

The Life of Saint John Bosco (Don Bosco)

JOHN BOSCO'S EARLY YEARS 1815 - 1841

John Bosco was born in Morialdo [in Piedmont, northern Italy] on August 16 1815, in the town and parish of Castelnuovo d'Ásti and, to be more precise, in the hamlet of Becchi, which consisted of only a few shacks. Although Turin was only about twenty miles away, a whole world separated the Piedmontese countryside from the capital in those days.

His father, Francis (1784-1817), had two children by a previous marriage: a son Anthony (1808-1849) and a daughter, Theresa, who did not live very long. After his second marriage to Margaret Occhiena (1788-1856), he had two more sons: Joseph (1813-1862) and John (1815-1888). One should also mention the grandmother, Margaret Zucca, Francis' mother who, until her death in 1826, retained a clear mind and great influence.

The Bosco family was poor but by no means destitute. They possessed a small house and a piece of land. Nevertheless, in order to support his family, the father found it necessary to work for a neighbour who was better off.

Fatherless

"I was not yet two years old when God in his mercy allowed a great misfortune to befall us." It is with these words that Don Bosco refers to his father's death on May 11 1817.

Francis [Don Bosco's father], coming home from work one day, wet with perspiration, had been careless enough to go into the underground wine-cellar. He caught cold and, seized by a sudden fever, died a few days later at the age of thirty-three. Throughout his life John recalled his mother's words as she led him out of the dead man's room: "Poor lad, come along, you no longer have a father."

Fortunately for her family, Margaret [Bosco's mother] had both a head and a heart. The outstanding qualities of Saint John Bosco's mother were her even temper, her sense of commitment, and piety. Perhaps the greatest qualities of this country woman were drive and determination. We are told that even as a girl she succeeded in chasing away the horses some Austrian troops had put to pasture on her grain. She was left a widow at the age of twenty-nine and faced her difficult situation with courage. As a mother she was rather demanding. She taught her children never to remain idle to the point of cutting down on sleep. On many occasions she showed great forbearance with Anthony, a difficult son. With John she was protective and patient. She could neither read nor write but had a deep understanding of the catechism in its traditional interpretation. She placed no obstacles in the path of her youngest son.

With the father gone, the family had periods of difficulty and crisis. There was material hardship when a terrible famine ravaged Piedmont during the early years of the restoration. In 1817, while crowds of starving people thronged the streets of Turin, the Bosco family at Becchi went through very hard times. There were emotional problems too when the unity and harmony of the family were disturbed by the eldest son's rebellion against the authority of his stepmother, and by his lording it over the two younger stepbrothers. Given to violent outbreaks, rude, and withdrawn, Anthony may well have been just a disturbed lad shaken by the traumatic experience of the deaths of both parents. Over the years, his relationship with the youngest boy deteriorated to the point where it was impossible to have them both under the same roof. Apparently Joseph, a prudent and peace loving boy, was less of a problem.

Early Years

John grew up simply in the small, unsophisticated village of Becchi. At an early age he learned how to make himself useful around the house and in the fields. He tied up the corn, and very soon his main occupation was taking the cow and sheep out to pasture.

He made friends with the local boys, especially John Filipello and Secondo Matta with whom he shared toys and games, fears and exploits. No one could match him when it came to snaring birds in a trap or catching them in their nest! Nimble and strong, he liked to imitate the clowns and acrobats he saw at neighbouring fairs. He also tells us how he came to be a leader of his peers and even of boys older than himself.

His main traits of character were already emerging. John was alert, imaginative, and quick to see the positive side of people and situations. He was very sensitive and subject to fits of temper. The death of his pet blackbird touched him deeply. Father Lemoyne [his chief chronicler and biographer] speaks of his serious turn of mind and his reserve. Nothing escaped him; he weighed people's words, tried to understand others, and to read their minds so as to behave accordingly.

It did not take long for him to develop a sense of vocation. When he was only five years old, he wanted to 'gather boys together for catechism classes'. His other gifts brought him success in this particular ambition, and he conveyed to his companions the lessons learned from the parish priest or from his mother.

