

St John Bosco

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A point of view

The acrobat doubled up with laughter. A challenge was one thing, but a challenge from an upstart teenager obviously still green behind the ears was too much. And all because a crowd of kids preferred to watch his show rather than go to church! He looked at John, sized him up again and promptly accepted.

There were to be four contests and they fixed the stakes for the first. To his amazement John beat him at running and, after doubling the bets, won again at jumping. He was absolutely furious when John managed to beat him at juggling, so in an all-or-nothing bid he set about climbing the elm-tree.

Up and up he went until he began to feel the tree bend under his weight. Finally he reached the top and it was obvious to everyone that it was impossible to climb any higher. He got a tremendous round of applause.

Happy again, he watched condescendingly as John shinned up the tree. Up and up he went until the tree bent under his weight too. Then the boy did an extraordinary thing: he stopped climbing just short of the top and proceeded to do a daring hand-stand so that his feet extended well above the top of the tree. He had won again!

It was a costly afternoon for the acrobat; he had lost both his money and his pride. However, everything turned out all right when John invited him to have a meal with some of his friends, all members of his 'Cheerful Club'. After paying for the meal out of the prize-money, John then gave him back what he had lost.

This incident is typical of the life and work of St John Bosco, affectionately known as Don Bosco after his ordination. It contains many of the elements which were to characterize his life-style: his love of God, his concern for the spiritual welfare of young people, his skill and quick thinking, his courage in facing opposition, his generosity to rivals or enemies, his good humour, his oneness with and openness to his boys, his use of sport and games to bring youngsters to God, and his practical common-sense approach to problems and situations as they arose.

Numerous other incidents in his life would have illustrated these just as well, and no special importance need be attached to the one we have just related. But it is always well worth taking such a typical incident and attempting to get behind it to ask the question: 'Why?'

This is particularly necessary when dealing with a life such as Don Bosco's, which is full of incident and a wide variety of activities. Otherwise one can become very confused indeed. A person's life-long undertakings are likely to appear meaningless to us unless we keep in mind the guiding principles of his life. We need a unifying principle which will link these things together and give us a kind of bird's-eye view of his life.

Naturally, this is not at all an easy thing to determine, and almost certainly there will be a number of such guiding principles at work. But this should not stop us from making the attempt.

What, then, was the unifying factor in Don Bosco's life and work? Certainly one needs to single out his deep love of God and of our Lady. These motivated all his actions. But, in particular terms, we could perhaps underline the following: Don Bosco was above all a man of action, who so cared for the material and spiritual welfare of poor boys that he was ready and willing to meet the problems and needs of the moment with whatever good means he had at his immediate disposal. He used to say later on in life, 'The better is the enemy of the good,' and would undoubtedly have supported Chesterton's remark that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.

He was never one to remain inactive until a perfect solution to a problem presented itself. 'If I can't get over an obstacle,' he pointed out, 'I simply try to go around it.'

Don Bosco was a very practical, down-to-earth saint. He did not hesitate to adopt a short-term solution to a problem rather than sit back and do nothing at all and so allow the situation to deteriorate. This was an outlook which was to shape and colour his whole ministry. Predictably, it was also one which annoyed his critics.

Early life and difficulties

John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815 in Becchi, in the parish of Castlenuovo in Northern Italy. His father, Francis Bosco, was a poor farmer, who died when John was only two years old.

His mother, Margaret, still only twenty-nine, was then left with the burden of caring for her two sons, John and his older brother Joseph, and also for her aged mother-in-law and Anthony, her husband's son by his first marriage. It was from his mother, who was herself quite unable to read, that John learned many of the things which were to stay with him for the rest of his life, above all his reverence for the Eucharist, his devotion to Mary, and his spirit of hard work.

Life was difficult for the Bosco family after the death of John's father. From the age of four John had to work hard, drawing water from the well, feeding the cows, and collecting fruit. But he also knew how to play, and when he went to the nearby fairs with his mother on market days he eagerly watched the jugglers and acrobats, scrutinizing their acts so as to find out their secrets. Then, at home, he would practise hard until eventually he could walk the tight-rope, do somersaults and perform various conjuring tricks and feats of strength. With these, and his ability to read stories from books, John entertained his friends regularly, making sure that they either started or finished with some prayers. Even at this early age he was making use of a technique which he was to perfect later on in life.

