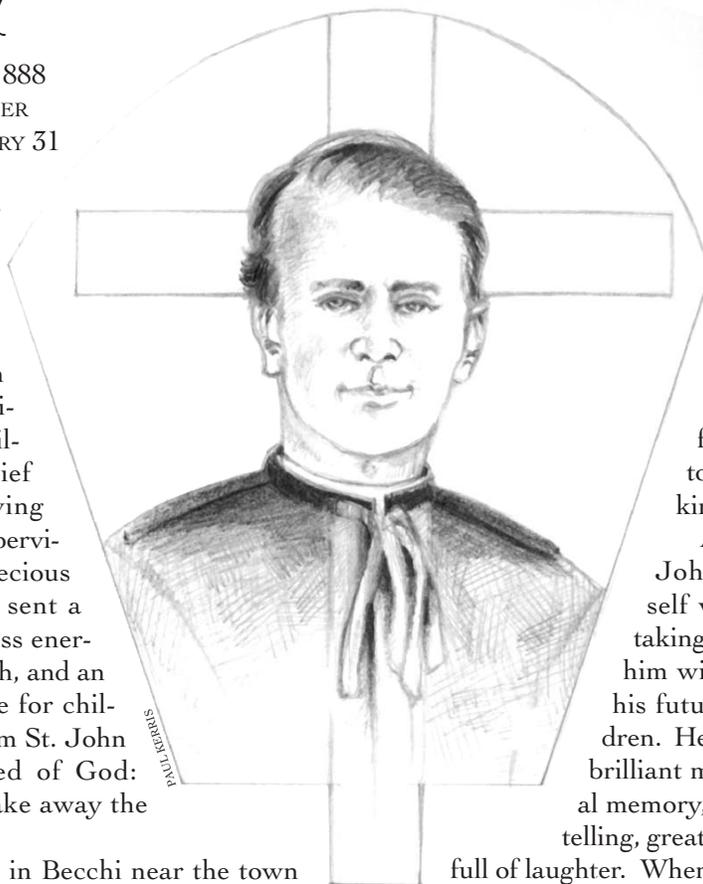


St. John Bosco

BORN 1815; DIED 1888
PRIEST AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: JANUARY 31

NINETEENTH-CENTURY TURIN, Italy was caught up in the wars for Italian unification and in the industrial revolution. Children were the chief victims, many living without care or supervision. To these precious young souls God sent a man with boundless energy, unfaltering faith, and an extraordinary love for children. He sent them St. John Bosco, who asked of God: "Give me souls; take away the rest."

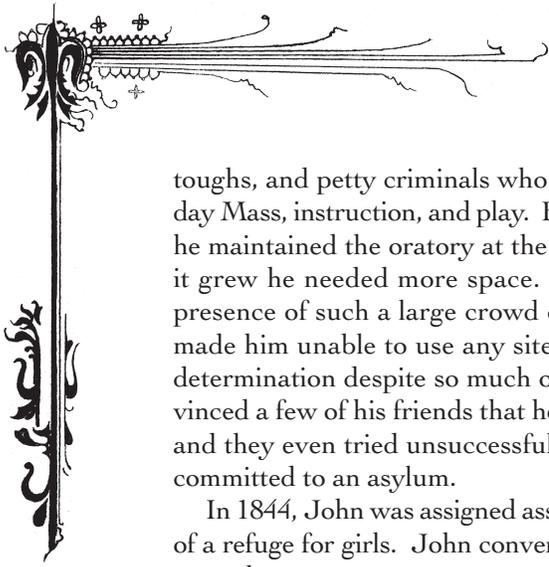
John was born in Becchi near the town of Castelnuovo east of Turin, in northwestern Italy. He was the younger of two sons of Francesco Bosco, a peasant farmer, and his second wife Margherita Occhiena, a devout and industrious woman. He also had one older half-brother. Francesco's death when John was two left the family in poverty. From the age of five, he felt a desire to teach catechism. With determination, he set out to acquire the skills and aptitudes he needed to attract the young, going to circuses and fairs to learn skills such as tightrope walking, acrobatics, juggling, and magic tricks. The first inkling of his vocation came in a dream at the age of nine. He was in the midst of a crowd of children swearing and fighting, whom he tried and failed to stop with his fists. Jesus appeared to John in his dream and told him that he could help the boys only by being kind, leading them, and teaching them to hate sin and



love purity. Mary then appeared, changed the children from wild beasts to lambs, and told him he must do the same. Humiliations during his early years in school reinforced his intention to treat children with kindness and love.

