



Neither land nor money

Since the early 1860s, Don Bosco had dreamt of building a church of considerable size; the reason he gave initially was that the church of St Francis of Sales, built between 1851 and 1852, was too small. This what he told Fr Paul Albera one evening in December 1862: "I've been thinking, our church is too small, and may not hold all the youngsters, or they'll be too packed in. So we'll build another one, a bigger, more beautiful one. We will call it Mary Help of Christians".

On February 1, 1863, Don Bosco resolutely began planning the new church, although the land he was dreaming of building it on was not his and he lacked a plan, but he sent out a large number of circulars to ask benefactors to help.

The excavations were partly begun in autumn; winter passed then work was taken up again in March 1864.

Towards the end of April, at the invitation of the foreman, accompanied by his priests and many of his boys, Don Bosco went down the excavations to place the foundation stone. After this was done, to show how pleased he was he turned to Buzzetti the foreman and said: "I want to immediately offer you a deposit for this wonderful effort". So saying, he pulled out his wallet, opened it and poured into Buzzetti's hands everything it contained, all of 40 cents. "Don't

worry" said Don Bosco, "Our Lady will take care of providing the money we need for her church". "And Mary", Don Bosco wrote later, "wanted to give a hand herself and make it known that since it was in her honour, she wanted to build it herself: *aedificavit sibi domum Maria*. Oh, how many have had recourse to Mary Help of Christians, making the Novena and promising a donation if they obtained the grace they were asking for!"

Devotion pictured

Don Bosco was no connoisseur of art, but had a strong sense of the potential of a religious building for strengthening memory, and of sacred art for conveying a message. He entrusted the task to architect Antonio Spezia, who had been a long-time friend of his.

For the Church of Mary Help of Christians, Spezia drew inspiration from the facade of the Basilica of St George the Great in Venice, by Venetian architect Andrea Palladio. In five years, the church was complete and was consecrated on June 9, 1868.

After the consecration of the church the time for thinking about some inner adornments began. Don Bosco certainly had a precise iconographic plan in mind: he wanted, through the paintings over the altars and various devotions, to communicate a message, offer the faithful more than just saints to address their prayers to, but examples to follow.

In June 1868, at the time of the consecration, the large painting by Thomas Lorenzone was already in place, picturing Mary Help of Christians with the baby Jesus in her arms, surrounded by the Apostles and Evangelists; over the altar dedicated to St. Joseph, in the left transept, he placed a canvas featuring St. Joseph and the Family of Nazareth, also by Lorenzone. Then, proceeding towards the back, where we find the altar dedicated to St. Anne, he placed a painting by Giovanni Battista Fino which had the education of the Virgin as its subject.

The final work, completed after Don Bosco's death, was the decoration around the dome, the Help of Christians in her glory. This project, designed by artist Giuseppe Rollini, goes back, however, to Don Bosco himself.

Between the 1920s and 1930s the Salesian superiors wanted to enlarge and re-design the basilica for the beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco.

The blessing of the enlargement, and of the monumental altar to St. John Bosco and the marble additions to the sanctuary took place June 9, 1938, recalling the the fiftieth anniversary of Don Bosco's death. With the start of World War II work slowed down, creating all kinds of difficulties, especially financial ones, but on December 19, 1942 the chief foreman, Carlo Cussetti, declared the work completed with final touches to the main altar.

