

# BOSCO FAMILY ALBUM



**Mamma  
Margaret**  
Don Bosco's Mom

# Margaret Occhiena Bosco

## The Saint-Maker Mom

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Capriglio, Apr. 1, 1788 -

Turin, Nov. 25, 1856

68 years old

Declared Venerable  
2006



# Margaret Occhiena Bosco

## The Saint-Maker Mom



### In context:

A survivor: 1788 infant mortality rate, 25%

1 year old: 1789. French Revoltion began

Education: None

9 years old: 1797. Napoleon invades Piedmont.  
Ten-years of war and guerilla activity destroys the province of Asti.

11 years old: 1799. Russian soldiers allow their horses to consume Margaret's family reserve of corn.  
She fights them off with a pitch fork.

# Margaret Occhiena Bosco

## The Saint-Maker Mom



### In context:

13 years old: 1801. Napoleon annexes Piedmont.  
Imposes French law & language.

18 years old: 1806. An attractive woman.  
To avoid amorous advances on the way to and from church, she accompanies a cantankerous old woman who wards off Margaret's would-be suitors with her flailing walking stick!



# Margaret Occhiena Bosco

## The Saint-Maker Mom



### In context:

24 years old:

1812. Napoleon invades Russia.  
Piedmontese men are conscripted.  
25,000 Italian men die in Napoleon's debacle.

June 6. Margaret marries Francesco Bosco (tenant farmer, widow; father of 3-year old son Antonio).  
Margaret moves to Becchi, with her husband, step-son and mother-in-law

# Margaret Occhiena Bosco

## The Saint-Maker Mom



### In context:

25 years old: April 8, 1813. Joseph, her first son is born

27 years old: August 15, John Bosco is born.

34 years old: 1817. Widowed after 4 very happy, short years of marriage.

John remembers:

“My parents were farmers who earned their living by hard work and thrifty use of what little they had...

My good father, Francesco, by the sweat of his brow, was responsible for three sons and supported my grandmother in her seventies. She was susceptible to frequent illness.”



I grew up in this little house, in the village of Becchi.  
This is where my mom taught me the basics about  
life, faith, and service.






When I was two years old I lost my father, My mother, Margaret, was left alone to take care of three boys (me, Joseph and my step-brother Antonio), and Grandma.



Dad was 34 years old when he died. I have only one memory of that day, the first memory of my life: Everyone left the room where my dad had died, but I did not want to leave him. Mom said to me, “Come, Johnny, come with me”. I resisted: “If daddy doesn’t come, I’m not coming either”. My mon said, “Poor child, you no longer have a dad”, and she burst into tears, took me by the hand, and led me away .

(MO, pp 7-8)



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When wealthy suitors came to propose marriage to my widowed mom, she was focused on our benefit, not her comfort:

“God gave me a husband and God has taken him away; with his death, the Lord put three children under my care. I would be a cruel mother to abandon them just when they needed me most.

A guardian could only be their friend, but I am a mother to these sons of mine; all the gold in the world could never make me abandon them.”

Mom's passion was to teach us to love God, religion, fun, obedience and responsibility. She kept us busy with age-appropriate chores and activities.





“Look! What a storm! How powerful God is! Let us never offend God with sin and He will help us in everything.”



“How beautiful these flowers are! If God takes such good care of them, just imagine how well he will take care of us.”



“Look how many stars! God created them for us!  
How He loves us!”





My mother taught us to see God in the beauty and power of nature, and especially in the poor. "Mom, can I take this bread to Aunt Maddalena? She is poorer than we are!"





Returning home after doing some errands, I would say to mom: “How I wish I could become a priest to help so many young people! Then they wouldn't get into trouble...”



Mom was educating me to be loyal and courageous.  
But one day I got into some real mischief with my  
brother. "Reach a bit higher. Grab the good olive oil..."



I grabbed it alright... And it slipped out of my hands. The jar smashed open and there was no way to hide the oil stain on the floor. Joseph was a great consolation: “Just wait until mom gets home.”





Mom will be so disappointed. Money is already tight as it is. This is all she needs. So I grabbed a broom and braced myself for the punishment I deserved....





When mom returned from the market, I told her exactly what I did. I gave her the broom and said I understood why she has to punish me.



