



**a man
sent
by God**

by Paul Aronica

a 15 minute life of St. John Bosco

This little booklet is written for busy people, who haven't much time to read. Maybe you have to dash out to school or to work, or maybe you are too tired to do long reading. Take time out to read this—*just fifteen minutes*—and you can be sure no fifteen minutes were ever better used than in getting acquainted with a great man, one whose equal in many fields of endeavour has rarely been found, a man who combines the romantic with the prosaic, the dream with the reality, the natural with the supernatural—a man sent by God to a needy, hungry, tired world.

A MAN
SENT BY GOD

A FIFTEEN MINUTE LIFE
OF SAINT JOHN BOSCO

BY

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A Man Sent by God

God, it is said, sends the world Saints when they are most needed—not men and women of “general holiness,” but specialized experts who fit into the pattern of the times and are capable of giving God’s tone to their century.

Boy of the Age

And so it was that on August 16, 1815—when an era was closing in Europe with the exile of Napoleon and another was opening to the clanging of the Industrial Revolution—“a man was sent by God whose name was John.” He came to the scrubby stone cottage of Francis and Margaret Bosco on the hills of Becchi, at the foot of the Italian Alps. “A fine healthy baby,” the neighbors all agreed, “fit for the soil, to take his father’s place on the old homestead.” But

no one went farther than that in predicting the peasant child's future.

As a youngster, Johnny early toughened to the strain of farm labor. There were house chores to do, firewood to be cut and gathered, fields to plow, crops to weed, harvests to be brought in, cows to tend—and little John and his older brother Joseph, supervised by their step-brother Anthony, set to the tasks with a will.

By far the sweetest influence in their lives, easing the otherwise breaking burden of poverty, was their mother, as noble a character and tender a woman as the world has known. She meant everything to them, especially after they lost their father—John was two years old then. Mama Margaret she was called by all who knew her. Fathomless was the love she showed her sons, not in coddling words but in deeds; innumerable were the lessons in upright living, Christian fortitude, and fear of God which she taught by her example. A pillar of goodness she stood before them, as

sturdy as the very Alps. At her knee John first heard the voice of the Master calling him to a special assignment. It was a low insistent voice, an urge that once in a while manifested itself in a sudden outburst—like the time Margaret and John were walking along the countryside and met a priest.

“Hello, Father,” cried the lad, only to be acknowledged by a curt bow of the head. Deeply hurt, he complained that he had been slighted.

“When I grow up,” he told his astonished mother, “*I’m going to be a priest, and I’ll talk to children all the time, and I’ll do everything for them!*”

The Juggler

Again the *voice* urged John to go among the farm lads, not just as a playmate but as a leader. More than once he came home with a battered cheek or torn shirt and in explanation would say, “But, mother, those boys are not really bad. They haven’t got a good mother

like I have, and they don't know their catechism and their parents don't take them to church. When I'm with them, they behave better. Please, mother, may I go with them?"

Soon the lad took over completely, as God's plan called for. He learned the tricks of magic from travelling showmen. He juggled. He walked the tight-rope. Then he opened his own carnival show—admission: one rosary to be recited by all the spectators; added attraction—a sermon, preached the Sunday before by the pastor and now repeated by the little *ring master*. The show grounds were the field in front of his house, where Margaret Bosco often watched her son at work and wondered what might come of it all.

The Open Call

When John was nine, the master called him openly. A mission as important as his could not be left to a mere urge. In a "dream" the boy found him-

self fighting a large crowd of rowdy lads who were cursing and carrying on abominably, refusing to hearken to his voice. Suddenly, a "Man" appeared, who motioned to John and said, "*Not with blows will you help these boys, but with goodness and kindness!*"

"Who are you?" gasped the astonished lad.

Then a "Woman" appeared. Putting her arm around him, she said, "Watch what I do, John." John looked. The boys had changed to a pack of snarling wild animals, whose growls sent terror to his heart. Then the woman put out her hand. The beasts changed to a frolicking flock of lambs.