As he grew older, John supported himself while in school by taking jobs that equipped him with skills useful for his future work with children. He was blessed with a brilliant mind, an exceptional memory, a knack for storytelling, great charm, and a heart full of laughter. When he was sixteen, he began his high-school education at Chieri south of Turin, and at twenty entered the seminary there. The rector, St. Joseph Cafasso, obtained financial support for him. At twenty-six, he was ordained and sent to postgraduate study at a college in Turin. There his pastoral duties included visiting the poor, prison ministry, and catechizing boys who no longer lived in a family setting — the refuse of the streets.

Several months after his ordination, John — now as a priest called Don Bosco — was preparing to celebrate Mass when a boy was rudely ejected by the sacristan when he balked at serving Mass. Overhearing, John had the boy brought back, spoke kindly to him, and invited him to return the next Sunday with friends. Nine youngsters came. These became the first members of a "festive oratory" that, before long, numbered more than a hundred street urchins,



toughs, and petty criminals who came for Sunday Mass, instruction, and play. For three years, he maintained the oratory at the college, but as it grew he needed more space. However, the presence of such a large crowd of unruly boys made him unable to use any site for long. His determination despite so much opposition convinced a few of his friends that he was not sane, and they even tried unsuccessfully to have him committed to an asylum.

In 1844, John was assigned assistant chaplain of a refuge for girls. John converted two rooms near the property into a chapel. However, he was soon refused permission for the oratory to continue and was forced to resign his chaplaincy. After several more rejections, in 1846 he leased a piece of land with a large old shed. The oratory, now grown to four hundred boys,

gained a permanent home. He nearly died from pneumonia three months later. After he recovered, his mother came with him. The following year, in a nearby rented house, he and his mother opened a boarding house for forty boys. "Mamma Margherita" gave all her time and love to her son's boys for ten years until her death. In 1853, he opened two workshops on the premises to train apprentices as shoemakers and tailors. By 1856 he was caring for five hundred fifty boys among three oratories and the boarding-house, and had added workshops for printing, book-binding, carpentry, and mechanics. By 1868, the number of boys had grown to eight hundred, enrolled in the workshops and in schools of arts and sciences for the more gifted and a school of liberal arts for boys preparing for the priesthood.

Although not trained as a teacher, John had

immense educational gifts. He developed an educational method that relied on "reason, religion, and kindness." He scandalized the professionals, who saw him as overindulgent and unwilling to inflict punishment. But he knew that the use of punishment was far less effective than kindness, and he was endlessly patient with his boys. The proof was in his results: the boys followed him in everything. John practiced what he termed "preventive education," intended to teach virtue and prevent evils rather than mend them. His starting point was the dignity and freedom of each of his

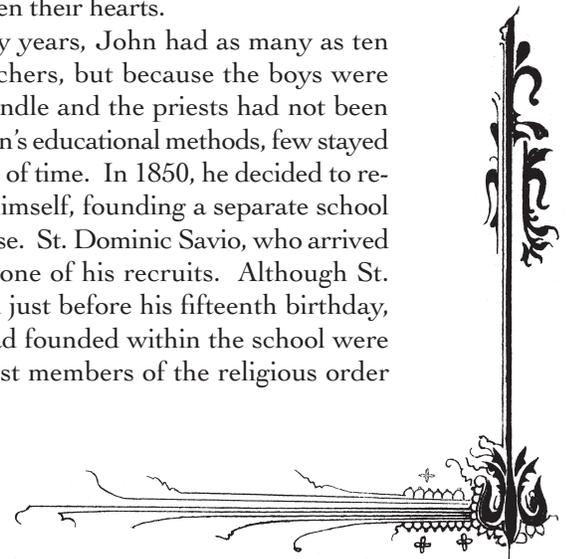
young charges, in whom he instilled moral values and taught a sense of duty and personal responsibility. He always applauded their efforts at virtue, and gave them no occasions to be disobedient. He filled their lives with worthwhile activity so that there was no idle time