If Don Bosco's dates are correct, an unusual incident took place when he was nine or ten years old. Fifty years later, Don Bosco recounted in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* a boyhood dream that he had not forgotten. He had seen a group of boys turned into ferocious beasts become meek lambs. He had also seen a distinguished personage advocating 'meekness and love' when he was vainly trying to correct the faults of others with words and gestures. In the second part of the dream there appeared 'a woman splendidly attired', the mother of the first mysterious personage. She entrusted him with the care of her 'children' and asked him to prepare himself by becoming 'humble, robust, and strong.' The dream ended with her words: 'In due time you will understand everything.'

This was the first of Don Bosco's many [prophetic] dreams. It gave him a lot to think about throughout his life. As a little boy he might have been content to follow his grandmother's advice not to believe in dreams, but now he felt the dream was an invitation from Christ and his Mother to help abandoned children. After telling this dream, Don Bosco recalls his experiences as a boy, teacher, and apostle: 'At a very early age I was already sizing up my companions. When I looked at somebody, I could usually tell what was on his mind; this made my peers either admire or fear me; they wanted me either as a judge or a friend, and I always did my best and never hurt anybody.' There can be no doubt that Don Bosco when in his sixties enjoyed recounting in great detail his early successes which had been quite spectacular.

By the time he was ten or eleven years old, he was already able to draw a crowd of about a hundred people or more. During the long winter evenings, John read stories about the French kings to the children on a neighbouring estate, and when the weather was good, they watched his acrobatics. His main concern, however, was always religion! Nothing was more important to him than prayer, and a recitation of the rosary probably always preceded and ended his performances.

In 1826 John made his First Communion, and we can well imagine that it was on this occasion when he first expressed, probably to his mother, his desire to become a priest.

First Steps in Education

Though John Bosco was very fond of the young, his childhood companions soon found that he was also extremely fond of reading, which was connected with his vocation. He wanted to study seriously, without wasting time.

Things were not easy just then. Three miles [5 kms] separated Becchi from Castelnuovo, where the school of the district was located. In 1824 Margaret managed to have her son admitted to Father Lacqua's school at Capriglio which was a little closer to home. This arrangement, however, did not last long because of Anthony's increasing resentment. He did not like the 'little lord' walking around with a book in his hand all the time, forever thinking of great things to come. John's athletic skills only increased his jealousy. There was so much discord that their mother thought it better to separate them; she sent the younger boy away from home. When he was about fourteen, perhaps in 1828, John went to live with the Moglias, a peasant family, in the village of Moncucco. This was a time of great sorrow for him, which he doesn't mention in his Memoirs, perhaps out of consideration for his mother. On the Moglia farm he earned his keep as a farmhand, but he was allowed to take lessons from the parish priest and to study in his spare time. His uncle, Michael Occhiena, found him another place to live in November 1829, but that still did not end the conflict with his older brother.

A few days later, when he was returning from a mission service in the village of Buttigliera, he met the new chaplain of Morialdo, Joseph Calosso. The old priest at once appreciated the great gifts of the boy who was able to recite by heart long extracts from each of the two missionary sermons. He began to teach him Latin in 1829-30. Unfortunately, just when John was beginning to enjoy a little security in the company of this good and simple priest – so different from the other priests only interested in their career – Father Calosso died suddenly on November 21 1830.

Nevertheless, the year 1830 ended well. Margaret's portion of the inheritance was so small – her bedroom and part of the kitchen – that she and Joseph moved out of Becchi to Sussambrino. John was now free to attend the local school in Castelnuovo while preparing for high school in Chieri.

When he was fifteen or sixteen years old, his life at last took a turn in the right direction. Tried by misfortune and disadvantages such as growing up without a father, suffering the hostility of an older brother and the deprivations of poverty, he had emerged stronger and wiser. Besides, these years had also brought substantial rewards. They had provided him with a sound training in Christian values at the hands of a strong woman, an ability to cope with the harsh realities of life, first apostolic successes, and a growing awareness of his vocation.

- from Morando Wirth, *Don Bosco and the Salesians* (Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, New York, 1982).