

TERESIO BOSCO

DON BOSCO

A New Biography

Translated by Giuseppe Moja, SDB

Edited by Ivo Coelho, SDB

Tej-prasarini
Mumbai
2006

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This small token
of
gratitude and love to

DON BOSCO.

He opened one of his houses to me
and made me feel at home
from that first day till now,
for over three score ten years,
in so many places
and varied situations,
with joy and without regrets.

May these pages
fill many readers
with admiration and desire to imitate him
in spending themselves for others
in God's name
and out of love for him

Giuseppe Moja, SDB

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Introduction to the English Edition

What began as a casual reading to kill time on a rainy September afternoon three years ago—September 2002—became something that gripped me and followed me, awake and in my dreams, since then. I read and reread the whole book three times, and then repeatedly in parts, taking notes to make sure I had grasped what the author really wanted to convey. Throughout, the resolve: “I must translate this book and see that it gets to as many as possible of my Indian confreres.”

The author, Fr Teresio Bosco, a Salesian priest, has written extensively and with success on Don Bosco and about the Salesian spirit and work, besides several other biographies and catechetical material. The present book, *Don Bosco: una biografia nuova*, is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

Taking the life of Don Bosco (as we familiarly call Saint John Bosco), Teresio Bosco leads the reader through the main details of his boyhood, highlighting his precocious intelligence, his photographic memory, his instinctive love of God and passion for the welfare of his companions, with all the pursuits, hopes (often momentarily thwarted), misunderstandings and traumas caused by poverty, by the ambivalent evaluations on the part of his teachers and companions because of his superior intelligence, and the touch of the ‘unexplainable’ that colour many episodes of his life as a student.

The author’s sources are the *Memoirs* of Don Bosco himself, written at the insistent request of Pope Pius IX. In these pages Don Bosco narrates the story of his own life: of his family, his growth and maturing as a human being, as a priest and as founder of a religious family. Fr Teresio also **gleans** the enormous mass of testimonials left by those who lived with Don Bosco or had something to do with him, pruning all unnecessary details. The life of every human being is inevitably linked to and shaped by the historical, social and economic conditions of his time. The author provides an abundance of details which enable us to understand Don Bosco a product of his own times, but also quite at home and imitable in our own time.

The author gives pride of place to a vital but rather cryptic private episode in John Bosco’s boyhood: a dream. We are confronted here with something that seems excerpted from the Old Testament: the election and call of this little boy to become a prophet and a leader among the people of God. Our Lord himself enters the life of Johnny Bosco, giving him a mission among the youth of his time and assuring him of success, on condition that he accept and follow faithfully a special teacher and guide who will inspire him and lead him by the hand.

Go through the lives of all the founders of religious congregations in the first

twenty centuries of the life of the church, and you will find that this detail of Don Bosco's life is unique: Jesus, our Redeemer, 'takes time,' so to say, to plan the life of this boy and future priest and founder, delegating his Mother to look after the details of the whole venture! In June 1887, 64 years after the dream, at the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, Don Bosco can hardly finish his Mass, so moved and shaken is he by uncontrollable tears, tears of joy:

“One day you will understand!” Our Lady had told me when I was asking, “How can that be?” “One day you will understand.” Today I have relived and understood my whole life!

It was the life story of a poor priest, walking and working like any other poor mortal, but wading the whole time through the colourful chiaroscuro of the supernatural. We just mention a few examples: his knowledge of future events, his ability to read the minds of people, the multiplication of consecrated hosts at communion, of loaves of bread, of chestnuts and hazelnuts; his gift of healing maladies and deformities by a simple blessing or recital of some common prayer, the unexplainable yet timely appearance of the dog Grigio when his life was threatened; his ability to read the future of people's lives and the future of his congregation into our present times and times that are still to come.

In 1841, Don Bosco is ordained a priest and is raring to start working for poor boys, but he finds difficulties at every turn. The first to slow him down in his pursuit is his spiritual guide, Fr Joseph Cafasso (now St Joseph Cafasso), who orders him first two and then yet another year of training in the 'art of being a priest.' During this period Don Bosco begins and gradually expands his work among poor immigrant lads and abandoned street boys. At the end of five years of burning the candle at both ends, he is burnt out and dying, but is miraculously cured through the prayers and anguished tears of his boys.

From the year 1846 to the end of his life, Don Bosco is busy on a small plot at Valdocco on the outskirts of the city of Turin. He gradually and painfully contrives to own it and expand it so that, already during his lifetime, it becomes a mammoth institution and motherhouse of educational institutions and devotional centres throughout Europe and South America. Every idea of his is tried and tested. The growth is slow but surprising. Every step often requires more than one attempt. The times are not conducive to the growth of a religious institution: so many had been suppressed. Strangely, it is Rattazzi, the suppressor, who is the one who tells Don Bosco how to dodge obstacles and succeed. Don Bosco, the man with a dream, is fully intent on his purpose but at the same time alert to what is going on in his volatile country, the newly established kingdom of Italy, Europe and the world. The world is changing, politically, geographically, socially at a dizzy speed.

The dream of becoming one nation and getting rid of all foreign occupants warms the heart of most people in the peninsula called Italy. What the politicians want is independence, to be reached with the cooperation of the military. What the people want instead is better living conditions and a fair chance for all. The church, which still governs almost half of Italy, is dragged into the movement

Don Bosco, so unwilling to commit himself to any of the parties involved in the struggle, is nevertheless forced into cooperating, as a citizen and as a priest. He is

insistently sought by both politicians and the pope as a go-between in the most delicate problems such as the appointments of bishops to several of the dioceses of Italy. He is esteemed and trusted by the king and his court despite his outspoken opposition to the laws that are being passed by anticlericals, the same ones who had suppressed religious congregations in the territories of the new kingdom. What developed between him and the Pope Pius IX from their first encounter is the mutual esteem, understanding and love that is only possible between two saints.

During this historical period of battles resulting in hundreds of wounded and displaced persons, and tragically affecting families of both rich and poor, Don Bosco helped all, especially by looking after the orphans and wandering boys. He probably remembered the lessons received from his mother who, in the cold nights of winter, gave shelter and a hot meal to both marauders and the *carabinieri* who were after them, and offered them the same haystack for shelter.

Fr Teresio Bosco makes use of one example to prove how Don Bosco had the gift of reaching out to people and influencing them, eliciting admiration and a desire to cooperate with him. Don Bosco was desperately in need of money to complete the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, which he was building at the special request of the pope, and he decided to go to France to beg for it. As soon as his plan became known, all rose against him. France was the last place he could go to. The French did not agree with the policies of the Vatican. They were trying hard to finish their own temple to the Sacred Heart at Montmartre in Paris. Don Bosco's French was far from correct and refined, and Italians were not much appreciated in France, to say the least. The French government was firmly in the hand of the freemasonry and Don Bosco's own attachment to the church and the pope was well known, and so on. But Don Bosco insisted and began his journey, entering France from the south. After some hesitation in Nice and Marseilles things began to stir: the graces and favours obtained through Our Lady Help of Christians were on the lips of all. As he slowly journeyed north to Paris, enthusiasm grew. By the time he reached the capital, the reception was triumphant. Coaches of the nobility queued up patiently day after day to have the privilege of driving him to the places he wanted to visit, making him change coaches more than once, and he consenting in spite of the discomfort he was experiencing. They were gruelling days of celebrating Mass in one place, staying in another, preaching here and there, visiting institutions and families, and giving never-ending audiences. The press followed every little detail of what he did and said, leaving all surprised and pleased.

Some time later he repeated the same experience with the same result in the south of France and Barcelona in Spain.

The Church of the Sacred Heart had swallowed tons of money without ever appearing to grow. A cardinal told the Pope Leo XIII: "There is only one man in the world who can finish that church: Don Bosco. Try him." The pope tried him and was not disappointed.

There are hundreds of biographies and books on Don Bosco, beginning with the monumental *Biographical Memoirs* in 19 volumes, and going down to pocket editions and collections of anecdotes, dreams and miracles. None, in my opinion, gives us a Don Bosco as understandable and complete as the present book. Teresio Bosco puts before us a three-dimensional Don Bosco! We see his life and his deeds with greater descriptive force, but with an added quantity: the third dimension, the inner drive, his total loving

dedication to God and his Blessed Mother, in whose name and through whose intercession he did everything. This is what I felt during the many hours spent on translating the book. This is what made me resolve to translate and make it available to my fellow Salesians, so many of them still uncertain, doing good work but lacking drive and inspiration, and looking for it among advisers, otherwise qualified, but completely ignorant of Don Bosco's way based on reasonableness and kindness, training the youngster to grow up by always deciding what God wants of him out of love.

Oh, yes! The little cane is always there, near the door, in the kitchen-living room of the house at Becchi. It was Mamma Margaret's way of telling her children that there was a law and that it had to be observed, but always and only out of love of God and of people. Many who accept and practice the principles of the Preventive System find it difficult to make firmness and kindness go together. They think that kindness is permissiveness which allows the young to simply do what they like. When they realize their mistake, and something must be done urgently, instead of firmness they use harshness. The result is negative from start to finish.

Don Bosco: A New Biography could be called a pleasant textbook on how to overcome this difficulty and succeed in the education of the young. That Don Bosco was right in word and deed is proved by the great number of saints and saints-to-be who surround his glorious figure, and by the many hundreds of thousands all over the world who have lived and worked in Salesian institutions, and who now give good example, found exemplary families and spread the goodness they learned from some unassuming Salesian.

Any fool can put up a building with some money and proper assistance, but no one can help another to be good and persevere to the end unless he or she is personally and intimately good, desires salvation, and lives according to the law of God's love.

One good way of closing this introduction would be to use the closing paragraph from the author's preface:

I hope and pray that [this book] will be *for all* a joyous if demanding encounter with Don Bosco, and *for many* what it has been for me: a help to return to the 'holy land' of Valdocco, to the climate in which Don Bosco, Fr Rua, Fr Cagliero, Dominic Savio, Joseph Buzzetti and others lived, when, under the eyes of the Madonna, the great intuitions, the great orientations, and the great realizations of the Salesian work germinated in simplicity and poverty.

But, perhaps, this would be too much for people unfamiliar with the language and culture of the people among whom Don Bosco lived and worked. So to my Salesian confreres I say: Remember that you once, by a solemn public oath, vowed to follow Christ in the way marked out by Don Bosco. According to the way you live this vow, you will one day be judged. Hence it is imperative that you know Don Bosco thoroughly and follow him with all your heart. But I beg you not to go to any roadside puddle if you want to know Don Bosco. Drink, rather, at the pure stream of tested Salesian sources followed by our saints and the great Salesians we may have known and admired. Drink deep, that you may not only know but also follow. Drink and do not sully, that the stream might flow pure, and that the dream might go on.

Giuseppe Moja, SDB

Editor's Note

I requested Fr Giuseppe Moja to undertake the translation of Teresio Bosco's *Don Bosco: una biografia nuova* way back in 2002. A first draft was ready in six months time, but the correcting and polishing went on for some time. In the meantime, Silvano Borruso's translation was published at Nairobi in East Africa in 2003.

Why then the present attempt? Is this not a duplication of labour? Well, in a sense, the duplication has taken place. Fr Moja had completed a first draft when Borruso's translation came out. In the subsequent work of redrafting, correcting and editing, use has certainly been made of Borruso's work, and this debt must be acknowledged without hesitation. However, there are differences between the two translations.

One significant difference is that, where Borruso has decided to drop dates, names of people and of places, and historical information which in his opinion could be of interest only to Italians, the present translation retains all the details as per the original text. This has been a deliberate choice, in the firm belief that it is high time readers in the English speaking world familiarize themselves with the history and geography of Don Bosco. Besides, as explained by Fr Raineri in his preface and by Fr Teresio Bosco in his introductory note, the aim of the 'new biography' was precisely to steer a middle course between repetitions of 'stories' of Don Bosco and strictly scientific studies. Teresio Bosco wanted to provide a readable life of Don Bosco 'that did not take for granted too many things' and at the same time took full advantage of the vast amount of solid scholarship that has been building up about Don Bosco and his times, thanks to the efforts of people like Stella, Desramaut, Braido, Wirth, Valentini and Molineris.

Borruso's translation has received a good welcome in Africa as well as in India, and the copies are exhausted already. I am sure that Fr Moja's labour of love will receive an equally magnificent reception, and that through this, Don Bosco will become better known, better loved and better followed.

The Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chavez, in his first visit to India, spoke of his many dreams for India and of the contribution that Salesians can make to India. But if the sons of Don Bosco are to make any significant contribution, one of the conditions is that we have to pass beyond stories and a merely 'folkloristic' knowledge of Don Bosco, to an in-depth study of his life, his pedagogy and his spirituality. This is something Fr Chavez has been insisting on from his very first goodnight as Rector Major. To this end, and on the happy occasion of the centenary of Salesian presence in India, the present translation is a small but precious contribution.

Last year Fr Moja completed 89 years of life, 71 years of missionary life in India,

70 years of Salesian life, and 60 years of Salesian priestly life. Arriving in India as a young aspirant, he has spent his active years first in the Northern and North Eastern parts of our country, then in colonial and post-colonial Goa, and finally in and around the city of Mumbai. Fr Moja has a remarkable love for Don Bosco and an equally remarkable love of life. It is a tribute not only to his salesianity but also to his energy that he has been able to spend almost two full years of his life working on the translation of the present book. I am really very happy that we have been finally able to see this work to the press. Salesian India will owe to Fr Moja an undying debt of gratitude.

Finally, to the several people who have collaborated with me in the revision of this work, a special word of thanks. Thank you, Fr Michael Fernandes, Mrs Lea Pereira and Fr Kenneth Pereira for all the work you have done, so willingly and so well.

Ivo Coelho, SDB

Preface

We have not had a new life of Don Bosco for many years. Those who wanted to know the figure, the thought and the work of the saint of Turin had to have recourse to works written almost half a century ago. The repeated printings and translations of these works, while on the one hand bearing witness to the undying interest in the saint, on the other hand were not able to highlight the reasons for this continuing and even expanding interest and relevance.

The relevance of Don Bosco is shown also by the continuous expansion of his works and of the veneration of him in popular piety.

Recently, leaving behind the reconstructions along the lines of the social and political history of the Italy of his times, it was natural that there should arise new studies and researches about Don Bosco's relations with many of the protagonists of those happenings, in order to have a better image of him.

Taking these studies into account, Fr Teresio Bosco, while showing the contemporary relevance of the saint and of his message, and demonstrating the validity of his educative and pastoral system, situates him in the historical context of his time, in order to understand him better.

On page after page the reader sees emerging the lasting dimensions of this great figure, which are happily in harmony with the post-conciliar renewal, retain their freshness in midst of the cultural changes of our time, and acquire new perspectives for the future. To convince ourselves, it would be enough to think of the type of apostolate that the saint chose for himself and for his spiritual family: at a time when the young had a place neither in church nor in society, when the popular classes were kept at the margins of social and political activity, and even in the church itself the laity were not considered indispensable collaborators in the evangelization of the people of God, Don Bosco turned his attention precisely to this category of persons.

Much has been said about the Christian humanism of Don Bosco, especially in the context of his system of education. Today, with Pope Wojtyla, we can say that Don Bosco, priest of Christ, had intuited that in the gospel, together with the offer of eternal salvation, there were also the germs of full terrestrial development, of liberty, of dignity and of human rights, and that therefore by educating young people to be good Christians and honest citizens, one prepares human beings who will work for justice and for peace, and lay people who will collaborate in the work of evangelization.

The author, with his solid historical and cultural preparation, is able to respond with seriousness to the questions posed by modern people about certain social and political choices made by Don Bosco, who lived in a period crucial to the history of Italy, Europe and the world.

Naturally, there is a part of the life and the history of Don Bosco that escapes the

parameters of historical knowledge and can be explained only by the presence of supernatural gifts, which not only he but also his contemporaries were aware of. This is an element which should not be lost sight of for a fuller understanding of Don Bosco; neither should the place occupied by Mary Help of Christians in his vocation and his work be forgotten.

Reading this book written in the style to which the people of today have been accustomed by the diffusion of the press—of which Don Bosco was an apostle – and of the means of social communication, one is surprised to come across facts and sayings before which the reader of today is still moved, as were those who had the fortune of being the ocular witnesses.

Don Bosco, translating the values of the gospel into simple and comprehensible terms – as Mamma Margaret had done for him – formed in his youngsters persons capable not only of living in their own times but also of constructing the future.

Reading about this in the present volume of history, moved by the very human episodes of which it is composed, grasping the meaning because of the simple language in which it has been written, one understands why Don Bosco, after a century of such extraordinary events, is still so much alive, as if he were a man of our times, and why his intentions still have the perspective of a prophecy of the future.

Giovanni Raineri, SDB

The How and Why of This Book

Author's Introduction

Early in 1978 Fr Giovanni Raineri, member of the superior council of the Salesians, together with the directors of the Elle Di Ci Publishing House, urged me to write a life of Don Bosco that would be *popular and pleasing* in form but *dignified and serious* in its content.

Both were motivated by their concern over the fact that, in the last fifteen years, the writings about Don Bosco were increasingly dividing into two types:

—books that continued to narrate beautiful stories about Don Bosco ‘for boys and for common people,’ ignoring the recent historical studies regarding Don Bosco’s times or about the figure of Don Bosco himself; these widely diffused books certainly have the merit of having given widespread publicity to Don Bosco, but they tend to reduce the gigantic figure of Don Bosco to ‘something meant only for boys,’ or to mere material for comic strips;

—books that studied fundamental aspects of Don Bosco and of his time, but which ‘took for granted as well known’ the happenings, the stories and the facts; if at all they gave any attention to these, it was only to ‘demythicalize’ particular episodes resting on dubious testimonies.

Between ‘beautiful stories’ and ‘critical studies,’ Don Bosco ran the risk of being at once little known, and of appearing as a figure surrounded by dubious legends.

The present book attempts a third way.

It narrates the life of Don Bosco, does not take anything for granted, and takes into account everything that makes up the beautiful, adventurous and dramatic story of the saintly priest of Valdocco.

It takes into account therefore:

—the *autograph testimonies of Don Bosco himself*, i.e. the many pages written in his own hand, and conserved in the Salesian Archives (particularly the manuscript of the *Memorie per l’oratorio di san Francesco di Sales*: 180 notebook pages written by Don Bosco in 1873, and edited and published by Fr Ceria only in 1946);

—the enormous volume of *testimonies of his pupils and collaborators*, in large part given *under oath* during the process for the beatification of Don Bosco (many of which have entered into the 19 volumes of the *Memorie biografiche* compiled by Frs Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria);

—the *serious studies on Don Bosco carried out in the last twenty years* (Stella, Desramaut, Wirth, Valentini, Molineris...) which make more precise, set in context,

complete, at times prune, but in no way demolish or deprive of their value the testimonies on which the narration of the life of Don Bosco is based;

—the *important studies* carried out on the *history of society in general, of the Italian state and of the church in the nineteenth century*.

I have had the fortune of writing the central part of this book in the company of Fr Peter Stella and Fr Eugene Valentini, who have had the goodness of reading and correcting the typescript as it was being composed. I have also been able to discuss with them certain fundamental points (as for example chapter 26), and have received precious suggestions from them. The typescript was then re-read by Fr Carlo Fiore, who advised me about the final shape of the text.

I thank these confreres cordially, though absolutely without wanting to share with them my own responsibility for possible inexactitudes or disputable opinions.

This book may be judged in different ways, all of them legitimate. All I can say is that it has meant for me a great deal of work and great commitment.

I hope and pray that it will be *for all* a joyous if demanding encounter with Don Bosco, and *for many* what it has been for me: a help to return to the ‘holy land’ of Valdocco, to the climate in which Don Bosco, Fr Rua, Fr Cagliero, Dominic Savio, Joseph Buzzetti and others lived, when, under the eyes of the Madonna, the great intuitions, the great orientations, and the great realizations of the Salesian work germinated in simplicity and poverty.

Teresio Bosco, SDB

1

AWAY FROM HOME AT 12

Bitter, hurtful words flew around the kitchen table that evening. Anthony saw the usual book next to Johnny's plate and erupted:

"That book again! I'm going to throw it into the fire."

Their mother Margaret sought to ease the tension. She spoke softly:

"But Johnny does his work like everyone else. If he wants to read too, why should that upset you?"

"It upsets me a lot because I have to shoulder the burden of keeping this place going. I'm the one who breaks his back in the fields. I've no intention of raising a little prince. I'm not going to allow him to enjoy a comfortable life while we remain stuck with our *polenta*."

His remark drew a sharp retort from Johnny. Never at a loss for words, he was not prepared to turn the other cheek. Anthony became violent. Joseph looked on, frightened. And Margaret tried to step in as Johnny received a beating from Anthony. This was the first time he was being treated so horribly. Being only 12 years of age, he was no match for Anthony who was 7 years older.

That night Johnny cried in his bed, more out of anger and frustration than pain. On the other side of the wall, Margaret too cried quietly. She did not sleep the whole night.

By morning, she had made up her mind. Addressing Johnny with the saddest words of her whole life, she said:

"Johnny, it's better for you to leave home. Anthony can't stand the sight of you. He might even hurt you one day."

"But where shall I go?"

Mother and son felt as though a cold hand had gripped their hearts. Margaret mentioned the names of some farms around Moriondo and Moncucco.

"These people know me," she said. "Someone will give you work, at least for a while. Later on, we shall see."

Into the Fog with a Little Bundle

Margaret got ready a bundle with a few shirts, two books and a loaf of bread. It was a cold February day. The paths were shining with ice and the hills around were white with snow.

John left the next morning. His mother followed him with her eyes and kept waving till he was swallowed up by the fog.

John knocked at all the farms on the way. No one had a job for a boy at that time of the year. By mid-afternoon, the bread was over and the situation seemed hopeless. The Moglias were the last of those mentioned by his mother. "Ask for Signor Luigi," she had said.

John stopped at the heavy gate. An old man was trying to close it.

"Hallo, boy. What are you looking for?" said the old man.

"For work."

"Good. Go and work then. So long!" The old man went on closing the gate. John gathered the last fragments of courage.

"But I must see Signor Luigi."

He stepped into the yard. The whole Moglia family was sitting by the porch. They were busy cleaning the willow twigs used for tying up the vines. Louis Moglia, a young farmer of 28, looked at him with surprise.

"I am looking for Signor Luigi Moglia," said John.

"That's me."

"My mother sends me. She wants you to keep me as a stable boy."

"But why does she send you away so young? Who's your mother?"

"Margaret Bosco. My step-brother Anthony ill-treats me, so she told me to look for work as a stable boy."

"My dear lad, we are in winter. We hire stable boys only at the end of March. Have some patience, go back home."

John had reached the end of his tether. He burst into desperate tears.

"Please take me, I beg you. I don't mind if you don't pay me, but don't send me home. I'll sit here and won't budge," he said with the force of desperation. "Do what you want, I am not going away." Still crying, he picked up the willow twigs and began cleaning them.

Dorothy, Louis' young wife, was moved. She pleaded with her husband:

"Take him, Luigi. Let's see what he can do."

Theresa, a girl of 15, also felt pity for the boy. She was Louis' younger sister, and was in charge of the cows. She put in a word.

"I am old enough to join the rest of you in the fields. This boy could very well look after the stable in my place."

That was how on that February day, Johnny Bosco began his life as a stable boy at the Moglia's. The Moglias were a well-to-do family of farmers, with fields and vineyards, oxen and cows. They were a God-fearing family. Every evening they gathered around the fireplace to say the rosary. On Sundays, the whole family, led by Louis, attended the High Mass celebrated at Moncucco by the parish priest, Fr Francis Cottino.

