their homes to homeless young people to provide emergency accommodation until something more permanent becomes available. This documentary really inspired me to do something and offer to help a young person.

I recalled the image of Don Bosco who looked at the needs of others and acted. He saw in every person the image of God.

A stranger can be anyone. Maybe somebody who has fallen out with his or her family or someone who is studying for exams and things have gone badly wrong at home. They feel rejected or unwanted. The situation is so dire they have to get away. They don't know where to go.

**I looked at different religious orders before making any decision, but it was the Salesian spirit that touched me most.**

Geraldine Feeley

They have no experience of sleeping away from home, and the Nightstop workers know the importance of finding somewhere safe for young people to stay for the night.

The documentary showed both the complex needs facing young homeless people and also the clear positive impact that taking

a young person in for the night can have on the person providing the accommodation. I felt I could offer my home to someone to help them out.

In September 2017, I started the process of becoming a volunteer with Nightstop, Glasgow. After passing the interview and many home visits and training, in January 2018, I officially became a volunteer for Nightstop, Glasgow and am now ready to accept those in need into my home and hopefully make a difference in their lives.

Don Bosco calls us to befriend the young who are poor and abandoned or at risk. As a Salesian Cooperator I feel called to help those most vulnerable. In every young person there is an individual goodness, and I feel challenged to find it. Don Bosco says of the young: "You are young, you are precious, you are loved." I want to offer that same friendship and love.



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## Gina Hindley

Since I said my promise in 2014, I have made some big changes professionally and personally which now means that I no longer have frequent direct contact with young people. So how do I live out my vocation as a cooperator, especially when I do not attend any cooperator groups?

In the words of St Francis de Sales I have learned to “bloom where I am planted”.

I now revel in being more available for my nephews and nieces at what I see as the most important time of their lives, many of them being on the cusp of adolescence and adulthood. I try to ensure that I am there to listen, guide and educate them with my Salesian spirituality and ethos being central to my relationship with them all.

I'm no longer a chaplain, but it is my responsibility to provide support workers for university students who have disabilities. While doing this, it's important to me to ensure the students feel their needs are being met, any barriers are removed, they feel valued and that their voice matters, especially when it comes to their own education.

Prayer and my relationship with God continue to guide and strengthen me as well as provide me with the ability to find Jesus in all I do and in each encounter I have.

## Midge Robinson

I made the commitment the night before my eighteenth birthday.

I have never forgotten that evening or the many stories Fr Francis shared with us on our journey to becoming

cooperators. I believe the Salesian way becomes ingrained in all who meet Don Bosco. My early teaching career was varied: I taught in a school for children with special needs and a Roman Catholic primary school, where apparently, I displayed a leaning towards the ‘naughty children.’ Gosh doesn't that phrase grate on Salesians! I soon found myself teaching predominantly boys, who had been permanently excluded with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. To me, they were children watched over by Don Bosco and it annoyed me intensely that children as young as five years could be labelled by society and put on a path to young offenders' prisons. Here I found the de Sales quote: “You catch more bees with a spoonful of sugar than a jar full of vinegar” working in every lesson and playtime. They just needed to be loved unconditionally and someone to try every day to teach them basic literacy skills. How can you learn to read if your parents never did?

**I have seen so many people publish various new ways of working with the young—Don Bosco called it ‘The Preventative System’ and it still works best!**

**Midge Robinson**

After many years, I suffered severe facial damage and a brain injury—there is a limit even for Salesians as to how many punches you can absorb. I prayed continually, how could I not use my Salesian way? My prayers were answered when I was able to volunteer as a school pastor in a secondary school. One lunchtime, I walked out on to a playground and just knew that something was wrong. I soon became aware of a crowd gathering around two teenage lads, chest to chest, posturing and glaring. Despite my inner voice shouting ‘you are joking!’ I muscled my 5-foot-3-inch frame through 6-foot teenage lads to the sparring two. I had no crucifix, as we are not allowed to carry religious symbols, but waded in anyway, sure that Dominic Savio would have it covered for me. They soon became lambs. In the twenty-plus years

that I've been teaching and volunteering with youth work, I have seen so many people publish various new ways of working with the young—Don Bosco called it ‘The Preventative System’ and it still works best!



## Kendal Cooperators

Our cooperators were enrolled at Brettagh Holt Salesian House in Levens. Our ages ranged from mid-thirties to ninety years. We support the local parishes of Christ the King in Milnthorpe and Holy Trinity and St George in Kendal.

Some are extraordinary eucharistic ministers and take the Blessed Sacrament to the elderly and housebound in the community. Other ministries include Catechesis in Sacramental preparation.

There is a Salesian spirituality group that meets once a month to pray and reflect on the work and influence of St John Bosco. This meeting is open to anyone who is interested in learning more about Salesian spirituality.

Cooperators are involved in organising parish groups and activities for young people.