"But what does it all mean? I'm just a farm boy. What can I do?" Tears streamed down his face.

The Lady's answer came to him, ever to resound in his heart, to be repeated audibly several times in his life: "*This is the field of your work. BE HUMBLE, BE STRONG, BE COURAGEOUS!*"

To the Priesthood

John now knew his vocation. But the priesthood meant studies, and there was no money on the Bosco farm. Even school was almost impossible. Due to the goodness of a farmer who taught him, John learned to read and write and do sums at the age of eight. His first schooling came the next year, when he hiked some three miles every morning to the country school of a priest. But the increasing hostility of his stepbrother, unpacified by John's attempts to put in extra hours on the farm, made life at home unbearable. And so, for the sake of domestic peace, Margaret Bosco divided the paltry estate left by her husband and allowed her youngest son to go to Castelnuovo to attend public school and board with a good family she knew.

Working His Way

Alone in the town, John soon learned the hardships of an "orphan's"

life. He worked after school hours to support himself. Though he was only 15, he labored in a blacksmith shop, then as a tailor, a waiter, a pin-boy in a bowling alley, a shoemaker—anything to get a few pennies and ease his mother's burden.

At school he did exceptionally well. True, he had been looked upon by teacher and classmates as a stupid country dolt in the beginning, but his brilliant memory and steadfast application soon won him the respect of all. In one year he was ready for his secondary studies.

As we look back over the records, we find that John did three years of high school in one scholastic year and one summer. How he ever succeeded is quite a problem, unless we take in account his exceptional memory and intensive study habits.

One teacher, on finding this husky farm lad in his class, almost dwarfing the smaller town boys, remarked, "What are you—a giant moron or a genius?"

"Somewhere in between," was John's ready answer, "just a pupil who is determined to study hard and learn."

Throughout his school work John did not lose sight of his vocation, which was now, more than ever, an actual conviction. "*I'm going to be a priest,*" he told his friends, "*and I'm going to give my life to the care of boys!*"

By 1835, when John was 20, he was ready for the seminary, taking with him an enviable record for excellence in studies, a reputation for solid piety, and the friendship of countless people in many walks of life. Prominent among them was a young priest, Father Cafasso—now St. Joseph Cafasso—John's confessor, who best understood him and interpreted God's plan for him.

On June 5, 1841, John was ordained to the priesthood in Turin. He celebrated his first Mass the next day in the church of St. Francis of Assisi. "During my first Mass," he said, "I asked for the gift of *efficacy of speech*, and I think I got it!"

His First Boys

With ordination came the release of a powerful spiritual energy, which, joined to his rare human gifts, was calculated to exert a lasting influence on modern youth.

The beautiful Lady of his dreams was not slow in showing Don Bosco (as he was called, for Don means Father in Italian) just what she expected him to do. On the feast of Mary Immaculate, December 8, 1841, the first sign came. While vesting for Mass, the priest heard the sexton shrieking at a poor youngster who had stolen into the sacristy to get warm. "Here, call the lad back," cried Don Bosco, "he is my friend." And that friendship, struck up on the spur of the moment, began Don Bosco's world-wide campaign to bring youth to God.

"Next Sunday," he told the boy, "you bring your friends here, and we'll spend the day together."

The next Sunday, a hundred ragged

boys, looking badly in need of a meal and warm clothing, came to Don Bosco. They were certainly in very dire spiritual need. That hundred multiplied in a few weeks, so that caring for them soon became a major problem.

"But my girls!" exclaimed the directress of the girl's orphanage of which Don Bosco was Chaplain: "What will become of them?"

"You can always find a priest for them," said Don Bosco, "*but the care of these boys is MY task!*"

In the Slums

Walking through the slums of Turin, over-run by the poverty that spewed out of the factories with their sweat-boxes and hazardous machinery and child labor and starvation wages, Don Bosco came face to face with his mission. As he walked through the prisons with Father Cafasso, the conviction of his vocation seemed to shout within him: "*These boys were not bad once—take care of*

them BEFORE they fall into crime—that is your task!”