John's work as a stable boy was not considered demeaning at that time, nor was it exceptional. Between the end of March and October, every farm had several stable boys like him. It was the normal lot of most boys from poor families. On 25 March, feast of the Annunciation, the employers made the rounds of the farms and markets recruiting boys for the rest of the year. The employment was seasonal: eight months of solid work, from April to November, in exchange for board, lodge and 15 *lire* for clothes.

Stable boy John was, however, different. Different because he was exceptionally young, being six months short of the age of 12; and different also because he had a dream. A real dream, dreamt at night with eyes closed. He narrates it himself.

A Dream That Chalked Out the Future

When I was 9, I had a dream which remained deeply engraved in my mind for all my life. In the dream I saw myself near my home in a rather spacious ground where a crowd of boys was playing. Some were laughing and quite a few were cursing. Hearing those bad words I threw myself at them, trying to silence them by words and blows.

At that moment a venerable Man appeared, nobly dressed. His face was so bright that I could not look at him. He called me by name and said:

“Not with blows, but with meekness and charity you will make them your friends. Set to work at once, telling them about the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue.”

Confused and not a little frightened, I answered that I was only a poor and ignorant boy. At that moment the boys stopped fighting and shouting, and gathered around the Man who was speaking. Almost without knowing what I was saying I asked:

“Who are you who order such impossible things of me?”

“Precisely because these things seem impossible to you, you must make them possible by obedience and the acquisition of learning.”

“How can I acquire learning?”

“I will give you a Teacher. Under her guidance you will become wise.”

“But who are you?”

“I am the Son of Her whom your mother taught you to salute three times a day. Ask my Mother for my name.”

At that moment, I saw near him a Woman of majestic appearance, dressed in a mantle that shone like the sun. Seeing me confused, she beckoned me and took me by the hand.

“Look!” she said.

I looked, and saw that all the boys had disappeared. In their place I saw a multitude of goats, dogs, cats, bears and many other animals.

“This is your field of work. Make yourself humble, strong and robust, and what you will see now happening to these animals, you will do for my sons.”

I looked around, and instead of wild animals I saw meek lambs, prancing and bleating happily around the Man and the Lady.

At that moment, still dreaming, I began to cry. I asked the Lady to be clearer because I could not understand what it all meant.

She placed her hand on my head and said:

“In due time you will understand.”

She had hardly said these words when a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I felt bewildered. My fists were still paining because of the blows I had given and my cheeks smarted because of the blows I had received from those urchins.

In the morning I related my dream first to my brothers, who began laughing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one had a different explanation. “You’ll become a shepherd,” said Joseph. “A leader of a band of robbers,” said

Anthony. My mother said, “Who knows but you'll become a priest.” But grandma put the lid on it: “Don't pay too much attention to dreams.”

I was inclined to agree with grandma. But I could never get that dream out of my mind.

The years that followed were deeply marked by that dream. Mamma Margaret had understood that the dream indicated a way. Soon John would understand too.

180 Pages, Lest We Forget

At the age of 58, hardly anyone remembers what has happened five years before. But we all remember, as if it were yesterday, the years when we were 9, 11, or 15. We can still feel the rough bark of the trees on our chafed thighs. We still remember the warmth of the dog romping through the fields.

At the age of 58, ordered by the pope, Don Bosco wrote the story of the first decades of his life. Aided by his photographic memory (not very ‘logical’ but extremely ‘visual’), he filled three thick notebooks, making a total of 180 pages. He made a bit of a mess with the dates,¹ but the episodes, recollections and details come through with the most lively freshness.

At the eleventh line he wrote: “I write for my dearest sons, my Salesians. I forbid them to publish these things, whether before or after my death.” He underlined these words.

The Salesians disobeyed him 73 years later, after a long and debated problem of conscience. Because of this, we can today, with the help of those notebooks of *Memoirs*,² follow the exploits of the farm-boy Johnny Bosco in the smallest details.

¹ The dates regarding the infancy of Don Bosco remain a problem even for the experts, because the municipal registers of Piedmont go back only to 1838 for the births, and to 1866 for marriages and deaths. For the years before, recourse must be had to parish registers, which go back to 1625.

² G. Bosco, *Memorie per l'oratorio di san Francesco di Sales*, a cura di E. Ceria (Turin: 1946) = *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*. Tr. D. Lyons, with notes and commentary by E. Ceria, L. Castelvechchi and M. Mendl (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989).

2

TWO TRAGEDIES

“My mother's name was Margaret Occhiena, she was from Capriglio; my father's name was Francis. They were farmers who made their living by hard work and thrifty use of what little they had.”

John Bosco saw the light of day on 16 August 1815. His mother named him *Giuanin*, Johnny, a familiar diminutive in Piedmont.

One of Johnny's first memories was the death of his father. Francis Bosco had bought a small house with a few pieces of land around it. But to feed the five mouths in his family, he had to help out also on the farm of a well-to-do neighbour.

One evening in May, returning from work soaked with perspiration, he made the mistake of entering the landlord's cold cellar. Within a few hours he was in the grip of a violent fever. In the space of four days he was dead. He was only 33 years old.

Don Bosco writes:

I was not yet two years old when my father died. I can't even recall his features. I remember only the words of my mother: “Here you are, Johnny, left without a father.” We were all leaving the room where he had died, but I insisted on staying behind. “Come, Johnny,” said my mother, coaxing me gently. But I would not move. “If daddy is not coming, I won't come.” “My poor son,” she said, “come with me, you no longer have a father.” And with these words the saintly woman broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying too because she was crying. What can a child understand at that age? But those words, “Here you are, without a father,” remained always in my mind. This is the earliest memory of my life.

A Bad Season

John's second memory is one of hunger.

Becchi, the little locality where the Bosco family lived, was made up of ten houses scattered on a hillside, in the midst of a vast undulating countryside covered with vineyards and woods. These formed part of the hamlet of Morialdo, which itself was five kilometers away from the town of Castelnuovo d'Asti.

In 1817, the hills of Monferrato (Castelnuovo belongs to the northern strip of the Monferrato region), together with the rest of Piedmont, were hit by a severe famine. There had been frost in springtime and then a long drought. All the crops were lost.

There was famine in the villages. Beggars were found dead in the ditches, with their mouths full of grass.

A document of the time says that Turin, the capital of Piedmont, was invaded by a migration of biblical proportions. Long lines of emaciated people abandoned the countryside. Entire families descended upon the city from the surrounding valleys and from the hills, settling down to beg before churches and palaces.

Margaret found herself carrying the burden of her family during that unlucky year. She had four mouths to feed: her old mother-in-law, half paralyzed and confined to her chair; nine year old Anthony, Francis' son by his earlier marriage; and her own two sons, four year old Joseph, and John who was two. Poor illiterate peasant that she was, during that year she showed her mettle. Don Bosco recalls:

My mother fed the family until she exhausted all the food. She then gave money to a neighbour, Bernard Cavallo, to go looking for food to buy. That friend went round to various markets but was unable to buy anything, even at exorbitant prices. After two days he returned bringing nothing but the money he had been given. We were all in a panic. We had eaten practically nothing the whole day. But my mother did not allow herself to be discouraged. "My dying husband," she told us, "said I must have confidence in God. Let's kneel then and pray."

After a brief prayer she got up and said: "Drastic circumstances call for drastic remedies." Then she went to the stable and, helped by Bernard Cavallo, she killed a calf. Part of that calf was immediately cooked and the worst of the family's hunger satisfied. In the days that followed cereals bought at a very high price from more distant places enabled us to survive.

Among the peasant families of Piedmont, even up to a few decades ago, killing a calf was an act of desperation. The fattened calf was an investment: it was a reserve kept for emergencies like sicknesses or sudden needs. Killing it left the family without any reserves at all.

An Event That Changed the Face of the Earth

Death, hunger and insecurity are the first memories of a boy who would become the father of so many orphans, who would give bread to hundreds of poor boys.

The little tragedy of the Bosco family, on a forsaken and unknown hillside, was one more detail added to the vast tragedy that, like a hurricane, had upset Europe and Italy in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

28 years earlier, in 1789, the French revolution had broken out in Paris. That event would change the face of the earth. A detailed account of this revolution is beyond the scope of this book, but some of its aspects did have a profound impact on the life of John Bosco.

All of a sudden, the whole climate of Europe had become pregnant with novelty and expectation. After centuries of unquestioning acceptance of the absolute power of the king and the aristocracy, France had exploded. The bourgeoisie and the popular classes clamoured for their rights and for the cessation of the privileges of the nobility and the higher clergy. Words like *liberty* and *equality* were no longer whispered, but shouted from the rooftops.

‘The rights of man’ and ‘the sovereignty of the people’ were proclaimed. “Men are born free, and free and equal they remain in their rights... These rights are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression. The nation is the source of all sovereignty” (From the *Preface to the Constitution of 1791*). It was to defend these principles, rather than the dynastic rights of the king, that the French armies fought against the other nations of Europe.

As in every age of radical change, however, weighty and just intentions were mixed with seditious and totally unjustifiable violence.

The bourgeoisie who guided the revolution gave the right to vote only to the landed gentry. “Governance without education and self-control,” they justified themselves, “easily leads to excesses.”

The revolution, therefore, abolished all privileges but stopped short before that of wealth. The middle classes had found liberty but the poor remained poor.

On the other hand, a ‘parallel revolution’ was being conducted by the people and the peasants, and its excesses seemed to justify the fears of the bourgeoisie.

The French peasants were assaulting the castles of the nobility and burning them. At the same time (those were years of great famine) they were violently preventing the transport of grain and battling hordes of hungry people who were wandering desperately in search of something to eat.

The people of Paris suddenly burst into violent revolution. King Louis XVI was surrounded by crowds who forced him to don the beret of the revolutionaries and to drink to the health of the nation. Twenty days later he was dragged into prison together with his family.

From August 1792 to July 1794 the ‘parallel revolution’ took over. ‘People’s representatives’ took the place of the bourgeoisie at the head of the nation. They tried to transform the ‘revolution for liberty’ into a ‘revolution for equality.’

Some of the results were, unfortunately, disastrous.

In September, armed popular troops invaded the prisons full of aristocrats and presumed conspirators, and massacred more than a thousand people.

In January 1793 the king was found guilty of treason and guillotined.

During that same year the Reign of Terror began. All those suspected of being enemies of the revolution were found guilty of treason. In October, 177 were condemned to the guillotine; in July of the following year the number rose to 1,285. The ‘enemies of the revolution’ were liquidated rapidly, without even the semblance of a trial.

At the same time a process of ‘dechristianization’ was set into motion. Christian cult was prohibited, churches were shut down, Christian symbols were destroyed, and priests were persecuted. The ‘cult of reason’ took the place of the cult of God, with sacrilegious rites performed in the very cathedral of Paris.

Europe looked on dismayed. The happenings of Paris of those months seemed to be manifestations of a collective madness. Even those who had originally sympathized with the revolution were shocked and disgusted.

The word ‘revolution’ came eventually to mean the Reign of Terror in Paris. ‘Democratic revolution’ became a derogatory term meaning ‘an uncontrollable mob giving rise to disorder and violence.’

A 27 Year Old General

In July 1794, the ‘dictatorship of the people’ ended by executing its own leaders, the fanatic Jacobins Robespierre, Saint Just and Couthon.

The revolution became once more bourgeois. The new constitution, promulgated in 1795, gave the right to vote to only 30,000 persons, when Paris alone had a population of 600,000. The governance of the country was confined to the hands of the landed gentry. Very soon the revolution would be transformed into an ‘involution.’ The republican regime would become an ‘empire.’

In 1796, a revolutionary army led by 27 year old Napoleon Bonaparte reached Italy. After a few bloody skirmishes on the plains of the river Po, Napoleon defeated the Austrians. The French soldiers spoke everywhere of liberty, equality, fraternity. Despite the shadows of the Terror, these words inflamed the imaginations of the younger generations. The king of Sardinia (of Piedmont-Savoy-Sardinia, really) was shocked and went into exile.

But Napoleon was a restless genius. He dreamt, not of the triumph of the revolution, but of shining and bloody triumphs of military glory.

The tragic events that befell Italy in those years are now studied by school children. In 1799, while Napoleon was in Egypt, the Austrians and Russians invaded northern Italy once again. The Cossacks, with their thick long beards and menacing pikes, re-entered the city and wrought havoc among the people. Napoleon returned and there was war once again, bringing misery even in the rich and fertile plains of the river Po.

Napoleon went on to extract money and enforce recruitment from every region of Italy, first for the war with Spain and then for the expedition to Russia. He invaded this distant and mysterious land at the head of the greatest army of all times. Thanks to the terrible winter of Moscow, there followed the great collapse and the disastrous retreat. Napoleon saw almost 600,000 men dying around him, 25,000 Italians among them. 20,000 had already fallen in Spain.

From 16 to 19 October, in the plain of Lipsia, the titanic ‘battle of the nations’ marked the end of the great French Empire and, in the minds of many, the burial of the ideals of the revolution.

Once more the Austrians, Germans and Croats poured in through the Alpine passes into the valley of the river Po. All claimed to have come to ‘liberate Italy,’ but, as in the case of all ‘liberators,’ no one had invited them, and so they paid themselves lavishly by pillaging the cities and the countryside. After the last attempt of the ‘hundred days’ and the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon ended his days on a little island in the middle of the Atlantic.

Europe and Italy were tired and full of ruins and orphans. The countryside had been ruined by the wars and deprived of young hands, which had been conscripted and sent to die on faraway battlefields.

People stopped shouting ‘liberty’ and now wanted only peace.

It was in the context of this great tragedy of peoples that the Bosco family lived out, in 1817, its small but intense tragedy.

The King Sets the Clock Back by 15 Years

Johnny Bosco would read in his history book that he was born at the beginning of a new era called the ‘restoration.’ This era began on 1 November 1814 with the opening of the Congress of Vienna by the victorious nations, and in most parts of Italy it would last till 1847, i.e. till the beginning of the ‘Risorgimento.’

The restoration was a time of great ambiguities. By decree of the Congress, the kings deposed by the revolution and by Napoleon returned to their thrones, and attempted, with a few strokes of the pen, to cancel 25 years of history.

At the ‘banquet’ of Vienna, Italy was divided into eight slices: The kingdom of Sardinia (comprising of Piedmont, Sardinia, Savoy, Nice, and, as a bonus, the republic of Genoa); the Lombardo-Venetian kingdom (tightly dominated by Austria); the Duchies of Modena, Parma and Piacenza; the Grand Duchy of Tuscany; the Principality of Lucca; the Pontifical States; and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Victor Emmanuel I re-entered Turin. He rode the royal coach, surrounded by nobles decked in powdered wigs and ribboned pigtails.

The people were out on the street acclaiming the king. What they wanted, especially those living in the countryside, was peace. But the nobles wanted to build peace by “setting everything back to what it was before.” They ignored the new realities that had been born during the bloody campaigns of Napoleon and had come to stay.

History had changed, and nothing could make it turn back. The bourgeoisie had come to stay as the new class. Commerce flourished on the solid network of roads built by Napoleon's engineers.

For hundreds of years, most Italians were born, lived and died in the same locality, in the same village, fossilized in their own economic self-sufficiency and in the traditions of centuries. The Napoleonic armies had broken this inertia. Internal emigration, even when provoked by tragic causes, had become a mass phenomenon.

The new means of transport helped diffuse also newspapers and books. Not many knew how to read, but curiosity had been awakened. Those who could read were communicating the news, and horizons were being enlarged. Ferdinand IV of Modena complained at the Congress of Lubiana in 1821: “The freedom of the press, the multiplication of schools, the freedom given to all to learn reading and writing: these are the bad seeds from which revolutions are born.”

In Piedmont, agriculture had come to a new and prosperous turning point. The last patches of forests on the plains and on the hills had been destroyed. Vast new stretches of land had been brought under cultivation. Thousands of mulberry trees were being planted everywhere, giving a powerful boost to the new silk-worm industry.

There would soon spring up factories, plants and workshops. Industry would develop, and the prices would stabilize.

The day after his return, Victor Emmanuel I abolished the laws of the previous 15 years and re-established the pre-Napoleonic ones. The nobility and the higher clergy got back all their privileges, and the bourgeoisie lost many of its hard won rights.

While the king set his watch back by 15 years, middle class intellectuals like Silvio Pellico migrated to Milan. Young people of the better families began to follow rebellious currents, enter secret societies, and pin their hopes on a young prince of the Savoy-Carignano house, Charles Albert, who seemed sympathetic to the new ideas.

The echoes of these happenings arrived muted and distant at the hills of Monferrato, where Johnny Bosco was living the humble, serene years of his childhood.

3

AROUND THE HEARTH

When her husband died, Margaret was just 29 years old—rather young to be left with the burden of the family. She did not, however, spend time crying over her plight. She rolled up her sleeves and set to work.

Washing, keeping the house in order, fetching the water and airing the bedrooms was done in her spare time. The useful hours of the day were given to the fields and the stable.

Like the other peasant women of those villages, she mowed hay, ploughed, sowed, harvested the grain, brought it home, threshed it and stored it. She tended the vines, gathered the grapes, crushed them and made wine.

Her hands were hardened by labour, but she knew how to be tender with her children. She was a thrifty housewife but before everything else she was a mother.

She brought them up with kindness but also with firmness. A hundred years later, psychologists would write that a child needs the exacting love of a father as well as the serene and joyful love of a mother. They would say that orphans ran the risk of an affective imbalance, growing either too soft when brought up by the mother alone, or lacking in feeling if brought up by the father alone.

Mamma Margaret instinctively managed to keep a fine balance between a calm firmness and a reassuring joy. Don Bosco's method of education owed much to his mother.

God

“At the basis and at the summit of her instinctive pedagogy,” writes Fr Auffray, “Margaret Occhiena placed the religious sense of life.”

“God sees you” was one of her frequent sayings. She would allow her children to go and play in the nearby fields, saying to them, “Remember that God sees you.” When she found them in the midst of some disagreement, or on the point of telling a lie in order to find a way out of trouble, she would warn them: “Remember that God sees also your thoughts.”

But it was not a policeman-God that she tried to impress on the hearts of her children. On a beautiful and starry night, as they were enjoying the fresh air outside the house, she would remark, “It is God who has created the world and all those beautiful stars that we see.” When the fields were covered with flowers she would whisper, “How many beautiful things the Lord has created for us.” After the harvest or the grape-gathering, as they were taking a respite from the heavy work she would say, “Let's thank God. See how generous he has been with us. He has given us our daily bread.”

Even after a storm, when rain and hail had ruined everything, she would reflect: “The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. He knows why. If we have been bad, let us

remember that God cannot be mocked.”

And so, alongside his mother, his brothers and his neighbours, John learnt to see another person: God. Someone great. Invisible, but present everywhere. He saw that person in the sky, in the fields, in the poor, in the voice of his conscience that told him, “Yes, you did right, or no, what you did was not right.” A person in whom his mother had a boundless and unquestioning trust. He was a good and provident father, he gave them their daily bread, sometimes he permitted certain things which were difficult to understand, such as the death of his father or a hailstorm on the vines. But ‘He’ knew why, and that was enough.

A Game of Tip-Cat

Johnny was four when his mother began training him to some little jobs. She would give him a few soaked hemp stalks to skin. It was simple work, but he began in this way to make his contribution to the family.

Later he joined his brothers in the household chores: gathering firewood, rekindling the fire by blowing delicately on the live coals under the ashes; drawing water, cleaning vegetables, sweeping the rooms, cleaning the stable, taking the cows out to pasture, watching the bread baking in the oven...

Once the little chores were done, mother would come to check, and then they were off to play. His friends would be waiting, strong little chaps full of life, sometimes quite rough and coarse. They would pull moles out of their burrows, climb trees for nests, or play endless games they had invented themselves.

One of the common games was ‘tip-cat.’³ One afternoon Johnny came home with blood all over his face. The wooden peg had struck him on the cheek. Margaret was worried.

“One of these days you will come home blind in one eye. Why do you go with those boys? You know that some of them are little rascals.”

“I won’t go anymore, if you wish. But see, mamma, when I am with them, they are careful not to use certain words.”

Margaret did not stop him from his games.

His courage grew faster than his size.

John was 5 and Joseph 7. Margaret had sent them to the field to look after the turkeys. As the birds ran about for insects, the brothers played. All of a sudden, John found a turkey missing.

They looked everywhere in vain. But a large bird like a turkey cannot simply disappear. Behind a hedge John caught sight of a man. “There’s the thief,” he thought. Calling out to Joseph, he boldly approached the man.

“Give us back our turkey.”

“Your turkey? Whoever saw one?”

“You stole it. Out with it or we start shouting for help and people will come with sticks!”

Two little chaps who could be sent running with couple of slaps, but their resoluteness discomfited the man. There were labourers everywhere, and anything could happen. He went to the hedge and pulled out a sack with the turkey in it.

³ *Lippa* in Italian, very similar to the Indian *gilli-dandu*. A player with a stick struck the end of a tapered wooden peg, and then struck it again, sending it flying, while fielders tried to recover it.

“It was only meant as a joke.”

“Not a gentleman's joke, surely,” commented the little fellows as the man went away.

In the evening, as usual, they told their mother what had happened.

“You took a big risk.”

“But why?”

“First, you were not sure he was the thief.”

“But there was no one else around.”

“That's not reason enough to call someone a thief. And then you are small. Suppose he had turned on you and hurt you?”

“So we had to let him take the turkey away?”

“It is good to be brave. But it is better to lose a turkey than get a beating.”

“Hmm,” Johnny mumbled. “Maybe you are right, mother. But it was such a fine big bird!”

A Rod in the Corner

Margaret was the sweetest of mothers, but strong and energetic too. Her children knew that when she said no, she meant it. No tantrums could make her change her mind.

In one corner of the kitchen there was always a rod. She never used it. But she never put it away either.

One day John got into serious trouble. In his eagerness to run out to play, he left the door of the rabbit pen open and all the rabbits ran out. It was a job bringing them back.

Back in the kitchen, Margaret tried to catch some breath.

“John, give me that rod,” she said.

The boy backed away towards the door.

“Mamma, what do you want it for?”

“Just bring it and you'll see.”

Her tone was firm. John brought the rod, and gave it to her gingerly.

“You don't want to use it on me...,” he said.

“And why not, when you have been up to such mischief?”

“Mamma, I won't do it again. Promise!”

Both mother and child were already smiling.

It was a day of scorching heat. Joseph and John came back from the vineyard gasping for water. Margaret pulled up a bucket of fresh water from the well and gave the copper ladle to Joseph first.

John was offended. When mother turned to him with the ladle full of cold water, he refused it. Without a word, Margaret put bucket and ladle away in the kitchen and shut the door. A minute later John shyly came inside.

“Mamma...”

“Yes.”

“Won't you give me some water too?”

“I thought you were not thirsty.”

“I'm sorry, mamma.”

“That's a good boy.” And she gave him to drink.

At eight, John was a healthy boy with a quick laugh. Not too big but solid, with black eyes and curly black hair thick as wool. He liked adventure and was not afraid of taking risks.

He could already climb trees, hunting for birds. One day something went wrong. He had discovered a nest deep down in the cleft of a tree. He stuck his arm inside right up to the elbow, but then could not pull it back. He tried and tried without success. The arm was caught as if in a vice and had begun to swell. Joseph, who was looking at him from the ground, had to go and call mother. Margaret came with a ladder, but could not do anything either. They had to call in a neighbour. John, meanwhile, had beads of perspiration running down his face. Joseph, more frightened than John, kept encouraging him from below: "Hold on, they are coming."

