

DON BOSCO'S SPECIAL 'ARISTOCRATIC DOMAINS'

Don Bosco's curious 'feudal entitlements'

Struck down by pneumonia at the Biglione farm, Francis Bosco died on 11 May 1817. His family was left with a simple abode (the Becchi cottage), sundry articles of furniture, some farm equipment, a few head of cattle and eight small allotments worth 1331.3 new lire; and debts to the total of 445.95 new lire.

This was no great inheritance, but at least a passable property for a peasant family of modest conditions and accustomed to hard work and frugal living.

Margherita Occhiena's husband was the head and support of the whole family, and his death at the early age of thirty-three left his wife in a critical situation. She now had three boys and a mother-in-law to look after, and this in a year of desperate famine.

She was, however, a remarkable woman, and capitulation was far from her mind. With faith in God's providence and with dynamic courage, she rolled up her sleeves and set to work: she restructured the cottage, paid up all debts, and managed the estate in such a way that in thirteen years she was able to divide the property among her sons.

The eight lots of land belonging to the family were suitable for viniculture, crop-growing and cattle-grazing: 272 tavole in all.¹

We have no detailed knowledge as to how the property was divided between Antonio, Giuseppe and Giovanni in 1830. We know, however, that when in 1840 cleric John Bosco, about to receive the subdiaconate, had to scrape together an ecclesiastical patrimony, a calculation was made of the immovable property of Giuseppe and Giovanni. The united value came to 2510 lire, producing an annuity of 125 lire.

The allotments were listed in the inventory found in the State Archives of Asti. The archives also mention a vineyard next to the Becchi, a field in the Valcapone area, and another in Bacajan. These three allotments made up what Don Bosco used to jokingly call the 'Bosco domains'.

In his missionary dream of 1886 the saint made reference to the vineyard next to the Becchi. It was actually named Bric dël Pin, but in those days it was called Poggio del Pino [Hillock of Pines] - erroneously, however, for in Don

¹ A *tavola* was a land measure formerly used in central and northern Italy. It was equal to one tenth of a *giornata*, which was the area a yoke of oxen could plough in a day: 3810 square metres. This would make the Bosco property 10,336 square metres, or about one and a third hectares (nearly three acres). [Salvo meliori iudicio: translator.]

Bosco's day there were certainly no pines to be seen there. The reference is rather to a hillock beyond Valletta Sbaruau (Scarecrow Valley), east of Colle and below Serra di Capriglio. It was called `del Pino' because it was once used as a vineyard belonging to Giuseppe (or Giuseppino, which became Pino or Pin in dialect). The writer received confirmation of this on 24 March 1982 from Miss Francesca Bosco, grand-niece of the Saint.

Valcapone, on the other hand, is to the east of Colle, also below Serra below Serra di Capriglio, but downhill in the `Scarecrow zone'. It was heavily wooded, with a few huts well hidden by the leafy branches and serving as refuges and hiding-places for miscreants and brigands.

Bacajan is also east of Colle, between Valcapone and Morialdo.

This information sheds light on Don Bosco's words one day when he conferred `titles of nobility and domains' on his first lay Salesians: he referred to `the Count of Becchi, the humble section of the hamlet where he was born; the Marquis of Valcappone (sic), the Baron of Baccajao (sic), and the Knight Commander of some other domain. He used to apply these titles to laybrothers Rossi, Gastini, Enria, Pelazza and Buzzetti - not only within the community, but also outdoors, especially when he travelled with any of them during holiday periods.'²

Among these `aristocratic' Salesians, we know for sure that Brother Giuseppe Rossi was the `Count of Becchi' (or of Bricco del Pino).

Giuseppe Rossi was the first lay Salesian, the first Salesian Coadjutor. He loved Don Bosco as a son loves his father, and his fidelity to the saint was life-long. He died at Turin on 28 October 1908. In his Salesian life he had been assigned various important responsibilities: he had been in charge of the linen room, then a laboratory assistant, later a work-shop coordinator, and finally administrator for Don Rua. He had always distinguished himself for his scrupulous observance. His deportment was so distinguished that at times in public he was seriously taken for a genuine `Count' and treated accordingly.

On one occasion Don Bosco was at the Porta Nuova railway station and Giuseppe Rossi was with him, carrying his bag. The train was ready to leave when they arrived, and the carriages were packed with travellers. Don Bosco was unable to find a place, and he turned to Rossi and remarked to him in a loud voice, `Forgive me, dear Count, for causing you this inconvenience'. The answer came promptly, `Not at all, Don Bosco; I consider it an honour'.

² v. MB 8 198-199.

Those travellers at the window-seats who heard the titles 'Count' and 'Don Bosco', looked at each other in amazement and one of them called out, 'Don Bosco and Signor Conte, come into this carriage: there are still two vacant seats'. 'But I don't wish to inconvenience you', Don Bosco replied. 'Come on in. We are honoured. I shall move my luggage. There will be room for all of us.'

So it was that the 'Count of Becchi' was able to enter the carriage with Don Bosco: baggage and all.

'Count Rossi' also made his appearance in the dreams of Don Bosco. In the missionary dream of Barcelona in 1886 he appeared to Don Bosco in his domain of Bric dël Pin, together with Don Rua. Both of them were showed much concern about the Salesian Congregation, one on account of material matters, and the other because of spiritual affairs. In that dream Don Bosco saw our missions in Asia and Africa, and particularly in Hong Kong, Calcutta and Madagascar. From 'Count' Rossi's domain Don Bosco also saw Beijing. The Salesian work had extended to all parts of the world, and Don Bosco was observing it from that tiny patch of ground on Bric dël Pin that had been a part of his ecclesiastical patrimony and had provided the aristocratic title for his first Salesian Coadjutor.