

**DON BOSCO**

**DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL REALITY**

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**PART FOUR**

**HOW PHOTOGRAPHS OF DON BOSCO and the early Salesians SPEAK TO US ABOUT HIS perception of communication**

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Photography is one communicative feature of Don Bosco. He was one of the first saints to enjoy being photographed. The motifs and scenarios of Don Bosco's photographs are very well studied, strategically enacted with communicative objectives of profound impact and great persuasive power. Don Bosco understood the power of images and the effectiveness of a recorded moment for stirring people’s emotions.

Perhaps Don Bosco is the most photographed of the Church’s saints of his time. A complete collection of photos (and paintings) of Don Bosco was put together by Giuseppe Soldà. In this work of precise methodological rigour, he offers a presentation of Don Bosco’s photos: of him alone; photos connected to places that Don Bosco had been; Don Bosco's encounters with individuals, groups of Salesians; photos organised by chronological stages of his life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By observing the variety and unique quality of these photos of Don Bosco in different situations and with people of different ages, we note some aspects of his notion of visual communication.[[2]](#footnote-2)

First of all, we note Don Bosco’s intention to organise and record individuals, situations, times that could be future references for the Salesians. Each photo is a display of experiences and lessons of life aimed at becoming a living book of memories for future generations. Photography is memory and at the same time message!

A photograph is an expression of intention and motives, and both Don Bosco and those early Salesians saw a language and a message in these first photographs. Indeed they were not ‘snapshots’ as we might take today, but deliberately posed for.

The dimension that Don Bosco gives to the photos demonstrates the sense of belonging of the Salesians, some of the organised activities, (e.g. the Band), a desire to record the fidelity of the Salesians (handing over the Constitutions). Then there are the photos of Don Bosco hearing confessions, praying before a statue of Our Lady. The photos reveal Don Bosco, his feelings, his latent intentions.

Don Bosco certainly knew very well how to frame his photographs:

Photography is always created through the spatial dimensions that are delimited by the framing of the image. Above all, the dimension we want to give to photography influences the composition of the scenes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Photographing and being photographed, therefore, involves a psychological attitude. Photography is a way of expressing feelings of friendship, deep emotional ties, a sense of future and belonging.

Don Bosco wanted to be photographed in different moments of his life and in different situations. It is clear that he was not thinking only of himself, but about his Salesians, his boys, his projects, the Salesian Congregation he founded. In doing so, he was also expressing his perceptions and interest in communicating values and memories in a very modern way for his time.

Writing was the most common way of communicating during Don Bosco’s time, and he wrote a great deal. But his decision for photography showed his desire for something modern, something that could have a greater visual impact on viewers for the sake of the message.

It is interesting, too, that since his childhood, Don Bosco had been very much involved in music, sounds, rhythms. Having learned at least one instrument (violin), he knew the power of sound for touching people’s hearts and perceptions.

As a writer, Don Bosco used the power of words to instruct and educate his people: through the *Catholic Readings*, the *Lives* of a few of his pupils, many letters and many textbooks and other books, and even teaching his boys how to produce books, he was a master of communication via the written word.

As he moved into photography, we can imagine a Don Bosco who sought to increasingly modernise his way of communicating. He certainly wanted to use photography to educate his Salesians to have a better perception of what God had done for him, for them and for young people. His one aim was to open people’s eyes more and more to the reality of young people who needed love and education.

The experience of photography can be seen as an eye opener to less ignore the life we live in because photography helps us focus on what is going on around us by forcing and teaching us to see more attentively.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Communication is very much about words, sounds and images. This trio was and continues to be the basis of communication, including the digital and virtual. This explains why we like to see movies, listen to music and read. It is correct to say that digitisation has brought about a huge revolution in communication and will continue to do so. We human beings are very much driven to visual and sonorous messages because they have to do with two strong senses: hearing and seeing. Sound and images have the power to touch us deeply and to stay with us, sometimes forever.

Given Don Bosco’s intuition in this area, his being photographed alone but also with groups of Salesians, the Salesian Congregation has inherited significant visual memories of this great communicator and many of his moments with his Salesians.

By exploring these images in depth, we perceive something of his personality, spirituality, feelings, values and holiness. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words! This is the reason why great communicators like Don Bosco knew how to use them at the right time and place.

1. G. Soldà, *Don Bosco nella Fotografia dell’800 (1861-1888).* Societá Editrice Internazionale – Torino - 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although this is a challenging effort at interpretation, because the photos are not accompanied by descriptions of what they represented, or what was intended by photographing such people and events. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Diana Eftaiha (2012). This is accessible online: *The Theory and Psychology of Framing Your Image*: <https://photography.tutsplus.com/articles/the-theory-and-psychology-of-framing-your-image--photo-3106> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 See article at <https://the.me/the-psycholo-of-photography/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)