Mom just laughed! “Yes, I’m upset about the jar of oil, but I’m glad you didn’t lie about it. Next time be careful. Think before you act. Oil is very expensive”.



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My mom taught me and to pray.

She taught me to kneel down with my brothers, both morning and evening, and together we would say our prayers.

She was illiterate, but the priest of Capriglio had taught her lengthy verses of the Gospel, and she would repeat them to us.

She believed in the need to pray, to speak with God in order to be strong and to do good.


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My mom herself prepared me for my first confession.

She went to church with me, went to confession herself, then presented me to the confessor and helped me to make my thanksgiving.


She continued to do this until I reached the age when she judged me able to use the sacrament well on my own.



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I made my **first holy communion** on Easter Sunday. I was eleven years old. By then I knew all the catechism.


I received all my religious instruction from my mom. She wanted me to carry out that great act of faith as soon as possible. She did everything she could to prepare me well.

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During Lent, she sent me to catechism class every day and she took me to confession three times.

She would say to me each time, “John, God is giving you a great gift. Try to behave well, and make a sincere confession. Ask the Lord’s forgiveness and promise him you will be a good boy.

I promised. Whether or not I kept my promise, God only knows.

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On the evening before my first communion, she helped me to pray, made me read a good book and gave me advice that only a true Christian mother would think of giving her children.

On the day of my first communion, in the midst of that crowd of children and parents, it was almost impossible to remain recollected. My mother, in the morning, wouldn't let me be with anybody but her. She accompanied me to the altar. She made the preparation and thanksgiving with me. And she didn't want me doing any manual labour that day. I spent my time reading and praying.



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She spoke these words to me:

“My son, this has been a wonderful day for you. I am certain God has become the Master of your heart. Promise him you will keep it that way all your life. From now on go to communion often, but do not go with sin on your conscience. Always confess sincerely. Always try to be obedient. Go to catechism class willingly listen to God’s Word. But for love of God, stay far away from bad company. Treat them like the plague.

I was really good at sports. I was always team captain and everyone wanted to be on my team. One day after a game of “lippa” I came home with my face covered in blood.



“One of these days you’re going to lose an eye. It would be better if your didn’t play with those boys anymore.”





“Please mom, let me keep these friends. When I’m with them, they behave well, they don't swear!” That was enough for mom to change her mind.



I understood that it was not enough to entertain my friends:  
I had to get involved in the activities of the parish, to grow,  
and to be educated...



I was always eager to learn, so I decided to attend a mission that was taking place in a neighbouring village.





That's how I met Fr. Calosso. He saw my capacity to understand and remember his sermons, so he wanted to talk to my mom.



“Margaret, your son has a prodigious memory! He must study! Send him to my house and I’ll give him private lessons”.



My older step-brother, Antonio, did everything to prevent me from studying. “We don’t need books around here, we need hands in the fields. I’m big and strong and provide food for the family, and I’ve never read any books!”





Overcome with anger, I replied “Our donkey is bigger stronger than you are and he has never read a book either.”



Thanks to my quick legs I escaped a beating that day.  
Mom was very distressed by the situation. And I cried...



Feeling sorry about this, Fr. Calosso invited me to come live with him, which I did. But this solution only lasted a short time, because he died suddenly. I had to return home.





Antonio became violent when he saw me with a book in my hands. One day, he gave his ultimatum: "Either this 'little gentleman' leaves his books, or I leave this family!"





Mom tried to reason with Antonio, but it was useless. She even offered to pick up my share of the chores. But Antonio wouldn't budge.



Broken-hearted, mom realized that in order to have peace, I would have to leave home to continue my studies. "We must have courage! God's Providence will take care of us!"



The separation was painful. "See you, John! Always be a good boy and be devoted to Our Lady! Trust in Her!". I was 12 years old.





I was taken in by the Moglia family. I helped on their farm and they gave me some pocket money.





When the church bells rang at noon, I always remembered my mom's words. Kneeling down wherever I was, I prayed the *Angelus*.



One day my uncle paid me a visit to see if I wanted to start my studies again. I was so excited. I went back home and hugged my mom!



Every day, I walked 16km back and forth from school. Even in the rain, snow and wind...





"Go to sleep, Johnny, it's late! If you keep this up, you'll get sick!"...