A Rainbows Bereavement Support programme is offered to the local Catholic primary school for children who have suffered a loss in their young lives following family separation, divorce or death.

All the cooperators have at some time been involved in fundraising for the Salesian project in Dagoretti, Kenya. This has been done by organising and supporting coffee mornings, selling the products made by the women supported by the project, car boot sales and by being the nominated charity for the Milnthorpe parish for one year.

A number of the cooperators belong to a mothers' prayer group who meet once a month to pray for their children, grandchildren, godchildren, all other children and our priests, in unity with all the 'Mothers Prayers' groups throughout 120 countries worldwide.

The older cooperators, following many years of very loyal service, support the Salesian work by praying regularly for all young people and those who walk beside them.

## Milton Cooperators

We meet every second Tuesday in one of our cooperators' houses. Our group numbers have fallen over the years with the death of at least three of our cooperators.

We plan our yearly meetings in June, and we all have an input to this. We have a varied calendar and our theme this year was 'Devotion to Mary'. We welcome visitors and speakers coming in, and each cooperator usually takes a turn to hold the meeting and lead the Goodnight.

Sr Ella joins our monthly meetings when she can; it is good to have the presence of the Salesian Sisters.

## Dan Antonio

"Stay with Don Bosco." That was the advice given to me by the late Fr Bernard Parkes in July of 2010, as my year as part of the retreat team community at Savio House was coming to its end. Bernard had recounted to me the words of Don Bosco to Valdocco's first occupants when the time came for them to leave the Oratory. I can only imagine how those boys would have been feeling: excited to embark on a new phase of their journey? Afraid that they would need to step out of the comfort zone of the Oratory? Grateful for the example and inspiration of their saintly friend? My eighteen-year-old self connected in some way with the experience of these boys, as I, too, craved the security, friendship, and sense of belonging that God had blessed me with in my new-found Salesian family.

This sense of belonging enabled me to remain connected to the Salesian family ever since I left Savio House, as I continue to support the Salesian mission through my involvement in various youth ministry initiatives. The question I am often asked is, "Why are you so involved with the Salesians?" The only answer I can give is that, like the boys at Valdocco, staying with Don Bosco has enabled me to make my fullest contribution to the world. The Salesian family is somewhere I feel I really belong, where I learn about my gifts and my limitations, where I have discovered deep and lasting friendships, and where, ultimately, I have found meaning in my life.

I would like to think that, somewhere, Fr Bernard is still working in his role as delegate for the cooperators and, as I discern where next I take my involvement with the Salesian family, he is praying for me and smiling, as he reminds me to: "Stay with Don Bosco."





“**Childhood means simplicity. Look at the world with the child’s eye—it is very beautiful.**”

**Kailash Satyarthi**





# A VOCATION WITHIN THE CHURCH

**I am proud to say that I am a Salesian Cooperator. It's my vocation. It's who I am. Recognising my deep desire to serve God through serving the young, identifying St John Bosco and St Mary Mazzarello as great inspirations in my life and finding a strong sense of belonging within the Salesian family helped me to discover this blessed vocation. A period of accompaniment and initial formation led me to make my promise on May 24, 2002.**

Salesian Cooperators were founded by Don Bosco himself. We are part of the worldwide Salesian family. We serve God in the young and the poor according to our own personal circumstances in life. Some Salesian Cooperators work in the field of education or youth work and some don't. Some are single, some married, some separated, some widowed, some secular priests or deacons. Some have children, some don't. Some are young and contemplative, some old and active, some middle-aged and contemplatives in action. All Salesian Cooperators have felt called by God to join the association by making a promise "to be a faithful disciple of Christ in the Catholic Church; to work for Your Kingdom, especially for the advancement and salvation of the young; to deepen and give witness to the Salesian Spirit; to collaborate, in family communion, in the apostolic initiatives of the local Church." (Project of Apostolic Life)

God draws each of us into a relationship with him through our Lord Jesus. He calls each of us to love and to be holy. There are as many ways to respond to that call as there are people on the planet! The Gospels, the teachings of the Church, the lives of the saints and reliance on the Holy Spirit help us to discern how God calls us to live our lives, using the gifts, talents and circumstances with which we are provided. In Pope Francis' latest apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, he reminds us, now in 2018, that we are all personally called by God. "Be holy,



for I am holy" (Lev 11:44; cf 1Pet 1:16); Pope Francis writes "To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case." (*Gaudete et exsultate* 14) Don Bosco knew this when he said to the boys, "Do the ordinary things extraordinarily well." Dominic Savio agreed saying, "Here we make holiness consist of being cheerful!"

