

## Birth bicentenary of great educator and founder of Salesians St John Bosco

Brian Maye

The Second [Vatican Council](#) and Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), gave particular impetus to what might be described as the Catholic Church's mission to the poor.

But nearly a century and a half before that, a young Italian, the bicentenary of whose birth falls on August 15th, began his own particular mission that turned out to have great success.

His name was [Giovanni Melchiorre Bosco](#), who became better known as [Don Bosco](#) and to us, in English, as [St John Bosco](#). To mark the bicentenary, [Pope Francis](#) sent a letter to the Salesian Order, which John Bosco founded, in which he described his vision as "love in action, reaching out to those most in need".

John Bosco was born at Becchi, near Turin, to peasant stock. His father died when he was only two and his mother, Margherita, raised him and his two siblings alone. She had a huge influence on his formation and supported strongly what he was trying to achieve.

According to his memoirs, dreams played a significant role in his life. He recalled one very vivid one when he was nine years old. A group of very poor boys were behaving badly on a street and he went in among them to try to stop them forcefully. But a man of noble bearing appeared and told him he would have to persuade the boys with gentleness and kindness rather than with physical force.

He interpreted the dream as a sign from God. From studying travelling entertainers he learned how to do juggling tricks and acrobatic feats and used these to win the attention of poor street children, beginning and ending his performances with prayers.

### Shepherd

His modest background meant he had to work as a shepherd and afterwards he found work on a vineyard. He received a little instruction from a parish priest until another, elderly priest recognised his talent and supported his going to school.

At 20, he entered the seminary at Chieri and was ordained six years later. The industrial revolution in Turin had resulted in many poor families living in the city's slums. As a prison chaplain, John Bosco was shocked by the number of boys and teenagers from poor backgrounds among the prisoners and he resolved to prevent them ending up there.

He met the boys where they worked and gathered to socialise, and began to take them on Sunday excursions into the countryside where he instructed them in faith and encouraged them to enjoy themselves. He also got apprenticeships for them and insisted that employers treat them well.

### Numbers grew

The number of boys in his care grew enormously as the group moved from place to place seeking accommodation. It was too much work for one man; eventually he organised his followers into the Congregation of St Francis de Sales (he was a follower of the saint's philosophy). It became the Salesian order and would carry on his work. Some of its foremost members were young men John Bosco had rescued as abandoned children.

In 1871, he founded a group of religious sisters, the Daughters of [Mary Help](#) of Christians, to do for poor girls what the Salesians were doing for boys. They became the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco. He also founded a mainly lay group, the Salesian Cooperators, to work among the poor.

The Salesian order spread and by the time of his death, there were 38 houses in [Europe](#) and 26 further afield.

Missionary work abroad had always been dear to his heart (he wanted to embark on such work himself when he was ordained but was dissuaded by the Archbishop of Turin) and the first Salesians departed for [Argentina](#) in 1875.

The schools he set up in Turin were known for their child-centred education and achieved great success. John Bosco was well ahead of his time in his attitude to corporal punishment. His "Preventive System" was based on "reason, religion and kindness" and placed great emphasis also on music and games.

In 1883, [Pope Leo XIII](#) asked him to raise funds for the completion of Sacro Cuore (the Basilica of the Sacred Heart) in Rome and he did so in [France](#) and [Spain](#) as well as in [Italy](#), preaching and saying Mass to huge gatherings.

He died in January 1888, was declared blessed in 1929 and canonised in 1934, being given the title "Father and Teacher of Youth". Pope Francis's letter, mentioned above, described John Bosco as a "youth pastor" who developed a model of education and spiritual growth for the young, especially those marginalised.