The neighbour wrapped John's arm with Margaret's apron and chiselled away at the tree till the arm was set free.

Margaret did not have the courage to shout at John. The boy was mortified enough. She only sighed:

"Johnny, please don't try anything else!"

The Devil in the Loft

One autumn evening Johnny and his mother were at Capriglio, visiting the grandparents. The whole family was gathered around the table for supper. The room was dark, lighted only by a small oil lamp. Suddenly a suspicious noise was heard above their heads—once, twice, and then again and again. All looked up, holding their breath. A short pause and the mysterious noise started once again, followed by a long, muffled drag. The women made the sign of the cross and the children clung to their mothers.

An old crone began to narrate, guardedly, how in times past they used to hear long cries, groans and terrifying howls from the loft. "It was the devil. And now he is back," she said, crossing herself.

John broke the silence.

"It's only a bird, and not the devil," he said.

They silenced him as an impertinent fool. Just then a loud thud and a long dragging sound seemed to prove their fears. They all looked up, terrified, at the wooden ceiling of the loft where the farm products and utensils were kept.

John got up. "Let's go up and see," he said.

"You are mad," they exclaimed. "Margaret, stop him! You can't play about with the devil."

But the boy had already lit a lamp and gotten hold of a stick.

"Why not wait for the morning?" his mother suggested.

"Mamma, are you afraid too?"

"No, I'll come with you."

They climbed up the wooden ladder. The others also joined them, with lanterns and sticks. John pushed open the door of the loft and held up the lamp.

"Look there, in the corner," came the muffled cry of a woman.

They all looked: an upside down grain basket was moving and advancing towards them. John took a step forward.

“Be careful! It’s bewitched!” they shouted.

John got hold of the basket and pulled it up. A big hen bolted away squawking.

Everyone started laughing heartily, relieved. The devil was only a hen after all. The basket had been leaning against the wall. The hen, trying to get at the grains caught in the wicker-work, must have brought it down on itself. Tired and hungry, the poor creature had been trying to get out, pushing the basket here and there, banging against other things in the loft and causing thumps and long dragging sounds on the floor.

The Oil Patch Spreads

Every Thursday, Margaret used to go to the market at Castelnuovo. She would set out with bundles containing cheese, chicken, vegetables and other farm odds and ends for sale. In the evening she would come back with cloth, candles, salt and some little present for the boys. The boys knew the time and they would tear down the path to meet her.

One memorable Thursday, during a most exciting game of tip-cat, the wooden peg ended up on the roof. John was quick:

“There’s another one on the kitchen cupboard.”

He ran for it. The cupboard was, however, too high for him. He had to use a chair, stand on tip-toe, and stretch. Crash! The big jar of oil which was kept on the shelf fell to the ground, and the oil stain began spreading all over the red tiles.

Joseph came running to see what had happened.

“What will mother say?” he said.

The brothers worked frantically to clean up the mess. The shards were easily gathered up. But the oil kept spreading, and there was nothing they could do about it.

John spent a half hour in silence. Then he pulled out his penknife, went to the hedge, and selected a long, flexible twig. As he sat carving little rings and designs on it, he was thinking of what to say to his mother.

At dusk they saw their mother arriving. Joseph, hesitant, fell back a bit. John ran towards her.

“Good evening, mamma, how are you feeling? Had a nice day?”

“Yes, yes. And you, boys, you have behaved, I hope?”

“Well, mamma, look at this...,” said John, presenting her with the rod he had kept hidden behind his back.

“What is it this time?”

“This time I really deserve a caning. I’ve broken the jar of oil.” He reeled out the whole story.

“I’ve brought you a cane, because this time I really deserve it. Take it, mamma.”

He offered her the cane with such a look, that his mother could not help laughing. John joined in, relieved. Margaret took him by the hand, and together they walked up the slope towards the house.

“Do you know you are becoming a first class rascal, Johnny? I feel bad about the oil jug. But I am glad you told me the whole truth. Be careful in future: you know how expensive oil is.”

Joseph also drew near, now that the storm had blown over. 10 year old Joseph was mild and calm, with none of the liveliness and restlessness of John. He was patient, steadfast, a good worker. He dearly loved his mother and his younger brother, but was a bit

afraid of Anthony.

“I Am Your Mother, Not Your Stepmother!”

Anthony, 7 years older than John, was growing into a difficult youngster, with occasional outbursts of violence and impatience.

At times he would beat up his younger brothers savagely, and Margaret had to step in to stop him. He was perhaps only a hypersensitive youngster, traumatized by the death of his mother and then of his father.

He had a love-hate relationship with Margaret, swinging from moments of tenderness to frightful outbursts of anger. Sometimes, when scolded for his tantrums, he would confront her with clenched fists, calling her stepmother.

Margaret could have settled things with a couple of slaps. Mothers at that time would have hardly hesitated to do so. But Margaret never raised her hand on Anthony. She would merely say firmly:

“Anthony, I am your mother, not your stepmother. Try to cool down now. You will soon realize your mistake.”

After a while Anthony would cool down and apologize. But he could flare up easily and unpredictably, and John and Joseph were always terribly afraid of him.

4

SPRINGTIME

The Bosco family was poor, and their house was the poorest in Becchi. It was a one storey affair that served as dwelling, stable as well as barn.

Sacks of maize were stored in the kitchen, and a thin wall separated the kitchen from the stable. The bedrooms, small and dark, were upstairs, just under the roof.

It was real poverty, but not misery, because everyone worked, and a farmer's work did not yield much but something it did yield. The walls were bare but whitewashed. The sacks of maize were not many, but they were made to last. The cows were also used for the cart and the plough. The milk was therefore neither rich nor abundant, but it was enough.

And so the children of the family were not sad or aggressive. A little patience makes happiness possible even in poverty.

At the age of 8 or 9, John began to participate more actively in the work of the family, sharing the hard and austere life.

They worked from dawn to dusk, and in summer the sun rose early and the days were long. "The early bird catches the worm," Margaret would say every morning as she woke up her sons. Johnny, heavy with sleep, often wondered about the poor early worm that got caught.

Breakfast was simplicity itself: a chunk of dry bread and fresh water. John learned to hoe, mow grass, handle the pruning hook and milk cows. Travel was on foot. There was a coach plying along the main road to Castelnuovo, but it was too expensive. At night John was happy to stretch out upon a thick mattress of maize leaves.

The Feet of the Poor

Whenever anyone fell sick in the neighbourhood, they would come to wake up Margaret. They knew she would never refuse to help. She would wake up one of her sons to go with her.

"Let's go son," she would say. "It's a work of charity."

"Doing a work of charity"—a simple expression that put together many 'values,' which today we would call generosity, service, concern for others, practical love, altruism.

"In winter," recalls Don Bosco, "a beggar would often come to knock at our door. There was snow all around, and he wanted to sleep on the haystack." Before sending him there, Margaret would give him a bowl of hot soup. Then she would look at his feet which, more often than not, were in a bad state. His clogs were worn out and leaky. She had no new ones to give him, but she would wrap his feet in pieces of cloth and tie them up somehow.

In one of the houses at Becchi there lived a certain Cecco. He used to be rich but had

squandered all his wealth. Boys made fun of him and called him ‘cicada.’ Mothers would point him out to their children and narrate the story of the ant and the cicada: “As we wore ourselves out working, he used to go about eating, drinking and making merry... like the cicada of the fable. Now see what state he is in. It is a lesson for you.”

The old man was too ashamed to beg and often went hungry. When it was dark, Margaret would leave a small pot of hot soup on the window sill. Under cover of darkness, Cecco would come and take it.

John learnt that charity was greater than thrift. Secondo Matta used to work as a stable boy on a nearby farm. In the morning he would receive a chunk of black bread from his master, and he would lead two cows out to pasture till midday. Coming down into the valley he would meet Johnny who was also leading his cows to pasture, with a chunk of soft white bread in his hand. In those times white bread was a luxury. One day John said to Secondo:

“Would you do me a favour?”

“Of course.”

“Let’s swap our bread. I think yours tastes better than mine.”

Secondo Matta believed him and for three seasons this became a daily routine. We know this from Mr Matta himself. Only in later years, reflecting on things, did he realize that John Bosco was an extraordinary person.

Outlaws in the Woods

Near the house there was a thicket. After dusk, it sometimes happened that small groups of outlaws would stealthily knock at Margaret’s door. All they wanted was some warm soup and, perhaps, a hidden corner on the haystack.

Margaret was not scared by these visits. She was quite used to them. During Napoleon's days young men who were trying to escape the levy were numerous. In the last years of the period, according to historians, their number reached an astounding 70%. They lived in groups in the woods or on the mountains. Some worked on farms under a false identity. Others resorted to highway robbery. (Among those who evaded Napoleon’s levy in France was John Vianney, the future saintly Curé of Ars. He used to work on a farm under the name of Vincent).

The problem was that the police would often follow in the wake of the outlaws. (The so called *carabinieri* had been founded during this period by Victor Emmanuel I.) But there was a sort of tacit armistice at the Bosco house. The police would stop, have a look around and ask for a glass of water or a drop of wine. The bandits on the hayloft would hear the voices and quietly slip away. “The police often knew what was going on,” writes John B. Lemoyne, Don Bosco's biographer, who learnt this from Don Bosco himself in long conversations during the Turin years. “But they knew how to close one eye, and never ever tried to arrest anyone in Margaret’s house.”

Johnny was all eyes and ears and in his precocious mind was weaving what he saw into a pattern, trying to make sense out of these events. He learnt from his mother that ‘first’ there were the soldiers of the democratic regime, who used to be after those who had remained faithful to the king. Now it was the other way about: the *carabinieri* of the king were after the democrats. Things would change again before long. The gallow-birds (as Marquis Michael de Cavour used to call the democrats) would become ministers,

commissioners of police and in charge of public administration, and some others would become the ‘bad ones.’

Mamma Margaret became inured to these changes. She gave a bowl of soup and a slice of bread to whoever knocked at her door, without inquiring about their political affiliations. These events possibly contributed to Don Bosco’s convictions about the relativity of politics and parties. He would always look at politics as a debatable variant of life. He would therefore try to establish his life on more solid principles: souls to be saved and poor boys to be fed and educated. He would call that ‘the politics of the Our Father.’

“My Mother Taught Me to Pray”

Charity, at Becchi, did not arise from philanthropic or sentimental feelings. It was rooted in the love of God. God reigned in the house of Becchi. Margaret was illiterate, but she knew by heart long passages of sacred history and of the gospel. And she was convinced of the necessity of prayer: one needed to speak to God in order to find the strength to live well and to do good.

“From my earliest years,” writes Don Bosco, “she would teach me the prayers herself. She would make me kneel with my brothers, and all together we would recite the morning and night prayers.”

The nearest priest was far away, and Margaret did not expect him to find the time to teach catechism to her children. Here are some questions and answers from the Compendium of Christian Doctrine that Margaret had learnt as a young girl, and that she taught her sons John, Joseph and Anthony:

Q. What should a good Christian do as soon as he gets up each morning?

A. The sign of the cross.

Q. What should he do after rising and dressing?

A. He should kneel down if he can before some holy image, and renew from the heart the act of faith in the presence of God and say devoutly: I adore you, O my God, and I love you with all my heart...

Q. What must one do before work?

A. Offer one’s work to God.

One of the first practices of piety John learnt with his family was the recital of the rosary. At that time the rosary used to be the usual evening prayer of all Christians. Repeating the Hail Mary fifty times, the peasants of Becchi spoke to Our Lady, seeing her more as a mother than as a queen. Repeating the same words fifty times was not nonsense to them. They were used to hitting the hoe hundreds of times, and they knew that this was the secret of good harvests. As they fingered the beads, their thoughts went to their children, to their fields, to life and to death. This is how John began to converse with Our Lady, and he knew that she was looking at him and listening to him.

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco remembers also his first confession. “It was my mother who prepared me. She accompanied me to church. She went to confession before me and introduced me to the confessor. Later she helped me make an act of thanksgiving.”

School during the Off Season

Johnny must have attended the first elementary class at the age of 9, in the winter of 1824-25. This used to be the 'off season' for farmers. Classes would begin on 2 November and end on 25 March. Before and after this period, all hands, even the little ones of children, were needed in the fields.

Since the municipal school was at Castelnuovo, five kilometres away, Johnny's first teacher was a peasant who knew how to read. Later his aunt Marianna Occhiena, Margaret's sister, asked the priest at Capriglio to find a place for her nephew in his school. Marianna was housekeeper for the priest.

Fr Lacqua agreed, and Johnny probably stayed with his aunt those three winter months. This was repeated in the winter of 1825-26. This time, however, Anthony, now a 17 year old, began to object.

"Why send him to school again? Once he knows how to read and sign his name, it's enough. Let him learn to wield the hoe like me."

Margaret tried to explain:

"Education is becoming more and more important with the passing of years. Even cobblers and tailors go to school. It would be useful to have someone in the house who can write and keep accounts."

As soon as he learned to read, books became Johnny's passion. He would borrow some from Fr Lacqua and spend the hot summer afternoons reading in the shade of a tree. When out grazing, he would volunteer to look after his friends' cows, provided they allowed him to read in peace.

But he never became a bookworm. He liked to read, but he also liked to play and climb trees.

One afternoon he and his friends spotted a nest at the far end of the branch of a huge oak tree. He climbed the tree and saw that the eggs had hatched already. The little birds had to be taken immediately. The nest was at the very end of a long branch which was almost parallel to the ground.

John thought for a moment and then decided to go for it. He slithered along the branch which was becoming dangerously thinner and weaker. He stretched out his hand, caught the four young birds and put them into his shirt.

Now he had to go back along the branch which had bent under his weight. He proceeded cautiously, but suddenly his feet slipped and he found himself hanging only by his hands, at a frightening height. With a powerful twist he managed to hook his feet once again to the branch, but could do nothing else. All efforts to try and hoist his body face down onto the branch were in vain. He broke out into a cold sweat. His friends below were shouting and giving advice, but it didn't help much.

At last his arms could not hold any more and he let go. He slammed down on to the ground, and lay stunned for a few minutes. Then he managed to sit up.

"Are you hurt?"

"Let's hope not," he managed to answer.

"And the birds?"

"Here they are, alive." He opened his shirt and pulled them out. "But they have cost me a lot."

He tried to walk towards the house, but was shaking so much that he had to sit down again. When he managed to enter the house, he said to Joseph:

“I’m feeling awful, but don’t say anything to mother.”

A night in bed did him good, but the aches and pains remained for many days.

A Tiny Little Blackbird

John was fond of birds. He had taken a tiny blackbird from a nest and had reared it. He kept it in a cage of willow twigs and taught it to whistle. Whenever the bird saw John it would greet him and jump about happily in the cage, looking at him with its brilliant black eyes. It was a dear little bird.

But one morning, there was no whistle to greet John. A cat had broken into the cage and devoured the bird. Some blood-stained feathers were all that was left. Johnny burst into tears. Mother tried to console him: he could easily catch another bird if he wanted. But John continued to sob. He didn’t want another bird. He wanted just that one, his dear little friend that had been killed, which he would not see any more.

John remained sad for many days, and no one could pull him out of his melancholy. “At last,” writes Fr Lemoyne, “he stopped to reflect about the vanity of the things of this world, and took a resolution well beyond his age: he would never again attach his heart to earthly things.” He repeated the very same words years later, at the death of his best friend, and many other times.

It does us good to note that this was a resolution that John Bosco never managed to keep. Like us, he too had a heart of flesh, and he needed to love things great and small. He cried his heart out at the death of Fr Calosso and at the death of Louis Comollo, and when he first saw young boys behind prison bars. Of those who did harm to his boys he would say: “If it were not a sin, I would choke them with my own hands.” Every one of his boys had but one thing to say: “He loved me.” One of them, Louis Orione (now Blessed Louis Orione) went so far as to write: “I would walk on live coals to be able to see him once more and say thank you.”

The asceticism of the time taught that it was bad to attach one’s heart to creatures. Better not to take risks, better not to love too much. The more evangelical asceticism of Vatican II certainly warns us against making creatures into idols, but tells us that God has given us a heart so that we might love without fear. The God of the philosophers is cold and without feelings. But the God of the Bible is different: he loves and gets angry, he suffers and cries, he thrills with joy and smiles with tenderness.

His Land

At the age of nine, a boy shakes off the comfortable shell of his family and begins to look around. Johnny was no exception. He looked around and discovered his land: those hills so solemn, so calm, lined with vines, studded with mulberry trees; the maize fields, the hemp nodding in the breeze; cattle and sheep grazing; dark green thickets full of mystery. The peasants working the land were people who were patient and tenacious. They were people who were faithful to their land, into which they had sunk their roots like trees. They were not afraid to doff their hats to the priest and to God, and when they reached home and shut the door, they knew they were kings in their own house.

John Bosco was a great son of God but also a son of his land. He got his vocation from heaven, but it was nourished and shaped by the climate, the air, and by character of his

people. In his voice he would always bear the cadence of the dialect of the hills, and in his soul the traits of his people.

5

THE YOUNG ACROBAT

Johnny's ninth year was marked by the 'great dream': the crowd of boys, the Man who tells him, "Not with blows but with kindness," the Lady who promises, "In due time you will understand everything."

Despite the prudent advice of his grandmother, that dream cast a beacon of light on the future. The dream at the age of 9, writes Peter Stella, conditioned John Bosco's whole way of thinking and of acting. It conditioned also the conduct of his mother during the months and years that followed. She saw it as a manifestation of a higher will, a clear sign of her son's priestly vocation. Only thus can we understand the tenaciousness with which she guided Johnny on his long way to the altar.

In the dream John had seen a multitude of youngsters, and had been ordered to work for them. Why not start at once? He already knew a good number of boys: those who played with him, those who worked in the farms spread out over the countryside. Many were good boys, but others were vulgar and coarse.

In winter, many families would pass their evenings together in one of the more spacious stables. While the women spent their time spinning and the men smoked their pipes, John began to read aloud to his friends some of the books he had borrowed from Fr Lacqua: *Guerin the Wretched*, *The Story of Berthold*, *The Kings of France*. He was an immediate success. "I was invited by all to their stables to read," he comments. "People of every age and condition joined my little group of friends, happy to pass their time listening in rapt attention to the stories I was reading."

The 'best seller' of those evenings was *The Kings of France*. The book told of the wondrous stories of Charlemagne and his paladins: Orlando, Oliver, the traitor Ganelon, the bishop Turpin, the fantastic victories wrought by the magic sword Durendal. Don Bosco recalls: "Before and after the reading, all joined in making the sign of the cross and reciting a Hail Mary."

Bugles on the Hill

During the warm season things changed. Stories were not enough. John knew he had to do something different. But what could that be?

There was a fair on the nearby hill. The bugles of acrobats and tumblers could be heard. Johnny went over with his mother. The fair was a fluster of activity—buying, selling, shouting, yelling. All seemed to be enjoying themselves. There were crowds around the acrobats and conjurers. Tricks of sleight-of-hand kept the simple people spellbound. John mused: This could do, I must learn the secrets of tightrope walking and the tricks of the

magicians.

The big shows, however, were rare and far between, only at the annual feasts of the village. On those occasions one could see acrobats dancing on the tightrope and conjurers with their trick-box drawing pigeons from a spectator's cap, making someone disappear, cutting someone else in two and making him stand up hale and sound again. 'Painless tooth extractors' were also much admired.

But one needed a ticket for these shows, and that ticket cost two *soldi*.⁴ Where to get that? From mother?

"No," Margaret promptly replied. "Make your own arrangements, but don't ask me for money, I have none."

Johnny set about making his own arrangements. He caught little birds and sold them. He wove little baskets and made bird cages which he sold to passing vendors. He collected herbs and seeds and took them to the chemist at Castelnuovo.

He was now able to sit in the front rows at the shows. He studied every movement of the juggler's fingers, and observed the way the acrobat kept his balance on the rope. He also discovered that some of the tricks were not so subtle at all.

To extract a bad tooth, at that time, was a torture. The first anesthetic was tried out in America only in 1864. John assisted at a 'painless extraction of a tooth' in 1825! That was possible in virtue of a 'magic' powder. A peasant came forward with a very painful molar. The conjurer dipped his finger in the powder, and, to the blaring of trumpets and the roll of drums, deftly knocked out the tooth with the help of a spanner he had been concealing up his sleeve. The patient jumped up with a yell of anguish, but the trumpets blared loudly, while the conjurer embraced him shouting, "Thank you! Thank you! The experiment was a great success!" Johnny was one of the few to have seen the spanner, and he went away laughing.

At home John began practicing his first tricks. "I practiced for days on end till I learned them to perfection." Months of practice and determination and many falls were needed before he could make rabbits appear from hats and walk the tightrope. "You may not believe me," he writes, "but at the age of eleven I could juggle, turn somersaults, walk on my hands and dance on the tightrope."

A Show on the Grass

One summer Sunday evening John announced his first show. On a carpet of empty sacks he balanced pots and pans on the tip of his nose. From the mouth of a little spectator he pulled out dozens of coloured balls. He played wonders with a magic wand, and ended the show by walking on the rope to the applause of his friends.

The news spread from house to house. The public increased with every show: adults as well as children, boys as well as girls, and even some elderly persons. They were the same ones who used to hear him read in the stables in winter. Now they saw him drawing out a cascade of coins from the nose of an innocent peasant, changing water into wine, multiplying eggs, opening the bag of a woman and letting loose a live pigeon. They laughed and clapped their hands, delighted.

Even his brother Anthony would look on from afar, writes Fr Lemoyne, always careful to keep out of sight, appearing and disappearing behind some tree. Sometimes he

⁴ One *soldo* was five cents of a *lira*.

would tease the little juggler:

“Here is the lazy-bones! I break my back working and he goes about playing the charlatan!”

John was hurt. Sometimes he would stop the show and move further away till Anthony left him in peace. He was a ‘special’ kind of charlatan. Before the final item he would pull out the beads, kneel down and invite all to join in the rosary. At other times he would stand before all and repeat the sermon the priest had preached that morning at Mass. That was the ticket all had to pay. This would become John’s habit in life: he would give freely of himself, but he would always make sure to exact something in return, like the good Piedmontese that he was—not, of course, in terms of money for himself, but in terms of some commitment for God and for his poor boys.

Finally there would be the brilliant ‘finale’ on the rope with his home-made balancing rod, between moments of suspense and thunderous applause.

“After two or three hours of such entertainment,” John writes, “when I was quite exhausted, I would stop, make a short prayer, and all would go home happy.”

First Communion

In the year 1826, Easter fell on 26 March. On that day John received his First Communion in the parish church of Castelnuovo. Here is how he remembers the day:

My mother kept close to me the whole time. During Lent she had prepared me for confession: “My dear Johnny,” she told me, “God is about to give you a great gift. See that you prepare yourself well. Make a thorough confession, be sorry for the wrong you have done, and promise God that you will do better in future.” I promised everything. Whether I was faithful, God knows.

That morning she accompanied me to the holy table. She made the preparation and thanksgiving with me. She did not allow me to do any work that day, she wanted me to read and pray. Several times she said to me:

“Today is a great day for you. God has taken possession of your heart. Promise him to do all you can to be good the rest of your life. Go often to communion; be always sincere in confession; try to obey; be regular at catechism and the instructions; but for the love of God, shun like the plague those who indulge in bad conversation.”

I can say that I tried to practice the good counsels of my mother. I think that from that day on there was some change for the better in me, especially in obedience and being submissive to others, a thing for which I felt great repugnance.