In practical terms, Salesian Cooperators are Christians who are living out their baptismal promises and are inspired to do so in the style of our Salesian saints and holy people. They draw energy, encouragement and renewal from belonging to the Salesian family, receiving ongoing formation and being part of networks that connect people, places and projects. Some Salesian Cooperators are past pupils, teachers from Salesian schools or Salesian volunteers who have had intense experiences of the Salesian charism as young adults. Some may learn or hear about or come into contact with the Salesians later in life after careers in industry. Some may have been part of a Salesian parish for decades and then after a feast day celebration or day of recollection, recognise their vocation. All Salesian Cooperators have responded to the call for God to build a better world under the guidance of Mary, Help of Christians.

By the example of his passionate faith, his ardent desire to make the world a better place for the young and his contagious energy and enthusiasm, Don Bosco drew others to holiness. Some were, and still are, called to religious life as brothers, priests or sisters, many more as Salesian Cooperators.

**Jessica Wilkinson**  
Provincial Coordinator



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## *Supernatural Guidance or A Childish Dream?*

**A**t the age of nine, John Bosco had a prophetic dream that revealed for him (as his mother understood it) the prospect of a priestly vocation. This is how John describes the dream in his book, the *'Memoirs of the Oratory'*.<sup>1</sup>

It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream, I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists. At that moment, a dignified man appeared as a nobly-dressed adult. He wore a white cloak and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment, the children stopped their laughing, shouting and swearing; they gathered around the man who was speaking. Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge."

"Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness."

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day."

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So, tell me your name."

"Ask my mother what my name is."

<sup>1</sup> John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, trans. D Lyons [2nd ed.] (New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1989) 18–20.

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." Glancing round, I realised that the young people had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals had taken their place.

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children."

I looked around again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady. At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

The memory of that man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night. I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying, "Pay no attention to dreams."

## A Childhood Dream Put to Paper, Forty-Nine Years Later . . .

The exact historical influence of the dream on young John is hard to define. In the 'Memoirs', John Bosco appears to accept the revelatory character of the dream but with a lot of uncertainty. This renders it more difficult to determine the exact import this dream exerted at the time on the young boy's thinking, and ultimately on his vocational choices. He agrees with his grandmother that one should pay no attention to dreams, but he could never subsequently put it out of his mind. Later, he narrates that the dream had remained deeply impressed on his mind and had repeated

As years went by,  
Don Bosco eventually  
realised the importance  
of the dream...



itself at other times in much clearer terms, proposing the priestly vocation, but again he was hesitant to put any faith in it. In 1844, Don Bosco had another dream which was like an appendix to the first dream. Like his narration of his first dream, Don Bosco expresses in the 'Memoirs' similar reservations to this dream.

In 1875, writing to the Salesian Fr Julius Barberis (1847–1927), Don Bosco states that, "At the time I understood little of its meaning, since I put little faith in it." As years went by, Don Bosco eventually realised the importance of the dream and states that, "Later, together with another dream, it served as a blueprint for my decisions."<sup>2</sup>

What remains a mystery is the fact that it took Don Bosco a long time to eventually speak of these dreams. Michael Mendl affirms that Don Bosco first spoke of the dream to Fr Joseph Cafasso around the year 1846.<sup>3</sup> Cafasso advised Don Bosco, "Go ahead. You may quite safely give special significance to these dreams. I am convinced they are for God's greater glory and the welfare of souls."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Arthur Lenti asserts that Don Bosco first spoke of the dream in 1858 when he recounted it to Pope Pius IX and to some Salesians.<sup>5</sup> He bases himself on the biographical memoirs and cites the following testimony:

Looking fixedly at Don Bosco, he [Pope Pius IX] asked if he ever had any supernatural revelation about his undertakings. Then, seeing that Don Bosco was apparently ill at ease, Pius IX insisted that he be told of any event, no matter how slight, which might have even the appearance of the supernatural. In filial trust,

Don Bosco told him everything he had seen in his extraordinary dream ... The Pope listened with great attention and emotion ... He then said to him more or less these words: "Write down these dreams and everything else you have told me, minutely and in their natural sense. Save all this legacy for your congregation, so that it may serve as an encouragement and norm for your sons."<sup>6</sup>

Some fifteen years later, in 1873, Don Bosco obeyed the Pope's request and eventually put it into writing in the 'Memoirs of the Oratory'. He interpretatively narrated the dream from the vantage point of the mid-1870s. By looking back, Don Bosco was able to discern the clear line of astonishing events and the supernatural guidance that

led to the establishment of the work of the Oratories. It seems that by the time of the writing of the 'Memoirs' (1873–1875), Don Bosco had clearly come to regard these dreams as signs of supernatural guidance.

Natale Cerrato questions whether this dream is a simple childish dream developed by Don Bosco in later years as a dramatic expression of his strong desire and calling to become a priest in a majestic vision. But then again

Cerrato asks, "Couldn't the Lord himself have used the dream to guide Don Bosco on his vocational journey?"<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, why not? John Morrison maintains that the dream was not an invention or "dramatic expression" as initially suggested by Cerrato. Morrison fully grasps the ramifications and describes the dream as one "which was to illumine his [John Bosco's] pedagogical purpose to educate poor and deprived children."<sup>8</sup>

By looking back, Don Bosco was able to discern the clear line of astonishing events and the supernatural guidance that led to the establishment of the work of the Oratories.