When he was nine John had a dream which was so decisive and prophetic that it conditioned his whole way of doing things

in his work with young people. It is worth noting that Don Bosco was always cautious when speaking of his 'dreams'; he refused to be drawn on the question of whether they were of divine origin or simply the normal outcome of his concern for educating the young. It was Pius IX who later commanded him to write them down, and as a result of this insistence we now have more than a hundred of Don Bosco's dreams recorded.

Anyway, in his dream John found himself in a large yard with a crowd of boys who were playing together. Some of them were laughing and having a good time, but others were cursing and swearing. John tried to stop them by shouting, but when that failed he, waded into them with his fists.

Then a man appeared, majestic in appearance, who called him and said: 'You will only make them your friends with gentleness and love, not with blows. Teach them the beauty of virtue and the ugliness of sin.' When John replied that he had not the necessary knowledge to do this, the man said: 'My mother will be your teacher.'

John then saw a beautiful lady standing beside him. She took him by the hand. 'Look,' she said. When he did so he found that the boys had vanished and in their place was a herd of wild animals. 'This is your work,' she went on. 'Be humble and strong. I will show you now what you must do.' As she spoke the wild animals disappeared and in their place John saw gentle lambs gambolling about. He began to cry, and asked what it all meant. 'You will understand it later', the lady replied, and with that the dream was over.

John told his mother of his dream and she thought it might be a sign that he was meant to be a priest. At that time many priests were puritanical and Jansenistic in outlook, and kept themselves aloof from the working classes and in particular from dirty street-urchins. Such was the gap between the sacred and the secular that, in their minds, mixing with the common people was seen as a kind of profanation or contamination.

John was very hurt when his greetings were not returned and priests passed him by without a word. Later on he said: 'I used to cry about this and told my friends that if I ever became a priest I certainly wouldn't act like that. I'd talk to the boys and try to give them some good advice.' In fact, this was also his criticism of life in the seminary, where he was to spend six years studying for the priesthood. His teachers were mostly distant and forbidding figures who never mixed with their students. As soon as class was over they disappeared. It was almost impossible to get near them to ask for their advice.

But the kind of spiritual loneliness which John experienced, the lack of care and affection on the part of his superiors, only served to increase his desire to become a priest who would spend his whole life with needy boys, so that, in getting to know them better, he would be in a better position to help them in all their troubles.

Fortunately, there were some priests who were prepared to take an interest in him, and it was well that there were. His step-brother was resentful and badtempered, and adamantly opposed John's going to school. But, happily for John, when he was eleven he met a kindly old parish priest, Don Calosso, who decided to help him.

Much to Anthony's annoyance, it was arranged that John should go to the old priest each morning to study Latin and then work in the fields for the rest of the day. However, the arguments continued at home, and finally John's mother decided that the only thing to do was to put a stop to the lessons and send John away for a while. At thirteen he found himself away from home, working as a farmer's boy for a pittance of a wage.

Eventually his uncle made peace of a sort with Anthony, and John was able to go back. But trouble broke out again, and in the end Margaret decided to divide the property. As a result, Anthony set up on his own and John was able to continue his lessons under Don Calosso. However, the good priest soon suffered an apoplectic stroke and died.

So, John had to go to school at Castlenuovo. At first he made the journey to the village twice a day, and often travelled the distance (about thirteen miles) barefooted, so as not to wear out his boots, which he slung over his shoulder. But when winter came he was so worn out himself that his mother arranged for him to board with a tailor, and paid for his keep with eggs and corn. As the tailor was also a musician and sang in the parish choir, John soon learned how to play the violin and the harmonium and the essentials of plain-chant, as well as how to cut cloth, stitch, sew and turn out a decent pair of trousers. All of these skills he put to good use in his later ministry.

In November 1831, when he was sixteen, he commenced his studies at the local grammar school in Chieri. He was much older than the other children and badly dressed, so they did not spare him their taunts. However, he not only survived but overcame these difficulties, and due to his excellent memory and serious application he advanced at the rate of two classes a year until by July 1833 he had finished his course.