"A little longer, mom! I'm almost finished!"



The next year I left home to start high school in Chieri, hoping to enter the seminary. Providence was kind to us; mom was able to collect many donations...



I had to learn several trades to support myself...





I found a kind family to take me in. Whenever mom brought them a gift to show her gratitude, they refused to accept it, because of my good behavior...



I made lots of friends in Chieri. I started a group, the 'Joy Club', where friends could gather for games and good fun and prayers.





“John, follow your vocation! But remember: if by some misfortune you become a priest who is rich, I will never come to visit you!”





After so many difficulties, at the age of 26, I was ordained a priest. My mother was in heaven when she received Jesus from the hands of her son!



That night, after the festivities, when we were alone, mom told me: “Remember, John, that starting to celebrate Mass means starting to suffer!”

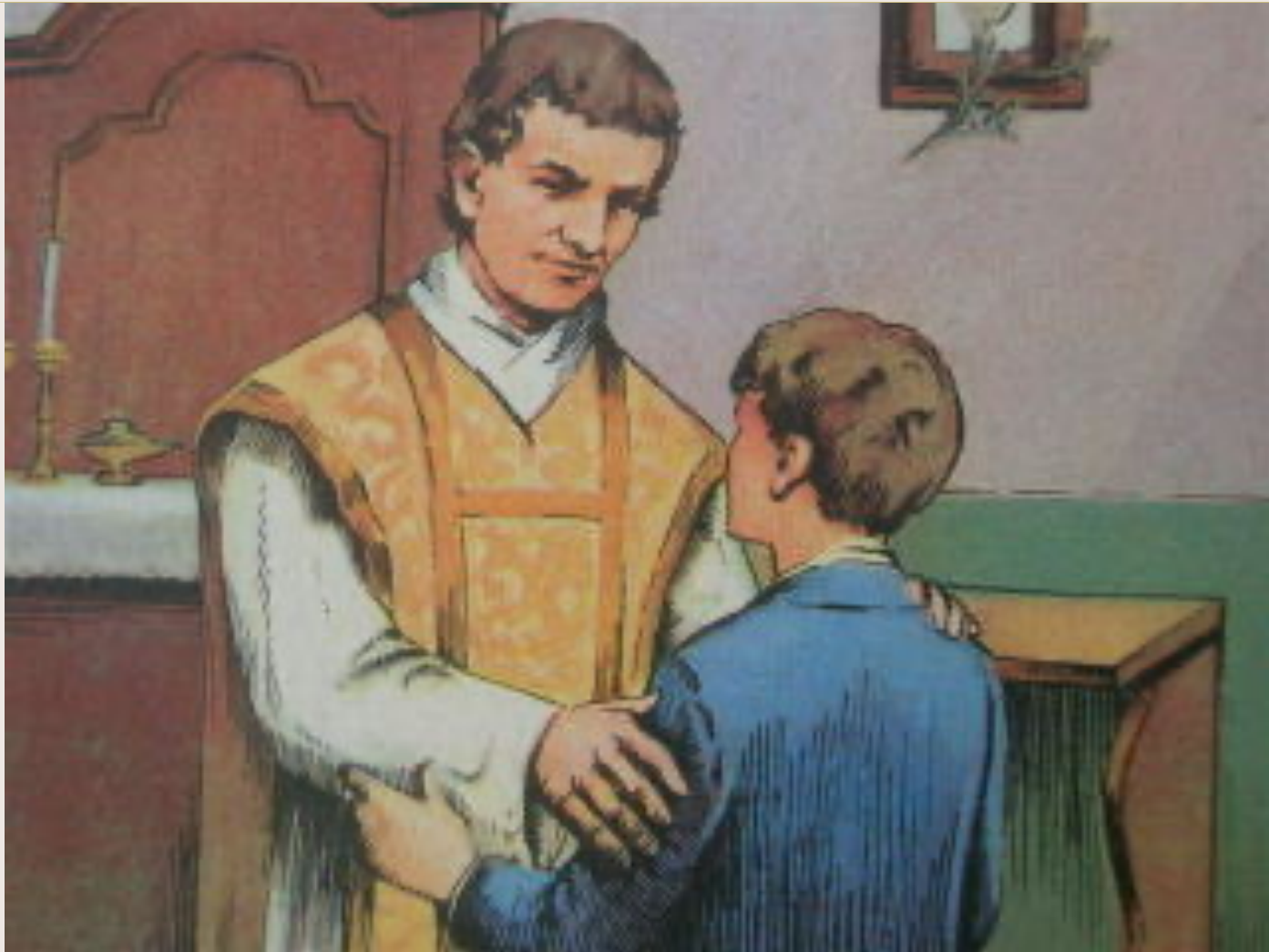


As a new priest, a dream that I had when I was 9 years old came back to me: *'Here is your field, here is where you must work!'* ... When I had described this dream to my family as a boy, everyone made fun of me, except my mom: “maybe it means you will become a priest”.





On December 8 that same year I met my first young friend, a poor orphan in the sacristy of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Turin: Bartholomew Garelli. My mission begins!



The Oratory became 'a house that welcomes, a parish that evangelizes, a school that prepares for life, and a playground to meet as friends and live in joy.



By 1846, I was overwhelmed by all the work and got deadly sick. I asked mom if she would come to Turin to help me and to be a mom to the boys.





For someone who had never left her village, a move to the big city, at 68 years of age, was a big ask.



Mom's "yes" testifies to her faith in action: "If you believe that this is the will of the Lord, I am ready to come".



When she was 30 years old she had only us 3 boys to raise. Now, at sixty-five, she had dozens of homeless orphans who saw her as their mother.





The presence of Mamma Margaret transformed the oratory into a family. For ten years her life merged with mine and the beginnings of Salesian work: she was my first and foremost co-worker; she became the maternal dimension of the preventive system; she was, without knowing it, a "cofounder" of the Salesian Family.



She was so much more than the cook and the laundry lady. She had earned the boys' total confidence, the affection of orphans who felt loved. (Fr. Pascual Chavez)



At first, it was discouraging. Our guests ran off with the bedding and everything they could carry ...





Many times I tried to welcome these young people, but always with the same result! Mom and I didn't know what else to do...



But there were many others who were grateful to find a home and a family with us. So I began to welcome them at the Oratory. Mom was right there beside me.



I remember that rainy night in May when that frightened orphan boy, soaking wet and crying, knocked at our door. Mom let him in and gave him a snack.