<sup>2</sup> Giulio Barberis, *Appunti di Pedagogia Sacra. Esposti agli Ascritti della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales dal sac.* (Turin: Litografia Salesiana, 1897) 8.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mendl, 'The Dreams of Don Bosco: An Introduction to their Study' in *Journal of Salesian Studies* vol. XII, 2 (Berkeley CA, 2004) 323–324.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Lemoyne, Eugenio Ceria, Diego Borgatello, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* (New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1964) [EBM] II 322.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Lenti, *Don Bosco, History and Spirit* (Rome: LAS, 2010) I 177.147–148.

<sup>6</sup> EBM V, 577.

<sup>7</sup> Natale Cerrato, *Vi Presento Don Bosco*, (Turin: LDC, 2005) 76–77.

<sup>8</sup> John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St John Bosco* (New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana, 2010) 1.



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Perhaps, at this point, one could suggest that this God-given dream would have easily fizzled out if it were not for spiritual guides who helped young John Bosco respond to God's plan for him. Andrea Bozzolo offers a reflection on the Virgin Mary's last words: "In good time, you will understand everything."<sup>9</sup> Bozzolo observes that:

Once again in history, the Virgin Mary, and with her the feminine dimension of the Church, capable of intuiting in love and accompanying in prayer, was called to accompany a future priest to become truly so. For John Bosco, the face of this feminine Church was not only the Virgin Mary but also had the face of his mother, dear Mamma Margaret. She probably contributed to her son's priesthood more than anyone else.<sup>10</sup>

Andrea Bozzolo's assertion here is thought-provoking. He identifies the significant import of Mamma Margaret on John Bosco's spiritual journey towards priesthood.

## The Dream of Nine: Nature, Aim, Content and Method of Salesian Accompaniment

One notes that while this dream could indeed be considered at face value as a vocational experience from his childhood, the narration of the dream has four clear aims which deserve attention. Don Bosco recounts this dream with the aim of:

- 1) Instilling in his Salesians an awareness of the **Divine Nature** of their vocation;
- 2) Clarifying that the **Aim** of the Salesian mission is to transform ferocious animals (bad youth) into lambs (good and saintly youth) who revel in the presence of Jesus and Mary. This entails a process of transformation and transfiguration;
- 3) Demonstrating that the **Content** of the mission is to teach about the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue;
- 4) Showing that the **Method** is to attract and conquer the hearts of young people not through physical force but through love.

Don Bosco's narration of this dream, without a doubt, epitomises the scope and spirit of the 'Memoirs of the Oratory' and indeed other texts which followed later on. These reflective and systematic writings were mainly aimed at those who were and would continue to offer Salesian accompaniment in the future. These writings proved to be useful tools in making sure that Don Bosco's praxis of spiritual accompaniment would not be lost.

### Dr Louis Grech SDB

[With thanks to the Salesian Bulletin of Malta]

<sup>9</sup> John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Bozzolo, *Non Ebbe a Cuore altro che le Anime* (Turin: LDC, 2011) 107.



© Andrew Ebrahim

# THIS IS SUCH A DIVE

—get me out of here!

When I visited Don Bosco Ashalayam in 2007, my initial response was that it was a dreary, stinking place that I couldn't get out of fast enough! Fast forward to 2016, and I was asking to go and spend a few months of my sabbatical there to teach the boys of the Ashalayam. It's funny how your perception of a place changes once you have developed relationships with those who live there.

**India has a huge number of street and vulnerable children, particularly in the cities; and in all those major cities, the Salesians of Don Bosco are present, responding to a very real need of those young people who are at risk of exploitation, a life of crime or just sinking deeper into poverty.**

Don Bosco Ashalayam was set up in Kolkata over twenty-five years ago to help children on the streets or those who were vulnerable so that they could create a life for themselves, either through education or through learning a trade. The Salesians recognised the need to help young people stand on their own two feet and become independent in order to break the cycle of poverty into which they had been born.

For the most part, the Salesian priests and brothers will try and trace the family of abandoned children, sort out whatever the issue might be and then return the child home. This is because they believe that the best place for any child is their own home. However, this is not always possible, and many children, about 300, end up staying at one of the Ashalayam homes in and around the city of Kolkata.

Children are brought to the Salesians by parents who can no longer afford to feed them, or by family members who have rescued children from a dangerous situation where, for example, a child has witnessed the killing of one of their parents by the other. However, a number of children have been rescued from railway stations where they have been spotted disembarking unaccompanied from a train. Salesians have to work fast in such situations to ensure that those children don't end up in the wrong hands, and often police protection is needed for such work.