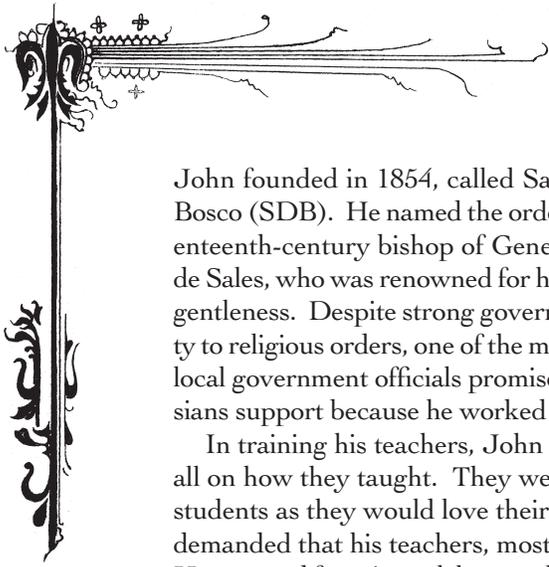


Basilica of Superga in Turin, Italy, where St. John Bosco would often take large groups of boys on day trips

for mischief. A bishop once remarked "he imbues his boys with such a spirit of piety that he almost inebriates them." He wanted these boys to become saints, and admonished them to go to confession regularly, receive Communion often, go to Mass daily, and chose a confessor to whom they could open their hearts.

In the early years, John had as many as ten priests as teachers, but because the boys were difficult to handle and the priests had not been trained in John's educational methods, few stayed for any length of time. In 1850, he decided to recruit priests himself, founding a separate school for this purpose. St. Dominic Savio, who arrived in 1854, was one of his recruits. Although St. Dominic died just before his fifteenth birthday, a group he had founded within the school were among the first members of the religious order





John founded in 1854, called Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB). He named the order after the seventeenth-century bishop of Geneva, St. Francis de Sales, who was renowned for his kindness and gentleness. Despite strong governmental hostility to religious orders, one of the most anti-clerical local government officials promised John's Salesians support because he worked for the poor.

In training his teachers, John focused first of all on how they taught. They were to love their students as they would love their own sons. He demanded that his teachers, most of all, be kind. He opposed focusing solely on a child's talent and accomplishments but failing to form his will and character as a type of misplaced "kindness." He insisted that everyone who worked with his children must earn the students' trust and give a clear Christian witness of intimacy with God in their own life. He also believed that good music greatly assisted in the growth of the minds of the young, helped to civilize them, and awakened the spiritual part of human nature. He was ever-mindful of entertainment as a means to lure the young and of a child's need for joy, fun, and laughter.

John had the gift of reading souls. Sometimes in his dreams he would see individual boys in his care. Those living virtuous lives appeared to shine with light, or their hearts would appear to be overflowing with flowers. Those living in sin would appear to be hideous with sores, filth, and stench, or their hearts would seem to be filled with maggots or snakes. Some would appear to have sharp-clawed monkeys on their shoulders, keeping them from confession. He recounted these dreams to the boys in general terms, never giving the names of those he saw, and urged those who needed it to go to confession.

John lived during a tumultuous period and was sometimes himself a target. He was shot at, and once was attacked by thugs while on his way to hear the confession of a dying man late at night. He was defended by a divinely-supplied guardian, a huge and fierce gray dog that he named Grigio, who appeared and accompanied him as he went about, especially at night, whenever danger was imminent.

Miracles of every sort were a common feature of John's life. On one occasion, he multiplied twenty loaves of bread so that four hundred boys each received a loaf; on another, the same thing happened with chestnuts. Once when there were far more communicants than hosts, the Body of Christ was multiplied in his ciborium so that all who wished could receive their Lord. He healed a blind girl, and people were cured when he blessed them. Once he raised a fifteen-year-old from the dead long enough to hear his final confession, and several instances of bilocation and prophecy also occurred. Pope Pius XI said of his life: "The supernatural almost became natural, and the extraordinary ordinary."

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In 1872, with St. Mary Mazzarello, John founded the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA or Salesian sisters), dedicated to the care of poor girls. When Italians began to emigrate to Lat-

in America, he directed the Salesians to undertake missionary work. By his death, there were already over seven hundred sixty Salesian priests and brothers and nearly as many Salesian sisters. Today there are some forty thousand Salesian priests, brothers, and sisters staffing over four thousand three hundred technical, agricultural, and other kinds of schools, nurseries, orphanages, and clinics and hospitals across the world. They also carry out pastoral and missionary work. Assisting them are the lay Salesian Cooperators.

From his youth, John sought to control his passions, quick temper, impetuous nature, and pride. Having no memory of his father, he was vividly aware of the fatherhood of God, and his own spiritual life was based on carrying out an apostolate of fatherhood. He was especially devoted to the mother of Jesus under her title Mary, Help of Christians. His principal ascetical practices were complete self-denial, little sleep, and unremitting work. As he grew older and his health broke, he replied to those urging him to ease up: "First tell the devil to rest, and then I'll rest too." "God gave him," declared Pope Pius XI, "magnanimity of heart as the sand on the sea-shore."

