

# KNOWING DON BOSCO

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## GOD'S CALL

### DON BOSCO'S CHOICES ARE DETERMINED BY THE CALL OF GOD, THE LORD OF HISTORY

*At the heart of the Old Testament God calls to Moses from the burning bush. The Lord says: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad" (Exodus 3:7-8).*

*"I have seen ... I have heard ... I am well aware... I mean to deliver them." These are four words about perfect fatherliness. God does not abandon his children. Don Bosco was called to incarnate God's fatherliness in our times.*

#### **A time of wounds**

Don Bosco was living and working in a period of rapid, epoch-making change. This change was traumatic, especially in the social and ecclesiastical fields. In particular, the process that began with the Enlightenment was accelerated. This had put an end to the *societas christiana*, through the triumph of agnostic and anti-Christian ideologies, with their declared incompatibility between reason-science and faith, the progressive disaffection of the middle and working classes from ecclesiastical institutions (more rapid in the cities, more gradual in the countryside). In Italy the Roman Question (Italy's desire to take Rome from the Pope and make it the national capital) opened a painful wound in the heart of believers. Under the pressure of the lay, anticlerical intelligentsia and of the bourgeois business class, which used the press to shape public opinion and lifestyles, the new generations were being formed in a school that was progressively agnostic and became disoriented, an easy prey to ideas and behavior far removed from Christian practice. At the same time, new forms of poverty were appearing: there was massive internal and external migration; cultures were being uprooted; the working poor were being exploited; and the poorest groups in the population were being morally brutalized.

#### **Saving the young**

It was precisely this historical context, these social traumas, and these tensions which were for Don Bosco the stimulus and the valuable occasion to discern God's voice. While others argued,

condemned, and bewailed the sad state of affairs of the times, he was able to perceive God present and active in human history. Trained as he was to feel himself a pastor called to work for the salvation of the human race, especially for the salvation of youth, he became immersed in his own times, critically, but lovingly and creatively, fully a part of the events taking place around him, which he often felt deeply, ready to give his life for the mission that he felt himself called to undertake, convinced that God's grace is stronger than any human obstacle and effectively supports anyone who works to spread in people's hearts the Kingdom of Christ.

The situation of the poor boys he met in Turin in the 1840s and '50s, as well as the ecclesial, political, and social events and the new laws, encouraged and shaped in practical ways his gift for education, his pastoral zeal, his natural talents. All these factors led him toward a discernment that was proactive and preventive.

In the decades which followed, the situations would change, new problems would arise, but Don Bosco's way of thinking and his spiritual approach would lead him to expand his horizons, to formulate activities and plans, to multiply his operations, co-involving ever growing hosts of disciples, supporters, benefactors, and well-wishers. In this way the expression "poor and abandoned boys" would acquire an ever broader significance, not in socio-economic terms only, but also in spiritual, cultural, and moral.

**"I can do all things in him who strengthens me!"**

His modernity consists in this: not only new ideas in tune with the requirements and the tastes of the times and of the young, but responses, prompt and really effective (since they were far-sighted and the result of a process of discernment and of a genuine love of God) to new problems, new challenges, new needs, new "satanic" attacks, starting from a solid faith, from an unwavering hope, from a total gift of himself to God and to his brothers and sisters, from an inner freedom that was the result of purification and self-detachment. He wrote to a priest who was discouraged: "There is work to be done? I shall die on the field of work *sicut bonus miles Christi* [like a good soldier of Christ]. I'm good for little or nothing? *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat* [I can do all things in him who strengthens me]. There are thorns? With the thorns changed into flowers the Angels will make you a crown in heaven. Times are difficult? They always were, but God will never fail to come to your help: *Christus heri et hodie* [Christ yesterday and today]" (October 25, 1878, Ceria ed., *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, 3:399).

**For us it is a lesson of hope and of courage, an invitation to shake ourselves, and to renew our fidelity, our commitment, and our trust in God.**