The rehabilitation of children starts immediately, whether they are to be returned home or not. If this is not done quickly and effectively, it could cause further damage to the emotional development of the child. In some cases, children choose not to stay with us but will return to the streets. Some opt to come to the drop-in centre run by the Salesians, where they can have a meal, a wash and a safe place to sleep. A small number of them will even take up the basic reading and writing classes that are provided.

For those who choose to stay with the Salesians, they are offered two routes: either training in a specific trade or schooling. This is supplemented, where possible, by music, dance and drama lessons, all very important in the rounded development of a child and in fitting with the vision of Don Bosco.

The day starts and ends with prayer, and 'Goodnights' are a regular feature of life in Don Bosco Ashalayam (for those of you who are unfamiliar with this term, it is a short story with a moral). For many children, faith in God has been deeply ingrained in them by their families, and the Salesians encourage that sense of gratitude to God for all that they have. These are regarded as the 'lucky' children, a term coined by the young people themselves, who realise that their lives could have been so much worse without the intervention of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

So, what have I got to do with all this? In 2008 at Salesian School, Chertsey, we decided to give some of the money that was raised during Lent to Don Bosco Ashalayam. They thought we would send them a couple of hundred pounds. We sent them just under £2,000, and they used the money to paint one of their homes. It is amazing how much a lick of paint and a few repairs can transform a place.

The following year, two sixth-form students came out with me for ten days bearing £5,000. Today, and ten trips later, we raise in the region of £25,000–£30,000 annually. This covers all the running costs of their homes in the city of Kolkata—

that includes food, medical expenses, school fees, etc., because nothing is free in India! In addition, Salesian School decided to sponsor a child being looked after at the Ashalayam. He had been trafficked and did not know where his parents were; today over sixty children are being sponsored through us.

**The money we raise is, of course, vitally important to give the children a start or a foundation to build on in life.**

For the students who visit Don Bosco Ashalayam, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. A hundred viewings of the film 'Slumdog Millionaire' could not prepare them for what hits them when they visit India. Many come back more motivated to study, stronger in their faith in God or more determined to improve relationships with their families. Day-to-day issues are suddenly seen in perspective.

For the young people of the Ashalayam, a visit provides them with the confirmation that they are not worthless, that they do have dignity, that they are not the forgotten children of Indian society. Gifts that are taken out by sponsors are always gratefully received, but it is the letters and photos of sponsors that really matter for these children. In fact, all the children in the homes are given something when we visit so that none of them feel left out.

Needless to say, visits from our students give the children from Don Bosco Ashalayam the opportunity to wear their best clothes (as you will see in the photographs). A welcome of singing and dancing awaits our arrival, and this is something



the children thoroughly enjoy doing. The smiles just come naturally, but everyone is aware that the smiles mask a story; the smiles mask their own insecurities and the smiles mask rejection. For many, rejection or setbacks would be the deepest wounds that these children face, and this gradually became apparent to me during my few months out in Kolkata. The money we raise is, of course, vitally important to give the children a start or a foundation to build on in life. However, the underlying issue is one of self-esteem, learning to trust again and overcoming rejection and the knowledge that life has not been kind to them. On the face of it we see the smiles, but the wonderful smiles hide what has gone before; they are a coverup for the outside world. In this respect the visits, particularly of students from abroad, appear to make a big impact, if only for a while.

This February, I took a few adult sponsors to Kolkata so that they could meet their sponsored children. The experience was magical. One young lad was so overwhelmed that he was speechless at meeting his sponsor. Later that afternoon, after the shock had worn off, the young lad spoke non-stop in Bengali without pausing for breath!

The response of the sponsors was as expected. Simon Browne said: "The trip was a life-changing experience. The work of Don Bosco Ashalayam is so important as it provides a safe and stable environment in which children can flourish and develop into well rounded and balanced young people, who have been educated, allowing them to become independent people. Education was seen as a route out of poverty and it was wonderful to see the children at school so engaged and enthusiastic in their activities."

Ray Woolrich concluded that: "The experience will live in me for ever, and I would return without any hesitation. And I know from the experience of being there that you will find God in the most unexpected places, in the hearts and minds of the abandoned, vulnerable, lost and poor."

Pauline Watts, who has been sponsoring children at Don Bosco Ashalayam for nearly ten years and has visited the Ashalayam more than once reflects: "Without the work of the Salesians of Don Bosco, where would these children be? They are given the chance to have a future. They are given an education which provides them with the opportunity to have a better life, whether that be via the academic or the apprenticeship route. It was also inspiring to see the end result of the work of the Salesians, boys who had made a life for themselves and were looking to give something back to those in need. The name 'Ashalayam' ['Haven of Hope' in Sanskrit] is very fitting because it really does give these young people hope!"