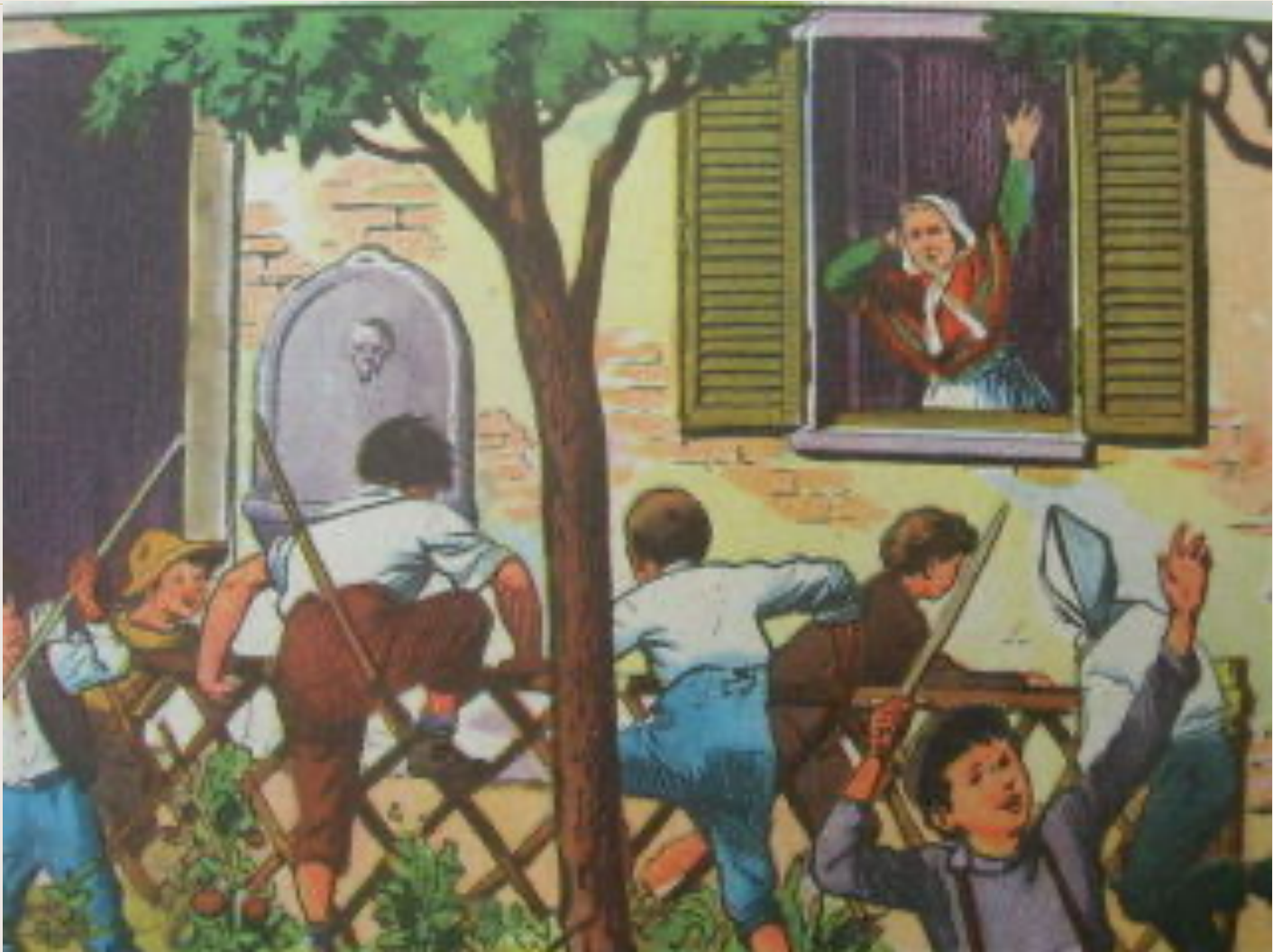
“Tonight you can sleep here. But don't do as others did, who ran away with everything! Tomorrow God will provide... And before going to sleep, lets pray together”.



This was how we welcomed the first abandoned orphans at the Oratory. We beginning with 15 boys in 1849, and by 1854 we had 100 youngsters.



I remember that day Mama Margherita's patience ran out. Her little garden, cultivated with so much effort and love, was completely destroyed!





"I can't take it anymore! You see how hard I work, but that take it all for granted! These boys are becoming unbearable! Today I find the laundry I put out to dry dragged along the ground. Yesterday, they trampled through the vegetable garden."



“Some of them come home in the evening with their clothes torn to shreds, others without their tie or handkerchief, some hide their shirts from me and some take my pots and pans to play with and pretend its the most natural thing to do.”



“... It takes me hours to find everything again.... I’m just so tired! I was better off in Becchi!... You know what...”





I let her finish. Then I pointed to the small crucifix. This deeply Christian woman understood. Her eyes filled with tears. "You're right, John, you're right".  
And she put her apron back on.



After that moment, not a word of dissatisfaction ever  
escaped his lips (Biographical Memoirs)



Mamma Maraboni

Mom's life was woven into the life of the Oratory.





How many times I read my homilies to her before delivering them at mass. She would tell me to get rid of the fancy words and just speak simply so that ordinary people like her could understand.



Mom was wise and she defended me against the attacks of my many 'enemies'. When I would not heed her warnings...



...my stubbornness was met with a mysterious gray dog, “Griggio”, who would stand at the gate and not let me out of the house! Soon after, I came to know that someone was plotting to kill me...





Then the dog would receive mom's affection...  
This happened many times and nobody ever knew  
where my furry 'guardian angel' came from.



One of the most beautiful traditions that my mother established was to cook chestnuts in the autumn for the boys.



I started handing them out generously but I didn't realize right away that there wouldn't be enough for everyone. What to do? I continued distributing them and somehow they didn't run out. Everyone got their share.





Every year we took a 35 km hike with all the young people from Valdocco to my house in Becchi. It was a celebration for us and for the communities we visited.



It was on one of these hikes that I met a 12 year-old boy named Dominic Savio, a boy of exceptional intelligence and deep spirituality.