The Blackest Winter of His Life

The winter that followed was for Johnny the blackest of his life.

His grandmother died, and Anthony, now 18, was more and more estranged from the family. His ‘bad moments’ became more frequent.

Towards the end of October, Margaret mentioned the possibility of sending John once again to Fr Lacqua’s school. He would be introduced to Latin. Anthony reacted strongly:

“Why Latin? What need do we have of Latin in the house? All we need is work.”

Margaret probably made mention of the possibility of John becoming a priest. Anthony thought that quite impossible: “To make a priest,”—John would hear this refrain again and again—“it takes more than ten thousand *lire*.” An impossible sum for a peasant family in those days.

Under one pretext or other, sometimes to help Aunt Marianna and at other times grandfather who lived at Capriglio, John managed to attend several classes of Fr Lacqua that winter of 1826-27. Anthony however took it very badly. One day the hostility burst out into the open. Don Bosco tells us about it himself:

First to my mother, and then to my brother Joseph, Anthony declared:

“Enough is enough. I’ll put an end to this schooling thing. I have grown big and strong without ever seeing any books.”

Overcome by distress and anger I said what I shouldn’t have:

“Of course: even our donkey has never gone to school, and he is bigger and stronger than you are.”

At these words Anthony became enraged, and with great difficulty I managed to escape from his blows and slaps. My mother was terribly distressed, and I full of tears.

Things dragged on like this for several days, and the tension grew. Anthony was very stubborn, but John would not allow himself to be bullied and was never at a loss for words. Then, because of a book that John had kept by his plate at table one evening, there was a new explosion. John did not manage to escape this time, and was thoroughly beaten up by his brother.

On the following morning Margaret said those sad words to John: “It is better you go away from home for some time.”

Thus on a misty February morning, John stumbled into the Moglia farm, and because of his tears was accepted as a stable boy.

6

THREE YEARS AT THE FARM AND ONE AT THE RECTORY

A few days after hiring John, Louis Moglia confided to his wife Dorothy:
“I think we made a good deal when we took in that boy.”

John had settled into the work at once, and had shown himself available and obedient. He was in charge of the stable. The heaviest part of the job was to clean the stable every morning, put in fresh straw, remove the manure and take it out to the dung-heap. He then had to groom the animals, take them to the watering trough, fill the manger with hay, and milk the cows.

John did not have to do all this alone, of course. There was a cowherd in charge, and he had to do whatever the man assigned him.

John proved good at prayer time in the evening too, and Mrs Moglia would occasionally ask him to lead the rosary.

For sleeping, the Moglias had given him a nice little room with a good bed, much better than he ever had at Becchi, where he had to share his room with Joseph, and perhaps also with Anthony. After a few nights, John dared to light a candle and read one of Fr Lacqua's books for some time. No one said anything, so he continued doing so.

On Saturday evening, he asked to be allowed to go early the next morning to Moncucco. He came back for breakfast, and then accompanied Mr Moglia and the whole family to the High Mass at 10.00 a.m.

Since he asked the same strange permission every Saturday, Mrs Moglia became curious to know where he was going. She was responsible for him before his mother. She reached Moncucco before dawn and watched from the house of a friend. She saw John arrive and enter church. She saw him go to confession, hear the first Mass and receive communion.

In those years communion was not received often. During the High Mass which was attended by most of the people, communion was not distributed at all. Anyone who wanted to receive communion had to participate at the Low Mass which the parish priest celebrated very early.

Dorothy joined him on his way back to the house. “From now on, John,” she told him, “if you want to go for the first Mass, feel free to do so. You don't need to ask permission.”

Making his confession to Fr Cottino, John told him of his desire to become a priest and of all the difficulties along the way. Fr Cottino exhorted him to come to confession and communion every week, to spend some time in prayer every day, and to put all his trust in God. If it was God's will, he would provide. He also encouraged him not to stop reading. If it could be fitted in with his duties, he could also give him some lessons in Latin. In the

meanwhile he could lend him some books.

Two Seeds and Four Ears of Corn

Old Joseph, Mr Moglia's uncle, was returning from the fields one day, hoe on his shoulder and dripping with sweat. It was noon and from the belfry of Moncucco came the sound of the bell. The old man, dead tired, sat on some hay trying to catch his breath. A little way off he saw John on the hay too, but kneeling. He was reciting the Angelus, as his mother Margaret had taught him to do.

Joseph, half serious, half joking mumbled:

"*Bravo!* The owners wear themselves out from morning to night till they drop dead of exhaustion. But the boy takes it easy and spends his time praying."

John replied in the same vein:

"When it is time to work, uncle Joe, you know I never shirk. But my mother taught me that when we pray, two seeds yield four ears of corn, and if we do not pray, four seeds will give us only two ears of corn. It would do you good to pray too."

"*Evviva!*" laughed the old man, "Now we have also a preacher in the house."

In summer, the stable boys had to take the cows out to pasture. They had to watch lest they trespassed into the fields of others, ate wet grass or broke their horns. Sitting under a tree while the cattle grazed, John found some time for his books too. Louis Moglia did not complain, but was curious:

"Why do you read so much?"

"Because I want to become a priest."

"But don't you know that to study, nowadays, you need nine or ten thousand *lire*? Where will you find all that money?"

"If it is God's will, someone will provide."

Anna too used to come out sometimes into the fields to play. She was the first daughter of the Moglias, and was 8 years old. She saw John intent on his books instead of taking interest in her games, and resented it:

"Oh, stop all that reading, John."

"But I want to become a priest, and will have to preach and hear confessions."

"Yes, a priest!" teased the girl. "You'll be tending cows all your life."

One day John told her very seriously:

"Anna, you are pulling my leg now, but one day you'll come to me for confession."

Anna eventually married and settled in Moriondo. She often narrated this episode to her children. Four or five times a year she used to visit the Oratory at Valdocco, to make her confession to Don Bosco. He always received her like a dear sister.

When winter came, the Moglias sometimes allowed John to attend Fr Cottino's classes. The lessons were too few and far between, however, to produce any tangible effect.

But the friendship of the parish priest helped him get friendly with the youngsters of Moncucco. The entrance hall of the presbytery, which served as a classroom during the week, would be transformed on Sundays into a little oratory. John would perform his magic tricks, read out the more exciting pages of sacred history, and help his young friends to pray.

When the weather turned bad and it was not possible to go to Moncucco, some boys living on the nearby farms would visit him at the Moglia's. John would take them to the hayloft, entertain them and teach them catechism.

John stayed at the Moglia farm almost three full years, from February 1827 to November 1829. During these years he could not study. But were they also useless as far as his God-given mission was concerned?

Peter Stella recalls an episode which at first sight is almost insignificant. “One day... Dorothy Moglia and her brother-in-law, John Moglia, found John kneeling, book in hand and eyes closed, his face turned up towards heaven, completely absorbed in reflection. They had to shake him to bring him to his senses.” Fr Stella concludes: “This period of time, then, was not a useless hiatus for John. His sense of God and prayerful contemplation took deeper root as he conversed with God amid the solitude of his labours in the field. It was a period of expectant waiting, focused on God and human beings and filled with meditation and supplication.”⁵

In 1827, at Milan, Alessandro Manzoni published the first edition of his *Promessi Sposi*. In 1828, at Recanati, Giacomo Leopardi began to compose his *Idilli*. In 1829, at Paris, Gioacchino Rossini staged the premiere of his masterpiece, *Guglielmo Tell*. During those three years, John Bosco was grooming cows on a farm lost in the hills of Monferrato. But he had begun to converse with God.

Uncle Michael

John’s stay at the Moglia farm was a painful thorn in the heart of Mamma Margaret. She must have poured out her heart to her brother Michael who, towards the end of the contract period (11 November 1829), went to see his nephew on the farm. He found him leading the cows out of the stable.

“So, Johnny, are you happy to be here?”

“No. They treat me very well. But I want to study. Years are slipping by. I am already 14, and have made no progress.”

“Take the cows back to the stable and go back to Becchi. I will explain things to the Moglias. I have to go to Chieri, but this evening I’ll come to see you and we will work out something.”

John bundled up his few things and said goodbye to Mr and Mrs Moglia, uncle Joseph, Theresa and Anna. They had become friends and would stay so for life.

He took off for Becchi. Mamma Margaret saw him from afar and hurried out to meet him.

“Anthony is at home. Hide somewhere till uncle Michael comes. If Anthony sees you he will suspect something, and God knows what might happen.”

John hid himself in a ditch behind the hedge. So the struggle was not over yet. He had to be prepared to fight on.

Uncle Michael arrived quite late and brought his half-frozen nephew into the house. The atmosphere was tense but there was no open hostility. Anthony was 21 now and set on starting his own family. Upon being assured that John’s upkeep and studies would not fall on his shoulders, he did not raise any objections.

Michael contacted the priests at Castelnuovo and Buttigliera, trying to find a place for his nephew with them, but found difficulties everywhere. But help came from an unexpected quarter.

⁵ P. Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, 2nd rev. ed., tr. J. Drury (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1985) 16-17.

Four Cents for a Sermon

In the month of September 1829, Fr John Melchior Calosso was assigned as chaplain to the church of Morialdo. He was in his seventies. Because of his indifferent health he had given up his post as parish priest at Bruino. He was a venerable old priest, much esteemed for his pastoral experience.

In November there was a 'mission' at Buttigliera. John went and Fr Calosso too was present. On his way back home, the elderly priest spotted this boy in his early teens, walking all by himself.

"Where are you from, my son?"

"From Becchi, Father. I've been to the mission."

"God knows what you have made of all those Latin quotations," said the priest smiling and shaking his white head. "I'm sure your mother could have given you a more appropriate sermon."

"True, Father, my mother often gives nice little sermons. But I think I understood also what the missionaries said."

"If you tell me four words of today's sermon, I'll give you four cents."

John quietly began, and gave the chaplain the whole sermon, word for word, as if he were reading from a book.

Fr Calosso, hiding his emotion, simply asked:

"What's your name?"

"John Bosco. My father died when I was a child."

"How much have you studied?"

"I learnt to read and write from Fr Lacqua at Capriglio. I would love to continue studying, but my eldest brother is against it, and the priests at Castelnuovo and Buttigliera have no time to help me."

"And why would you like to study?"

"To become a priest."

"Tell your mother to come to see me at Morialdo. I might be able to help you, old as I am."

Margaret, sitting in front of the priest, heard these words:

"Your son has a prodigious memory. He must begin to study immediately, without wasting time. I am an old man, but I will do whatever I can to help him."

They agreed that John would stay with the chaplain and study, returning home only to sleep. When he was needed at home, however, he would stay and help.

At one stroke John obtained what he had been missing for years: someone he could trust as a father, a sense of security, and confidence.

"I put myself immediately into the hands of Fr Calosso," he wrote. "I told him everything about myself, my every word and thought. I began to understand what it meant to have a stable guide, a faithful friend of the soul, which up to that moment I had not been fortunate to have. Among other things he forbade me a penance which was not adapted to my age. He encouraged me to go frequently to confession and communion, and he taught me to do every day a short meditation, or better some spiritual reading."⁶

⁶ At Bruino, Fr. Calosso had revived a 'Sodality of Mary Help of Christians.' In the parish church there was even an altar dedicated to the Madonna under this title. Could it be that it was from Fr. Calosso that John

“With Him All Hope Died”

In September 1830 (probably to avoid any further tension with Anthony) John went to stay with Fr Calosso even at night. He would go home only once a week to have his clothes changed.

He progressed rapidly in his studies. Don Bosco would refer later to those days with words full of enthusiasm: “It would be difficult to express how happy I felt. I loved Fr Calosso like a father, and I served him willingly in any way I could. That saintly man showed me much affection and more than once repeated: ‘Do not worry about your future. As long as I live you will not want for anything. And if I die, you will be provided for.’ I was very happy. But an unexpected disaster put an end to all my hopes.”

One morning in November 1829, while John was at home to change his linen, someone came running to tell him that Fr Calosso had suddenly fallen ill.

“I did not run, I flew,” Don Bosco remembers. Fr Calosso had suffered a heart attack. He recognized John, but could not speak. He pointed out to the key of a drawer, indicating that it was for him and no one else.

That was all. The boy could only cry his heart out over the dead body of his second father. “With him,” he writes, “all my hopes died.”

Humanly speaking, there was still one hope left: the key. In that drawer there were six thousand *lire*. From the signs Fr Calosso had made, it was clear that the money was for John and for his future. Some of those who had been assisting the dying priest had no doubt about this. But others said that the signs of a dying man did not mean much. Only a regular will gave undisputed right to anything.

The nephews of Fr Calosso acted as honest people would. They listened to everything and then said to John:

“It seems that uncle wanted you to have this money. Take whatever you want.”

John thought for a while and then said:

“I don’t want anything.”

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco sums up this even in a single sentence: “When the nephews of Fr Calosso came I gave them the key and everything else.” It was an expeditious gesture that cut short all discussion. As a priest, he would take as his motto a phrase from the Bible to the same effect: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle.*” Give me souls, I don’t care for the rest.

John was alone once again. He was 15 years old, and was left without a master, without money and without plans for the future. “I wept disconsolately,” he writes.

Bosco heard for the first time about the Madonna, ‘Help of Christians’?

7

THE ROAD TO CASTELNUOVO

But life had to go on.

To avoid further clashes with Anthony, Margaret decided to divide the patrimony. A good excuse was available: Anthony intended to marry Anna Rosso, a girl of Castelnuovo, on 21 March 1831.

The fields were divided. The house of Becchi was shared. Anthony would get the half looking east with the exterior staircase leading to the upper floor; Margaret, Joseph and John would go on living in the other half.

In December, John began frequenting the public school at Castelnuovo. Besides the primary school, the municipality was offering a five-year Latin course. But the students were few, so they were all in one classroom with a single professor, Fr Emmanuel Virano.

Lunch Out of a Tiffin Box

John was by now a strong 15 year old, and so at first he thought nothing of the five kilometres separating Becchi from Castelnuovo. He left home with a slice of bread in the morning. After three hours and a half hours of class he returned home for lunch. Then he walked back to school for the afternoon session of three hours, and returned in the evening. That made 20 kilometers every day. It was a mad rhythm that, after a few days, was promptly modified.

Uncle Michael found part-time lodgings for him with John Roberto, tailor and musician. John used to have his lunch at Roberto's, eating out of his tiffin box.

But five kilometers in the morning and five in the evening are no joke, especially in winter. John walked with a will, and whenever the path was not a muddy swamp or slippery with ice, like every good farmer he would take off his shoes and carry them. Wind and rain, sun and dust were his traveling companions for many days.

But there were evenings when his courage failed in the face of a blizzard. Then he would ask Mr Roberto to allow him to sleep under the stairs. Supper did not matter.

Margaret was aware that John's health could be adversely affected by all that walking in the winter, and made a deal with the tailor. For a reasonable sum, payable also in kind, he was ready to give John boarding and lodging: hot soup at midday and in the evening, and a place to sleep under the stairs. His mother would provide the bread.

She personally accompanied John to Castelnuovo, carrying a bag with the few things needed by a boy of 15. She recommended him to Mr Roberto, asking him to keep an eye on her son and tweak his ears if necessary. And to John she said: "Be devoted to Our Lady. She will help you grow up well."

At school, John found himself with boys of 10 or 11. His cultural preparation up to now had been rather modest. With his ill-fitting coat and coarse shoes he soon became the butt of all the jokes. His companions nicknamed him ‘the cowherd of Becchi.’

Used to being adored by the boys of Morialdo and Moncucco, John suffered deeply. He threw himself into his studies, helped and aided by his teacher. Fr Virano was a capable teacher and a kind man. Seeing the good will of his new student, he took him aside and in a short time helped him make remarkable progress.

When John wrote an excellent essay on the biblical figure of Eleazar, Fr Virano read it out to the class and concluded:

“A boy who writes essays like this can wear whatever shoes he wants. What counts in life is the head, not the shoes.”

Castelnuovo d’Asti stands on a hill, some 20 kilometres from Turin. At the top of the hill are the ruins of a castle, and at the highest point a church dedicated to Our Lady. John often climbed there, praying to Our Lady “that he might grow up well.”

The town was made up of about 600 families, amounting to some 3000 persons.

Mamma Margaret came from Becchi every week. She brought two large loaves of bread which had to last through the week. She came personally because she wanted to see for herself how her son was getting on. She knew that among his school companions there were scoundrels who could easily lead him astray.

Don Bosco recalls: “That year some of my companions tried to tempt me into danger. They wanted to take me gambling during school hours. When I said I had no money, they suggested stealing it from my landlord or even my mother. One of them said: ‘My dear chap, it’s time you woke up. You must learn to live in the world.’ I well remember what my reply was: ‘My mother loves me dearly. I have no intention to start hurting her now.’”

Schools, in those years, were explicitly religious. The first half hour every morning was given to catechism. The evening class on Saturdays was dedicated to Christian instruction, and ended with the recital of the Litanies of Our Lady. Teachers were expected to give not only the possibility but also the facility of attending Mass daily and of making a monthly confession.

“Only Donkeys at Becchi”

By April John had caught up well with his studies, when disaster struck again. Fr Virano was nominated parish priest of Mondonio, and had to leave the school in the hands of Fr Nicholas Moglia.

Fr Nicholas was pious and charitable, but he was 75. He found it impossible to control the five classes of the school. Once in a while he would get furious and threaten to use the cane; the rest of the time he would sit helpless before the chaos.

He blamed the bigger boys for the situation. He had a particular aversion for biggest of them all, ‘the cowherd from Becchi,’ even though John himself suffered keenly at the disorder. Fr. Nicholas never missed an occasion to humiliate the boy:

“What can you understand of Latin? Becchi produces only donkeys. Excellent donkeys, true, but donkeys all the same. Go look for mushrooms, go search for nests, forget about Latin.”

His companions, who had begun to appreciate him under the influence of Fr Virano, now went wild once more, and John's sad days began again.

But one fine day he wanted to have his revenge.

Fr Moglia had assigned a Latin exercise in class. John, who was in class one, asked if he could do the test for class three.

"Who do you think you are? Go straight back to your seat and stop playing the ass."

But John insisted, and at last Fr Moglia gave in.

"Do what you like, but don't expect me to read your foolish translation."

The boy swallowed this insult and got to work. It was difficult, but he felt he could do it. He was one of the first to finish. The teacher took the paper and put it aside.

"Please, Father. Read it and tell me my mistakes."

"Go to your place and stop bothering me."

John, respectful but stubborn, did not give up.

"I am not asking you much, only that you read it."

Fr Moglia read it. The translation was good, so good that it made him lose his patience again:

"I told you that you were good for nothing. You have copied this translation, every word of it."

"And from whom, please, Father?" Those who sat near him were still biting their pens in search of inspiration.

"This is an impertinence!" shouted the priest. "Go back to your place and thank God I am not expelling you from school."

Arteriosclerosis was deadly even in those days, and so were prejudices.

The last months of that school year were months of humiliation for John. In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco does not mention Fr Moglia by name. He always had great respect for old people. But he does make mention of "one who, incapable of keeping discipline, almost scattered to the wind all that Fr Virano had taught me in the preceding months."

A Black Cassock Sets You Apart

There was another thorn in John's side during those months. He had come to know two wonderful priests, Fr Calosso and Fr Virano. He could not understand why all the others were so different. "Often I would meet our parish priest and his assistant on the road. I would greet them from a distance and bow to them as they passed. In their distant and courteous manner they would return my greeting and go on their way."

The black cassock seemed to 'cut them off' from the people. In the seminaries of the time, students were taught the behaviour appropriate to ecclesiastics: self-restraint, gravity and detachment.

"It made me very sad. I used to tell my friends: 'If I ever become a priest, I'll do just the contrary. I'll be the first to approach the young, befriend them with kind words and give them good advice.'"

John could not imagine that this decision would bring about a silent revolution among priests in the next 80 years. Seminaries would come to recognize that he was right, and would train new generations of priests not to 'a gravity that keeps distances' but to the smiling goodness that does away with them.

At Morialdo, John used to spend his free time chatting with Fr Calosso. The old

priest would recall his past and John would daydream about his future. He would then go to clean the church, put order in the kitchen and rummage about the library.

Here at Castelnuovo, the priests had no time for him. How was he to spend his free time?

His first hobby was music. Mr Roberto was the main singer in the parish choir and had a spinet at home. John went with him frequently to the choir, and Mr Robert helped him learn first the spinet and then the organ.

But Roberto's real occupation was tailoring, so John's second hobby was to sit by him and learn how to sew buttons, make hems, stitch handkerchiefs and cut waistcoats. He learnt so well that Roberto asked him to forget school and become his assistant.

In April Fr Moglia's harassment began again, and chaos continued to reign in school. John became convinced that he was wasting his time. After discussing all this with his mother, he apprenticed himself to the blacksmith Evasio Savio. He learnt how to wield hammer and file and to work at the forge.

Johnny Bosco had no way of foreseeing that all these trades would one day come in handy for opening workshops for poor boys in the suburbs of Turin. His only preoccupation at the time was to earn some money, which he would soon need. With his mother Margaret, he had decided to take a risky but decisive step the following year: schooling at Chieri.

8

“I HAVE TO STUDY”

After bundling up his things and saying goodbye to Mr Roberto, John did not return to Becchi. He went to Sussambrino, a farm where his brother Joseph worked as a sharecropper together with Joseph Febraro. Margaret too had left Becchi to be with her son.

Those summer months were a time of intense study. John did not want to find himself handicapped at Chieri.

But neither did he want to be a burden on his brother. So he helped in the fields, mended tools on a rudimentary forge, and took the cows out to pasture. This last detail was the one he liked best because it gave him an opportunity to read.

Rose Febraro, daughter of Joseph Febraro, tells us that John was so taken up with his books that he would often not notice the cows straying. It was she, then a girl of 10, who would run after them and bring them back before the neighbours began complaining.

“Your cows were feeding on the millet.”

“Thank you, Rose.”

She would look at him for some time.

“Why do you take them out to pasture if you don’t look after them?” she would ask.

“I have to study, Rose. Sometimes I forget.”

“Is it true you want to become a priest?”

“Yes.”

“Then, if you want, I’ll look after your cows together with mine.”

John would thank her and plunge back into his books.

A Dream That Recurs

At Castelnuovo, John had made friends with a school companion, Joseph Turco. Joseph’s father owned the Renenta farm bordering on the Sussambrino. He was a good man and a good Christian. He would sometimes pass by and see John studying.

“Keep it up John, this time you’ll make it.”

“Thanks, Mr Turco. I hope so. Sometimes I am afraid my mother won’t be able to pay for me at Chieri.”

“God is there. If he wants, He will pave the way.”

“That’s true, but I can’t help being worried at times.”

He said these words with a sad smile. And who could blame him after all the setbacks he had suffered?

But one day, Mr Turco and his son saw him running up to them, excited and happy:

“Good news!” John shouted. “Last night I had a dream. I’ll definitely become a priest and I will work for many boys.”

“But it’s only a dream,” said Mr Turco, perplexed.

“It’s hard for you to understand, I know. But for me it’s enough. This time I know I’ll make it.”

During the night, he had seen once again the valley of the dream of nine. He had seen the flock and the shining Lady who wanted to entrust it to him. He had heard again those words: “Make yourself humble, strong and robust, and in due time you will understand.”

In the summer, the village of Montafia celebrated the feast of its patron saint. The village was not far, and John had come to know there would be a grease pole with prizes, among them a purse of 20 *lire*.

“That would be useful,” thought John, and set out for the fair.

