

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Bosco

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 31

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Bosco

Priest of Turin, educator of poor boys and founder of the Salesians, patron saint of young people.

Feast day	January 31
Born	August 16, 1815, I Becchi, near Castelnuovo d'Asti, Piedmont, Italy
Died	January 31, 1888, Turin, Italy
Canonized	April 1, 1934, by Pope Pius XI
Era	19th century
Patron saint of	young people, educators, apprentices, schoolchildren

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Bosco

Saint John Bosco, known familiarly as Don Bosco, was a 19th-century Italian priest who devoted his life to the poor boys of Turin, at a time when the city was becoming industrialized. The son of peasants, he founded an oratory, workshops and schools, then the Salesian congregation and, with Saint Mary Mazzarello, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. His method of education, built on trust and affection, is still practiced all over the world. He died on January 31, 1888, and his feast day is celebrated on that date.

Who was Saint John Bosco?

Giovanni Bosco was born on August 16, 1815, at I Becchi, a hamlet in the hills near Castelnuovo d'Asti, in Piedmont. His father, Francesco, died before he was two. His mother, Margherita Occhiena, raised her three sons alone, in great poverty and with solid faith; she would later be called "Mamma Margaret."

Very early, little John drew the neighborhood children to himself. He learned acrobatic and conjuring tricks to gather and entertain them, then repeated the Sunday sermon to them and invited them to pray.

Around the age of nine, he had a dream that marked him for life. Among boys who were fighting and cursing, a majestic man asked him to win them over not with blows but with gentleness, and a lady showed him wild beasts turned into lambs. He would tell this dream in his *Memoirs* as the announcement of his mission.



The house at I Becchi, at Colle Don Bosco, where John Bosco grew up.

Key dates

- **August 16, 1815**: Born at I Becchi.
- **c. 1824**: The dream at the age of nine.
- **1835**: Enters the seminary of Chieri, after years of study paid for by odd jobs.
- **June 5, 1841**: Ordained a priest in Turin; he continues his training at the Convitto Ecclesiastico under Saint Joseph Cafasso.
- **December 8, 1841**: Meets a young bricklayer, Bartolomeo Garelli, the starting point of the oratory.
- **April 1846**: The oratory settles for good at Valdocco, in a shed rented from Mr. Pinardi.
- **1854**: Young Dominic Savio arrives at the oratory.

- **December 18, 1859**: Founding of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, the Salesians.
- **June 9, 1868**: Consecration of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin.
- **1872**: Founding, in Mornese, of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians with Mary Mazzarello.
- **1875**: The first Salesian missionaries leave for Argentina.
- **January 31, 1888**: Dies in Turin.
- **April 1, 1934**: Canonized by Pope Pius XI, on Easter Sunday.

The oratory at Valdocco

In the Turin of the 1840s, thousands of boys from the countryside worked on building sites or roamed the streets. The young Father Bosco visited them even in prison, where he was shaken to see teenagers locked up. He decided to welcome them on Sundays: they played, sang, learned the catechism and went to confession. For years the oratory wandered from place to place, driven out by neighbors who complained about the noise, until it found a home at Valdocco, an outlying district, in 1846.

At the end of that same year, Mamma Margaret left I Becchi to come and help him. Together they took in the first boarders. Little by little a boarding house grew up, with apprentice workshops (shoemaking, carpentry, bookbinding, printing) and classrooms. Don Bosco even negotiated apprenticeship contracts with employers to protect his boys, something rare at the time.

The preventive system

Don Bosco summed up his way of educating in three words: reason, religion and loving kindness, the *amorevolezza*. Rather than punishing faults, he wanted to prevent them by being present among the young, in the playground as much as in the chapel. Educators must love what young people love, so that

young people in turn will love what educators propose to them. Joy, games, music and theater had their full place, alongside frequent confession and Communion.

Among the fruits of this education was Dominic Savio, a pupil of the oratory who died at fourteen in 1857, whose life Don Bosco wrote himself and whom the Church canonized in 1954.

The Salesians and the mission to the world

To secure the future of his work, Don Bosco trained his own co-workers from among the boys he had raised. In 1859 he founded with them a religious society that he placed under the patronage of Saint Francis de Sales, a model of pastoral gentleness: these are the Salesians. Then came the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, founded with Mary Mazzarello for the education of girls, and the Salesian Cooperators, open to lay people.

From 1875, missionaries left for Argentina and Patagonia. To fund his works, Don Bosco wrote, published, traveled as far as France and Spain, and built the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, then the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. Worn out by work, he died in Turin on January 31, 1888. Today Salesian schools, parishes and youth centers are found across the world, from India and the Philippines to the United States, Britain and Ireland.

Why is Saint John Bosco the patron saint of young people?

