

A great collaborator of Don Bosco: Fr Antonio Sala

written by Fr Francesco MOTTO | September 2, 2024

An important but practically unknown figure in the history of the early years of the Salesian Congregation, he spent his entire Salesian life dealing with financial matters. Dynamic and enterprising, he was a great administrator in the modern sense. We owe many works that are the current pride of the Congregation to his far-sighted and foresighted vision. But above all his love for Don Bosco was intense.

Childhood and youth

He was born on 29 January 1836 in the Brianza area of Lecco, in Monticello di Olgiate Molgora, diocese of Milan. His father Pietro and his brother, who ran a spinning mill, had married two sisters. They were both very religious families with one son a priest (the Salesian Antonio and his cousin Federico, a theologian and future Auxiliary Bishop in Milan) and one son who was a religious: Ambrogio, Antonio's brother, a Salesian for a few years, and Sister Maria Serafina, Federico's sister, a cloistered religious in Bergamo. Having completed his primary schooling, and a strong and robust teenager, Antonio immediately set to work in the family. As a leader at the parish oratory, he showed an aptitude for priestly life, with his ability to attract boys, organise their entertainment, and take them to church services. Returning from military service in the Austro-Hungarian army, he took responsibility for running the family business, where he revealed excellent administrative skills and great practical sense. When his mother died, young Antonio grew in the desire to become a priest. The parish priest Fr Nava took this on board and wrote to Don Bosco in early 1863, praising the young man's gifts of nature and grace and asking him to accept him at Valdocco. After Don Bosco's immediately positive reply, Fr Nava thanked him and assured him that the very grateful 26-year-old Antonio would arrive at Valdocco as soon as possible. The very generous parish priest undertook to pay in advance for five years, not just the "very modest" school fees requested by Don Bosco, but in the event of his death he would give furniture, silver cutlery and valuables in his possession as collateral.

Student-worker and priest-educator

Arriving in Turin on 5 March 1863 Sala began his secondary school studies. He was at ease at Valdocco, and as a “son of Mary” [late vocation] he not only made up for the school years he had missed, but, easy-going and practical in business affairs, in his free time he helped the sickly bursar Fr Alasonatti, lent a hand to those who worked to keep the house supplied, went to the market himself and assisted in the first construction works on the Church of Mary Help of Christians. The experience would serve him well for the various Salesian churches and buildings he would personally supervise over the following decades.

On 22 May 1869 Fr Sala was ordained priest, having been at the Lanzo house for four years.

Economer at Valdocco (1869-1880)

Even before the end of the school year, on 3 July 1869 Don Bosco asked him confidentially if he would be willing to move to Valdocco for some time because there was an absolute need for a house economer, since the Economer General, Fr Savio, was overworked. Fr Sala accepted and went down to Valdocco. He would stay there for 26 years, until his death.

There he was able to deepen his hasty theological studies by attending moral lessons at the Convitto for three years: they would be very useful to him in the pastoral ministry he would carry out for many years as ordinary confessor in the Church of Mary Help of Christians, chaplain of the Good Shepherd Institute, extraordinary confessor for the Artigianelli college, and later also spiritual assistant to the St Joseph’s women’s workshops at the Barolo refuge.

At the meeting of the Superior Council on 11 December 1869 Fr Savio was confirmed as Economer General, but Fr Sala also received many votes, and was formally elected economer at the Oratory Chapter the following January. He was to carry out a formidable economic and administrative activity within the mega work of Valdocco, with several hundred young people, divided between students, artisans, oratorians, clerics, with many classrooms, courtyards, workshops, refectories, dormitories, halls, the Church of Mary Help of Christians, chapels; to this must be added lotteries, buildings, general maintenance, tax problems, notaries... He was not without difficult moments, so much so that on 27 January 1870 from Florence Don Bosco invited Fr Rua to encourage him.

In January 1873, having started a small lottery with the first prize being a precious copy of Raphael’s Madonna di Foligno, Don Bosco entrusted him with the sale of the tickets, planned especially in Lombardy. Fr Sala travelled particularly through the provinces of Milan, Como and Varese, where he could

offer written material with requests for donations to the most conspicuous families, whom he felt were close to him in some way and who were perhaps already in contact with Don Bosco. He sent out many of these, but many others were returned to him, so he went looking for other benefactors as far as Rome. One of the first Salesians, Fr Sala performed many other humble services, including the classic assistance in the courtyard and in the workshops and some teaching of young brothers. In 1876 in Rome, he took care of housing both the Salesians destined for the new foundations in Albano, Ariccia and Magliano, and the missionaries who had come to receive a mandate from the Pope. On 17 December 1876 he attended the meetings of the Superior Council for the first time: he would do so for almost 20 years. In 1878 he made inspections in Mornese and Chieri to provide for the necessary adaptation of the FMA houses. In October he did the same for the Salesians at Randazzo in Sicily and then at Este and Mogliano Veneto. He did the same for more than fifteen years. Don Bosco trusted him and he returned the trust right up to his deathbed, indeed even afterwards, as we shall see.

