Salesians on the Peripheries: 
A Tale of a Few Cities

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That Was Then: Salesian Beginnings in Turin

This year we Salesians of Don Bosco are celebrating 200 years since the birth of our founder, St John Bosco (1815–1888), and it is impossible to understand who we are now without an awareness of the circumstances within which we were born. John Bosco’s life spanned a turbulent period of massive change in the city of Turin, where he founded his ministry. It was the era of the Risorgimento, when city-states and larger kingdoms were recovering from the Napoleonic invasions at the turn of the century and, after a series of wars of independence, merged into the unified nation of Italy.

It was similarly a time of social, economic and migratory upheaval. The combined effects of years of war and harsh winters drove many small landholders and tenant farmers off the land and an emerging class of proprietors was acquiring larger holdings. In the (all too often false) hope of increased security, hundreds of thousands headed for the cities.

It was very destabilising. Not just the breadwinners, but entire families were losing not only their traditional rural livelihood, but the very fabric of long-established culture. Families from widely differing origins were now lodging cheek by jowl in shoddy tenements hastily erected on the expanding borders of cities such as Milan and Turin. Men, women and children hunted for work in the factories, mills and even more dangerous munitions plants, which were fuelling the surrounding wars. They were confused in their strange new surroundings, divorced from their traditional work skills; they had lost their backyard food

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gardens and were impaired by undernourishment and endemic diseases such as pneumonia, typhus and cholera. No longer did they know who they were or how they slotted into a long-established community framework.

This upheaval also affected their practice of the faith. The village church and parish had for generations been the centre of faith, ritual and routine, where the church bells announced key times of the working day, as well as baptisms, marriages and funerals, in communities where each knew the other. Now neighbours spoke differing languages, bore separate traditions and were each struggling merely to survive, let alone have the leisure time for spiritual or recreational nourishment. Similarly, following the clarion cries of the revolutionaries in France, strong secularist anticlericalism was reducing both the power and the influence of the church, which, in turn, was by and large reactionary, attempting to restore the Old Order and its power base. The church responded with documents such as the Syllabus of Errors (1864) and the First Vatican Council’s (1870) declaration on papal infallibility.

The situation of newly migrated urban youth was particularly troublesome in the decade surrounding John Bosco’s ordination in 1841. Education, beyond our equivalent of year two was neither compulsory nor easily available to the lower classes. To relieve family poverty, most adolescents sought work, but with the supply pressure of continuing immigration and the concomitant lack of skills far outstripping demand, most were left at a loose end. Juvenile gangs proliferated in Turin and were a particular problem in and around the market squares. Under-resourced authorities responded by gaoling many of them and, without alternative options, children were incarcerated in the same gaols as adults. As in Dickensian London, capital punishment was commonplace, and the newly ordained Don Bosco was introduced to hearing the confessions of inmates, old and young, on death row.¹

He was deeply distressed by this and wanted to establish preventive measures that would forestall the otherwise likely descent of so many youth into crime and despair. Adopting and modifying St Phillip Neri’s Roman model of oratories, he set up places where boys would be attracted by fun activities to gather, feel safe, pray and be spiritually nourished. A hundred years ahead of his time, he insisted that peer leadership and ministry were vital ingredients.

Largely at the suggestion of Pope Pius IX, who had befriended him, in 1859 he founded the Society of St Francis de Sales, priests and brothers who would perpetuate his ministry of forming good Christians and honest citizens. He predated Abraham Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ insights by promising his men they would receive bread, work and heaven provided they continued to work for the young who were poorest and most abandoned with kindness and genuine

¹ Salesians retain an affectionate bond with their founding father due to his warm and endearing relational style. John Bosco was universally known as Don Bosco, with Don being the Italian equivalent of our Father.
love. Contrary to established educational practice, he banned corporal punishment and insisted that an obvious caring and kindly relationship between boy and educator would achieve better discipline and deeper value as the true face of our loving God was revealed.

