



Don Bosco - Founder

An orphan sheltering in the church ...



On 8th December 1841, four months after his priestly Ordination, Don Bosco met an orphan called Bartholomew Garelli who was sheltering from the cold in Church. After spending some time with him, Don Bosco invited him to return the following Sunday with some of his friends. So began the special youth club or Oratory which met every Sunday and Feast day. There were games, religious instruction, access to the Sacraments and Mass. The biggest problem was finding somewhere for the large group of boys to meet. Their rough appearance and boundless energy frightened people and they spent a number of years wandering from location to location.

In April of 1846, Don Bosco acquired the Pinardi shed and the surrounding land. The Oratory at last had a permanent home, situated in the Valdocco district of Turin. The educative side of things became more systematic. In 1847 he opened a hostel for the poorest, homeless boys. Between 1847 and 1862 his work became more organised, with a school, night classes and workshops based on a deep spiritual and caring formation for the boys. He also took on the running of two other Oratories around the city. In all this work, Don Bosco was helped by friends, priestly and lay, who volunteered their time to help with the boys.

In 1857, Don Bosco had a meeting with Interior Minister Ratazzi, anti-clerical government minister, but admirer of Don Bosco's work. He suggested to Don Bosco that he should be thinking of founding a society to carry on his work! This had been in Don Bosco's mind for a while, and after a few false starts, he realised his best chance was to train his older pupils who loved him and would be prepared to work for him. On January 26th 1854, the project for a religious order took its first proper steps. Don Bosco gathered four young men, including Michael Rua and John Cagliero, and bound them by promise to live good lives and practice charity to all. Formal vows might come later. Don Bosco called them "Salesians" after St Francis De Sales whom he admired greatly. Over the next five years, there were regular meetings. Some of the young men donned the clerical habit and took vows.

The birth of two new congregations

On December 13th 1859 the Salesian Congregation was finally born. Eighteen young men signed the first official document and act of the Salesian Society. A Superior Chapter was elected and began the function of governing and expanding the new Society.

During this period of expansion, it crossed Don Bosco's mind a number of times that perhaps a congregation of women was needed to do the same kind of work with girls. Fr Dominic Pestarino, pastor of the village of Mornese, had in his parish a pious union of women known as the "Daughters of Mary Immaculate", who wanted to live a more dedicated life and help to care for young girls. One of the leading lights of this group was an impressive young woman called Mary Domenica Mazzarello, whom Fr Pestarino had been guiding spiritually for a number of years. In 1862 Fr Pestarino visited the Oratory and was impressed by Don Bosco. In 1864 Don Bosco came to Mornese and Mary met him for the first time. It would seem each was struck by the other.

Another three years passed before, in 1867, Don Bosco met the Daughters of Mary Immaculate as a group and shared his vision with them. In 1871, after consulting his General Council, Don Bosco decided to found a congregation of women to work for girls. On August 5th 1872 Mary Mazzarello and her group pronounced their vows as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with Mary as the Superior.



St Mary Mazzarello and the first Salesian Sisters make their vows in the presence of Don Bosco