During these years in Chieri he stayed with a baker, sleeping and studying by candlelight in a dark cupboard under the stairs. Although the tuition at the school was free, John had to work hard to pay for his board and lodging, his clothes and text-books, as his mother could not afford to pay for everything herself.

The baker owned a restaurant which John swept and scrubbed before going to school in the morning. After school he used to score for the billiard-players long into the night. Only then did he get a chance to do his own studies, often cold and very hungry in the bare space under the stairs. But even here he managed to learn another skill: how to bake cakes and make pastry.

His cheerfulness and good nature made him a firm favourite with his school-friends, and he used his acrobatic and other skills to draw them to God. This, in fact, was the period when the incident with the acrobat took place.

John still wanted with all his heart to become a priest so that he could, as he himself put it to the old priest Don Calosso, 'teach the truths of religion to other boys, who are not bad, but who will get into trouble if no one takes care of them.' Now another saintly priest took a hand in his training. This time it was the young Don Cafasso, then only twenty-three. He counselled John to enter the seminary, which he did in October 1835. Six years later, on 5 June 1841, he was ordained in Turin at the age of twenty-six. His troubles had only just begun.

Portrait of a young priest

The hardships and open opposition which Don Bosco had to face as a child were to continue to be the pattern of his life as a priest.

After his ordination, he was offered a position as a teacher and posts in two parishes, but on the advice of his friend Don Cafasso he decided to continue his studies at the college in Turin (population then about 136,000), where young priests had a chance of deepening their knowledge of theology and obtaining first-hand pastoral experience of the problems of people in a large city. Under the guidance of Don Cafasso and others they carried out their studies and exercised a fruitful ministry visiting poor people in slums, hospitals, prisons and reformatories. Don Bosco stayed there for three years (1841-1844) free of charge.

On 8 December 1841, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, he intervened to rescue a scruffy, sixteen-year-old bricklayer's apprentice from an irritable and unsympathetic sacristan. The boy was an orphan who could neither read nor write and knew nothing about his faith, not even how to bless himself. In this he was typical of the many poor and homeless boys who came to Turin in search of work and roamed around the city neglected and unwanted.

With patience and gentleness, Don Bosco began to talk with him about God, and when he had finished, invited the boy to come again and bring some of his friends with him. The following Sunday he came back with six of his mates, and Don Cafasso had picked up three more. A couple of months later there were eighty.

The problem, of course, was in finding a place for them to meet. Fortunately, for the three years he was at the college, Don Bosco was allowed to use the courtyard, in spite of the noise and the liveliness of the meetings. But when he finished his pastoral studies he had to search for a place to go. He became chaplain to an orphanage for young girls which had been founded by a charitable noblewoman, and was allowed to hold his meetings in the courtyard there. However, after eight months the good woman could no longer endure the noise and, although Don Bosco still remained chaplain, he again had to find a meeting place where he could organize games and catechism classes and hear confessions.

For the next year and a half he and his boys wandered up and down the city, unable to stay in one spot for very long. It makes a marvellous picture: there he was, a small, squarely-built priest of thirty, only five-foot four in height, with an untidy mop of dark brown hair on his head and an unruly mob of 400 young hooligans at his heels. Small wonder that no sooner had they settled down in one spot than they were firmly asked to move on to another! Not even the deserted cemetery next to the church of St Peter in Chains was to be a refuge for very long.

Complaints poured in and he was eventually summoned to the town hall, where the mayor tried to persuade him to disband his group. When he refused, the mayor attempted to put pressure on the archbishop, but he got no satisfaction there either. He retaliated by putting Don Bosco under police surveillance, but the policemen who were detailed for the job were soon admitting that if they had much more of it they would probably be going to confession themselves!

For the most part the clergy, too, viewed his work with suspicion. Some of them even thought he was mad and arranged for two canons to have him taken by carriage to the nearby asylum for examination. But Don Bosco was no fool. He neatly turned the tables on them by politely allowing them to get into the carriage first, then slamming the door and telling the driver to head for the asylum as fast as ever he could!