The pole was very high, smooth and well-greased. All the young men of the village were eyeing the ring at the top, with its salami, bottles of wine, the purse and other goodies. Every now and then, egged on by the shouts of the crowd, someone would spit on his hands and attempt the climb. They all began with enthusiasm, but by the time they were halfway they would be out of breath, and would slide down to the whistles and boos of the crowd.

John had taken his time to study the whole affair. He suddenly stepped forward, spat on his hands and began to climb slowly and calmly. Every now and then he would sit on his heels and recover his breath. The crowd below shouted impatiently, waiting for him to slide down like the others. But John badly needed the money. At Moncucco, he had to work a whole year to earn 15 *lire*. Here, a few metres above his head, were 20 *lire* waiting for him. He was ready to spend the whole day on that pole if necessary.

Inching his way up calmly, he reached the place where the pole was becoming thinner. Here he rested again before the last strokes. A hush fell upon the crowd. John stretched out his hand, took the purse with the 20 *lire* and held it with his teeth. Then he took a salami and a kerchief and came sliding down.

Begging is Repugnant

The 20 *lire* off the grease pole were of course not quite enough for the shift to Chieri. He needed clothes, shoes and books, and also money for his boarding and lodging. The Sussambrino was certainly not a gold mine. So in October John said to his mother:

“Mamma, if you agree, I’ll take two bags and make a collection from the families around.”

It was a hard blow to his self-love. Don Bosco would become the greatest ‘beggar’ of the nineteenth century, but it never came easy to him. That October marked the very first time he overcame his repugnance and set out to beg.

Morialdo was an odd collection of little hamlets and isolated farms. John went from house to house. He would knock at the door and say:

“I am Margaret Bosco’s son. I am going to Chieri to study for the priesthood. My mother is poor. Please help me if you can.”

Everybody knew him. They had enjoyed his shows, they had heard him repeat the sermons he had heard in church, and they liked him. But few were well-to-do. They gave him what they could: eggs, maize, a few measures of wheat...

A courageous woman from Becchi went to Castelnuovo to see Fr Dassano, the

parish priest. She told him it was a shame not to help such a good boy and compel him to go begging.

Fr Dassano was ignorant of the whole affair. He thought that in November John would resume his studies at Castelnuovo. After making more inquiries, he collected a small sum of money and sent it to Margaret. He also told her to contact Lucy Matta, a widow who was about to settle in Chieri where her son would also be studying.

That was a good piece of information. Margaret spoke to the woman and they agreed that John would lodge with her at Chieri for a fee of 21 *lire* per month. Margaret could not pay the whole amount in cash, but undertook to supply flour and wine. John on his part undertook several domestic chores: drawing water, getting wood for the fireplace and the stove, hanging out the washing...

Towards the end of October, John went to the parish priest of Castelnuovo to obtain his *Admittatur*. No one could be admitted to the public schools without this certificate of good conduct from the parish priest. The parish priest also undertook to keep an eye on the candidate during the holidays and to report any bad behaviour.

This provision had been made by King Charles Felix, shortly before his death in 1831. The liberals had named him Charles the Fierce.⁷

History Had Marched On

While John Bosco was living out the difficult years of his childhood on the hills of Castelnuovo, history was marching on. Once again, it is not our intention to give an exhaustive picture of Italian history. But it is indispensable to trace a few lines of this history, because it was the background against which John Bosco's life unfolded. And it was from this history that he drew his impressions, ideas and sensibilities.

Against the rigid restoration of the 'pig-tailed' aristocracy, a number of secret societies had sprung up all over Italy between the years 1815-1820, fomenting rebellion and revolution.

In January 1820, a spark was ignited in Spain. At Cadiz, a military revolt had compelled Ferdinand VII to put an end to absolutism and grant a constitution—a law that guaranteed every citizen the basic liberties and the right to vote. The king bound himself under oath to honour this constitution.

The spark in Spain burst into a fire in Italy six months later. In the kingdom of the Two Sicilies, a small cavalry regiment revolted to the slogan of "Long live liberty and the constitution." In order to save his throne, within eight days Ferdinand of Naples granted the constitution of Cadiz and swore on the gospels to honour it.

On 10 March 1821 (John Bosco was 6), the military revolt spread to Piedmont under the leadership of Count Santorre di Santarosa. The town of Alessandria lowered the blue Savoy flag and hoisted the tricolour, reminding people of the French Revolution and its proclamation of human rights. The garrisons of Pinerolo and Vercelli joined the revolt, and from Fossano, a colonel marched on Turin at the head of his regiment.

King Victor Emmanuel rushed in alarm from Moncalieri to Turin, called a meeting of his royal council, and was advised to grant the constitution if he wanted to save his throne. He was about to do it when Austria decided to intervene in Italy "to re-establish order."

⁷ *Carlo Feroce* in Italian, a play on *Carlo Felice*.

Overwhelmed by the turn of events, Victor Emmanuel renounced the throne in favour of his brother Charles Felix. Since Charles Felix was at his father-in-law's at Modena, he named the young prince Charles Albert as regent. Charles Albert was only 23 years old.

“Tell the Prince ...”

Charles Albert had been in touch with Santarosa and shared some of his ideas, but had never been able to make up his mind between absolutism and liberalism. He was already giving indications of the vacillating character that would earn him the nickname of *Re Tentenna* (King Shilly-Shally). But there was one thing he wanted at all costs: to preserve his right to the throne, against the Austrians on one side and the liberals on the other.

Confronted by a huge crowd in front of the Carignano Palace clamouring for a constitution (though many of them had no idea of what it was), Charles Albert gave in. He signed the Constitution of Cadiz on 13 March, and two days later pledged his allegiance to it under oath. He set up a new government with Santarosa as Minister of War.

When Charles Felix got the news at Modena, he was furious. Turning to Chevalier Costa who had brought the letter, he shouted: “Tell the prince that if there is still a drop of royal blood in his veins, he should leave immediately for Novara and await my orders there.”

Charles Albert seemed inclined to resist at first, when news came from Naples that an Austrian army had defeated the liberals, parliament had been dissolved, and the constitutional regime abolished. The young prince withdrew to Novara. There he renounced his regency, invited all to submit to the authority of the king, and went into exile in Florence.

The return of Charles Felix to Piedmont was preceded by an Austrian army which routed Santarosa's volunteers and ‘restored order.’ 70 leaders of the revolt were condemned to death (though 68 of them had already escaped to Switzerland and France), 300 officers and 300 civil servants were removed from office, and the universities of Turin and Genoa were closed for a year. “All those who have frequented the university are corrupt,” wrote Charles Felix to his brother in exile. “Those who are educated are bad, those who are ignorant are good.”

‘The uprisings of 1821,’ as history books would call them, were events that involved only the bourgeoisie or the middle classes. The masses of the peasants and the workers remained completely indifferent and at times even hostile. The middle classes, consisting of merchants, entrepreneurs, industrialists, civil servants and the military, were hoping to wrest power from the old aristocracy by means of a liberal revolution. The reforms advocated (and sanctioned by the Constitution of Cadiz) were neither popular nor democratic. The right to vote was conceded only to those who owned a certain amount of property. Only these could send their representatives to parliament; naturally, only their own interests were looked after. Like the French Revolution, the liberal revolution was ready to abolish all privileges except the one conferred by wealth.

“King by the Grace of God and of No One Else”

Charles Felix entered Turin only in October 1821. By today's standards, he was a most extraordinary figure. He had never wanted to be king. He loved a life of retirement and was deeply religious. He accepted the throne solely as a 'duty of conscience.'

But once he had accepted, he would not contemplate any compromise with his rigidly absolutist ideas. He felt himself king "by the grace of God and of no one else." He was resolved to govern his people in the manner of a strict father governing a family of wayward children. No idea was further from his mind than that of the 'sovereignty of the people' enunciated by the Illuminists of the eighteenth century and proclaimed by the French Revolution. *He* was king, not the people.

He gave the clergy the monopoly of education. Censorship of books was in the hands of bishops and the curia of Turin. He imposed a severe regimen in the schools, which included daily teaching of catechism and prayers before and after class. The schools that John would frequent at Chieri (four years of public school and six in the seminary), the books he would read, the timetables he would follow, the institutions in which he would live, all bore the stamp of Charles Felix.

The king pushed the Jews back into ghettos and deprived them of the rights granted by the Napoleonic Code. He approved new regulations for the military which established, among other things, that a soldier guilty of seditious speeches be subjected "from one hundred to a maximum of one hundred and twenty strokes of the cane, to be administered in two sessions with a day of rest in between." He wanted that death sentences be salutary lessons to all hotheads, and so he approved "the application of red hot tongs" to all those condemned to death. It was this last detail that earned him the nickname of Charles the Fierce.

Charles Felix never understood what an anonymous poster (drawn up by Brofferio and Durando) tried to tell him from the walls of Turin: "Your Majesty, your subjects are not things, they are persons." For him they were merely subjects, people who had to be kept on the 'right path' with a strong arm. Massimo D'Azeglio defined his reign of ten years as a despotism full of good intentions.

Charles Felix died in April 1831, leaving his throne to that Charles Albert whom he had insisted on calling a "degenerate shoot of our family." Just before his death, he received disturbing news from Modena, Parma and Bologna. The liberals had again revolted once again, as they had done a year before at Paris. Austria had to send in its army to quell the revolt sparked by an industrialist, Cyrus Menotti, and a general, Charles Zucchi. There was fear of an invasion of Savoy by volunteers gathered in Lyons, but they had been dispersed by the French police.

"Long and Sad like Lent"

Charles Albert, 33, succeeded Charles Felix on the throne of Turin. Charles Albert had redeemed his name before the absolutists and reactionaries by fighting in Spain against the liberals. These last in turn called him 'traitor' and 'perjurer' in their writings.

He was pale tall man. The Piedmontese populace lost no time in dubbing him 'long and sad as Lent.' To prove that he was no longer the prince who had signed the constitution, in the year 1833 he had seven followers of Mazzini shot at Alessandria and twelve at Genoa, and condemned about seventy more to jail.

But despite these attempts to halt the progress of history, Piedmont and Italy had

changed. The bourgeoisie had become very important, and though it had not yet grasped the meaning of 'democratic freedom,' it understood the need for 'commercial freedom' to get the peninsula out of the dumps.

So canals were dug and swamps were reclaimed in Piedmont. Forests were cleared in the Langhe and mulberry plantations, hemp and vineyards took over. The cultivation of the potato became widespread, finally putting an end to the terrible famines in years of drought. Some thirty odd iron mines were opened; the ceramic industry thrived. Bra became a tanning center and Cuneo the premier European market for silk cocoons. As soon as Charles Albert lowered octroi fees, the Biella region became the seat of a flourishing wool industry: spinning mills mushroomed and the first Merino sheep made their appearance.

Soon the need was felt for new roads and railways. The political mentality also began to change inexorably.

In the last months of 1831, Mazzini founded the 'Young Italy' society at Marseilles. The idea began to spread of Italy as a 'nation state,' as a historical unit endowed with its own cultural and popular traditions, with the right to liberty and to independence. Italians began to realize that they had a common destiny, and that they had to become shapers of this destiny, either together with or in place of the kings, who up to now had considered the people as a herd of incompetent minors.

In 1832 Turin saw the publication of *Le mie prigioni* by Silvio Pellico. It was a book that shook Italy and opened up new trends of thought. Austria, up to then considered as the guardian of public order and of social harmony, lost face. In the mild and sad pages of this author, who had spent ten years in the imperial prisons of Austria, the true face of a cruel and oppressive foreign dictatorship was revealed.

9

GREEN YEARS AT CHERI

4 November 1831 was a beautiful sunny day. John Bosco walked the whole way to Chieri together with John Filippello, a companion of his own age. Along the way, John spoke of the studies that lay ahead, shared some of his past experiences and the many failed attempts. Filippello, a simple lad, asked:

“You are only just going to enter school, and you know so much already? Soon you’ll become a parish priest.”

John became serious and said:

“Do you know what it means to be a parish priest? A parish priest has very weighty obligations. When he gets up from table at lunch or supper, he must think: I have eaten, but have all my parishioners? Whatever he has, he must share with the poor. My dear Filippello, I will never agree to be a parish priest. I want to give my whole life to help poor boys.”

As those two lads were walking along speaking of hunger and of the poor, 250 kilometres away at Lyons the silk workers were beginning to revolt. They took to the streets in thousands, protesting against miserable salaries and inhuman hours of work, reaching up to 18 hours in some places. The uprising would be quelled by troops after days of fighting in the streets. More than a thousand would lose their lives.

In the following year a revolt broke out at Paris, resulting in more than 800 casualties. In the spring of 1834, the workers of Lyons and Paris rose up together with the slogan, “Live working or die fighting.” This time cannons were used against them.

John knew nothing of all this. With the local papers under rigid censure, not a piece of news entered the Piedmontese kingdom. John would hear every now and then about ‘liberal movements.’ A conspiracy was uncovered in Turin, work of ‘The Knights of Liberty’ led by Brofferio and Bersani. Charles Albert put it down strongly, and Bersani spent seven years in the prison of Fenestrelle. The ‘revolution’ whispered about every now and then was the one that advocated a ‘constitution’ for Italy and liberation from Austria. This movement would soon be known as the *Risorgimento*.

But he did not even suspect the idea of another revolution, more profound and radical, which was already changing northern Europe and was about to enter Italy. It was the ‘Industrial Revolution,’ closely tied to the ‘Workers’ Question.’ John would begin to see its first dramatic effects ten years later, when he entered Turin as a priest.

Sticking Out Like a Sore Thumb

“My lodgings were at Lucy Matta’s,” writes Don Bosco. “She was a widow with an only son. She had come to town to look after him.”

Margaret arrived in Chieri shortly after John. A friend had carted for her two sacks

of wheat. She went to see the widow.

“This is my son,” she said, “and here is the payment for his board and lodge. I’ve done my part. My son will do his. I hope he will not disappoint you.”

Don Bosco continues:

The first person I came to know was Fr Placid Valimberti of happy memory. He gave me precious advice, took me to the prefect of the school, and introduced me to the professors. As the studies I had done up to then had been rather haphazard, I was advised to join class six.

The teacher, Fr Valerian Pugnetti, was very good to me. He took special care of me in class and invited me to his home. Seeing my age and good will, he did all he could to help me.

I was 16 years old and so much bigger than all my companions that I stuck out like a sore thumb. Anxious to get out of this position, I appeared for an examination after two months in this class, and was promoted to the fifth.⁸

I was happy to be in this class because the teacher was dear Fr Valimberti. After two more months, since I came out first in my class in several tests, I was, by way of exception, promoted to the fourth.

The professor here was Vincent Cima, a stern disciplinarian. On seeing a boy almost as big as himself enter the class half way through the year, he said jokingly:

“This one here is either a blockhead or a great talent.”

Taken aback by his severe presence, I said:

“Something in between. I am a poor boy eager to do my duty and make some progress in my studies.”

He liked those words, and with unusual affability he said:

“If you have good will, you are in good hands. I won’t leave you idle. Cheer up. If you find any difficulty, say so at once. I’m here to help you.”

I felt immensely relieved and thanked him warmly.

“A Little Incident ...”

Chieri is 10 kilometres from Turin. It is situated at the foot of the Turin hill, but on the other side. In John Bosco’s days it had 9,000 inhabitants. It was a town of convents, weavers and students.

The convents were of many different religious orders: Dominican, Oratorian, Jesuit, Franciscan...

A large number of weavers worked in some thirty odd cotton and silk mills.

Students flocked there from all over the Monferrato and Asti regions. They had a hard time. Courses were cheap, but there were no scholarships. Many had to make heroic sacrifices to pay their board and lodge. Much sought after were the part-time jobs after school hours: clerical jobs, cleaning the houses of the well-to-do, tuitions, looking after horses and carriages. To economize, the students would make do without fire even in winter, trying to study wrapped in woollen blankets with feet stuck in wooden clogs.

This was the kind of life that John lived. Every now and then Mamma Margaret would come to enquire about him. Lucy Matta had only words of praise for John. John

⁸ The classes were in ascending order: from the sixth one went to the fifth, and so on.

looked after the house. He was a pious lad and a good student. He was even helping her son who was senior to him.

This young man did not care much for his studies. John slowly befriended him and even managed to lead him to church for confession.

John missed no occasion to contribute to his board and lodge. He got a job with a friend who was a carpenter. He learned to use the plane, the chisel and the file.

I had been in class four about two months, when something happened and I became the talk of the place. The Latin professor was explaining Cornelius Nepos' life of Agesilaus. That day I had forgotten to bring the book to school. To avoid being noticed by the professor, I kept the grammar book open in front of me. My companions noticed it. One began nudging his neighbour, another began to giggle.

"What's that?" asked Professor Cima, and seeing that many were looking at me, he asked me to read the Latin text of Cornelius Nepos and repeat his explanation. Grammar in hand, I stood up and managed to repeat from memory both the Latin text and the explanation. The class exploded in applause.

The professor was furious. It was the first time, he shouted, that discipline was being broken in his class. He tried to cuff me, but I dodged. Then, with his hand on my grammar, he made my companions tell him the reason for the disorder.

"Bosco does not have the text. He has only the grammar, and still he has read and explained as if he had the text in hand."

The professor looked at the book under his hand. He bade me 'read' two more paragraphs of Cornelius. Then he said to me:

"I forgive you because of your wonderful memory. You are a fortunate person. See that you always make use of it for good."

John had already given proof of his extraordinary memory to Fr Calosso. But at Chieri, other strange things began to happen. One night he dreamt he was writing a test in class. On awakening, he wrote down the passage which he remembered very well and prepared a translation with the help of a priest friend. In class, the professor dictated the very same passage, and John was able to hand over his translation in record time.

The second time it happened there was a complication. John handed over his translation a bit too quickly. The professor read it, asked for the rough copy and was dumbfounded. On the rough copy there was the text of an assignment that he had been about to give, but on second thoughts had decided not to, because it was too long.

"Where on earth did you get this passage?"

"I dreamt it."

A dream is usually of little importance in the lives of most people, but in the life of John Bosco it had already acquired an important role. With the passing of years, that importance would increase. It was one of those things that still leaves people puzzled. Whenever they heard Don Bosco murmur, "I had a dream," those at Valdocco would immediately become alert. That strange priest saw too many things in his dreams: the sins of his boys, the death of kings, the splendid career of a snotty-nosed kid playing marbles.

The Società dell'Allegria

“During my first four classes,” writes Don Bosco, “I learned how to stand up to my companions.”

Despite the severe Christian discipline imposed by the school—pupils had even to show the ‘receipt’ of their monthly confession—some among the students were bad. “One was so shameless as to suggest that I steal a valuable object from my landlady.”

At first John kept away from these boys, so as not to end up like a mouse in the paws of a cat. But soon his success at school enhanced his prestige and placed him in a different position. Why not make use of it for their good?

“The boys who wanted to lead me astray were among the worst in their studies,” he remembers. “They began approaching me for help with their homework.”

He helped them, perhaps too much, even circulating complete translations during exams. At the finals of 1833 he was caught red-handed, and was saved only because of his friendship with the professor, who made him repeat the test.

“In this way I gained the good will and affection of my companions. They began looking for me during their free time to get help for their studies, then to hear my stories, and finally for no particular reason at all.”

They felt happy together. They formed a kind of gang which John baptized *Società dell’Allegria*.⁹ He drew up a simple code of conduct for them:

1. No actions and no words unbecoming of a Christian.
2. Fulfill one’s scholastic and religious duties.
3. Keep cheerful.

‘Cheerfulness’ would become one of Don Bosco’s ‘fixed ideas.’ Dominic Savio, his best pupil, would put it like this: “Here we make sanctity consist in being cheerful. We try to avoid sin which robs our hearts of joy.” For Don Bosco, cheerfulness is the deep satisfaction that is born of the conviction that one is in God’s hands, and therefore in good hands.” It is a simple word that indicates the great virtue of Christian hope.

“By 1832 I had become like the captain of a little army of friends.” They played quoit, walked on stilts, jumped and ran. Competition was heated and full of fun. When they were tired, John would entertain them with his magic tricks on a table set on the grass.

“I would extract scores of coloured balls from a dice box, and dozens of eggs from an empty can. I would gather marbles from the noses of spectators, guess how much money they had in their pockets, and with the touch of a finger reduce to powder coins of any denomination.”

As at Becchi, all the fun used to end with a prayer.

“On feast days we would go to the Church of St Anthony, where the Jesuit Fathers conducted wonderful catechism classes. I still remember some of the stories they used to tell.”

Four Challenges to an Acrobat

One Sunday, however, there were few listeners in St Anthony’s Church for the catechism classes. An acrobat had arrived and was giving a show that Sunday afternoon, challenging all the young men of the city to better him in races and long jump. All the

⁹ Crudely, the Good Cheer Society.

people flocked to see him.

John, annoyed at having been left alone by his group, went to see what was happening. The man was a real athlete. He ran and jumped with the power of a machine, and intended to stay in the city for a while.

John gathered the best of his friends:

“If that man goes on with his shows on Sunday afternoons, our society runs the risk of falling apart. Someone must beat him. We could then bargain with him.”

“And who can do that?”

“Let’s find someone. It’s not impossible, after all. Look, in a race, I don’t feel inferior to him at all.”

John was 17 and felt very fit. But in the *Memoirs* he adds immediately: “I had not weighed the consequences of my words. A foolish companion reported my words to the acrobat, and suddenly I found myself involved in a challenge: ‘a student against a professional athlete’.”

The venue chosen was the avenue of Porta Torinese, which ran practically the whole length of the town. The bet was for 20 *lire*, a whole month’s board and lodge. John did not have the money, but his friends of the society put it together. “A huge crowd had turned up,” Don Bosco remembers.

As soon as they started, the athlete took an advantage of ten metres. He was a sprinter, while John was more of a middle-distance runner. “But I soon gained on him and left him so far behind that he gave up half way.”

It should have ended there, but the athlete asked for a second round, and it was a point of honour to accept. “I challenge you to jump, he said to me, but the stake will be doubled. We accepted. He chose the site. We had to jump across a little stream whose other bank had been reinforced with a parapet.” The acrobat jumped and landed with his feet almost touching the parapet. “It was impossible to go further,” writes Don Bosco. “I could lose the challenge, but there seemed to be no way of winning it. Still, I found a way out. I jumped as far as he had, but, with my hands on the parapet, I vaulted to the other side.” A kind of pole-vault, without the pole. It was a second victory.

The man was nettled. He had lost the money, and the people were beginning to pull his leg.

“I’ll challenge you once more,” he said to me. “Choose any game of skill.” I chose the magic wand. The bet had risen to 80 *lire*. I selected a rod. I put a hat on one end of it and rested the other end on the palm of my hand. I made it travel on the tips of my fingers and thumb, on the back of my hand, on the elbow, the shoulder, the chin, the lips, the nose and the forehead and then all the way back to the palm of my hand.

“I won’t lose this time,” he said confidently. He took the same rod and with marvelous dexterity he made it travel up to the lips. At that point his long nose came in the way, and he had to catch the stick with his hand, thus losing this game too.

At this point John felt sorry for the man who, after all, was only trying to earn his living.

The man saw his fortune dwindle. Furious, he shouted: “I still have one

hundred francs, and I'll stake them on a tree climb. The one who touches the highest point of that elm tree will be the winner." We accepted, and in a way would have been happy if he had won, because we did not want to ruin him.

He climbed first and reached so high that if he had gone even a step further the tree would have bent. Everyone said that it was impossible to go higher. Then came my turn. I reached almost exactly the same place. Then, grabbing the tree with my hands, I hoisted my body up till I touched the tree about one metre higher than he had.