Don Bosco showed that education can be a path to holiness, for the young person as for the educator. He believed that in every teenager, even the most difficult, there is a point that goodness can reach. His motto, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, "Give me souls, take away the rest," expresses his one passion. He is invoked for young people, parents, teachers, youth workers and apprentices. Because of the tricks he used as a boy to gather his friends, he is also popularly regarded as a patron of stage magicians.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint John Bosco, or follow the novena to Saint John Bosco from January 22 to 30, finishing on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Bosco in art

- **A priest in a black cassock**, often smiling, surrounded by boys who look up at him or hold his hands.
- **Mary Help of Christians**: he is often shown with the Virgin, crowned, holding the Child, to whom he dedicated his basilica in Turin.
- **Dominic Savio at his side**, in many statues and holy cards.



The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, built by Don Bosco at Valdocco (1868).

Where to pray to Saint John Bosco

- **Turin** (Italy): the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, where his body rests, and the places of the Valdocco oratory.
- **Castelnuovo Don Bosco** (Piedmont): Colle Don Bosco, with the house at I Becchi and the great basilica built on the hill of his childhood.

- **Chieri**: the town of his studies and his seminary.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, near Termini station, which he built at the request of Pope Leo XIII.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Bosco for Young People

This page brings together two authentic sayings of Saint John Bosco and an original prayer by Saintspedia inspired by his life. The prayers to Saint John Bosco in use today were all composed after his death; his own words come to us through his letters and writings.

Prayer to Saint John Bosco for young people

Saint John Bosco, father and friend of the young, you who saw in every street child a soul loved by God, pray for us.

You who left your poor home at I Becchi owning nothing, and received everything from Providence, teach me trust. You who played, sang and laughed with your boys, give me the joy that opens hearts.

I entrust to you the young people of our time, especially those who are alone, without work or without direction. I entrust to you parents, teachers, youth workers and all who educate: may they know how to correct with gentleness and love with patience. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

With Mary Help of Christians, whom you loved so much, lead us to Jesus present in the Eucharist. And may we say with you: give me souls, Lord, and take away the rest. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

"Da mihi animas, cetera tolle"

Don Bosco had this motto written up in his room at Valdocco. It takes up words spoken by the king of Sodom to Abraham in the Book of Genesis (14:21), reread as a prayer addressed to God:

> *"Give me souls, and take away all the rest."*

Source: motto of Saint John Bosco, after the Latin Vulgate, Genesis 14:21 ("Da mihi animas, cetera tolle tibi"). It remains the motto of the Salesian family.

The Letter from Rome, 1884

On May 10, 1884, while staying in Rome, Don Bosco wrote to his boys and educators in Turin. He was worried that relationships at the oratory had grown colder, and he recalled the heart of his method. Saintspedia translation from the Italian; the original text is in the public domain.

> *"Let the young not only be loved, but let them know that they are loved."*

Source: Saint John Bosco, letter from Rome to the community of the Valdocco oratory, May 10, 1884.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Bosco's feast day is January 31, the anniversary of his death. People like to pray to him at the start of the school year, before an exam, for a young person who is struggling, for a son or daughter who has drifted from the faith, or for a team of teachers and youth leaders. The Salesian family also celebrates Mary Help of Christians on May 24. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John Bosco, and read the life of Saint John Bosco.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Bosco

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia. It follows the stages of Saint John Bosco's life, from the hills of I Becchi to the oratory at Valdocco. It is not an official liturgical text, nor a text written by the saint. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on January 22; it then ends on January 30, the day before his feast on January 31. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for a child, a teenager or a young adult you carry in your heart.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary to Mary Help of Christians. The small act suggested for each day helps you live the day in Don Bosco's spirit. This novena can be prayed as a family, in a classroom or with a youth group.

Day 1: A mother who passes on the faith

Widowed very young, Mamma Margaret raised her sons in poverty, but taught them to pray and to see God everywhere. John Bosco's faith was first the faith he received from her. Later she would leave her home to help him at Valdocco, a mother to hundreds of boys.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who passed on the faith to me. Bless the parents who raise their children alone.

Today: Pray for your parents, or for those who took their place.

Day 2: The dream at nine years old

In his dream, little John wanted to silence the boys with his fists. He was asked to win them over with gentleness and charity. His whole life would be the answer to that call.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to answer harshness with gentleness, and anger with patience.

Today: Hold back a harsh word toward someone who annoys you.

Day 3: Playing in order to proclaim

As a boy, John learned to walk a tightrope and do tricks to gather his friends, and then he led them in prayer. Joy is not a detour: it is an open door toward God.

Prayer: Lord, give me the joy that attracts and consoles. Keep me from the sadness that discourages others.

Today: Spend real time playing or relaxing with a child or a young person.