Saints, like prophets, have a way of going unrecognized in their own time and country. Everyday holiness frequently goes undetected; sometimes it is mistaken for madness. But in spite of all the heartbreak and disappointment, Don Bosco and his boys continued their nomadic existence, the little priest hiding his grief and joining in their sports and games. They, in their turn, were happy to attend his services and religious devotions, often in the open air. There was no compulsion about it; they knew him and loved him as a priest who radiated the love of God, and they spontaneously accepted his invitation to praise God as something which was right for them to do together.

But God was not to be outdone in generosity. He finally rewarded them with a home of their own—a wooden shed with a leaky roof which was so near the ground that they had to dig out a couple of feet and make a new floor. But on Easter Sunday (i.e. April), 1846, Don Bosco blessed the shed which had now become their chapel. His work grew up and developed around that site and spread out from it to the furthest parts of the globe.

The work expands

No sooner had he found a secure base than he redoubled his efforts. He organized evening classes so that those who were working all day could have an opportunity to learn. He solved his staff problem by recruiting some of his more promising boys as pupilteachers under his guidance and also by persuading a few friends in the city to lend a hand. He continued with his catechism classes and, when he found that there was no suitable Bible history-book, promptly wrote one himself.

At that time workers were cruelly exploited, disgracefully treated, shamefully underpaid, and often arbitrarily sacked. With no civil law to protect them they were completely defenceless. Don Bosco knew all this and did his best to put a stop to it. He walked around from factory to factory, either begging work for those who had none or trying to improve conditions for those who had. He drew up labour contracts for the young apprentices, an idea which was later adopted universally. He even managed to secure a fortnight's holiday a year for the boys, which was astonishing when one considers the times in which he lived.

Cardinal Cardijn, the founder of the Young Christian Workers movement, once remarked: 'Don Bosco was the first person in the Catholic Church to dedicate himself entirely to working-class youth.' In fact, Pius XII and John XXIII both proclaimed him patron of the young apprentices of various countries.

The strain of all this unceasing activity was, understandably, too much and one Sunday in July he fainted. He was found to have pneumonia and was soon in a critical condition. His boys received the news with shock and consternation. They had an intense affection for him and day and night prayed fervently for him. He did recover, but had to go back home to Becchi for three months to convalesce. Meanwhile some of his faithful friends kept his work going and quickly found out how difficult it was.

However, Don Bosco was anxious to be back with his boys. He had managed to rent four rooms in a house not far from his converted shed, but there were at least two brothels nearby, so he had to have someone to guarantee his good name. He asked his mother to give up her old home in the country, with its peace and quiet, and help him look after his 600 undisciplined, noisy youngsters in the city. That she accepted at all was a measure of her love for God and her belief in the work her son was doing.

The two of them set out on 3 November 1846 with their bundles of linen and kitchen utensils, and walked the entire six-hour journey to the city. Margaret was then sixty-six, and Don Bosco himself, still weak from his illness, was suffering from varicose veins which were to cause him much pain for the rest of his busy life. For the remaining ten years of her life, Margaret became a mother to his boys and an invaluable help to him in his work.

Typical of this period was the way in which Don Bosco trusted entirely in divine providence and the intercession of our Lady to meet his growing needs. The time came, for instance, when he had to buy the famous shed and the plot of land. After some bargaining he agreed on a price. It came to almost £1,200 and he did not have a penny in his pocket. He calmed his anxious mother with the simple statement: 'God will provide.' Sure enough, he had the money within a week.

It was this confidence in God and in Mary, Help of Christians, which kept him going despite setbacks and disappointments, which occasioned many astounding events and cures too numerous to detail, and which led to his undertaking new and dynamic initiatives at a time when his friends counselled caution and consolidation.

By 1851 the improvised chapel in the shed was much too small. He needed a new one, so he laid the first stone and then set about collecting the money. He begged from everybody (including the royal family!) and organized the first of his great lotteries (rather like our sweepstake draws). Within a year the church of St Francis of Sales was built and completely paid for—a major achievement even today. But, not content with that, he built a school nearby with room for sixty-five boys. Whenever it was needed, Don Bosco put up another building.