There was a thunderous applause below. My friends were dancing about with joy, while the poor man was on the point of tears. So we gave him back his money in exchange for lunch at the *Muletto*.

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco makes a note that the lunch came to 25 *lire*, and that the acrobat was able to keep 215 *lire*. He also notes that the athlete agreed to clear out of the place. Before leaving, he told the boys: "You have saved me from ruin. I thank you. I'll remember you gladly, but be sure that I'll never challenge students in future."

First Trip to Turin

After the challenge, the *Società dell'Allegria* went from strength to strength. Whenever there was a free day, the members would go to the hills of Superga. They would look for mushrooms, eat, sing, enjoy the scenery, and even manage a quick visit to Turin to see the 'marble horse' on the steps of the royal palace. Going and coming, it was a thirty kilometre walk. They would return famished and with plenty of news from the capital for their lazier companions.

It was during those hikes that John Bosco saw Turin for the first time. The city was expanding and the population increasing dramatically. Rents and real estate prices were soaring. There was an urgent need of hospitals, homes for the aged, kindergartens and schools.

Charles Albert wanted to do something concrete for the people's education, but his foreign minister, Solaro della Margherita (Catholic, but ultra-conservative), did not agree with him: too much education would arouse in the people "needs that the government could not satisfy... and new ideas that would make the people restless, unhappy, discontented and rebellious."

In the spring of the year in which John Bosco and his friends roamed the hills of Turin, Canon Cottolengo settled on the outskirts of the city with 35 sick persons who had been rejected by all the existing hospitals. It was 27 April 1832. In a quarter called Valdocco, the canon had rented a ramshackle building that had been a pub, and had arrived on a donkey cart accompanied by two nuns. His first act was to hang up a notice over the door: *Little House of Divine Providence*. This house would soon become a living miracle and would shelter up to 10,000 incurable and suffering people rejected by everyone else.

In June, John Bosco heard for the first time the name of Vincent Gioberti. Gioberti was a young priest from Turin, professor of philosophy at the university. Arrested for participation in a republican plot, he was exiled to France. Ten years later, at Bruxelles, he would publish a famous book, *Il Primato morale e civile degli Italiani*,¹⁰ eighteen years

¹⁰ *The Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italians.*

later, he would become Charles Albert's prime minister.

In the royal palace, where the boys of the *Società dell'Allegria* would go to touch the marble horse, the king granted the first reforms, slowly and with many scruples. The first one, signed in May 1831, was the abolition of torture, that inhuman relic of barbarian times.

10

THE SEASON OF FRIENDSHIP

In the autumn of 1832, John Bosco began class three. In the next two years he attended the courses of humanities (1833-34) and rhetoric (1834-35).

He remained an excellent student, with a prodigious memory and in love with his books. "In those days," he remembers ruefully, "I made no distinction between reading and studying. I could easily repeat from memory what I had read in a book. Paying attention in class was more than enough for me to learn what I had to. Since my mother had accustomed me to sleep little, I could spend two-thirds of the night reading by the flame of a little lamp. There was a Jewish bookseller, Elijah, who used to lend me Italian classics at five cents a volume. I would finish almost one a day."

John was now 18, the age of deep friendships. While he continued being the 'captain of a small army,' he had begun to form a smaller circle of intimate friends.

He came to know one of them during a class ruckus. Whenever the teacher was late, a real racket would ensue. The boys would begin playing leapfrog. "Those who loved books least were the best at the game," writes Don Bosco with some irony. A 15 year old newcomer, however, would sit calmly at his desk reading a book, ignoring the turmoil.

One day a hot-headed fellow went up to him and grabbed him by his arm.

"Come and play."

"I don't know the game."

"You'll learn. Don't make me kick you."

"Hit me if you wish, but I am not coming."

The rascal slapped him so hard on the face that everyone stopped to look. I felt my blood boil. I waited for the boy to take his revenge, especially since he was bigger. Instead he did nothing. Red and livid he said:

"Are you satisfied? Leave me alone now. I forgive you."

John stood there stunned. This was a truly heroic act. He asked the boy's name. It was Louis Comollo. "From that moment he became my intimate friend. I can say that I learnt from him how to live as a Christian."

Under the apparent fragility, he discovered a great spiritual richness. Instinctively he became Comollo's protector against the other boys.

A Human Club

A teacher was late once again, and the usual hullabaloo started.

Some of the boys wanted to give a beating to Comollo and another boy, Anthony Candelo. I told them to leave them in peace, but they would not listen. Insults began to fly. I broke in:

“The next one who utters a foul word will have to reckon with me.”

Some of the bigger boys made a wall in front of me, while two slaps landed on Comollo’s face. I lost my head. Finding neither a stick nor a chair at hand, I grabbed one of the boys by the shoulders and, using him as a club, I began swinging away at the rest.

Four fell to the ground and the others scattered shouting.

At that moment the teacher entered, and seeing arms and legs flying about everywhere in an infernal din, he began shouting and giving blows left and right.

When the storm abated a bit, he asked what was going on. Not believing what he was told, he asked me to repeat the feat. He burst out laughing, and forgot about punishing us.

As soon as Comollo could find me alone, he said to me: “Your strength frightens me. God did not give it to you to massacre your companions. He wants us to forgive and to repay evil with good.”

John listened, and followed Comollo to confession. But turning the other cheek never came easy to him. He would force himself to it, but it would never really become something congenial to him. He would have to repeat to himself very often the words of the dream, “Not by blows but with kindness will you conquer your friends.”

A Tip-Off

In the summer of 1833, companies of soldiers suddenly descended upon Chieri. Vigilance at the gates was doubled, the streets were patrolled day and night, and all gatherings were forbidden.

A tip-off had warned that the Mazzinians were preparing a revolt in Turin and other towns in Piedmont. The previous year had brought news of the founding of ‘Young Italy’ by Mazzini. Copies of the sect’s journal had been discovered in a trunk with a false bottom coming from Marseilles to Genoa. The plan was to provoke riots by beginning fires in different parts of Turin, wipe out the royal family and proclaim a republic. Later it transpired that Mazzini himself had handed over to Gallenga the dagger for assassinating Charles Albert.

The leak and the prompt mobilization of troops led to the arrest of the conspirators. Twelve of them were executed. A year later the Mazzinians made a second attempt in Savoy, with the help of General Ramorino and Garibaldi.

Censorship reached ridiculous heights: a stock of caps was confiscated because they were blue and red, the colours of the French revolution.

At the end of the school year 1832-33, Lucy Matta’s son finished his studies, and John had to look for new lodgings.

A family friend, John Pianta, had just opened a caffè at Chieri and offered him the post of barman. He would have to clean the place in the morning before going to school and spend his evenings at the bar and in the billiard room. In return, Mr Pianta would give him

soup twice a day and a place to sleep.

John accepted for want of anything better. It was hard work, and it meant staying up late at night to keep the billiard scores.

In 1888, more than 50 years later, Mr Pianta would say: "It was impossible to find a better young man than John Bosco. Every morning he would go to serve Mass at St Anthony's Church. At home I had my old and sickly mother, and he would look after her with admirable charity."

Much less admirable was the treatment Mr Pianta meted out to his young employee. He would make him prepare coffee and chocolate, cookies and ice-cream, but never thought of giving him anything more than soup. Mamma Margaret had to come all the way from Becchi with bread and something to go with it. Lodging was "a narrow ledge above the oven reached by a small stepladder. If he stretched out full length, his feet would stick out not only from the pallet but also from the ledge itself."

James Levi, alias Jonah

The town of Chieri had a large community of Jews. Charles Felix's laws had confined them to the ghetto. They were merely tolerated and were considered second class citizens. Jewish boys were faced with a dilemma every Saturday. Their law forbade all kinds of work on the Sabbath, including homework. They had to choose to either act against their conscience, or to accept bad marks and suffer the jeers of their companions.

John would help them very often by doing their Saturday assignments for them. He became very friendly with one of them, James Levi, whom the boys nicknamed Jonah. John and Jonah had one thing in common: they had both lost their father early in life.

Don Bosco remembers that friendship using expressions unusual to him. "He was extremely good-looking and had an uncommonly beautiful voice. He was good at billiards. I was very attached to him and he to me. He would spend every free moment in my room. We spent our time singing, playing the piano, reading and swapping stories."

It was a passionate and transparent friendship that reveals no trace of embarrassment or fear.

An unspecified "disorder and a fight which could have had sad consequences" provoked a crisis in the young Jew. John, out of affection rather than proselytism, offered him what was most precious to him: the faith. He lent him his catechism book. "Within the span of a few months, he learnt the basic truths of faith. He was tremendously happy, and every day became better in word and in deed."

The inevitable happened when Jonah's mother discovered the catechism book in his room. After having lost her husband, she was now in danger of losing her son. She confronted John bitterly: "You have ruined him!"

John tried his best to explain things, but without success. Threatened by his relatives and by the rabbi, Jonah had to leave his family for some time. Little by little things calmed down. He was baptized in the cathedral of Chieri on 10 August. The official register reads: "I, Sebastian Schioppo, theologian and canon, with the permission of the Most Rev Archbishop of Turin, have solemnly baptized the young Jew James Levi, aged 18, giving him the name Aloysius."

'Jonah' remained Don Bosco's affectionate friend for life. As late as 1880 he used to visit the Oratory at Valdocco and spend some time remembering the good old days.

The Apples of Blanchard

Mr Pianta's soup could hardly satisfy the healthy appetite of an 18 year old, and so John Bosco often suffered hunger. This did not escape the notice of a friend of his, Joseph Blanchard by name. This young man would often go to his mother's fruit stall and quietly fill his pockets with apples and chestnuts. More than once, at table, he emptied the fruit bowl for the same reason. The good woman always pretended not to notice. One day the other son, Leandro, complained:

"Mother, you are absolutely blind. Joseph is taking away kilos of fruit but you don't even notice it."

"Oh, I am well aware of it," she answered. "But I know what he does with it. That John is a good boy, and hunger is a bad thing at his age."

Despite the hunger, John somehow managed to find the five cents for the books from Elijah, and so he spent the nights reading. This did not escape the notice of Mr Pianta who testified: "He would often spend the whole night studying. In the morning I would find him still at his books by his little lamp." It is not quite clear whether the good man was impressed more by the determination of the boy or by the oil consumed by the lamp. But Don Bosco also remembered those nights: "It happened more than once that at the hour of rising I found myself still reading the book I had begun the previous night." He went on to add: "But this practice ruined my health. I would say now that we must do what we can but not more. I discovered at my own expense that nights are meant for sleeping."

Evidently, John Bosco was not a living wonder. He was a teenager full of determination and impatience. Like everyone else, he would have to learn patience and a sense of good measure from life itself.

11

JOHN BOSCO AT TWENTY

In March 1834, towards the end of his year of humanities, John Bosco asked to be admitted into the Franciscan order.

He received an answer through a school companion, Eugene Nicco:

“You are expected at the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Turin for an interview.”

John walked to Turin. The admission register of the convent reads: “The young man John Bosco from Castelnuovo has been unanimously accepted. He has all the necessary qualities. 18 April 1834.”

John began to prepare the documents necessary for entry into the monastery of La Pace at Chieri.

Why did he take such a decision?

John was 19; he knew it was time to make up his mind. He had struggled and suffered because he wanted to become a priest, but in the last few months he had been obliged to consider seriously several important problems.

Poverty

His first problem was poverty. He could not continue being a burden to his mother. He confided to his friend Evasio Savio: “How can I expect my mother to continue supporting me in my studies?” He had discussed the matter with some Franciscan Fathers who knew him well. They immediately invited him to join their order. They would see to everything, even dispensing him from the entrance fee paid by novices.

There were other problems too. We read in the *Memoirs*: “I thought to myself: if I become a secular priest, I will be in serious danger of ruining my vocation.” This was not a mere scruple or a groundless fear. Peter Stella writes: “One of the prevalent dangers in those years was the professionalism of the clergy. Many embraced the ecclesiastical ‘career’ not out of deep religious convictions but because of human considerations. The danger posed for the priesthood by an inner emptiness and a superficial religious life can easily be seen.”

An indication of this danger was the excessive number of young people who undertook to study for the priesthood. In 1834, Turin, Chieri and Bra together had 250 seminarians; by 1840 this number had risen to 354 boarders and 207 day pupils. Don Bosco himself recalls that out of his 24 companions in the class of rhetoric, 20 applied for admission to the seminary.

Corresponding to the large number of entries, there were also numerous and painful defections. Many considered the seminary as a short-cut to a teaching post or to a job in the civil service.

Bishops tried to stem this evil by reducing the number of day pupils. These students attended classes and liturgical services, but inevitably introduced an air of worldliness into the seminary.

Margaret Puts On Her Black Shawl

Towards the end of April, John went to his parish priest, asking for the papers he needed to enter the monastery. Fr Dassano was surprised.

“You in a monastery? Have you reflected enough before deciding?”

“I think so.”

A few days later Fr Dassano went to Sussambrino to speak to Margaret.

“John wants to join the Franciscans. I have nothing against that, but in my opinion your son should be a parish priest. He knows how to talk to the people, he has a way with boys, people like him. Why on earth should he bury himself in a monastery? And then, Margaret, let me be frank with you. You are not rich, and you are no longer young. If your son becomes a parish priest, he will be able to give you a hand when you are no longer able to work. But if your son becomes a friar he will be lost to you. For your own good, I think you should dissuade him.”

Mamma Margaret put on her shawl and went to Chieri.

“The parish priest came to tell me that you want to enter a monastery. Is that true?”

“Yes, mother. I hope you have nothing against it.”

“Listen carefully, John. I want you to think about this well. Once you have made up your mind, go ahead without looking at anyone else. The most important thing is that you do the will of God. The parish priest wants me to change your mind because one day I might be in need of you. But I want to tell you: keep your mother out of this. God comes first. I want nothing from you, I expect nothing from you. I was born poor, I have lived poor and I want to die poor. If you ever become a priest and have the disgrace of becoming rich, I will never set foot into your house. Remember that.”

The old woman with the black shawl spoke firmly and with great force. Don Bosco would never forget those words.

John had almost arrived at a decision when something happened. “A few days before entering the monastery I had a strange dream. I saw a large number of friars in torn habits. They were all running here and there. One of them drew near and said to me: ‘If you are looking for peace, you will not find it here. God is preparing some other place for you.’”

It was just another dream. But John had learnt by now that dreams were important for him, even if at times inconvenient. He went to his confessor: “I told him everything, but he wanted to hear neither of dreams nor of friars. ‘In these things,’ he said, ‘each one should follow his own inclinations, and not the advice of others. It is up to you to reflect and decide.’”

Not knowing what to do, John postponed his decision and went on attending classes. But he could not postpone it forever. He turned to his friend Comollo for counsel. He received a piece of advice typical of Comollo, fervent, spiritual and disincarnate: “Make a novena, write a letter to my uncle priest, and obey blindly.” Don Bosco recalls:

On the last day of the novena we went to confession and communion

together. Then I heard another Mass and served one more at the altar of Our Lady of Graces. Back home, we found a letter from Fr Comollo, Louis' uncle. It said: "All things considered, I would advise your companion not to enter the monastery. Let him don the clerical habit and have no fear of losing his vocation. With recollection and piety he will overcome all obstacles."

"Why Not Consult Don Cafasso?"

To don the clerical habit meant entering the seminary. But then John was back at his first problem: money. Fr Cinzano came to the rescue. He had just substituted Fr Dassano at Castelnuovo. He approached two well-to-do members of his parish and together they undertook to pay for John's last year at school.

But John was not fully at peace. It was his good friend Evasio Savio who advised him this time:

"Go to Turin and consult Fr Cafasso. He is young, but he is the best priest to have come from Castelnuovo."

Fr Cafasso was only 23 but was already considered one of the best spiritual directors available. Many people who were restless or troubled went to him. He lived at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin. While pursuing a specialization in theology there, he was also looking after the sick and the imprisoned.

John went to see him and told him all his difficulties. Calmly and without hesitation Fr Cafasso told him:

"Finish your year of rhetoric and then enter the seminary. Divine providence will let you know what you should do. And don't worry about money: someone will provide."

In Fr Cafasso, John had met the stabilizing element of his life. His volcanic temperament would lead him through dreams, projects, perplexities, successes and delusions. Alongside him, calm and serene, Fr Cafasso would be the discreet friend, the wise adviser and the silent benefactor.

The seminary of Chieri had been opened recently, in 1829. The archbishop of Turin, Colombano Chiaveroti, had wanted a recollected and almost monastic atmosphere for his future priests, far from the noisy world of Turin. John would enter this seminary as a boarder, as Fr Cafasso had advised. The fees of the first year would be waived, thanks to Cafasso's friend Fr Guala.

The entrance examination should have been at Turin, but every summer the city was under the threat of cholera, so John was examined at Chieri itself.

He spent his last holidays before entering the seminary at Sussambrino and at Castelnuovo, helping his parish priest. He writes:

During those holidays I refrained from giving shows and read some good books instead. But I did continue taking care of the boys, keeping them happy with stories, pastimes and songs. Many of them, even though quite big, did not know the basics of the faith. I taught them catechism and the daily prayers. It was a kind of oratory, some fifty boys who loved me and obeyed me as though I were their father.

The Piedmontese Trademark

On 16 August 1835, John Bosco turned 20. He had become a man, tenacious, intelligent and mature. He was about to enter the decisive years of his sacerdotal formation and bore, like a trademark, a solidly Piedmontese character.

Henri Bosco, a Frenchman from Provence and distant relative of the saint, has a beautiful page on the Piedmontese character. We shall follow his example and attempt something similar here.

The Piedmontese is neither brilliant nor witty. He does not think in a hurry. He is slow to understand, reflect and answer. He does not therefore act on impulse, and is not fiery or exalted.

On the other hand, he is solid and strong. He is forbearing: he can endure long hardship without complaining. He is also prudent: life has taught him that it is better to take his time rather than be hasty.

He is positive by birth. He is not easily seduced by new ideas: he knows instinctively that most of them do not last long. If he has any brilliant idea, he immediately puts it to the test. He lives with his feet on the ground. That is his strength.

Reality is often tough and hard. The Piedmontese tackles it with patience. He is patient in spirit and patient at heart.

He loves deeply and does not betray. He is faithful. Fidelity is the greatest sign of perseverance. It is its noblest expression and purest fruit. Fidelity implies courage.

The Piedmontese is courageous without being rash. He is more soldier than warrior. But he knows how to fight. He fights well, but not so much from a spirit of adventure. He is more inclined to defend than to attack.

This tendency to defend stems from his love for his land, his property, his family, even when his possessions are poor, his land hard, and the family a heavy burden.

Sometimes he emigrates, but never uproots himself completely from his land. From the depths of his soul there continue to spring the virtues of patience, affection, solidity and common sense.

Only God knows to what degree Don Bosco shared the virtues proper to his race—the resistance, the common sense, the practicality, the patience, even the stubbornness.

But God had also given something else to this young man about to enter the seminary: the gift of a large heart—a heart that would not give up before youth humiliated by ignorance, before people ruined by misery, before persons shrivelled by the absence of God. This, I believe, is the ‘charism,’ the particular gift that was given to Don Bosco, which he had to blend with the natural qualities of his people in a way that was sometimes dramatic and disturbing.

An undivided heart does not know half measures, faces the challenges of reality, and transforms human patience into Christian impatience. To the timorous promptings of ‘common sense’ it answers with enthusiasm. The saints have common sense, and lots of it, but we always notice it only afterwards. Their behaviour looks like madness, but is instead a great act of faith in God and in human beings. Not a passive faith awaiting everything from heaven, but a faith springing from vision and from adventure, a faith that goes on the offensive.

Don Bosco was animated by this kind of faith rooted in love, the reasons of which are unreasonable, because it reasons differently from intelligence and from down-to-earth common sense.

This explains why many priests, fellow countrymen and sincere brothers in the ministry, educated together with him in the same seminary, failed to understand him.

The church will summarize all this one day by placing, at the opening text of his Mass, the words used by the Bible of Abraham (another one of those clamorously lacking in 'common sense'): "God gave him wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sands on the shore."

12

THE SEMINARY: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

The taking of the clerical habit was, in those years, an important step. The young man took off his civilian clothes and put on a black cassock that covered him from shoulder to foot. It was a sign that said: "I intend to become a priest and live as a priest." The accessories that completed the clerical garb were the white collar, the biretta,¹¹ and the round hat. Everything was black except the collar.

"I have always been in need of help," Don Bosco would later say. It was so also on the day of his vestition: the cassock, the hat, the shoes, the biretta, and even his socks were gifts of the people of his village.

On that Sunday, 25 October, there were more people than usual in the church of Castelnuovo. They had come from Becchi, from Morialdo, and from the other nearby hamlets to witness the vestition of John Bosco, that splendid young man whom everybody knew.

John walked up to the altar carrying the black cassock on his arm. The words of the rite were solemn.

When the parish priest, Fr Cinzano, ordered me to take off my civilian dress with the words: "May the Lord remove from you the old man with his habits and ways," I said to myself: "How much junk there is in me! My God, destroy all my bad habits." And when he added, giving me the collar: "May the Lord clothe you with the new man, created after God's heart in justice, truth and sanctity," I added within myself: "My God, help me begin a truly new life according to your will. Mary, be my salvation."

Seven Resolutions

After Mass, unexpectedly, Fr Cinzano asked John to accompany him to Bardella, where they were celebrating the village feast.

I went half-heartedly, so as not to hurt him. I felt out of place, a sort of newly dressed puppet. I had prepared myself so much for that day, and there I was sitting at lunch among people who had gathered to laugh, chatter, eat, drink and enjoy themselves. What could they have in common with one who, only a few hours before, had donned a habit of sanctity meaning to give himself totally to the Lord?

On my way back, the priest asked me why was I so pensive. I answered him

¹¹ The biretta was a square cap with three ridges and a pompon in the middle.

frankly that the ceremony of the morning clashed glaringly with what had followed. Seeing priests playing the clown among the guests, half tipsy, had disgusted me. “Rather than becoming a priest like that, I would prefer to give up my habit immediately.”

The parish priest saw that the young cleric was right. He wriggled out of the situation by resorting to clichés. “That’s how the world is made,” he said. “We have to take it as it is. Evil has to be seen to be avoided.”

John spent the last four days before entering the seminary in silence and recollection, and wrote down seven resolutions that signaled a ‘reversal’ in his style of life:

1. I will not go to dances, plays, and public shows.
2. I will not perform sleight-of-hand tricks and acrobatics, or go hunting.
3. I will observe temperance in eating, drinking and sleeping.
4. I will read only spiritual literature.
5. I will shun all thoughts, conversations, words and readings contrary to chastity.
6. I will make some meditation and spiritual reading every day.
7. Everyday I will tell stories or share ideas that may do good to others.

“I went before an image of the Blessed Virgin and made a formal promise to observe these resolutions at the cost of any sacrifice,” he writes.

He would not always succeed, because he too was made of flesh and blood like the rest of us. But he had certainly set himself on a firm course.

John was due to enter the seminary on 30 October. The night before, he was packing the things Mamma Margaret had put together for him.

My mother kept looking at me as if she had something to say. Suddenly she took me aside and said:

“John, you are wearing the cassock now. I am as happy as a mother can be. But remember that it is not so much the habit that makes you a priest, as your virtue. Should you ever have doubts about your vocation, for God’s sake do not dishonour the habit. Lay it aside at once. I prefer to have a poor farmer for a son rather a priest who neglects his duties. When you were born, I consecrated you to the Madonna. When you began to study, I recommended you to love this good Mother of ours. Now I urge you to belong entirely to her.”