Day 4: Studying against the odds

To pay for his studies, John worked as a farmhand, a tailor, a waiter and a blacksmith. He did not complain: he knew that being formed meant preparing to serve.

Prayer: Lord, bless pupils and students, especially those who study in difficult conditions.

Today: Help a young person with homework, or support an educational project.

Day 5: The first boy

On December 8, 1841, Don Bosco stood up for a young bricklayer who had been chased out of a sacristy and taught him to make the Sign of the Cross. The whole oratory was born of this meeting with a single boy. Great works often begin with one face and one name.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the one who is rejected. Help me understand that a single gesture can change everything.

Today: Welcome kindly someone who has been left out.

Day 6: Visiting the prisons

With Saint Joseph Cafasso, the young priest visited the prisons of Turin. The sight of teenagers behind bars shook him: he wanted to reach them before they ended up there.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you young people in prison and those at risk of losing their way. Send them educators who believe in them.

Today: Pray by name for a young person you know who is going through a hard time.



Praying with Saint John Bosco.

Day 7: Loving, and letting it be known

Don Bosco wanted the young not only to be loved, but to know that they were loved. Loving kindness in education shows itself through presence, listening and concrete gestures.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love with a love that can be seen, that encourages and helps others grow.

Today: Tell a child or a young person what you appreciate about them.

Day 8: Mary Help of Christians

"She has done everything," Don Bosco said of the Virgin Mary, to whom he dedicated the basilica in Turin. He always lived under her gaze, with trust. Entrusting our cares to Mary is a simple way of letting her lead us, as she led him, to her Son.

Prayer: Mary Help of Christians, take young people and their families under your protection.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for young people.

Day 9: Give me souls

Worn out by work, Don Bosco died at seventy-two. He had given everything, his time, his strength, his health, so that young people might find a family and the way to God.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I give you my intention. Through the intercession of Saint John Bosco, give me a generous heart to serve the young. Amen.

Today: Offer some of your time to a youth ministry, a parish youth group or a school.

Closing prayer

Saint John Bosco, friend of the young, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the children and teenagers of our time, for their parents and for their educators. Obtain for us joy, trust in Providence and the love of Jesus and Mary that filled your life. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint John Bosco and the prayer to Saint John Bosco.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, Tomb of Don Bosco

The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, in the heart of Turin's Valdocco district, is the main pilgrimage site dedicated to Saint John Bosco. He had it built himself, and his body rests there. Around it stretch the buildings of the oratory where he welcomed thousands of young people, making Valdocco the motherhouse of the whole Salesian family.

A basilica built by Providence

In the early 1860s, the Valdocco oratory needed a large church. Don Bosco decided to dedicate it to Mary Help of Christians, "Help of Christians." He had almost no money: the work was financed little by little through gifts, lotteries, and graces received, and he liked to say that every stone was a thank-you. The cornerstone was laid in 1864 and the basilica was consecrated on June 9, 1868. Enlarged in the 20th century, it is topped by a dome bearing a statue of Our Lady.



Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, tomb of Don Bosco.

The tomb of Don Bosco

After his death in 1888, Don Bosco was first buried at Valsalice, in the hills above Turin. In 1929, the year of his beatification, his body was solemnly brought back to Valdocco and placed in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, where it rests in a shrine in a side chapel. The basilica also houses the tombs of several saints and blesseds of the Salesian family, including Saint Dominic Savio.

Valdocco, Don Bosco's home

Next to the basilica, you can visit the places of the oratory: the Pinardi Chapel, on the site of the shed where the work settled in 1846, the Church of Saint Francis de Sales, the first church he had built, and the rooms where Don Bosco

lived and where he died. These plain places let you take the measure of the poverty of the beginnings and the scale of what was born from them.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint John Bosco. On site, a time of prayer before his tomb lets you entrust a young person, a child, or an educational team. The prayer to Saint John Bosco can accompany this moment, followed by a Hail Mary to Mary Help of Christians. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Don Bosco

- **Colle Don Bosco** (Castelnuovo Don Bosco, about thirty kilometers from Turin): the Becchi house where he grew up, and the great basilica built on the hill.
- **Chieri**: the city of his studies at the school and then the seminary.
- **Turin**: the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, where he met Bartolomeo Garelli on December 8, 1841, and the Convitto Ecclesiastico.
- **Mornese** (Piedmont): the village of Saint Mary Dominic Mazzarello, cradle of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, near Termini station, which he had built late in life.

Practical information

Valdocco is a few kilometers northwest of central Turin and is easily reached by public transit. January 31, the feast of Saint John Bosco, and May 24, the feast of Mary Help of Christians, attract many pilgrims. For Colle Don Bosco, it is best to plan on a car or a coach. Check Mass times and visiting hours with the Salesians before you come.

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