The General Chapter in 1880 elected Fr Sala Economist General, but he also remained Economist at Valdocco for another three years. He immediately set to work.

In April 1881 he had the work on the Church of the Sacred Heart and the Salesian residence resumed in Rome. Then he became interested in the new building in Mogliano Veneto and examined the project for an extensive renovation of the house in La Navarra (France). At the beginning of April the following year he was back in Mestre to negotiate with the benefactress Astori and to make an inspection of the agricultural school being built at Mogliano; in November he accompanied the first four Salesians there. On 8 July 1883 he signed the specifications for the construction work of the Hospice of St John the Evangelist in Turin and in the autumn he had the rooms of the printing house at Valdocco tidied up, including the director's office, decorating it with curtains on the windows, "deserving" a kindly rebuke from Don Bosco for such "superfluous refinements". In mid-January 1884, for the National Exhibition of Science and Technology in Turin, it was decided to install the complex machine (purchased for the Salesian paper mill in Mathi), which churned out bound books from rags. It was a tough task for Fr Sala to get properly trained Salesian pupils to operate it. It was a resounding success with the public and Don Bosco allowed himself to refuse any prize other than first prize. Shortly afterwards Fr Sala went to Rome to

accelerate the work at Sacred Heart so that at the beginning of May Don Bosco could lay the foundation stone of the Hospice, together with Count Colle (who would bring with him an offering of no less than 50,000 lira).

Obviously Fr Sala attended the meetings of the General Council to give his enlightened opinion especially on matters he was interested in: acceptance of works, foundation of a house in Paris, specifications for the one in Lucca, replacement of an old oven with a new one from Vienna at a favourable price, adoption of a “guest house” for the female staff at Valdocco, estimates for lighting costs for the houses in Vienna, Nice and Milan. On 12 September he presented the draft of the official coat of arms of the Salesian Congregation, which, once discussed and corrected, was approved by the Council. At the same meeting he was charged with resolving the dispute over the land in Chieri and the strip of municipal land in Turin used for the Church of Mary Help of Christians, but already compensated for by an exchange. Numerous meetings followed in September and October with the occasional presence of Fr Sala. On 9 December he dealt with the economic problems of various houses, including those in Sampierdarena, Naples and Schio.

The three years from 1885-1887

For the whole of the following year (1885) he was interested in the house at Faenza for which he “deserved” another fatherly reprimand from Don Bosco for excessive expenditure on the foundations. In April he attended a survey carried out at the College in Lanzo by order of the Civil Court of Turin. On 22 June he presented and had approved the plan to raise the FMA house in Nice by one storey. For the house to be erected in Trent he ensured the availability of adequate local economic resources, confident of the collaboration of the Municipality, but put on alert by Don Bosco who, ever vigilant, reminded him that often “the Municipalities promise then forget”. On 20 September 1885 Fr Sala reported to the Council about the land for the Salesian cemetery that could be purchased for 14,000 lire. He was authorised to try to lower the price and see that the project presented was accomplished.

There followed two more years of General Council meetings, of trips to help houses in difficulty due to building, administrative and economic problems. Meanwhile he had been re-elected Economer General (September 1886; he would be re-elected again six years later) and was preparing everything for the solemn consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome (14 May). There, a few months later, at the express invitation of the Pope, a new Procurator and a new

Parish Priest were appointed to replace Fr F. Dalmazzo, and Fr Sala had a thousand headaches to unravel the tangled skein of an unsustainable economic-financial situation.

With Don Bosco as he lay dying (January 1888)

Urgently summoned from Rome on 30 December, he was already at Don Bosco's bedside on New Year's morning. For the whole month he alternated with the young secretary Viglietti in assisting the sick man.

When Don Bosco died on 31 January, the same evening the General Council "promised the Lord that if Our Lady gives us the grace of being able to bury Don Bosco under the Church of Mary Help of Christians or at least in our house in Valsalice it would begin work on the decoration of his church this year or at least as soon as possible." The formal request made by Fr Sala to the city authorities was rejected. He then appealed to Rome and the Prime Minister, F. Crispi, mindful of the help given him by Don Bosco when he was an exile in Turin, granted the burial outside the city at the Salesian College at Valsalice. In the meantime Don Bosco's body was beside Fr Sala's room. On the evening of 4 February he was transported to Valsalice. In the tiny procession up the hill Fr Sala wept: he had lost the dearest person he still had on earth. For another six years, however, he would continue to carry out with great competence the arduous field of work that Don Bosco had first entrusted to him. On 21 May 1895 he would join him in heaven, struck down by a heart attack.