With his heart full of trust in his Lady and his pockets empty, Don Bosco courageously took up the work. From then on it was only: *“Give me souls—the souls of youngsters!”*

The Wandering Oratory

Don Bosco called his weekly band of ragged youngsters “the Oratory”—a term which to his mind suggested prayer and organized recreation. In the beginning it was a floating thing, its members swelling in large proportions. There was no one place to meet, because in those troublesome times people were afraid of a large group of working boys—and, besides, who relishes the uproar of some two hundred lads enjoying a day’s freedom from the imprisonment of a factory? Every Sunday they would meet in a different spot—a city church, a cemetery chapel, an empty lot. Don Bosco would hear their confessions and

say Mass for them. This would be followed by an hour of religious instruction—plain, homely talks coming from the heart and embodying the solid truths of the Faith. Then the priest would take this gypsy band of his into the country for an all day outing of games. A final talk would close the “Oratory day,” and the tired bunch would trail into Turin, scattering on the way.

During the week, Don Bosco used to tour the city shops, “checking up” on his boys, making sure they had not forgotten his instructions to work hard and work well.

Those were heroic times—“those pioneer days,” as the Saint used to call them. Days of strenuous work they were, a shiftless existence that threatened to collapse any Sunday, a bankrupt enterprise with no capital and very little funds. Besides this, the city fathers, worried by the new cries of “freedom for the working classes,” eyed Don Bosco’s boys as a dangerous, half-cooked army of the children of the people, headed by an am-

bitious priest. Actually, this tired, pen-
niless priest sought only for a chance
to bring God's peace and order to the
hearts of restless youth.

The Shed-Chapel

In 1846 the first ray of hope broke through the clouds. Don Bosco bought an empty lot and a dilapidated shed in an undeveloped section of Turin called Valdocco. True, next door was a saloon and across the street a hotel of shady reputation—but what did it matter? The Oratory ground was sacred, for, as he later learned in a “dream,” it was the burial mound of the Martyrs of Turin.

With a roof over his head, Don Bosco knew that his Lady had set the permanent basis of his work.

The shed he dug deeper and converted into a chapel, with a tiny ante-room, and every Sunday five hundred lads managed—quite miraculously—to squeeze into it for Mass. “The Oratory of St. Francis of Sales” he called it, out

of admiration for the gentle holiness of this great Saint.

The shed-chapel can still be seen to-day—the tiny nucleus of a world-wide organization that began in poverty and Our Lady's blessing.

The Orphanage

New fields of boy-work opened themselves to the Saint. Turin was over-run by homeless lads, many of whom found an undesired home in its squalid prisons. They had to be saved BEFORE they fell!

Again, a little boy started the project. One stormy fall night in 1850, as Don Bosco and his mother were sitting up at their work, a timid knock came to their door. As Mama Margaret opened it, there he stood, tiny and dripping wet, scared, starved, blinking in the light.

"Please," he whined, "I'm hungry. Can I come in?"

As he devoured a plate of steaming soup, he told his story: his mother had just died, the farm was taken over by

creditors, and he was alone in the world.

"He will stay with us," Don Bosco stated.

"But where will he sleep?"

"If necessary, we will sling a basket from the ceiling for a bed!" laughed the priest. The boy laughed too. He was Don Bosco's first orphan.

The Trade School

More orphans came. Don Bosco bought the house adjoining the shed. The boarders used to go to work or school in Turin each day, returning "home" for meals, but Don Bosco soon realized that this makeshift system had too many drawbacks, and that he had to have a school of his own. One day in 1853, he took a corner of Mama Margaret's kitchen and converted it into a cobbler shop; the tiny hallway became a carpenter shop. The teachers? Don Bosco himself and two hired men. Now there was really no quiet at the Oratory with all the banging of hammers, but in

the midst of all that rumpus was born the Don Bosco Trade School. Not that Don Bosco would have ever called it that, but that is what the movement developed into. Today, the congregation of Don Bosco operates 640 trade schools in 53 nations. Literally, millions of boys have been taught a trade in Don Bosco's trade schools. It all began in Mama Margaret's kitchen.