By the time she had finished speaking my mother was moved, and I was crying.

“Mother,” I answered, “I thank you for all you have done for me. I will never forget your words.”

Early next morning I went to Chieri, and on the evening of that same day I entered the seminary.

The first thing that met John’s eyes in the seminary was a sundial upon a whitewashed wall. Below the dial was the inscription: *Afflictis lentae, celeres gaudentibus horae*—“Time flies slowly for the sad, but quickly for the cheerful.” It was a good piece of

advice for a young man about to begin six long years within those walls.

In the chapel the seminarians knelt in perfect order. The organ attacked the majestic notes of the *Veni Creator*.¹² The new academic year began with a three day retreat in perfect silence.

A Cast-Iron Timetable

On page 90 of his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco writes: “At the seminary, the days followed one another without change.”¹³ It was another way of saying that his greatest difficulty in those first months was monotony.

The timetable was precise, splitting the second. It was all written down on a board hanging in a corner near the bell. Everything was planned right down to the last quarter hour. The time-keeper rang the bell on the dot. At the stroke of the bell, the community came in, went out, spoke, entered into silence, studied, prayed. The first thing that was taught upon entering the seminary was that the bell was the voice of God.

A day lived like this can be stimulating, even interesting. But when repeated day after day for eight months at a stretch, it can become monotonous.

The timetable had been laid down by Charles Felix himself, and it extended to all the schools of the kingdom. No exceptions were made even for princes.

We can form an idea of what it was like by seeing the timetable that Prince Victor Emmanuel (who was 15 in 1835) had to follow in the royal palace at Turin: “Rising at 5 a.m., Mass at 7, classes from 9 to 12, lunch, homework from 2 to 7.30 p.m., supper; night prayers at 9 p.m. and sleep. Two Masses on Sunday morning, the ‘low’ Mass before breakfast in the palace chapel, and the ‘high’ Mass after breakfast in the cathedral.”

The seminary differed from the royal palace in one detail: there was meditation and the rosary with the daily Mass every morning. Meals were taken in silence. Seminarians took turns to read from Bercastel’s *History of the Church* from a pulpit.

The food was simple. “One eats to live, one does not live to eat” was a maxim that was repeated often.

Recreation was the only time of relaxation. Don Bosco remembers that there were heated card games. “I wasn’t very good at it, but somehow managed to win most of the time. At the end of the game, I would have my hands full of money, but the sight of my sad companions would make me sadder still. Besides, by dint of fixing my mind on the game, it happened that while studying or praying I would see the king of hearts or the jack of spades before my eyes. Half way through the second year of philosophy, I resolved to stop playing cards.”

The incident that actually provoked the decision was when he won a large sum of money. The seminarian who had stubbornly insisted on going on playing even when he was losing badly was as poor as John Bosco. In the end he was left without a cent, and was almost in tears. John felt ashamed of himself. He returned all the money to his companion and said goodbye to cards.

Even with his Salesians, he was strict about card playing. “It is a huge waste of time,” he used to say, “and our time belongs to the boys. If ever there comes a time when I have nothing else to do, I might start playing cards again.”

¹² The hymn *Come Creator Spirit*.

¹³ *Memorie per l’oratorio* 90 = *Memoirs of the Oratory* 131.

Negative Points

As the days went by, John discovered the dark spots in seminary life.

The first was the same one that had troubled him at Castelnuovo: the superiors maintained their distance. To safeguard their dignity, they showed themselves rarely. “We would see the rector and the other superiors on arriving and before leaving for holidays. No one went to speak to them, except to be reprimanded. Whenever a superior appeared there was a general stampede. How many times did I desire to talk to them, to ask for some advice...”

Peter Stella comments: “John was seeking not a formal sign of approval, but something like benevolence, a response to the affection he bore towards them. This desire to establish an atmosphere of mutual affection, harmony and sympathy, is a good expression of Don Bosco’s temperament.” Don Bosco would regard ‘physical presence’ as essential to an atmosphere of loving kindness. He was so convinced of this that he would make it an essential element of his system of education.

The second dark spot was the behaviour of some companions: There were many seminarians of shining virtue, but there were also some ‘dangerous characters’ who indulged in ‘bad conversations’ and who brought into the seminary ‘obscene and irreligious books.’

Another motive for sadness was the denial of frequent communion. “Holy communion could be received only on Sundays and on feast days.” To receive communion during the week one had to commit ‘an act of disobedience.’

In the morning, while the seminarians went in a long silent line to the refectory, some would turn the corner, enter the Church of St Philip and ask for communion, paying for it by foregoing breakfast and fasting till lunch time. “In this way I could receive communion more frequently. This was surely the most efficacious nourishment of my vocation.”

Thursday Breaks

Every Thursday afternoon the monotony of the timetable was broken by the doorkeeper’s call: “Bosco of Castelnuovo!”

The other seminarians, always on the look out for some fun, would echo the call in all the dialects and languages they knew: “*Bosch’d Castelneuf! Bosco di Castelnuovo! Bois de Chateauneuf!*”

John would laugh. He knew the visitors: the members of the *Società dell’Allegria*, who wanted to see him and bring him the latest news; his school companions; the youngsters he had entertained with his games and his stories and who longed to hear him again. “He would be surrounded by droves of happy youngsters,” recalls one of his seminary companions. “He entertained them cheerfully and spoke with all of them.” After the bustle, jokes and laughs, they would spend some time in the chapel before the statue of Our Lady.”

Thursdays were a breath of fresh air to John, the almost clandestine continuation of his ‘fixed idea,’ the oratory.

To his closest friends, John would often talk about this ‘oratory.’ It would be located on the outskirts of a big city, and would have playgrounds and buildings filled with boys.

“I’m not inventing anything,” he would say. “I see it in a dream every now and then.”

The biographer Fr Lemoyne writes that in 1890 Fr Bosio, parish priest of Levone Canavese, seminary companion of Don Bosco, visited the Oratory for the first time. On reaching the middle of the playground, surrounded by members of the superior chapter, he looked around and exclaimed: “Nothing of this seems new to me! Don Bosco used to describe it all to me in the seminary, as if he were seeing it with his own eyes, as I am seeing it now with mine.”

Dreams and poverty: two words that marked every phase of the life of Don Bosco. The dreams would open up vistas of a splendid future; poverty would put a spoke into the wheels of the present.

The half yearly examinations (examinations in those ‘good old days’ were held three times a year) carried a prize of sixty *lire* for the best student in every class in academics and conduct. John Bosco managed to get it every year. It paid for half his keep.

He also earned a little money with odd jobs: “Shaving, repairing a biretta, mending clothes—I was always ready to do anything of the kind.”

Among Rich Youngsters

Cholera struck again in the summer of 1836. Turin was in the grip of fear. The Jesuits decided to shift their boarders from the College of the Carmel in the city to the summer residence at the castle of Montaldo. They were looking for a reliable dormitory assistant who could also give Greek tuitions. Don Cafasso sent the seminarian Bosco. “You can make some *lire*,” he said.

From 1 July to 17 October, John Bosco lived for the first time among young people from distinguished families, making a first-hand acquaintance with the virtues and the vices of these pampered youngsters. “I experienced how difficult it is to gain among them the ascendancy a priest needs in order to do some good,” he confesses. He became convinced that God was calling him to work only among poor boys. This would be one of his absolute convictions: just as he was not called to work for girls, so he was not called to educate the sons of the rich. Some 30 years later, on 5 April 1864, when Fr Ruffino proposed opening a hospice for young men of the nobility, he would answer with words bordering on harshness:

“No, never! That would be our ruin. It has been the ruin of other religious orders that were meant to educate the poor, and instead ended up serving the rich.”

The Spell of Louis Comollo

In October 1836, as John Bosco left the castle of Montaldo to spend some days in Sussambrino, Louis Comollo received the clerical habit. At the end of the month he too entered the seminary at Chieri with his friend John. They became inseparable, bound by a solid friendship.

Louis was two years younger than John, but at once resumed being his spiritual ‘monitor.’ “He would often interrupt my recreation. He would take me by the sleeve and pull me to the chapel.”

There Comollo felt really at home, and his effusive piety would never end: visits to the Blessed Sacrament, prayers for the dying, the rosary, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, the rosary for the souls in purgatory...

Like many Christians who work hard for the kingdom of God, John felt a deep fascination for this kind of ardent piety, this simple abandonment to God. But he sensed also a hint of exaggeration. With great delicacy he says: “I did not even try to imitate him in his mortification. He fasted rigorously the whole of Lent and on Saturdays, and would at times have only bread and water for lunch... He would renounce the main dish and the wine, and would have his bread dipped in water on the pretext that it was good for his health.”

We can afford to be more outspoken: it was a recipe for exhaustion and death. A good spiritual director would never have allowed Comollo to rush headlong towards death in this manner. 20 years later, when Dominic Savio would want to try out a similar path, Don Bosco would stop him firmly. As yet, however, John was not the prudent director of consciences he would become. The disembodied asceticism of Comollo, that way of taking refuge in God and despising all earthly values, filled him with admiration.

He would always maintain a special fascination for the sanctity of Louis Comollo, so clearly and decisively directed to heaven. But his own path to God would continue to be different. It would be a more incarnate and solid type of holiness, worked out in living contact with reality, with the affection of the young and their impelling needs, and with the pressing and concrete problems that clarify and simplify every ascetical theory.

A Lonely Seminarian

John Francis Giacomelli of Avigliana entered the seminary at the beginning of December. He has left us a precious testimony, a graphic description of the seminarian Bosco in the second year of philosophy.

I entered the seminary a month late. I did not know anybody, and in the beginning I felt completely lost and lonely. The first time I sat in the study hall, I saw in front of me a seminarian who seemed older than the others. Good-looking and curly-haired, he was rather pale and thin, as if suffering from some ailment. It was John Bosco. Seeing me alone after lunch, he approached me and kept me company the whole recreation. He was very kind. I remember, for instance, that my companions were making fun of me because my biretta was too big. In no time John fixed it for me.

That year there were two seminarians by the name of Bosco. The first, who later became the director of the Rosine in Turin, decided to call himself ‘medlar wood’: *Mi sun Bosch 'd pucciu*. John instead decided to call himself ‘willow wood’: *Mi sun Bosch 'd sales*.¹⁴ Medlar is hard wood, impossible to bend; willow is soft wood, tender and flexible. Not that John was a paragon of virtue; he was rather hot-tempered, and had to make a real effort to control himself. He loved youngsters immensely, and his greatest pleasure was to be in the midst of them.

¹⁴ *Bosco* (*Bosch* in the Piedmontese dialect) means wood.

13

PRIEST BY PROFESSION

24 June, feast of St John the Baptist, was John Bosco's feast day, and also the beginning of the long summer holidays.

He took the dusty white road from Chieri to Castelnuovo and then climbed the path to Sussambrino, a good twelve kilometre walk. At his brother's farm he was welcomed by the cackling of hens and the shy smile of a splendid little niece.

Joseph had married Mary Calosso, a girl from Castelnuovo, in 1833. Their first daughter, Margaret, had lived only three months. The second, Philomena, was born in the spring of 1835. She was a quiet child who stared in wide-eyed fascination as uncle John worked with plane, lathe and forge, cut and stitched dresses, and made beautiful little cloth dolls for her.

Wielding the Sickle

Clusters of green grapes were forming on the vines, and the wheat was already turning golden in the fields. After a spell in his rudimentary workshop, John would get hold of a sickle and join the long line of reapers, his forehead dripping with perspiration under his straw hat.

He found tremendous joy in this open-air activity after eight long months of being cooped up in the seminary.

One day a hare darted out of a row of vines. Instinctively John dashed into the house, got hold of Joseph's gun and set off in pursuit. He thought it would be a question of a few minutes, but the hare was fast. Stubborn, John did not give up.

Running from field to field and from one vineyard to another, I crossed valleys and climbed hills. The chase took hours. At last the hare came within range and I shot it. As the poor animal fell, I was overtaken by great sadness. Some of my friends had followed, and they congratulated me for my shot. But I looked at myself: I was dishevelled, in shirt sleeves and straw hat, without my cassock, at the end of a five kilometre run with a hunting gun in my hand. I was most embarrassed.

On reaching home he pulled out the little notebook with the resolutions taken on his clothing day: "I will not perform sleight-of-hand tricks and acrobatics, or go hunting." "Lord, forgive me," he sighed.

For relaxation he turned once again to youngsters. "Some of them were in their late teens and knew nothing of the faith. I found great joy in teaching them catechism. I taught children of all ages to read and write. The classes were free. The only conditions I placed

were regular attendance, attention, and monthly confession.”

Priestly Training

Back in the seminary, on 3 November 1837 John began the study of theology. At that time the course took five years, and consisted of dogmatics (the study of Christian truths), morals (the laws which a Christian must observe), sacred scripture (the word of God), and church history (the history of the church from the origins to contemporary times).

The study of theology is of great importance in the life of a priest. During these years of youthful openness, there is set up the framework of ideas and values that will form the mentality of the priest. In the course of his life the priest will refine this mentality and perhaps modify it in the light of new facts, but he will seldom change it. His way of seeing and judging will be rooted in the ideological platform that theology has given him. It is theology that makes him professionally a priest.

For John Bosco too the years of theology were extremely important. Although endowed with extraordinary gifts, he was a man of his times and especially of the church of his times.

To understand Don Bosco, it is important to understand the ‘ideological schemes’ instilled in him by his studies, the books he read, the spiritual direction he received and the homilies he heard. Peter Stella dedicates twenty pages of the first volume of his *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* to this topic.¹⁵ We can cite here only a few illuminating passages from this work.

The *dogmatic theology* of the time situated everything in the light of the account to be rendered to the divine judge, in expectation of eternal life or death. It habituated one to consider everything in terms of its value for eternity, everything as deserving reward or condemnation.

Moral theology saw everything in terms of the relationship between divine law and liberty. It trained one to consider one’s actions as a responsible adequation to divine law.

Sacred eloquence, for seminarians, was directed at nourishing the state of anguish found in sensitive souls. It stressed the great and difficult obligations imposed by the priesthood, the dangers inherent in sacred ministry (the world, women, and all kinds of dissipation), the strict account that the Lord would require of his ministers.

We might note that, impelled by this kind of preaching, John Bosco may have exaggerated at times in matters of self-control and ascetical practice. Many seminarians of the old days doubtless experienced the same kind of thing.

Judging Events

It is also of great importance, if we want to understand Don Bosco, to trace the main lines of the ‘historical mentality’ he absorbed during those years: how he was trained to see

¹⁵ P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. 1 (Zurich 1968; Rome: LAS 1979) ch. 2 = Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work* ch. 2.

and evaluate the times he was living through, that important epoch that would enter the books of history under the name of the *Risorgimento*. Only through a clear perception of this ‘historical mentality’ is it possible to understand what Don Bosco thought of the future of the church and of the world.

The pastoral letters and sermons of the time clearly considered both the French revolution and the Napoleonic Empire as ‘failures.’ They abounded with phrases such as “The most terrible of revolutions ...,” “iniquity abounded among us,” “the net was broken and we were set free.” The restoration of thrones was considered “work of the hand of God and His alone.”

The ‘failure’ was seen in the passage from the proclamation of the great principles of liberty and equality to the Terror of the revolution and the Napoleonic dictatorship. This proved that the principle of the Enlightenment (adopted by the French revolution) of “reason as the unique way to the truth and the good” led to disastrous consequences.

It was therefore imperative to reevaluate the ‘religious dimension’: it could not be reduced to the limits of human reason. It was imperative to reevaluate the authority of the king, qualified only by the observance of divine laws: with its enlightened wisdom, this authority had to keep in check the revolutionary forces waiting to foster disorder and violence.

These revaluations were ambiguous. They could lead to an authoritarian Christianity, an alliance between altar and throne incapable of understanding that ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ are Christian values. These are the ambiguities of the ‘Catholic conservatism’ that dominated the scene almost up to 1848.

Quietly, however, even in ecclesiastical circles, other ideas were circulating—those of ‘Catholic liberalism.’ The validity of the main principles of the revolution was granted. The violence of the Jacobins and of the Napoleonic dictatorship was condemned. A system of balance of powers was advocated, one in which the king controlled the fervour of the revolutionaries, but at the same time accepted a constitution that guaranteed liberty and equality. Freedom and equality, however, were advocated for all except the ‘lower classes.’

Both liberals and conservatives were afraid of ‘democratic equality’: as the Terror had shown, this kind of equality soon transformed itself into the tyranny of a few claiming to govern ‘in the name of the people,’ leading to chaos.

Among Catholic liberals, the most illustrious were the priest and philosopher Anthony Rosmini and the writer Alessandro Manzoni.

John Bosco absorbed the historical mentality of ‘Catholic conservatism.’ His ideas were conservative, though the realities of the situation would lead him to overcome and even reverse many conservative attitudes. It could not have been otherwise: in 1832, in his encyclical *Mirari vos*, Pope Gregory XVI had declared that ‘modern liberties’ were not acceptable to Catholics. “To accept, for example, the liberty of conscience,” said the pope, “is to place Catholic truth and error on the same plane.” The text of the encyclical was in the hands of the seminarians; they had to make it the object of study and reflection.

And Where Were Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi?

While John Bosco at Chieri was absorbing these ideas, Charles Albert at Turin was the ‘champion’ of Catholic conservatism. The alliance between throne and altar was flourishing. The clergy had a dominant place at the university: a representative of the

archbishop assisted at every graduation. In 1834, on the grounds of the Arsenal, the king inaugurated a monument to Peter Micca, a man who had sacrificed himself to save the city. The speech, however, made no mention of the ‘virtues of the people,’ but only of the valor of a simple and ignorant subject, obedient and ready to sacrifice himself for his king.

In 1837, the protagonists of the *Risorgimento* (the period that would shake up Italy and reshuffle all the cards, including the ideas of ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’) were still scattered.

Giovanni Mastai-Ferretti, who in 1846 would become Pope Pius IX, was bishop of Imola. He was just 45 years old and was considered ‘a reckless bishop’ because he deplored the excesses of the papal police and was a friend of Count Pasolini, the most outstanding liberal of the city.

Camillo Cavour was 27 years old. He ran the family estate at Leri. In top-boots and straw hat, he could be seen moving around morning to night in his fields, pastures and rice paddies. He had been a young lieutenant in the garrison of Genoa in 1831. On hearing about the revolutionary movements he had shouted, “Long Live the Republic!” and had been banished to the Val d’Aosta. He left the army instead. His father, who was vicar of the city of Turin and chief of police, exiled him to the fields. Between one harvest and another, Camillo managed to tour Europe and had the opportunity to admire the parliaments of Paris and of London. He also met the Italian political exiles and concluded: “They are a pack of idiots and fanatics. I would gladly use them as manure for my beetroots.”

Mazzini was 32 years old and had just been expelled from Switzerland where he had been hatching his revolutionary schemes. He settled down on the outskirts of London and earned a living by writing for the newspapers. He grew a beard and wandered about alone, dressed in black, in the foggy streets of London.

Giuseppe Garibaldi had fled to America after the failed coup in Savoy. At the age of 30 he became commander of a privateer on the South Seas, at the service of the ‘revolutionary government’ of Rio Grande. He would soon vest his Italian Legion with its legendary red shirts: by a stroke of luck he managed to buy a large stock of red aprons meant for the *saladeros*, the butchers of Argentina.

Victor Emmanuel, 17, was living a strictly regimented life at the royal palace of Turin. He had to accompany his father to the feasts and balls of the aristocracy and stand at his side for hours. His only hours of unbridled happiness were at the stables. He spoke the rough dialect of the stable hands, rode like a swashbuckler, and was passionate about action and the open air.

Near and far, history marched on.

In 1836, Morse invented the electric telegraphic and his system of dots and dashes. The telegram would soon appear, first for the exclusive use of governments and the press, and later for the general public.

In 1837 cholera claimed the life of Giacomo Leopardi. He was only 39. Queen Victoria ascended the throne in England, beginning her long reign that would see England become the foremost colonial power of the world.

In 1838 Marquis Tancredi di Barolo, ex-mayor of Turin, died. His widow decided to dedicate her life and wealth to the service of unfortunate women. Thus there arose, near the Cottolengo on the outskirts of Turin, an institution for fallen women and ex-prisoners.

In 1839 King Ferdinand II ordered the construction of the first stretch of Italian railway, Naples-Granatello, and Jacques Daguerre built the first photo camera. Thanks to

this humble inventor, Don Bosco would become one of the first saints whose exact features would be preserved for posterity.

14

'DON BOSCO'

During the summer holidays of 1838, the young 'theologian' John Bosco was invited to preach his maiden sermon at Alfiano, on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. He remembers:

The parish priest, Fr Joseph Pelato, was a man of great piety and learning, so I asked him for his opinion about my sermon. He answered:

"Very good, well drawn up. You will become a good preacher."

"Do you think the people understood?"

"Very little, I am afraid. My brother priest, I and a few others might have understood."

"Yet the ideas were so simple."

"They might look easy to you, but for the people they are too high. It's all very well to weave a sermon based on sacred history and the history of the church, but the people don't understand."

"What do you suggest then?"

"Drop the classical style, use the dialect, or even Italian if you choose, but keep to the level of the common folk. Instead of arguments, use examples and comparisons, and keep them simple and practical. Remember that people follow little, and that the truths of the faith have to be explained in the simplest possible way."

Don Bosco writes that this piece of advice was one of the most precious of his life. He kept it always in mind while preaching, teaching catechism and writing books.

A Strange Pact with the Beyond

In November 1838, John Bosco began his second year of theology. This year would be dominated by a tragic event and a shattering experience.

During the last month of the holidays, Louis Comollo had said something strange to John. Looking upon a row of vines from a hill, he had said:

"Next year, I hope to drink a better wine."

"What do you mean?" At first Louis refused to answer. Then he said:

"From some time now, I feel such a strong desire for heaven, that I feel it will be impossible to live longer on earth."

Early in the academic year, another strange detail was added. John and Louis had

read together the life of a saint and John had commented:

“How nice it would be if the first among us to die were to bring some news of the beyond to the other.”

Louis was taken up by the idea.

“Let’s make a pact,” he exclaimed. “God willing, the first among us to die will come to tell the other whether he is in paradise. Agreed?”

They shook hands.

On the morning of 25 March, on the way to chapel, Louis stopped John.

“It’s over for me,” he said. “I’m feeling very unwell, and I know I will soon die.”

John tried to make a joke out of it.

“Oh, come on! You’ll be fine. Just yesterday we walked together for an hour. Stop getting ideas.”

But Louis was right. He collapsed in the chapel and had to be taken to the infirmary. The fever soared alarmingly.

31 March was Easter Sunday. Louis was given viaticum. He was exhausted and drained. Finding John alone with him for a moment, he caught him by the hand.

“The moment has come when we have to leave each other, John,” he said. “We were thinking that we would become priests together and continue helping and advising each other. But God has other plans. Promise you will pray for me!”

He died on 2 April at dawn, holding John’s hand. He was not yet 22.

Within 48 hours a strange event took place that shook the life of the seminary. Here it is in the words of Don Bosco himself:

On the night between 3 and 4 April I was in my bed in the dormitory containing about 20 seminarians. At about 11.30 p.m. a rumbling sound came from the corridor. It sounded as if a heavy carriage drawn by many horses was pulling up to the door of our dormitory. The seminarians all woke up but no one said a word. I was petrified by terror. The noise came closer. The door flew open violently. I clearly heard the voice of Comollo saying three times: “Bosco, I am saved!” Then the noise ceased. My companions had jumped out of their beds, and some were clustered around the prefect of the dormitory, Fr Joseph Fiorito of Rivoli. That, I remember, was the first time in my life that I experienced fear. I was so terrified that I preferred to die. I became so sick that I almost died.

