

## FILM REVIEW

### SAINT JOHN BOSCO: MISSION TO LOVE

Produced by LuxVide in association with RAI, Blue Star Movies, and the Salesians (2004).

Directed by Lodovico Gasparini. Starring Flavio Insinna, Lina Sastri, Charles Dance, and Lewis Crutch.

Option to listen to English partly dubbed and partly original, or to Italian with Spanish or English subtitles. Color. 200 minutes. DVD. Includes behind-the-scenes features and a viewers guide.

When *Saint John Bosco: Mission to Love* was first shown on Italy's RAI-TV, it's reported to have drawn a greater audience than soccer games over those two nights—no mean feat in Europe. “This just NEVER happens in Italy!” remarks an Australian Salesian working in Rome. “Italians thought this film was just the best thing since sliced bread.” Ignatius Press has finally brought to the English-speaking world this long-awaited production.

*Mission to Love* tells Don Bosco's story in dramatic and lively fashion. After an opening scene based on conflict with his archbishop, it flashes back to his life in Becchi. He narrates to his mother a part of his first dream, meets Fr. Calosso and starts to study, has numerous confrontations with a large, angry Anthony, leaves home to study for the priesthood in Chieri, is ordained, goes to Turin and learns of the difficulties met there by young farm boys trying to make their way, and starts up his Oratory with Fr. Joseph Cafasso (canonized 1947) at his side. And it proceeds straightforwardly to the point where we started, and beyond, up to the firm establishment of the Salesians, who will continue the saint's work.

More than the earlier films by Alessandrini (*Don Bosco: Founder of the Salesian Congregation*, 1936) and Castellani (*Don Bosco*, with Ben Gazzara, 1987), *Mission to Love* brings home the great challenge that young Don Bosco must have faced in reality as he entered Turin's jails or traveled the city streets to meet troubled or idle youngsters. There's no “I want Don Bosco!” (Alessandrini) but plenty of “Get lost, priest!” Of course he eventually wins over

many of these toughs, and the dramatic day's outing from the Generala jail is recounted here as in both the older movies.

This newest version does a much better job than Castellani's film of showing why the Oratory faced opposition from some people in authority. On the part of the prefect of the city, there's fear of revolution, very clear here. On the part of hard-driving employers, there's the fear of awaking youngsters to workers' rights. The anticlericalism of the late 1840s and 1850s also comes forth, with a strong emphasis on Don Bosco's place at the side of "the people," among the poor. None of that appears in the oldest movie, Alessandrini's, which was purely celebratory in honor of the saint's recent canonization. There are no assassination attempts, as in Castellani, and, alas, no Grigio this time.

The source of Don Bosco's conflict with his religious superior, the archbishop, is presented a little more clearly than in the Castellani film. That, too, was entirely lacking in the Alessandrini's. We see here the early friendship between the saint and the future archbishop as well as its breakdown. The archbishop is zealous to train priests, is anxious not to appear to be Don Bosco's creation—Don Bosco having proposed to Pius IX his appointment—and an unfortunate anonymous pamphlet publicizes their dispute. Don Bosco accurately describes (to the Pope) the archbishop as "ardent," and the archbishop less accurately describes (to his clergy) Don Bosco as "proud," though Salesians would prefer to say "convinced he was right," or perhaps "persistent." We see Don Bosco abase himself, in obedience to the Pope, to end the conflict just moments after the archbishop has called him proud.

Gasparini's film, unlike the older ones, introduces Dominic Savio, portraying well his eagerness to practice holiness and the esteem he earned both among his peers and with his mentor. We also encounter as real characters and not just names thrown at cassocked figures (in

the style of Alessandrini), a few of the early Salesians: Rua, Cagliero, Buzzetti, with some evidence of their varying personalities.

Gasparini gives some prominence to St. Francis de Sales that was missing in the earlier movies, as patron of the work and, very evidently, the source of the name “Salesian.”

One of the movie’s great strengths is the role of Mama Margaret: as teacher of young John, as strong mother in the family at Becchi, and as companion and mother of all at Valdocco.