The Preventive System

As Don Bosco's name became famous, more priests came to help him, secular priests released by their Bishops for this work. Though they came from different sections of Italy, they soon realized that Don Bosco had an educational system of his own, called by him "the preventive system."

Essentially it means: *prevent a boy from becoming bad*. It is based on Christian charity. Its double foundation is Reason and Religion: in other words, a sense of *understanding* between teacher

and pupil, engendered by daily contact, friendly chats, and an interest that is felt; and, secondly a sense of religion, fostered by the sacraments of Confession and Communion. According to the Saint, where other systems of education have failed, this system of kindly understanding and manly, sincere religion has more than succeeded.

The system is not new, though in Don Bosco's hands it achieved a freshness all its own. While it compensates for errors committed by youth—often changeable, always forgetful—it does not condone them, but rather uses them as stepping-stones to the formation of a solid character, permeated by Christian principles of life.

The Salesian Congregation

Don Bosco's times were unsuited to the erection of a new religious congregation. Those already in existence were being torn down by a diabolical campaign of Free-Masons, political radicals, self-styled freethinkers. Yet, it was pre-

cisely a liberal minded politician who had closed convent doors who first suggested the idea of a new religious congregation to Don Bosco. "Start a new Order and have you suppress it in its cradle?" smiled the Saint.

"No, your case is different. You work for the poor. Your schools really belong to the working classes. No one will resent what you do. Make sure your religious keep their status of citizens, and we will not touch you."

And so, still under his Lady's guidance, Don Bosco set about the task. His own boys were the best material. Little Michael Rua, who idolized him, tough Johnny Cagliero, hard-working Johnny Francesia, self-willed Paul Albera, and several others—they would be the pioneers in this experiment of a new religious congregation.

"Would you like to stay with Don Bosco?" he asked them.

"Here I am for four!" was Cagliero's stalwart answer. The others agreed. On

the night of December 18, 1859, was born the Congregation of St. Francis of Sales.

Now came the painstaking work of organization, based on experiment and experience, and of drawing up Rules for Rome's approval. It required a genius in the delicate art of human relations. Don Bosco was equal to the test, for in 1869 the Congregation was approved, and five years later, so were his Constitutions.

Today, 17,000 Salesians, Priests and Brothers, bound by one rule, inspired by the same spirit of their one Founder, are all dedicated to the double task of self-sanctification and the care of youth.

The Salesian Sisters

Rest was out of the question for Don Bosco. Another dream-vision opened a new field of endeavor to him. He found himself in a city square, surrounded by a squealing bevy of girls. They were puny things, unwashed, unkempt, with starva-

tion in their eyes. "Come to us, Father!" they whined. "We need you!"

With that pitiful wail in his ears, Don Bosco looked about for tangible proofs of his Lady's intervention. He found it in a girls' sodality of a countryside parish. As he spoke to them at a meeting he was convinced that they were the answer to a prayer, and that their leader, a soft-spoken, robust, and utterly spiritual minded girl of 25, Mary Mazzarello, was to be his co-founder. With usual humility and courage he set about the task, and in 1875 received the first vows of the new order, which he called the "Daughters of Mary Help of Christians." As far as he was concerned, they were the feminine counterpart of his Salesians and a living monument of gratitude to "his Lady."

Today, there are 13,000 Salesian Sisters in a world-wide order.

Salesian Missions

His main work secure, Don Bosco searched the horizon for new labors to

accomplish. Again, a dream-vision brought God's plans to him. He found himself looking down upon a screaming horde of savages who were massacring a band of white men. From the distance approached a few missionaries, wearing the garbs of their Orders. The natives turned upon them with wild satisfaction. Terrified by their blood curdling yells and inhuman cruelty, he gasped to see another group of missionaries coming through the jungles, surrounded by children. They were his own Salesians! Certainly, they would fare no better than the others. But the yelling ceased. The wild faces became human again. The natives dropped their weapons and sheepishly looked up into the missionaries' faces. Then they bowed their heads in prayer!

