



Don Bosco - Builder

Buildings at the heart of our family



The Basilica in Turin

Don Bosco has left us some substantial monuments in the great Churches which he built during his lifetime: the Church of St Francis de Sales in the Oratory (1852); that of St John the Evangelist, Turin (1882), on which our Salesian Church of the Sacred Heart in Battersea (1894) was based; and the crowning glories of the Basilicas of Mary Help of Christians, Turin (1868) and that of the Sacred Heart in Rome (1887), beside Termini Station.

Yet all these lead us back to the first of Don Bosco's permanent buildings, the Pinardi shed, that miserable 'lean-to' where Don Bosco founded the first permanent home for his wandering oratory in 1846 and which remains at the heart of all the Salesian buildings that have followed. It actually served at various times as a chapel, a schoolroom, a workshop, a dining room and some of the original youngsters who Don Bosco took in actually slept there.

For Don Bosco all his buildings reflected his vision of what it was to be a Salesian House. It was a home, a playground, a chapel and a school. Don Bosco's dream of gathering the poor and abandoned together needed a real place to house them. Poor and ramshackle though it was, it represents his extraordinary faith in God's guidance. Though he was a penniless priest, effectively dismissed from his job by the Baroness Barolo, he could take on the rent and gradually the financial burden of buying that property at Valdocco in 1851.

As for many people that first step on the property ladder shaped Don Bosco's life and outlook. What he always looked for in buying property was a 'zona popolare', in other words a place where plenty of ordinary people lived. Not for Don Bosco the desert solitude of the monks or the prestigious ex-palaces of others, he preferred to be near the market in Turin at the Porta Palazzo and near the railway stations at Porta Dora and Porta Susa and the and all the early Salesian houses followed that same pattern.

It all began with a 'Hail Mary'

He was down to earth and practical enough to realize that if he wanted to work for young people who were poor and abandoned then he had to attract benefactors and co-operators who would be impressed by his practicality and thrift. At the same time, Don Bosco always insisted that his work began with a simple 'Hail Mary' and at the centre of what he offered his youngsters were the two pillars that sustained the church, the Holy Eucharist and devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Being a catechist was a role he never gave up and through sharing his faith, symbolized in the Churches he built, he brought many young people to a fuller and happier life. The Pinardi chapel was dedicated to the Resurrection advisedly because what Don Bosco wanted to bring his students was real life lived to the full.

The Churches of St Francis de Sales and St John the Evangelist represented the growth of the Salesian work in Turin itself. The Basilica of Mary Help Christians represented the growing numbers of his Religious foundations and the worldwide growth of the Salesians. In Rome the Basilica of the Sacred Heart represented his outreach to the newly united Italy, sited as it was in the newly developing area near the Termini station in Castro Praetorio.

Always these churches were only part of a grand design which involved a playground, an oratory, a school, and a home for the young. Don Bosco wanted above all to be at the heart of a family where things were happening, so today maybe he would have built his houses near the airports.