An even bigger strength is what one viewer calls the film’s use of the *ipsissima verba* of St. John Bosco, his very own words. We hear them in the dialog between the two saints, Bosco and Savio, and in numerous other dialogs, as well as in the priest’s catechism lessons. They concern the path of holiness, the means of educating the young, making oneself loved, forming good citizens of heaven and the nation, and more. One sees—or rather, hears—the influence of Salesian scholar Fr. Aldo Girauda on the script.

The telescoping of real history in this movie is not unlike what Castellani did in 1987. But here the story seems easier to follow. What’s telescoped: pretty much everything that happened in reality between 1844 and 1882. Did one not know the story—Vicar of Turin Michele Cavour’s suspicions, revolution and war, Dominic Savio, the cholera, Mama Margaret, the long process of proposing and solidly founding the Salesians, the many dealings with Pius IX, and the whole Gastaldi affair—one might suppose all of this to have happened in, perhaps, a decade. As the current film ends with ecclesiastical approval of the Congregation (1864, in fact, and long before Don Bosco’s battles with either Archbishop Riccardo di Netro or Archbishop Gastaldi), both Fr. Cafasso (+1860) and Mama Margaret (+1856) are there to beam with joy. We could also observe that the crucial roles of Fr. John Borel and Fr. Cafasso are rolled together into one. In the two

earlier movies, Fr. Borel got all the credit for assisting our Founder; he doesn't rate even a mention in this one.

One understands of course that this telescoping is a valid and often necessary cinematic technique. The story is far too complex, the characters far too many, to portray "as it really happened," especially in the limits of one movie.

The conflicts that Don Bosco had with both civil and religious authorities were dramatic and real. One may well ask why Gasparini felt the need to fictionalize the names of his opponents. Vicar Michele Cavour becomes Prefect Clementi—who is diabolical, until his deathbed conversion, or at least until he observes Don Bosco weeping over Savio's death—in a way that Cavour wasn't. Then Clementi morphs into Urbano Rattazzi and arranges for Parliament to suppress monastic orders and, on his deathbed, advise Don Bosco about how to get around the law of suppression when he founds his own congregation. Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi becomes Cardinal Lorenzo Fassati—with the added risk of confusion with the Oratory's great benefactors the noble Fassati family, as well as the actual Cardinal Archbishop of Turin Maurilio Fossati (1931-1965).

There are a few minor quibbles: While it's refreshing that throughout the movie the priests are anglicized as "Father So-and-so" (instead of "Don" Calosso, "Don" Cafasso, and "Don" Fassati), it's disconcerting to hear "Father Bosco" over and over. And why, then, leave the personal names in Italian: Giovanni, Domenico, Lorenzo, Margarita...? One ought to be consistent in anglicizing or not. And one would think that someone would have taken the trouble to teach the English speakers (actors and dubbers) the correct pronunciation of *Salesian*. Although the Oratory is supposed to be within Turin—and in reality it certainly wasn't densely settled in the 1840s and 50s—one sees it here as miles out into the country.

A good part of the film was originally spoken in English by English actors—playing Colosso, Cafasso, Clementi, Savio, most of the lads, for instance. The lines originating in Italian (John, Margaret, Fassati, Pius IX, the baker, the printer) seem, for the most part, to have been dubbed well into English. If one uses the version with English subtitles, though, one will find the script considerably condensed from torrential Italian to *very* pithy English.

To sum up: *Saint John Bosco: Mission to Love* does a fine job presenting Don Bosco's mission and personality and gives an adequate impression of the very difficult times. Even with the filmmaker's literary license, one feels the authenticity. It's worth the price of admission—or of the video.

The viewer's guide supplied by Ignatius Press includes a description of the film, a sketch of Don Bosco's life and dreams, an interview with Flavio Insinna (the film's Don Bosco) from the Salesian news service ANS, discussion questions, and a very short list for further reading.

*Saint John Bosco: Mission to Love* is available directly from Ignatius Press (<http://www.ignatius.com>). Salesiana Publishers has obtained a small inventory, available at 201-986-0503 or [srmdist@verizon.net](mailto:srmdist@verizon.net).

Fr. Mike Mendl