The dream became a reality when in 1875, at the request of Argentina and the Holy See, Don Bosco sent ten missionaries to Buenos Aires, to care for Italian immigrants. But four years later, under the energetic leadership of Father

John Cagliero, later Cardinal, they penetrated the hinterlands of Patagonia, down to the frozen Strait of Magellan and the Falkland Islands. In ten years, Salesian Missions were established in South America, from Cape Horn to the lush jungles of the Rio Negro valley of Brazil.

Today, though Missions are volunteer appointments only, there are some 1300 Salesian Priests and Brothers on active mission work, helped by some 500 Salesian Sisters. The young Salesian Congregation is thus ranked third among missionary orders of the Church.

Man of Action

“First tell the devil to rest, and then I’ll rest too,” Don Bosco used to say to those who would urge him to let up in his activity. Indeed, rarely has the Church seen such a tireless worker. Trained to labor from his boyhood, he occupied himself with boys, constantly interesting himself in their activities. On

Sundays, after a strenuous day with his "Oratory," he often had to be carried home, and more than once fell asleep fully dressed, kneeling at his bedside. For many years he slept only five hours a night, skipping a night each week. After a day of physical work, he would spend the quiet hours of the night penning letters to friends for aid, sending letters of comfort to those who begged for his prayers, and writing books on mathematics, literature, Bible history, and Church history for boys. He began a pamphlet movement, the "Catholic Readings," and for some time wrote a pamphlet a month on Catholic Faith and Morals. Always at the beck and call of the Church, he was a tireless confessor; he was a popular preacher and never refused an invitation to a Mission or a Retreat. Even when age began creeping up on him, he worked. Many times, the people of Turin would see him stumble along the streets, led by a boy, dozing while he walked. As an older man, he lost the sight of one eye, and the other

was impaired. His legs were swollen to painful proportions. His back was curved by weakness. Yet his mind was crystal clear and he never laid down the burden. Besides his youth activities, he interested himself in matters of Church and State, acting even as a mediator for the Pope; he spurred boys on to Catholic Action; he favored and worked for Retreat movements, Mission Crusades, the Catechetical Movement, and Foreign Missions. Though urged by his personal friend, Pius IX, to rest he would answer, "While I have time, I must work."

Man of Prayer

Once, while at prayer, Don Bosco was interrupted by the visit of a wealthy noble. "Tell him I shall soon be there," he said, and he continued his prayer. Three times he was called. Finally he went, "My dear sir," he said, "you are a dear friend of mine, but God comes first." So also, he would repeat, "*First of all Don Bosco is a Priest!*" With such

a marvelous sense of values, he was able to temper his activity with deep, ceaseless, and fervent piety. In fact, the energy of his work came from this carefully tended fire of prayer in his soul. And God rewarded him in a wonderful way. Towards the end of his life, his prayers wrought miracles. His blessing carried astonishing powers. More than once, he was seen to rise in ecstasy during the Mass. But, with characteristic humility, he labored to feed his priestliness with piety, so much so that Pope Pius XI said of him that he prayed every moment of his life. His Rosary, his Breviary, his Mass—they were never to be sacrificed to anything else. Every beat of his heart was a prayer of faith and humility and thankfulness.

Man of Poverty

When Don Bosco planned to build a basilica to Mary in Turin, he drew up the plans and called an architect to start the excavations. "Here is your first pay-

ment," he said and handed the astonished man eight cents. "Mary will build her own basilica." This was characteristic of Don Bosco: personal poverty, yet spending millions for God. "When you become a priest," his mother had told him, "if ever you become rich, I shall never enter your house!" When asked about his life, he would say, "I am poor Don Bosco, penniless, a shepherd boy of the hills. I lived poor and shall die poor."