His two greatest achievements in this field were undoubtedly the building of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, in Turin and the construction of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. When Leo XIII asked him to build the church in Rome, Don Bosco was already old and worn-out—his eyesight was bad, his legs gave him so much pain that he had to use small steps to get in and out of bed, and he suffered from chronic eczema. But in spite of his exhaustion he heroically completed the task, making long fund-raising journeys to France and Spain in order to finance the building.

Salesians of Don Bosco

Don Bosco, however, was not content to build in bricks and mortar. Even as a young priest he wanted his work to live on in dedicated followers. So he began to train some of the boys who seemed to respond best to his ideals. Sadly, they all left him. But failure and disappointment were not new to him, so he made five more attempts before he eventually succeeded. On 26 January 1854 he held a meeting in his room. That evening his little group of four followers decided to bind themselves with a promise, which could later be changed to a vow. They called themselves 'Salesians', after St Francis of Sales, whose characteristic virtues of charity, gentleness and patience Don Bosco wanted them to imitate.

In 1859 he disclosed his intention to found a religious congregation—with a mere seventeen followers! The first elections were held on 18 December 1859, and the Salesian Society came into being, though it took ten years of patient negotiations before it was eventually approved by the Holy See.

Encouragement and opposition had both come from unexpected quarters. The Minister of Justice, Rattazzi, an anti-clerical, who was directly responsible for the existing oppressive laws against religious orders, recommended that he form a society of helpers and showed him how to get round the laws as they stood. On the other hand, the two archbishops of Turin during this period were opposed to his projects, and it was largely due to his confident trust in Mary, Help of Christians, and to the fatherly advice and kindness of his great friend Pius IX that he finally managed to win through. In 1863 there were just 39 Salesians; by 1874, when the Rule was definitively approved, there were 320; when Don Bosco died in 1888 there were 768; today they number 20,000.

As the Salesian work for poor boys grew and flourished, Don Bosco saw the need for a similar work for young girls, and so with the help of the saintly Mary Mazzarello he founded the Salesian Sisters. On 5 August 1872 the first fifteen Sisters made their vows, and Don Bosco gave them their official title: Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. From that small beginning they too have spread throughout the world and now number 19,000.

In 1876 a third family, the Salesian Co-operators, was added to the first two. This predominantly lay association was intended by Don Bosco to shake Christians out of their lethargy into an active apostolate on behalf of the Church. He meant them to be ready to take on every good work of charity, especially those which concerned poor and neglected youth. He constantly taught that sanctity was not the prerogative of any particular class or minority but that every Christian was called to holiness. Pius XII was so enthusiastic about the work of the Salesian Co-operators that he called Don Bosco one of the founders of the modern lay apostolate.

Although he himself never went as a missionary to far-off countries, Don Bosco was able to fulfil his lifelong desire to send his sons to spread the gospel in the remotest parts of the world. During his lifetime he organized a total of eight missionary expeditions. His successors followed up the programme which he had started, so that seventy-five years after the first expedition it was calculated that more than 6,000 priests and brothers had actually undertaken the missionary task. The Salesians were the first to make contact with many savage tribes, particularly in Patagonia, and a number laid down their lives as martyrs for the faith. Today the Salesians are active in seventy-two different countries.

A great educator

It has now become clear that Don Bosco was one of the very great educators of modern times. He used to say, jokingly, in his

own dialect: 'You can't teach a boy through the seat of his trousers,' and this became a hallmark of his own loving approach to education in what he called his 'Preventive System'.

He was convinced that the business of a child's education began with the need to win his affection and trust. 'Give your boys confidence. To this end you must make yourself loved . . . ,' he advised his Salesians. To be feared or respected was not enough. Love was the key. But in addition to love, there were two other indispensable elements : reason and religion. He believed that a child's immaturity was no obstacle to his recognizing the reasonableness of the demands made upon him, provided that the reasoning was adapted to his youthful understanding. He found that authority supported by reason and not by imposition was welcomed by the young and then became a positive factor in their education.