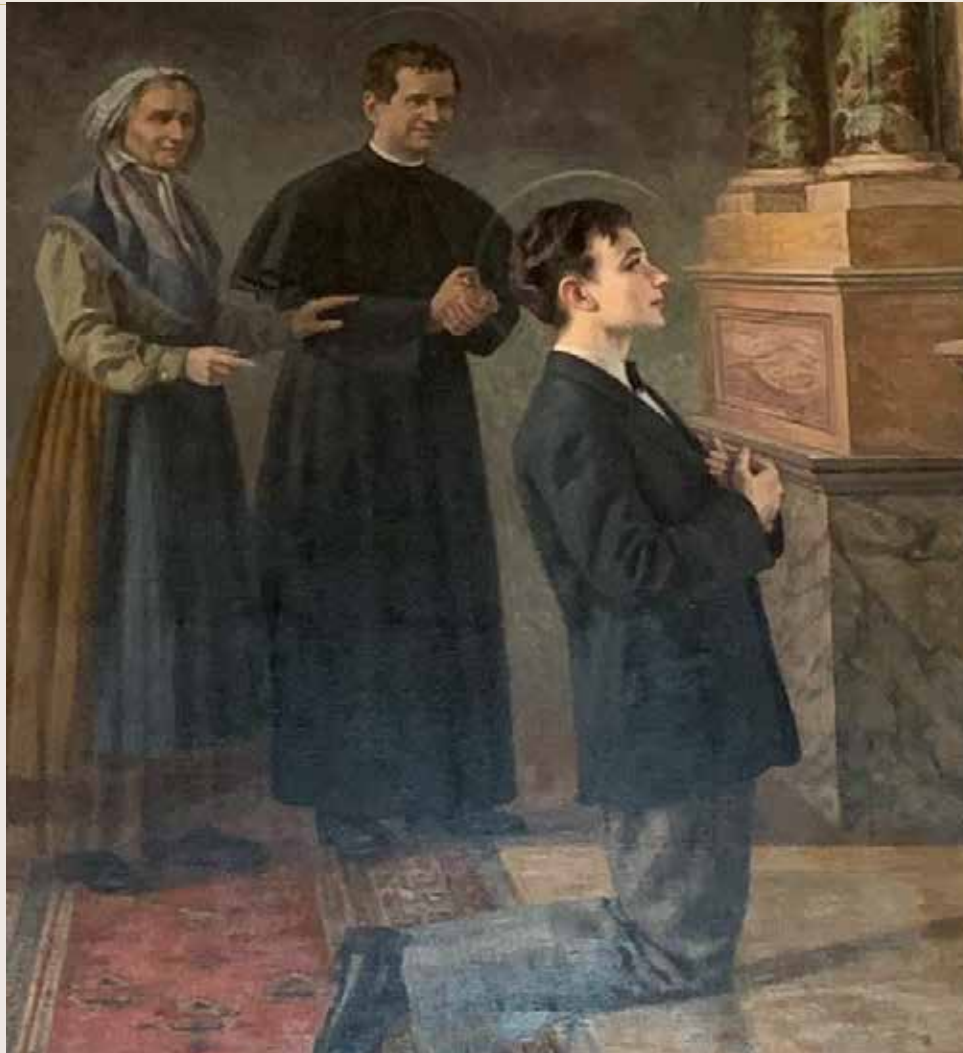
“What do you want to do with your life?”

“If God grants me the grace, I would like to become a priest. I will be the cloth and you will be the tailor.”





Mom sensed the depth of this boy's soul:  
"John, you have many fine boys here, but keep  
your eyes on Dominic. He is special".



In July 1854, a deadly cholera epidemic hit Turin. Over 800 people in Borgo Dora got sick and the young people of the Oratory risked their lives to take care of them.