Yet this impoverished priest, who lived on the coarsest of foods and wore the poorest garments, (often borrowed), spent millions for his boys, building large schools, a basilica to Mary in Turin, another to the Sacred Heart in Rome, and financing large Mission expeditions. "God will provide" worked miracles in his life.

Man of Wonders

Such generosity of spirit could not go unrewarded by God, for Whom this priest slaved the seventy-two years of his

life. Besides providing for his work, God gave him the gift of miracles. Numberless people were cured of deadly diseases by his blessing. After his prayers on their behalf, the deaf heard, the lame walked, and, once, a dead boy was raised to life. He had the gift of prophecy. He could read consciences—often to the embarrassment of a careless penitent. He could foretell one's vocation, as well as one's future. His dreams were really visions, sometimes strikingly verified.

All these gifts were so common that Pope Pius XI said, "In Don Bosco the ordinary becomes extraordinary." They were given to him in partial reward for his exceptional self-sacrifice and as a seal of Divine approval of his work.

His Sanctity

Don Bosco's sanctity was not a frightening one. It was attractive, because it was centered in love, rooted in charity, and forged by an exceptional purity that bathed him, as it were, in its light and

drew people to him. Though he sometimes did extraordinary penances, he would never allow them to his boys. "Sanctity is easy," he would say. "God does not scare us away. You do not have to scourge yourself or fast or pray long hours. Just do your duty in school, at home, at work. Take sufferings as they come—bad weather, disappointments, physical illness, sorrow—they will make you Saints." Saint Dominic Savio, one of his boys who died at the age of 15, is Don Bosco's proof to the world that holiness is not a monopoly of the monastery or of the desert. It belongs to our city streets.

The Reward

On January 31, 1888, Don Bosco's worn out body finally yielded to nature, and his soul winged its flight to its Maker. The last years were torturous for the tired, sick priest, yet he smiled and worked willingly, keeping up with all the activities of his Salesians, inspiring them

to greater achievements for youth. But when he took to bed in the December of 1887, he said, "Now I go to my rest. I shall not get up again." Just before his death, he summoned his priests and begged the favor of their prayers. "Do not ever forget these three things: devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to Mary Help of Christians, and devotion to the Holy Father!" With the names of Jesus and Mary on his lips, as the morning Angelus bell summoned the Church to prayer, Don Bosco passed on to his God and his Lady. "Our Saint has left us," the people of Turin mourned.

But Don Bosco never left this earth. His ideals, his spirit, his constant activity are all still with us in his Salesian Fathers and Brothers, who strive to perpetuate his work on earth.

On Easter Sunday, April 1, 1934, Don Bosco was declared a Saint by his personal friend, Pope Pius XI, who styled him, "A Giant of Sanctity."

As for himself, Don Bosco would say, as he often told his admirers, "I have

been an instrument in the hands of Mary. She has done all. Had I been a worthier instrument, I would have accomplished a great deal more."

Your fifteen minutes are up. What do you think of this John? Certainly, you admire him. Maybe you feel down deep in your heart a desire to imitate him. Do not stifle that desire. Keep it alive and live by it.

Youth is the chosen portion of God's vineyard, and he who work for the boys of today is building the men of tomorrow.

If you are a young man or boy who wants to step in the giant strides of Don Bosco, why not think about joining the Salesian Society, the living monument of Don Bosco, which keeps alive his ideals? *There is room for you in the Salesian Family—there is work for you—and a special reward.*

For further information on St. John Bosco—priest, boy-leader, miracle worker—read the following books:

FORBES, F. A. - *Saint John Bosco*

BONETTI, JOHN - *Saint John Bosco's Early Apostolate.*

BOSCO, JOHN, ST. - *The Life of St. Dominic Savio.*

CHIAVARINO, J. - *Smiling Don Bosco*

DOUGHERTY, EDDIE - *Lambs in Wolfskins*

LAPPIN, PETER - *Teenage Saint*

LAPPIN, PETER - *General Mickey*

HIGGINS, DANIEL - *The Challenge*

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