Circumstances changed, however, even within Don Bosco’s lifetime. As Turin stabilised through the final decades of the century, immigration turned to emigration, particularly to the Americas, and from 1875 Don Bosco began sending missionary Salesians to South America to care for the expatriate Italian communities, educate and evangelise their youth, and spread the Gospel into the native populations. Two hundred years from his birth, this family of priests, brothers and sisters has become the largest formal family of religious in the church.

This Is Now: Australia and the Pacific

It strikes this author that mid-nineteenth-century Turin and early twenty-first-century Australasian cities, in some respects at least, are not all that dissimilar. Many of the challenges and responses that our church in general, and we Salesians in particular, now face in this corner of the world have resurfaced. To name just a few: secularism, migration and its attendant confusions, diminished trust of clergy, political pressure on the church, transient families, youth facing rapidly changing pressures, and hostility or indifference to church proclamations.

The Salesians initially came to Australia in 1923 to evangelise in the Kimberley. That is a story in itself, and this mission was destined for early frustration, but it opened the door to youth ministry at the opposite end of the continent and our province is now scattered across the south-eastern seaboard and the South Pacific. Most works continue our founding purpose of direct youth apostolate through schools and youth centres; though, in response to local diocesan needs and aging clergy, more parishes are now under our oversight.

Beyond the province ‘epicentre’ of Melbourne, let us look at four different apostolates that exemplify particular responses to youth and family needs on the physical and cultural margins of our province and society. Space limits this essay to one brief overview of a long-term ministry and three thumbnail descriptions of more recent foundations.

Partners with Families in Crisis in Sydney

The Dunlea Centre in Engadine is Australia’s original Boys’ Town. It was

2. The question is often asked, why did Don Bosco found places only for boys? At that time in Turin there were already a number of philanthropic institutions for girls and young women at-risk. With repeated requests, he did indeed later (1872) found the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) with St Mary Mazzarello to undertake similar work for girls.

3. For a more detailed discussion of Don Bosco’s life and times, see Peter Carroll and Lynne Muir, The Gift of Don Bosco (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2011).

not founded by the Salesians but rather by Fr Thomas Dunlea in 1939, when he was parish priest of Sutherland. Fr Dunlea needed more adequate facilities to house a growing number of strays (both two- and four-footed!) he was accommodating during the Depression and he found them several kilometres away on a few acres of scratchy farmland in the bush at Engadine. Still sitting on the border of the Sydney Archdiocese, this property was then just outside the metropolitan area. Inspired by the real Fr Flanagan in Nebraska and Spencer Tracy’s portrayal in the eponymous Hollywood film, he began Australia’s first Boys’ Town, taking in an ever growing group of orphans and boys from struggling families or those who were struggling and at-risk themselves. With well-honed Irish flair he gathered a core of capable fundraisers and the help of the De La Salle Brothers to provide onsite schooling.

However, after a decade of wonderful growth, questions about some of the fundraisers’ accountability and issues with Fr Tom’s health led to the withdrawal of the De La Salle Brothers and the intervention of the archbishop. It would have been an otherwise unlikely intersection between Tom Dunlea’s home town of Tipperary and John Bosco’s centre in Turin, but both priests saw similar needs and responded with similar pastoral generosity; and Cardinal Gilroy requested help from Don Bosco’s Salesians, who came in 1952.

The Salesians continued and built on the founding style of Fr Dunlea. However, social and welfare realities were changing. The Depression and war years gave way to greater opportunity and prosperity and the number of orphaned and destitute children decreased. Boys’ Town began to take greater numbers of ‘troubled’ boys, many of them placed by the juvenile courts. The normal theory of the 1950s, -60s and -70s was to attempt to provide a ‘stable’ environment and, as far as possible, to keep the boys away from what was considered the destabilising influence of their home environment and families. This was an attitude well entrenched in Don Bosco’s understanding and writings one hundred years before.