Get me out of there? How wrong I was! Next year I hope to take a few sixth formers from my new school, St John Bosco College, while the parents and teachers of Salesian School, Chertsey continue in their kind support of the work in Kolkata by providing us with gifts for those children who are not sponsored.

If anyone is interested in sponsoring a child or in helping out in any other way, please contact me at [aebrahim@sjbc.wandsworth.sch.uk](mailto:aebrahim@sjbc.wandsworth.sch.uk).

More information can be found here: [www.dbashakolkata.org](http://www.dbashakolkata.org).

**Fr Andrew Ebrahim SDB**





# Men Without *Ties*

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I sat, as bored as could be, beside a collapsed mountain of dirty sports bags spread on the grass at the side of the pitch. Occasionally, one of the men would run over and take a swig from an old lemonade bottle, now filled with the team's communal water. I watched with disgust as they swilled it around in their mouths before spitting it out like crude garden water features. Sometimes they would wink at me or rough up my long hair or make a joke about my skinny legs. I glanced at my dad in goal, diving for the ball with no fear of hurting himself as he tumbled and crashed into the ground, hardly ever missing a save.

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I never enjoyed coming to watch my dad's team, but on this particular day, my lack of interest was increased significantly. After the news of the day before I would have rather been anywhere else. I was overwhelmed with confusion. I'd begged my mum to take me to work, I'd told her I could help clean the school, but it was against the rules. I had so many questions. What is a suicide note? Why did he have a gun? Who will be the lead singer of Nirvana now? I knew my mum would have tried to answer my questions, and I would have tried to understand her answers. Instead, I was wearing a Manchester United shirt, in a vague effort to fit in, among burps, sweat and a breed of human I did not understand.

The team manager, Phil, came and sat beside me. He was a large man, with a very round, red face and a shiny bald head. He didn't say anything but made a small nod in my direction. I nodded back awkwardly. I knew this was the way men greeted each other in real life, it wasn't like in the old films I'd watched with my Nana, where they shook hands and spoke finely. That was a world away from mine, I would have given an arm and a leg to have been born into that world. I could sense, when Phil looked at me, he was wondering why I, a boy of eleven, just six months shy of secondary school, was sat there showing absolutely no interest in the football game. I knew he was wondering this because I was wondering the same thing. What was wrong with me? In many ways Phil was quite a scary person, but he was my dad's best friend; I felt safe around him, even trusted him.

"Phil," I said with a tone that made it clear I wanted to ask a question.

"Yes," he replied, in a very similar tone.

"Why did Kurt Cobain kill himself?"

"Because he was weak," came the quick, certain reply.

"But," I continued sheepishly, "if he was weak, why didn't anyone help him?"

"That 'man' had a little girl," said Phil, sounding genuinely annoyed, leading me to regret asking him a question, "a two-year-old daughter, he's just left behind. Nah, he was a weak little puff, you can't help people like that."

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Madonna was in a recording studio in Los Angeles when Donatella called with the tragic news. I was sat on the living room couch with a bowl of porridge. News of the

assassination was a day old now, but this morning was the first time I'd watched television since. The presenters crossed over to their correspondent in Miami, who was discussing in great detail how Gianni Versace had been shot dead just feet away from his front gate. Images of blood-stained steps beamed from the screen and sent chills through every single bone in my body.

"What a shame," said my mum.

"Probably a mafia connection somewhere," added my dad.

Madonna recorded the vocal to 'Swim' on that day. I went to school. As I left the house I grabbed my Walkman and placed the buds into my ears, this was the international sign for 'go away and leave me alone'. I tucked my hair in behind my ears and took off my tie, leaving it on the doorstep in the hope I'd be sent home for uniform violation. I hit play. Alanis Morissette always made the terrifying walk to school a little more bearable. She was a prophet to me, a voice from the other side of angst, she had made it out alive. As I walked, I tried to blend in as much as possible. I wished for the grey of my school uniform trousers to melt and merge with the pavement, for the concrete to become fluid, so that I could sink into it and float to the classroom completely undetected. It was not to be. Just as I'd gone through the school gates I felt a heavy blow on the back of my head and fell to my knees, shaking, tears seeming to instantly stream down my face. I forced myself back up. On the ground was a rock, I saw three boys laughing, metres away from me.

"Are you gay? Are you queer?" asked the boy in the middle.

"Stupid puff!" yelled the boy on the left. The boy on the right picked up another stone and threw it at me.