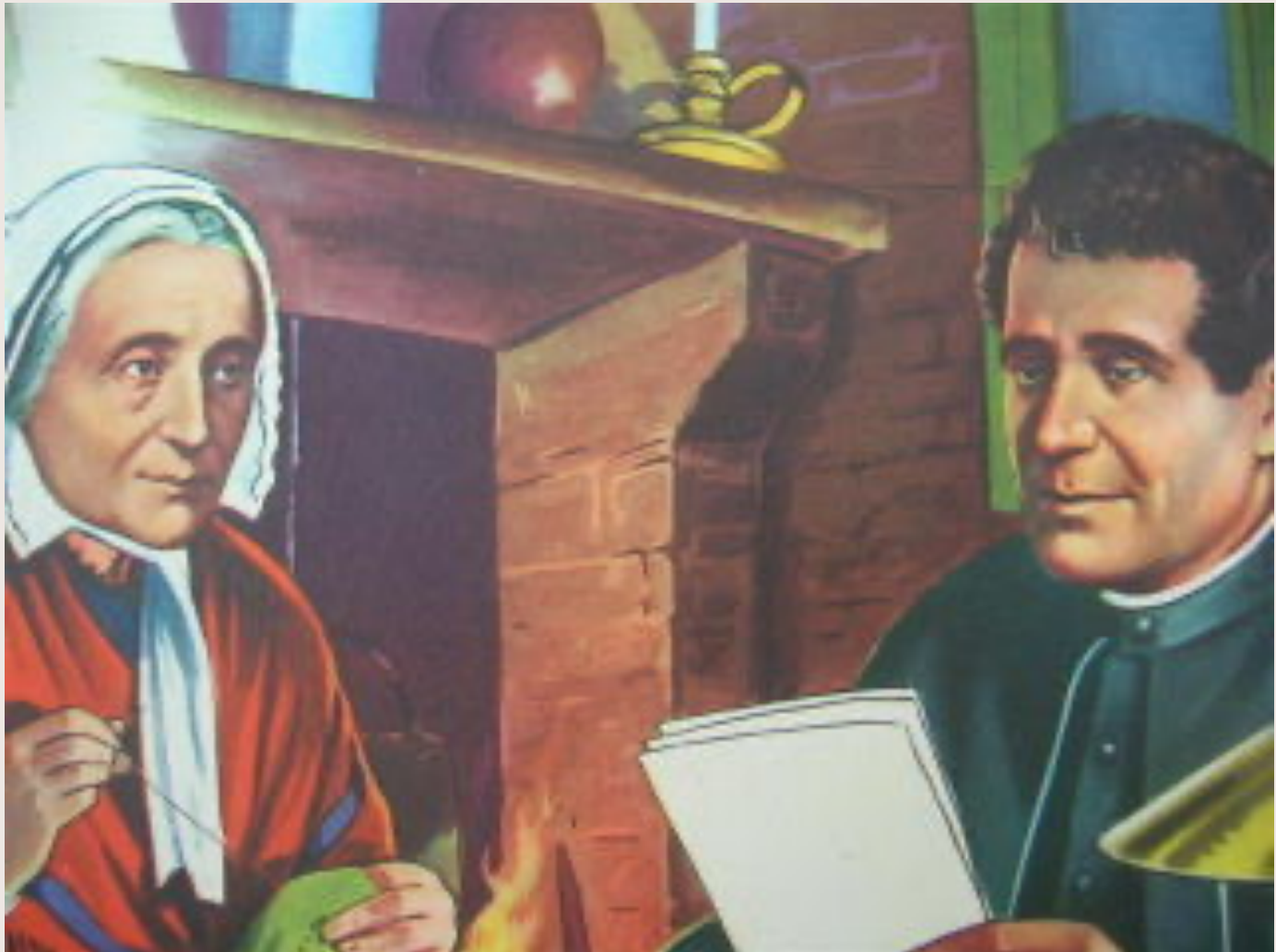
Mom always handled crises with common sense and practical faith. Taking all the altar linens (made from her dowry), including the altar cloth from our church, she said to Michael Rua, one of my boys, “Here, use this too as a bed sheet for those poor souls... they are the suffering body of Christ”.





We can say that 'the Salesian Congregation was  
cradled on Mamma Margaret's knees'

(Teresio Bosco)



'Such an enduring feminine and maternal presence is a unique fact in the history of founders and educational congregations.'

(Fr. Pascual Chávez)



“John, God knows how much I loved you, but up there it will be even better. I did everything I could... Tell the boys that I did it all for them, as their mother.” (Biographical Memoirs)





Mamma Margaret lived poor and died poor: taken to a common tomb, she never had her name written on a tombstone, but it is written in each one of us!



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