Both educational and care theories have changed significantly since then, however, and this is reflected in the quite radically changed operational style of what is now called the Dunlea Centre. In the 1970s one of our priests, Denis Halliday, broke with the established Salesian tradition of studying teacher training and earned a degree in social work. Motor neurone disease brought an early death, but through fifteen years of ministry, study, reflection and writing he identified the need for a radical change of approach and was awarded a doctorate posthumously. His seminal thesis was titled ‘Partners with Families in Crisis’ and changed the mode of taking young people away from their families and working with the boys alone, to intensive and tailored work with the families themselves.

Along with this ideologically driven change of focus came another less desired practical driver. As with other orders, plentiful vocations dried up. The established model of large-scale congregate care at minimal cost operated easily when there was an abundant supply of young and energetic religious to staff the
ranks of teacher–residential carers who were prepared to work on a twenty-four/seven schedule. Now we could survive only with a staff of paid laypeople. To further add to the mix, requirements for registration and funding were reducing the student to teacher/carer ratio and even the number of young people permitted to live and be educated together. As in a hospital, today’s students are outnumbered by staff. And an absence of facilities to accept at-risk girls in southern Sydney has led us to open the first girls’ unit. ‘Boys’ Town’ became a misnomer, so ‘Dunlea Centre’ sits more easily with the new coeducational reality. Just as in the normal school scene, chalk-face Salesian presence is now restricted to chaplaincy and mentoring and we care for the carers and try to imbue them with our charism. Congregational chapters now refer to the local Salesian community as the animating nucleus inspiring a broad range of lay collaborators, more than as the workers in the vineyard.

In this context, it is also worth commenting on a tension other religious orders working in the welfare sector may face. The small ‘c’ catholic (or universal) nature of our outreach is normally well accepted and utilised by Commonwealth and state statutory bodies, but the big ‘C’ Catholic faith basis is often challenged and restricted. There is a tenuous/tricky balance in not losing needed government registration and funding with its requisite non-denominational and non-explicit evangelising demands, while retaining a genuine Catholic ethos and a gospel and attendant faith that can be caught, even if not explicitly taught. It is instructive that Don Bosco faced similar conflicts when he proposed founding a new religious congregation at the very time the strengthening civil authority was forcibly closing religious houses considered to be ‘pariahs’ by the emerging state. Our founder had to choreograph a delicate dance in proving value to the civil authorities whilst convincing Rome of an innovation in religious life where members retained full civil rights and duties.

The Dunlea–Boys’ Town model also now has an outreach unit in one of our sister schools situated in the economically deprived Hobart suburb of Glenorchy. Operating as an edge-of-campus day unit, it offers programs tailored to the individual needs of students struggling to cope with mainstream schooling. The networking that a religious congregation enables can be the perfect medium for such cross-fertilisation and ongoing support of innovative ministries.

Helping Culturally Diverse, At-Risk Youth in Sydney’s Outer West

In the western suburbs of Sydney and diocese of Parramatta, St Marys and its surrounds are home to a diverse number of migrants and families in the lower socio-economic groups. Juvenile crime, vandalism and recreational drug use are all symptomatic results of diminished opportunity and sheer boredom. Civil and church authorities have long sought remedies and the Salesians were invited to establish a drop-in youth recreational facility. The Don Bosco Youth Centre was built in 1993 on council-provided land close to the main shopping and commercial centre. In a ‘first’ for our province, management and direction of the
centre is shared between the Salesian Sisters (Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) and ourselves, and each community lives in a separate house on site.

The youth centre follows St John Bosco’s founding style of providing a wide range of recreational activities with close adult and peer-leader accompaniment. The theory is, if young people are happy and engaged in good activities, they won’t resort to other destructive entertainments. All faiths and none are welcomed without distinction. It is hoped a trickle-down effect would occur where the ever present display of Catholic imagery and the active presence of religious and committed lay people would help provide a stimulus for the young to wonder about and question what they ultimately believe. Other more explicit faith-centred possibilities are offered as local schools and groups come for retreat or prayer days. Yet the key is in the face-to-face encounter with the religious on staff, as indeed with the various volunteer leaders who are offered special formation by the sisters, brothers and priests.