© Mari Carmen Dell Valle Cámara/Unsplash

I ran. I didn't stop running until I reached the relative safety of a toilet cubicle. I locked the door, put the seat and lid down and perched on top with my legs tucked into my chest, my arms wrapped around them and my chin resting on my knees. I sat there for what seemed like an eternity, just crying, with no sound. I touched the back of my head with my fingers, feeling sick as I saw them return to view covered in blood. It took more courage than I knew I had to unlock the cubicle door and walk over to the sink. There was nobody else in the toilets, for that I was thankful. I looked into the mirror as I dabbed the back of my head with a wet paper towel. Tired, sore eyes stared back at me. What am I? With each paper towel I threw into the bin there was less blood; eventually there was so little I stopped. I slumped onto the floor and looked at the bin filled with discarded green paper. What a horrible material paper towel was, designed for such a basic purpose; you clean or dry with it, and then you throw away. I wondered what material they'd use to clean the Versace mansion steps, and what would they use to clean his body, and what they'd line his coffin with. I remembered hearing that he once wanted to design a dress made of metal chainmail, so thin it could be worn in the hot summers of Milan or Miami. Everyone told him it couldn't be done, they told him that no such material existed, so he invented it.

"Mr Matthews, so glad you could join us," Mr Thompson said, in acknowledgement of my arriving thirty minutes late to his class. "Came straight from the shower, did we?" he asked, making me realise I had not dried my head as well as I thought. I liked Mr Thompson. There was something charming about his sarcastic way of speaking. He was the deputy head, and in whole-school assembly he always seemed so stern and strict, but as a classroom teacher he wasn't strict at all; he was really funny. It was as though he had two personalities, one for large-scale public consumption and one for the more intimate setting of a

smaller group. I made my way over to a desk and looked on as he continued to explain the finer points of 'Macbeth'.

At some point during the lesson I looked out of the window and watched the clouds rolling across the sky and the bees buzzing past, occasionally banging right into the glass, all the time hearing Mr Thompson talking energetically. I must have drifted into a daydream because the next thing I knew, his hand was on my shoulder and everyone else had left the room. I looked at him and he smiled.

"You don't seem yourself," he said gently. "Is everything ok?" He knelt down beside my desk. I didn't know what to say. I felt a tear roll down my cheek and off my chin.

I sensed the potential of an eruption of emotion if I started to tell him how far from ok everything was, that I didn't know who, or what I was supposed to be.

"I'm ok, Sir," I said instead. I stood to leave, and he moved aside, nodding to me with some sense of understanding. I walked towards the door, next lesson was PE. Every fibre of my being was telling

me not to go, that I should stay here and ask him for help, but I couldn't; the will to be normal, or to try and be normal, was too strong within me.

"Nathan," he called to me, as I was about to leave the room. "Even if everything isn't ok now, it will be. There's a world out there, for you. I'm here if you ever need to talk."

"Thanks, Sir," I said.

**Adam Ditchburn**

If you are worried about a young person, there are many help and advice services that can support you and/or young people, including but not exclusively:

[youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)  
[childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)  
[kidscape.org.uk](http://kidscape.org.uk)

“Every fibre of my being was telling me not to go, that I should stay here and ask him for help, but I couldn't; the will to be normal, or to try and be normal, was too strong within me.”



# SAVIO HOUSE:

## "A PLACE TO BE ..."

**S**avio House, Bollington, is the SDB residential youth retreat centre set in the foothills of the Pennines, close to the Peak District National Park. In this beautiful location we offer a unique retreat experience for young people coming from schools across the north of England: from Preston to Birmingham, from Doncaster to Liverpool. It is indeed, as our tagline states, "a place to be ..."

"A place to be ..."

- with friends, on retreat, away from the pressures of home or school;
- challenged, inspired, encouraged, affirmed;
- more the person God created, a volunteer retreat team member;
- relaxed, on holiday, prayerful and reflective;
- searching for meaning, understanding, belonging and acceptance.

The potential and possibilities are almost limitless.

The resident Salesian community of SDBs and young lay volunteers is dedicated to offering an inspiring, challenging and often life-changing three-day retreat experience to





over 1,500 young people each year. Based on the Oratory model of Don Bosco, we welcome young people from many different backgrounds and situations, helping them to feel at home with us and experience a secure sense of belonging. This is a really important element of the retreat and must be achieved in the first few hours of our encounter if we are to make the most of the great opportunities on offer over the following days.

Through reflecting and sharing the stories of their lives, through our affirmation session and other activities, we help the young people to learn a little more of themselves, their God-given gifts and talents, and their enormous potential for good: something Don Bosco was always keen to emphasise.

The middle day of our retreat experience focuses around the two great Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, central to Don Bosco's experience and Salesian spirituality. Through careful preparation in the morning, the young people can have a very meaningful celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their active participation in the evening Eucharist is enhanced by dance, drama, art and music, making the liturgy more accessible and meaningful to many 'unchurched' young people.

In good Salesian style, in and through all of this is a joyful atmosphere of games and fun, music and laughter, and moments of free time and recreation spent together, building up relationships among the young people and building up trust between them and their staff and the retreat team. It is the quality of these new, short and intense relationships, based on friendship and trust, that allow the work of the retreat to have a positive impact on the lives of the young people.

