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Feast of Saint John Bosco

Saint John Bosco: January 31



Carlo Felice Deasli, Don Bosco, Torino, 1887

On January 31, the Catholic Church celebrates the Memorial of Saint John Bosco. John Bosco, or Giovanni Bosco in Italian, was born in the small village of Becchi in the Piedmont region of Italy on August 16, 1815. He was the youngest of three sons. When he was only two years old, John's father died. His mother, Margaret, was left to raise her children alone. The family was very, very poor.

When he was growing up, John did many different jobs to try to bring home money to help his family. He did not have nice clothes or shoes to wear. His family really did not have any material possessions at all. One time John and his mother had gone to hear a sermon by Father Joseph Cafasso, who also became a saint. Father Cafasso realized how brilliant John was, and encouraged him to become a priest. Since John's family didn't have any money, John entered the seminary at the age of eighteen through the charity of others. Even his clothes and shoes were donated to him!

John went to the seminary in Turin to study to become a priest. Turin is a city in the Piedmont region of Italy. You might recognize the name of this city, because not too long ago the Winter Olympics were held there. But in the 1800s, when John was in the seminary, Turin was in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. Many poor young boys from rural areas of Italy left their families and came to Turin to find work and make money. But they were very young and they were alone, and the city life was very tough for them. Many of them were homeless, and ended up getting involved in stealing and other crime.

Father Joseph Cafasso ministered with prisoners. Sometimes John Bosco would accompany him on visits to the prison. John realized how hard it was for the young boys who had come to Turin to find work, and how easy it was for them to turn to crime. John began ministering to the youth in Turin. He was a very kind priest. He wanted to educate the young boys and teach them about faith, but he didn't want to be mean or cruel and punish them for getting into trouble. So he became what we might today call a youth minister. On Sundays, John would take the young boys to Mass, and then take them on outings to the countryside so they would get fresh air and not always be in the city. They would have picnics and play games, and John taught them about Jesus and the Church. John taught them that it was important to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation and to receive the Eucharist.



John Bosco was ordained a priest in 1841. In 1850 he opened a house where the young boys, most of whom were homeless and alone, could live. John's mother, Margaret, was their housekeeper. John helped educate the boys not only in the faith, but he also saw that they were trained as shoemakers and tailors and printers. John even wrote and printed his own materials to teach religion to the boys.

John needed help in his ministry, but it was hard to find priests to assist him. In 1859 he founded a religious order of men called the Salesians, named after Saint Francis de Sales. The Salesians' ministry was focused on education of youth and mission work. Later, with the help of Mary Mazzarello, who also is a saint, John founded a religious order of Sisters. He also began a group of lay people, called Cooperators, who assisted his ministry.

John Bosco died on January 31, 1881 in Turin, Italy. Pope Pius X declared him Venerable (the first step to sainthood) in 1907. Pope Pius XI Beatified (second step to sainthood) John in 1929, and Canonized (third and final step to sainthood) him a saint in 1934. Saint John Bosco is the patron saint of apprentices, boys, editors, laborers, school children and students. Today the Salesian order which he founded has over 40,000 members in 100 countries, and is the third largest Catholic religious order in the world!