Responding to Urban Drift in the South Pacific

In the early 1980s our then Australia-focused province accepted a missionary outreach into Samoa. In 1962, Western Samoa became the first independent South Pacific nation and its government was intent on preserving the local culture whilst developing opportunities for its people. Following Pope Paul VI’s visit en route to Australia’s bicentenary in 1970, Samoa was honoured when its archbishop, Pio Taofinu’u, was appointed the first Pacific cardinal.

After 140 years of evangelisation, almost all Samoans were Christian by the time of the Salesians’ arrival. Bringing the Gospel was no longer needed. But showing the gospel of good works and meeting a situation where the largest export by far was Samoans themselves, and primarily those in the fifteen to twenty-five year old age group, and where there was frustration of the unskilled and bored who had drifted to the city (and only town) of Apia, were very real needs. So the cardinal’s brief for us was to provide alternative education paths that would help the young remain on the islands and contribute better to their country’s development.

With a core of religious and developing waves of lay missionary volunteers, a technical training centre was set up in Alafua, on the outskirts of Apia. Rather like those unskilled and lost rural adolescents and young men Don Bosco found in the streets, or even gaols, of Turin, so the new generations of Apia youth could be provided with practical skills and a moral and faith-centred compass to guide their search for prosperity and security.

Providentially, a good number of vocations have come forward through our Samoan ministry, which has extended into parish oversight, primary education provided by the Salesian Sisters and, more recently, through a strengthening relationship with the government, a second high school and vocational trade centre, which we have built on the larger but less developed island of Savai’i. For a peppercorn lease, the government has granted us land within an area designated
for development of the first real township on the island. The prime minister is convinced that honest citizens and good Christians are essential for the solid emergence of a good urban society in Salelologa. Our aim is to sow the seeds of prevention before urban drift lures destabilised youth into destructive life patterns. These ministries really do replay central challenges of Don Bosco’s Turin of the 1850s.

**Multicultural Immigrant Parish Ministry in New Zealand**

Our most recent province presence is in the parishes of Massey and Avondale, suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand. Here, the ministry is akin to that at the beginnings of our missionary expansion into Argentina. Don Bosco, a child of the massive missionary movement of the nineteenth-century church, felt the call to bring the Gospel to native peoples in South America. But there was another immediately pressing need in the later nineteenth century, and that was caring for the waves of Italian emigrants who were sailing out to the New World. Like many of their forebears who had moved from country to city, these were confused and bewildered in an alien country, lacking adequate employable skills, struggling with a diversity of language and cultural backgrounds, and isolated from traditional piety and worship. Priests, brothers and sisters were needed to minister to them, oftentimes to be the translators, letter writers, and educators of faith and life in general.

New Zealand offers home for a broad diversity of migrants, particularly from the Pacific. Massey parish covers a wide area, with two churches and schools and large numbers of people from Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and Niue, as well as families of the Philippines, India, Korea and beyond, to earlier migrants from Europe. There are nearly thirty ethnic groups in the parish. By providing priests from Samoa and Tonga, and from India in the nearby parish of Avondale, we have been able to celebrate and minister with the people in culturally empathetic ways. Meeting the challenges of a new country is rendered somewhat easier when there are also moments of easy familiarity with the old ways and people who understand one’s mindset and background. Samoan and Tongan choirs bring parishioners together and enrich the Sunday liturgies. Youth groups celebrate their heritage and provide peer support in the demands of the New World.

Our Salesian religious have discovered that the face of God can be revealed more readily through features and faces that are already familiar to their people. And in changing, yet rather repetitive, scenarios we rediscover a grounding in the treasures of our traditions that provides inspiration to meet an evolving future. Great founders had great, far-reaching foresight!