But no sooner are the young people with us and we have just managed to connect with them and learn their names—and remember their names—then they are gone. The retreat experience is a very short and intense one, demanding a great deal of energy and resilience, confidence and compassion from the retreat team. We are blessed at Savio House each year by the presence, generosity, hard work and witness of a team of young Salesian volunteers. Like the young people we welcome and minister to, the volunteer team comes from mixed and varied backgrounds and experiences both in the UK and from other European countries; last year this included

Hungary and the Czech Republic. They are able to share their own experience of faith, of searching for meaning, of questioning and struggling with growing up with the young people, and to listen to the stories and experience of the young people with great understanding and empathy; this is young people ministering to young people, again a Salesian characteristic of Don Bosco's Oratory experience.

...this is young people ministering to young people, again a Salesian characteristic of Don Bosco's Oratory experience.

We are a mixed gender, mixed age (18–80 years), multiracial and multicultural community. The fact that we can live and work together as a community is a great blessing and also a powerful witness to the young people who often experience a breakdown of relationships and very fragmented situations in their lives. And at a deeper level, our community experience reflects a little of the universality of the Church and the great richness and diversity of the Christian community.

While most of our time and work is focused on the young people who come on retreat to Savio House, this is not the whole story. We have strong and growing links with



St Gregory's Parish, Bollington, supporting Fr Tony Fernandes SDB in the parish ministry. And Savio House is the home of the SDB Youth Ministry Office and the animation work of Sue McDonald. This brings in the wider group of Salesian volunteers and animators, gives opportunities for the Savio House retreat team to reach out to other projects and activities, fills Savio House with groups of young people for summer holidays and projects, including youth leadership programmes and training. In turn and in time, this activity attracts new volunteers for Savio House and the Salesian volunteer network.



## My Savio Experience

Ryan Wilkinson, Salesian volunteer, Savio House, 2016–2018.

I first came to Savio House on a three-day retreat with my school, All Saints Sheffield, when I was in Year 10. I had an amazing experience and decided to come back again in Year 11. While on retreat, I really enjoyed interacting with the team, some of whom I knew from school, and felt like I would love to be a volunteer. It wasn't until I came on the first ever Rise summer camp in 2015 that I felt called to be a volunteer at Savio. Rise is a summer camp based on leadership, communication and youth work, all with a varied mix of outdoor activities. So, after that summer, I applied to be a volunteer, completed my taster week and was accepted!

In September 2016 I moved into Savio House and began learning the retreats and about Salesian spirituality. During my first year as a volunteer I had so many incredible experiences that went alongside the general retreat experience at Savio. We also worked with the wider Salesian volunteers at different events like Make Some Noise and Flame. I was fortunate enough to speak on stage at Flame in Wembley Arena about my experience of visiting refugee camps in Lebanon with CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development). Not only that, during my first year at Savio House I became a Catholic and then went to the Holy Land on pilgrimage with some amazing people from the Salesian Youth Ministry Network.

I think Ryan's experience and story emphasises the mission and ministry of Savio House to the resident volunteers, all generous young people themselves journeying in faith. They are an inspiration and a challenge to all of us to continue our own journey of faith!

Finally, Savio House is a place to be ... a donor. On January 31, 2018, the Feast of Don Bosco, we launched 'Savio 100': a fundraising scheme to help sustain and develop this wonderful mission at Savio House for the benefit of young people. It asks donors to commit £100 each year to the work of Savio House. More information

Here at Savio, we not only give the young people an experience and a chance to connect with God, but Savio allows us as volunteers to reflect on our own relationship with God. I've always had a relatively good relationship with God, but quite early on into the year I felt that I needed to change and so I decided to become Catholic. Having had an amazing experience at World Youth Day in Krakow and feeling part of something universal, I felt that this was what God wanted for me. It was incredible to have the support from my family, Salesian community and friends during this journey in faith, and becoming a Catholic has been one of the best experiences of my life.

My second year at Savio has been so much better than I expected. I decided to return as I felt that I had more to get out of Savio, and that I had more to give: something that has proven to be true. I've developed my faith, friendships and creativity as well as trying new things and taking on more responsibilities. Each week until Easter I also did some chaplaincy experience at Loreto Sixth Form College Manchester, and I'm also going to be leading this year's Rise summer camp.

Savio has really helped me to find who I am and to grow in my faith, as well as helping and supporting me in my work with young people and general life skills. I could never have imagined everything I got to experience at Savio and it's been a truly remarkable and life-changing experience.

can be found in the leaflet enclosed with this magazine and from our website: [www.saviohouse.org.uk](http://www.saviohouse.org.uk)

**Fr Martin Coyle SDB**

If you would like to support the work of Savio House in this way, please complete the form and return it to us; no donation is too large or too small! If you can support us in any other way, please contact us at: [www.saviohouse.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.saviohouse.org.uk/contact-us), or email: [mcoylesdb@gmail.com](mailto:mcoylesdb@gmail.com).