He wanted discipline to come from within, not from without, so that, once the pupil was persuaded to want to be good, his education could be said to be secure. But to obtain this he was convinced that religion was necessary: 'Without a great deal of prayer, no rules would be of any use.' He maintained that the celebration of the Eucharist, frequent Communion and the regular reception of the sacrament of penance were vital to any system of education which would dispense with all repressive measures.

We have already mentioned how Don Bosco wrote a Bible history-book to meet a particular need. However, his ability as a writer, editor and publisher did not end there. He foresaw the urgency of providing good literature in language the average reader could understand, and decided to do something about it. Here, as elsewhere, his faith was such that he was able to make a start where others would have waited for means which would never come.

As a writer he can be ranked with the best-sellers of all time, though not every one of his 150 published books and pamphlets became a best-seller. His prayer-book, Companion of Youth, first published in 1847, had reached its 100th printing (six million copies) twenty-five years later. His monthly, 100-page digest, Catholic Readings, which he started in March 1853, soon had over 14,000 subscribers—an extraordinary circulation by the standards of the time. He wrote on everything from arithmetic and history to religion and oenology—the science of wines!

When he found that it was more fruitful to have his own presses he made a start in 1861 with two second-hand machines which worked on the old pressure system, and soon had a first-class printing works. In this way he not only provided good literature, but also the opportunity for his boys to become skilled printers, compositors and bookbinders. In 1883 he confided to Pius IX: 'Where the press is concerned Don Bosco wants to be always in the vanguard of progress.' For doing just that Pius XII declared him Patron of Catholic Publishers in 1946.

On one occasion a book of his was conditionally placed on the Index on the grounds of a passing remark in an appendix. This caused him much personal anguish until his great friend, Pius IX, intervened on his behalf.

But the hazards of attempting to provide 'a press against the press' were much more immediate and ominous than that. For some time a sectarian minority had been using the press to issue anti-Catholic tracts and seriously to mislead the public on religious issues. Don Bosco's answer was to beat them at their own game and obtain massive popular support for his witty and intelligent paperbacks. His opponents resented this success and resorted to libellous articles and vitriolic cartoons; when the lies and lampoons in the press proved ineffective, they attempted to silence him in other ways.

His would-be assassins used everything from pistols and poison to clubs and carving-knives in their attempts on his life. He was waylaid several times, and summoned to phoney sick calls, but on each occasion he escaped safely, helped by his good sense, his own strength and his confident trust in divine providence. Even the humour in the situation was not lost. One Sunday morning, for example, when he was teaching catechism, someone took a shot at him through the window. The bullet passed under his arm, making a hole in his cassock. It was a narrow escape, but, after checking the damage, he made the boys laugh by complaining that it had been his best cassock! For a long time, too, he was protected by a mysterious grey dog who seemed to materialize whenever his life was threatened.

Last years

Don Bosco had lived under six Popes, and at least two of them (Pius IX and Leo XIII) were among his closest friends. At a time when Rome and the State were in constant conflict he had managed, with much patience and skill, to achieve the seemingly impossible balance between fidelity to the Holy See and loyalty to the State. He made himself all things to all men so that, whenever it was necessary, he could be an influence for good. In fact, he acted several times as an unofficial intermediary between the Papacy and the Government. 'My politics,' he used to say, 'are those of the Our Father.'

Don Bosco was a visionary and a tactician, a man of God who implemented his dreams with pastoral inventiveness and bold improvisation. But he was also deeply conscious of the central role of Mary in his life. As an old man he could point to the statue of our Lady on top of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, and, with tears in his eyes, say to the two Salesians who were supporting him at the time: 'Everything I have ever done, everything we shall all ever do, is through her.'

When it came, Don Bosco's death was not the result of an assassin's bullet but the culmination of a life dedicated entirely to building up the kingdom of God, especially among poor and neglected children. Worn out by constant work, his health gradually deteriorated. He celebrated Mass for the last time on 11 December 1887. Paralysis gradually spread over his body and eventually, surrounded by his spiritual sons and mourned by thousands, he died on 31 January 1888, at 4.45 a.m. He was 72. There were over 100,000 people at his funeral. Pius XI canonized him on Easter Sunday, 1934.

Of his life and work one could truly say: 'Those who instruct others unto justice shall shine as stars for all eternity' (Dan 12:3).
