

# St Paul VI. The most Salesian Pope

written by Fr Francesco MOTTO | May 29, 2023

*Pope Montini knew the Salesians closely, appreciated them, always encouraged and supported them in their educational mission.*

*Other popes before him, and after him, have shown great signs of affection for the Salesian Society. We recall some of them.*

## **The two Popes at the origin and development of Salesian work**

There were two Popes with whom Don Bosco had direct dealings. First of all, Blessed Pius IX, the Pope whom he supported at tragic times for the Church, whose authority, rights and prestige he defended, so much so that his opponents called him “the Garibaldi of the Vatican”. He was reciprocated with numerous affectionate private audiences, many concessions and indulgences. The Pope also supported him financially. During his pontificate, the Salesian Society, its Constitutions, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA), the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, the Mary Help of Christians association were all approved. He appointed himself protector of the Society.

He was succeeded by Pope Leo XIII who in turn accepted to be the first Salesian Cooperator, treated Don Bosco with unusual warmth and granted him the privileges that were now essential for the rapid and prodigious development of the Congregation. He directed the first Apostolic Vicariate entrusted to the Salesians, appointing the first bishop in the person of Bishop Giovanni Cagliero in 1883. In his first audience with Fr Rua after Don Bosco’s death, he was generous with advice for the consolidation of the Salesian Society.

## **The two (future) Popes who sat at Don Bosco’s table**

St Pius X as a simple canon met with Don Bosco in Turin in 1875, sat at his table and was enrolled among the Salesian Cooperators. He left highly edified. As Bishop and Patriarch of Venice he gave proof of benevolence towards the Salesian Society. In 1907 he signed the decree introducing the apostolic process of Don Bosco and in 1914 for St Dominic Savio as well. In 1908 he appointed Bishop Cagliero as Apostolic Delegate to Central America. He was the first Salesian Cooperator raised to the honour of the altars.

As a young priest in 1883, Pius XI also visited Don Bosco at the Oratory, staying there for two days. He sat at Don Bosco’s table and left full of deep and pleasant memories. He spared no means to quickly promote the apostolic process of Don

Bosco, wanting to set no less than the date of Easter 1934, the close of the Holy Year, as the date of his canonisation. Thanks to him Dominic Savio's cause overcame difficulties that seemed insurmountable: in 1933 he signed the decree of the heroicity of his virtues; in 1936 he proclaimed the heroicity of the virtues of St Mary Mazzarello, whom he beatified on 20th November 1938. Other signs of predilection for the Salesian Society were the granting of the Indulgence of Sanctified Work (1922) and the elevation to the purple of Polish Cardinal Augustus Hlond (1927).

### **The most Salesian pope**

If Pius XI was rightly called the "Pope of Don Bosco", perhaps just as rightly the "most Salesian Pope" was Pope St. Paul VI for the knowledge, esteem and affection shown to the Salesian society, without wishing to underestimate other previous or subsequent Popes. Father Giorgio, a journalist, was a great admirer of Don Bosco (not yet Blessed), whose autographed painting he kept in his study, and was often admired by young Giovanni Battista. During his studies in Turin, the young Montini had wavered between choosing the Benedictine life he had known at San Bernardino di Chiari (which later became a Salesian house, it still is today), and Salesian life. A few days after his priestly ordination (Brescia 29 May 1920), he asked the bishop, even before receiving his pastoral destination, if he could choose his own. In that case he would have liked to go with Don Bosco. The bishop decided instead on studies in Rome. But after one Montini who had failed to become a Salesian came another. A few years after that interview, his cousin Luigi (1906-1963) told him of his desire to become a priest too. The future pope, who knew him well, told him that given his lively temperament, Salesian life would be good for him and so he took advice from the famous Salesian Fr Cojazzi. The advice was positive, and upon hearing the news Fr Giovanni was so pleased that his cousin would take his place that he himself accompanied him to the Salesian missionary aspirantate in Ivrea. He would then be a missionary for 17 years in China and later in Brazil until his death. Completing the Salesianity of the Montini family was the presence, for about ten years, in the Salesian house at Colle Don Bosco of one of Enrico's brothers, Luigi (1905-1973).

There is no need to say how close Bishop Montini was to the Salesians in the various responsibilities he assumed: for example as Substitute at the Secretariat of State or in the very early post-war period in Rome for the nascent Borgo Don Bosco work for the *sciuscìa* (shoe-shine boys), then as Archbishop of Milan at the end of the 1950s asking them to take over the Arese *barabitt*, and finally as Pope

in supporting the entire Salesian Congregation and Family, erecting among other things the Pontifical Salesian University and the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences at the FMA Auxilium.

He spoke several times of his immense esteem for Salesian work, missionary work in particular, in private audiences given the Rector Major Fr Luigi Ricceri as well as in public audiences. One of the most famous was the private audience granted to the Chapter Members of General Chapter 20 on 20 December 1971. Obviously in many speeches given to the Salesians, of Milan in particular, he demonstrated a profound knowledge of the Salesian charism and its potential.