

St. John Bosco

Be cheerful, do good, and let the sparrows chirp.

What do you think it means?

Giovanni Bosco lived in the 19th century. He was born into a very poor family in northern Italy. Giovanni craved to learn and this caused serious hostility from one of his older brothers. His life in the family home became so unbearable that he had to leave it at the age of 12. He found kind and supportive adults and, against all odds, finished his education all the way through college. He became a priest and started serving in different parishes. In his native Italian people addressed him as a priest: "Don Bosco" and this is how the rest of the world calls him today.

Whatever you accomplished in life, you could not have done it without support from kind people.

Who are they? Take a minute to bless them.

The 19th century in the Western world means wild industrialization with savage exploitation of workers. Time comp, unions, pensions, insurance etc., still belong to the realm of science fiction. Parents work from sunrise to sunset, public schooling is not available yet, so teenagers roam streets all day – looking for work or looking for trouble. Don Bosco starts to reach out to teenage boys around his parish. He plays soccer with them, tells them stories, and listens to them. They sing and laugh together. And... what do you know – his parishioners take offence. He is supposed to sit in church and pray. He is supposed to spend time with them – the adults. They start a slander campaign against him. Yet, some people admire his ministry. One family donates him a house where Don Bosco can move his ever-growing group of teens. Soon enough neighbors start a campaign against it – too much noise and too many scary kids around the neighborhood. The pattern of moving from house to house chased away by good people who hate the noise repeats itself a number of times. Finally, Don Bosco moves into a

bigger house outside the city. By now, there are already a few hundred boys in his ministry. He teaches them the 3Rs and religion. He looks for work for them. He demands from employers to promise him not to beat the boys they take as workers.

Some of the boys steal from Don Bosco's house, from his parishioners, or from their employers. Some start fights. Some are rude and demanding. Some priests portray Don Bosco to the bishop as a madman or as a heretic who takes kids out of churches. The bishop reprimands Don Bosco severely without bothering to investigate on site. Local politicians fear Communist revolution and suspect Don Bosco of political ambitions as a worker leader. There are a few assassination attempts on Don Bosco.

Which part of Don Bosco's cuddly youth ministry would you consider as less nice? If you lived in Turin at that time, would you support or oppose Don Bosco? Did you say: "Support"? Oh, come on. You are kidding yourself.

Finally, Don Bosco gets very sick. The stress takes its toll. He lands up in a hospital. The boys are very distressed but they are not allowed to come and see him. Hundreds of them stand on the street looking at his hospital window and wave. They organize themselves into orderly groups. They take turns in twos to come and visit him. The whole neighborhood – first terrified at the sight of hundreds of "hooligans" – comes to admire their discipline and love for Don Bosco. People discover how different these boys are from their countless unmannered and neglected peers around the city. Politicians who rack their brains how to address the teenage homelessness and vandalism in the city see the light at the end of the tunnel. Even anti-church decision-makers recognize value in Don Bosco's work.

What does Jesus mean when he says: "By their fruit you will recognize them?" (Mt 7:16) What fruit did people in Turin notice?

What fruit can people notice in you? Do you know the fruits of the Spirit by

heart? Google them.

How can we prevent burn-out in our ministries? Don Bosco recovers. His mother moves from the countryside to his house in Turin. She cooks and cleans for him. Young adult men join him and become leaders of boys. Maria Mazzarello and a group of women start a ministry for girls. Married people support both ministries by becoming volunteers or even members of Don Bosco's religious organization. Soon the groups develop into Salesian Fathers, Salesian Sisters, and Salesian Cooperators. The Queen of England hears of this successful way of addressing marauding teenagers in industrialized cities and sends her representatives to learn more. The king of Italy follows suit (and he should have been first to do it, right?). Soon Don Bosco receives wide support from people inside and outside the Church.

Today the Salesian Fathers is the biggest Catholic male religious order in the world. There are a number of female communities who serve young people following Don Bosco's spirituality. Think of the millions of teenagers in many countries being helped by men and women who chose to give their lives for young people instead of pursuing their own careers, getting married, buying a nice house with a pool, etc.

What do you tell God after learning more about Don Bosco?

What do you think of Don Bosco's advice to others:

"Be cheerful, do good, and let the sparrows chirp."?