Fr Lemoyne, who lived at the Oratory with Don Bosco from 1883 to 1888, declares: “Fr Fiorito recounted this apparition more than once to the superiors of the Oratory.”

Millet Bread and Barbera

The serious illness mentioned by Don Bosco was a form of depressive exhaustion that dragged on into the first months of the next academic year. He felt repelled by food, and suffered from obstinate insomnia. After many months the doctor ordered complete rest. John remained in bed almost a month.

He recovered in a way that is curious and almost incredible. When Margaret heard that he had been in bed for many days, she came to see him bringing a huge loaf of millet bread and a bottle of old Barbera wine. For the poor, malnutrition was the only sickness, and

good food the only remedy. The hill people of those days knew nothing of diseases with difficult names and sophisticated medicines.

John did not want to humiliate his mother by refusing her gifts. He took a piece of bread and a sip of wine. Almost without noticing, he took another, and yet another. Between bites and sips he finished the bread and emptied the bottle. At the end he collapsed into a profound sleep “that lasted two days and a night.” When he woke up at last, he felt completely cured.

“I Trembled at the Thought”

The recovery was so fast and vigorous that “at the end of the year I thought of gaining a year during the holidays. Such permission was granted only rarely in those times. I went to Archbishop Frasoni and asked for permission to cover the treatises of the fourth year during the holidays, so as to finish the five years of theology by the end of the academic year 1840-41. The reason I gave was my age: I was already 24.”

The archbishop first examined the results of the previous years and then granted the favour on condition that all examinations be cleared and the subdiaconate received before November. Fr Cinzano, parish priest of Castelnuovo, was appointed examiner. After two months of intense study, John appeared for the examinations.

The subdiaconate was, in those days, a decisive step in the life of a seminarian. It included a lifelong vow of chastity, from which the church did not dispense anybody for any reason whatsoever.

The seminarian preparing to receive this order had to make a ten day spiritual retreat, during which he would make a general confession, going over his whole life, asking himself and the confessor, who represented God, whether he was in a position to bind himself forever.

Remembering those days, Don Bosco wrote: “I wanted to go ahead, but I trembled at the thought of binding myself for life.”

On 19 September 1840, the ordaining bishop invited John Bosco to reflect once more on the importance of the order he was about to receive. If he was determined, let him take one step forward. John Bosco took a simple step forward on the floor of the church. With that gesture, he left behind every prospect of a worldly career.

A Priest Never Goes Alone to Paradise

In November 1840, John Bosco began his fifth and final year of theology.

On 29 March 1840 he received the order of diaconate, the last step before priesthood.

On 26 May, deacon John Bosco entered the spiritual retreat in preparation for his priestly ordination. Following the advice of his spiritual director, he meditated long on the words of the psalm, “Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord? Who shall dwell in his sanctuary? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart.” Looking back at his life, he saw that his hands, ever since Margaret had made him join them in prayer, had miraculously remained pure.

In a little notebook he writes: “A priest never goes to heaven or hell alone. If he lives well, he will go to heaven with the souls saved by his good example; if he lives badly and

gives scandal, he will suffer damnation with the souls who are damned because of him. I will therefore do all I can to keep the following resolutions.”

He wrote down nine basic resolutions, mostly repeating and making more explicit the ones he had taken at his vestition. Three instead were a deepening of what would be his characteristic ‘priestly style’:

- I will make rigorous use of my time.
- I will suffer, work, humble myself always and in everything when the salvation of souls is at stake.
- The charity and sweetness of St Francis of Sales shall be my guide.

A Priest Forever

On 5 June 1841, in the chapel of the archbishop’s palace in Turin, John Bosco, clothed in a white alb, prostrated himself before the altar. The austere notes of the Gregorian chant descended from the organ. The priests and seminarians present invoked the great saints of the church: Peter, Paul, Benedict, Bernard, Francis, Catherine, Ignatius...

Pale and drawn because of the efforts of the previous days and the emotion of the moment, John got up and knelt before the archbishop. Louis Fransoni laid hands on his head, invoking the Holy Spirit to descend and consecrate him a priest forever.

A few minutes later, joining his voice to that of the archbishop, John began his first concelebration. He had become ‘Don Bosco.’

He remembers his first Mass with simplicity:

I celebrated my first Mass in the Church of St Francis of Assisi, assisted by Fr Joseph Cafasso, my great benefactor and spiritual director. I was being anxiously awaited for the feast of the Holy Trinity in my village, where there had been no first Mass for a long time. But I preferred to celebrate it quietly in Turin, at the altar of the Guardian Angel. It was truly the most beautiful day of my life. At the memento for the departed, I prayed for my dear ones and my benefactors, especially Fr Calosso, whom I have always considered as my great and outstanding benefactor. It is a pious belief that God grants any grace asked by a new priest at his first Mass. I asked fervently for *efficacy of speech*, so as to be able to do good to souls.

Don Bosco chose to celebrate his second Mass at the altar of the *Consolata* in the great shrine of Turin. Lifting up his eyes he saw her there, the Lady shining like the sun, who had spoken to him seventeen years before in the dream. “Become humble, strong and robust,” she had said. Don Bosco had tried hard to do that. Now the time had come when he would begin to “understand everything.”

The following Thursday, feast of *Corpus Christi*, a day of obligation in those days, Don Bosco celebrated Mass in his native village.

The bells rang longer than usual, and the church was packed. “They loved me,” remembers Don Bosco, “and they were all happy for me.”

The youngsters could not believe that the young priest used to be an acrobat. The grown-ups remembered him as a playmate and school companion. The old people of the hills around had seen him so often on their roads, with his boots round his neck and books in his hand.

That evening, Mamma Margaret found a moment to speak to him alone: “John, now that you are a priest, you are closer to Jesus. I have not read any of your books, but remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not realize it immediately, but slowly you will see that your mother was right. From now on, think only of the salvation of souls and don’t worry at all about me.”

15

LEARNING TO BE A PRIEST

What would Don Bosco do now?

He was intelligent, willing to work, and poor.

He had three offers before him. A noble family of Genoa asked him to tutor their children. Many rich families in those days preferred to keep a private tutor rather than send their children to public schools. Almost always they asked for a priest. This particular family was offering Don Bosco a salary of 1000 *lire* per year. It was an excellent offer.

The people of his village were asking him to accept the post of chaplain at Morialdo, promising to double the present salary.

The parish priest of Castelnuovo suggested that he become his assistant. He also assured him a good salary.

Strangely, all were speaking to Don Bosco of money, as if becoming a priest meant settling into a comfortable job. Only Mamma Margaret, who always had to count every cent to make ends meet, reminded him: "If you become rich, I'll never set foot in your house."

To cut things short, Don Bosco went to Turin to consult Fr Cafasso.

"What am I to do?"

"Do not accept any of these offers. Come here to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* and finish your priestly formation."

Fr Cafasso was far-sighted. He understood that the human and spiritual potential of Don Bosco could never be fully used in a family or a parish. Turin instead could make good use of him, with its new neighborhoods, new times and new problems. Fr Cafasso's only job would be to keep some restraint on him.

First Finding: The Squalor of the Suburbs

The Convitto was an ex-monastery attached to the Church of St Francis of Assisi. In these premises, the theologian Fr Louis Guala, assisted by Fr Cafasso, was preparing 45 young priests to become "priests of the time and of the society in which they would have to live and work."

The course lasted two years, though Don Bosco did three by way of exception. The priests attended a conference in the morning by Fr Guala and another in the evening by Fr Cafasso. The rest of the day they exercised their ministry in hospitals, prisons, charitable institutions, palaces, popular tenements and garrets. They preached in the churches, gave catechism lessons to the young, and assisted the sick and the aged.

The conferences were not about theological theories. They were reflections on the daily apostolic experiences of the young priests. In today's language, we would say that the young priests were sent for a first-hand experience of the social and ecclesiastical situation,

and then called to a guided reflection on their pastoral action. Don Bosco summarized all this in a few words: “There one learnt how to be a priest.”

Fr Cafasso was small, frail and unimposing, but he was a man of untiring activity, teaching, preaching, hearing confessions and visiting prisons day after day.

From 1841 he became the ‘spiritual director’ of Don Bosco. Don Bosco would confess to him, ask advice before any important decision, discuss his projects of life and follow his advice.

Up to this moment, Don Bosco had known only the poverty of the countryside. He had no idea of the misery of the suburbs. Fr Cafasso told him: “Go, look around.”

“From the very first Sunday,” Fr Rua would testify, “Don Bosco went around the city to get an idea of the moral conditions of the young.”

He was devastated by what he saw. The suburbs were zones of turmoil and revolt, belts of desolation. Hardened teenagers roamed the streets without jobs, ready for anything.

“He met a great number of youngsters of every age,” continues Fr Rua, “who roamed about the streets and squares, especially on the outskirts of the city, gambling, brawling, cursing and blaspheming.”

The Labour Market

Next to the city market, Don Bosco discovered another market, ‘the market of young hands.’ “The area near Porta Palazzo,” writes Fr Lemoyne, “was swarming with peddlers, match-sellers, shoe-shines, chimney-sweeps, stable-boys, hand-bill pushers and errand boys. They were all poor boys living from hand to mouth.”

Don Bosco himself in his *Memoirs* remembers that the first groups of boys he could approach were “bricklayers, stone-cutters, plasterers, pavers, tile-setters and others who hailed from distant places.”

Coming from needy families, they were often unemployed and were on the lookout for any job. They were the first ‘products’ of the immigrants crowding into the slums that would soon surround every city.

He could see them climbing the scaffolds of new constructions, looking for jobs in shops, or walking the streets raising the cries of the chimney-sweep. He saw them gambling on street corners with the hard, set faces of those ready to try anything in order to succeed in life.

When he tried to approach them, they backed away in mistrust and scorn. They were not the boys of Becchi, they were not looking for interesting stories and magic tricks. They were the ‘wolves,’ the wild animals of his dreams, even if their eyes betrayed more fear than ferocity.

The Industrial Revolution

The boys on the streets of Turin were a ‘perverse side-effect’ of an event that was beginning to shake up the world, the industrial revolution.

James Watt had patented his ‘steam engine’ in 1769 at Glasgow in Scotland. It was a device to convert the energy of heat into the movement of levers and belts. A single 100 horsepower unit could do the work of 880 men. A spinning-mill driven by a Watt engine could produce as much yarn as 200,000 workers. To look after these spinning machines one

needed only 750 workers under a few sheds.

This was the beginning of ‘factories’ with ‘workers’ or ‘proletarians.’ Before, people were farmers, merchants or artisans. Artisans used their own tools and worked in their own shops. Among the artisans there were also spinners who worked cotton or wool manually.

The enormous output of the factories led to a dramatic lowering of the cost of cloth and a huge development of the market. At the same time there was an enormous increase in the use of iron for the production of machines, looms and railways, and in the extraction of coal for the use of steam engines and the production of iron.

Simultaneously there was a boom in the construction of railways, steamships and other means of transport.

During those same years, thanks to the progressive victory of medicine and hygiene over diseases like the plague and smallpox, the population of Europe soared from 180 million in 1800 to 260 million in 1850.

The overwhelming development of industry with its factories plunged private artisans into a crisis. Waves of people left the countryside and flocked into the cities. The factories developed a physiognomy of their own: centres in which a large number of workers did monotonous and repetitive tasks under a single master.

England saw the growth of new cities around the coal, iron and textile industries. The industrial revolution was in full swing. Born in England, it quickly invaded France, Germany, Belgium and America.

According to historian Carlo Cipolla, this was one of the greatest and most radical changes in the history of humanity.¹⁶

The first great change occurred in the night of prehistory. Human beings at that time were “disconnected little bands of brutal and savage hunters.” With the Neolithic revolution they changed into cultivators of plants and breeders of animals. “Between the hunters of the Paleolithic age and the breeders of the Neolithic there is a chasm. It is the difference between the savage state and civilization.” This first radical change in human history occurred over the course of thousands of years, and human beings had the time for gradual adaptation.

The second great revolution, the industrial revolution, “invaded the globe, upset life and overturned the structures of all existing human societies in the space of seven or eight generations”—about 150 or 200 years. Humanity was faced with immense new problems demanding urgent attention.

Immense Progress

The industrial revolution opened the doors to a completely new world, to new and unknown sources of energy: coal, oil, dynamite, electricity, the atom. “Watt’s discovery was followed by a whole series of similar inventions which permitted the exploitation of the new energies for both production and destruction.

The industrial results were staggering. By 1850 the past was not just past, it was dead.

The world population exploded: 750 million in 1750, 1.2 billion in 1850, 2.5 billion in 1950.

¹⁶ Carlo M. Cipolla, “La rivoluzione industriale,” in *Storia delle idee politiche, economiche, sociali*, ed. L. Firpo (Turin: UTET, 1971) 5:11-26.

The well-being brought about by the industrial revolution had never been known before. “In a pre-industrial country, half the income was spent on food. During the frequent famines, the entire income was not sufficient for survival. In an industrialized country, famine disappeared and food absorbed only one-fourth of the income.”

Sweeping changes took place in habits, ideas, beliefs, education and family life. The new generations were faced with enormous problems. Suffice it to mention the uncontrolled increase of population, the ever more dreadful new weapons, the collapse of the traditional state, pollution, and the marginalization of the aged.

Notwithstanding these problems, the industrial revolution allowed humanity “to triumph over nature, overcome distances and break the chains that had held it captive for millennia” (Giacomo Martina).

The Frightful Human Cost

But this immense progress exacted, especially in the first hundred years, a frightful human price. “A tiny minority of rich people imposed a veritable slavery on a numberless multitude of proletarians” (*Rerum Novarum*).

In this new era of humanity, there was a huge ‘black hole’: the Workers’ Question. In industrial cities a new class was formed, that of the proletarians, whose only riches were the strength of their arms and their children. Their conditions were frightful.

In 1850 (we draw from the research of Dolleans and Villermé) half the British population was already crowded in the cities. Their ‘houses’ were, for the most part, basements in which entire families lived without sufficient air and light, foul and damp because of the drains. In the factories there was no hygiene to speak of and no regulations except those dictated by the master.

The salaries were never enough to keep hunger at bay. Food was usually boiled nettles. The disintegration of the family, rampant alcoholism, prostitution and criminality, the diffusion of new illnesses linked to working conditions such as tuberculosis and silicosis—all these became mass phenomena.

Not only men and women but also children worked in the factories, and their life became one of continuous torture. Fatigue (they had to stand the whole time, sitting was forbidden), sleep and tiredness led to frequent accidents at work. Even without that, the life of these unfortunate creatures was short.

“Children were recruited in their hundreds from the poorer areas of London,” writes Margaret Laski. “Taken to the station, they were packed in carriages and sent to the textile mills of Lancashire. Many of them could barely walk. They worked twelve or more hours a day. The weaving was done by the machines, and there was no need of a man to look after these machines, a child was enough. The children succumbed to sleep and fatigue in the loneliness of the dark factories. The work day was from dawn to dusk with a single meal at midday. Many succumbed to disease.”

By 1850, the proletariat of France, Belgium, and Germany was in the same conditions as that of England. A family of workers could barely survive, with nothing to spare for doctors, medicines or clothes. Statistics reveal that at Nantes, France, 66 children out of 100 died before the age of 5. The average life of a worker, between 1830 and 1840, was 17-19 years. These were the years in which the workers of Paris and Lyons rose to the cry, “To live working or die fighting,” and were dispersed by cannons.

Slaughter of the Innocents in Italy

The industrial revolution arrived late in Italy for want of capital and raw materials. The first textile factories were set up in the Lombardo-Veneto region held by Austria (the Rossi mill at Schio in 1817, and Marzotto at Valdagno in 1836). Mechanical industries began at Milan in 1846. Industrial growth was slow and sluggish.

Rudolph Morando writes about life in the textile mills of Lombardy: “The silk mills, employing about 100 to 200 workers, were the greatest employers of children. Their tasks were so monotonous that they were quickly reduced to idiocy. The work day was 13 hours in winter and 15-16 hours in summer. Mills driven by water never stopped, and even children worked all night. The damp and unhealthy surroundings, the early rising, the long hours of work in unnatural positions were the causes, as a local doctor averred, of hardening of the glands, scrofula, rickets and tumours. More than 150,000 children spent the flower of their life in this way in Lombardy.”

By 1841 the industrial revolution was making a slow entry into Turin. The drop in prices thanks to a lowering of the octroi on silk and grains had induced land owners to improve their methods of cultivation. In 1839, Charles Albert approved the construction of the railway line between Turin and Genoa, and had begun re-examining the idea of a canal between Genoa and the river Po. In 1841 the engineer Medail presented his project for the Fréjus tunnel. In the following year, the Agrarian Association was born, and the king donated his property at Pollengo for an experimental farm.

The city developed rapidly. In the ten years 1838-48, the population rose from 117,000 to 137,000, an increase of 17%. The construction industry experienced a vigorous development. More than 700 new houses were built, giving shelter to 7000 families. Immigration kept a steady pace. It would reach its peak in 1849-50 with 50,000 or perhaps even 100,000 immigrants.

Those who arrived were poverty-stricken families or single youngsters from Val Sesia, from the valleys of Lanzo, from Monferrato and even from Lombardy. On building sites, Don Bosco saw “boys 8 to 10 years of age, far from their own villages, working with bricklayers, spending their days going up and down rickety scaffoldings, exposed to sun, wind and rain, climbing steep ladders loaded with bricks and mortar, with no instruction other than the rebuffs and cuffs of their masters.”

In the evenings, the families climbed up to their garrets, the only accommodation they could afford. Don Bosco climbed to see these houses and found them “low, narrow, squalid and dirty. Entire families slept, cooked and at times even worked there.”

Assessing the Situation

Gangs of boys loitered, especially on Sundays, on the streets and along the banks of the Po, staring at “the well dressed and perfumed” who passed by without even a glance.

Don Bosco quickly assessed the situation. Those boys needed a school and work which could assure them a better future. They had need of space to be themselves, to unleash their youthful energies by running and jumping about instead of rotting on sidewalks. They needed to encounter God and discover and realize their own dignity. Don Bosco was neither the only one nor the first to have come to such conclusions. Even Charles

Albert was, at that moment, feeling the urgency of helping the masses.

The king was, of course, worried mainly about the 'other revolution' that was waiting to happen, the political revolution, which would explode in 1847-48 and which in Italy would go by the name of the *Risorgimento*. He was divided between the ideas of the absolutists, which he had sworn to Charles Felix to defend unto death, and those of the liberals, who were pressing for a constitution and the unification of Italy.

Keeping an eye on Austria (the arch-enemy of any concession to the liberals), he shifted slowly and with great caution from absolutism to moderate liberalism. He established relations with Massimo d'Azeglio, Cesare Balbo and Giacomo Durando. This slow and long path would thus make him the protagonist of the first *Risorgimento*.

But he was also worried about the social conditions in his kingdom, and was ready to encourage any charitable or educational initiative on behalf of the masses. The priests and politicians of the time were themselves divided on the question of liberal ideas. But they found themselves in agreement when it came to battling the material and moral misery of the people.

A whole range of schools for the working classes thus arose in Turin. In the academic year 1840-41, the government agency for 'beggars' set up 10 schools for boys with 927 pupils, and 9 for girls with 519 pupils. In 1845, two technical schools were opened for workers offering courses in mechanics and in applied chemistry. In 1846, 700 workers applied for admission to the 8 evening schools run by the Christian Brothers.

Don Bosco himself was focussing his interest on the problems of youth. Fr Cafasso saw it and decided to give him a push.

16

“MY NAME IS BARTHOLOMEW GARELLI”

The people of Turin had nicknamed Fr Cafasso *el previ d'la furca*, the priest of the gallows. He was in the habit of visiting the prisons. When some unfortunate person was condemned to death, he would ride with him on the cart, comforting him till the end.

Turin had four prisons at the time, two for women and two for men. Of the latter, one was near the Church of the Holy Martyrs, and the other on via San Domenico.

On one of his visits, Fr Cafasso invited Don Bosco to accompany him.

The dark corridors, the moist walls, the sad and squalid looks of the prisoners disturbed Don Bosco deeply. He felt disgusted and choked.

But what anguished him most deeply was the sight of boys behind bars. “I was horrified at the sight of a great number of youngsters between the ages of 12 and 18, all healthy, strong and smart, but idle, swarming with vermin and deprived of bread, both spiritual and material.”

He visited them again, sometimes with Fr Cafasso and sometimes by himself. He tried to speak to them “not only during the catechism lessons” which were supervised by the guards, but also individually. At first the reactions were rude. He had to swallow heavy insults. But little by little one or two began opening up, and he could speak with them as a friend.

He came to know their sad stories, their descent into crime, and the anger that sometimes made them so fierce. The most common offence was theft, occasioned by hunger or else by envy of the rich people who exploited their work and left them in misery.

Society had done nothing for them, besides locking them up.

All they got was black bread and water. The prison guards, afraid of them, beat them at the slightest pretext.

They were locked up in big common rooms, where the worst elements quickly took control.

“What impressed me most,” writes Don Bosco, “was that many were determined to lead a better life once they were set free.” Perhaps this was only out of fear of prison. “But after a short time they were back again.”

He tried to discover the cause, and concluded that it was because “they were left to themselves.” Either they had no family, or else they had been disowned for having brought dishonour to the family name.

“I said to myself: these boys should find a friend to take care of them, to assist them, teach them, bring them to church on Sundays and holy days of obligation. Then they would not go back to prison.”

Every day he managed to make more friends. His ‘catechism lessons behind bars’

were attended more and more willingly. “As I made them conscious of their dignity as human beings,” he writes, “they felt a sense of goodness in their hearts, and resolved to become better.”

But often, when he came back, he would find everything destroyed. The faces had hardened again, the voices had become sarcastic and blasphemous. Don Bosco was not always able to overcome the backsliding.

One day he burst into tears. There was a moment of hesitation among the prisoners.

“Why is that priest crying?” one of them asked.

“Because he loves us. My mother would cry too, if she saw me in this place.”

Waiting ‘As in the Good Old Days’

Leaving the prison, Don Bosco decided once and for all: “At all costs, we must prevent boys like these ending up in prison. I want to save youngsters like these.”

“I revealed this thought to Fr Cafasso,” he writes, “and with his advice I tried to turn it into a reality.”

Other priests in Turin were also looking for solutions to the problems of youth and were following different paths.

There were 14 parishes in the city and 2 in the suburbs. The priests were aware of the problem, but waited for the youngsters to come to the sacristies or churches for the evening catechism or Sunday school. They mourned the ‘good old days’ when immigrant boys would come to them with a letter of presentation from their parish priests. They failed to realize that those arrangements had collapsed under the mighty waves of immigration. The ‘good old days’ would never return.

New methods had to be invented, new ways had to be tried. Assistant parish priests who continued to take care of funerals and baptisms would have to get out of their rut and try out new ministries in stores, workshops and market places.

At Milan, where the industrial revolution had arrived much earlier, the problem of youth had already been addressed with some success. There was a network of institutions abreast of the times: the ‘oratories.’ In 1850 the diocesan directory of Milan would list 15 oratories, some of which had been active for decades. At Brescia, Fr Ludovico Pavoni had opened his oratory for boys who were ‘poor, uncouth and despised’ already in 1809.

At Turin, instead, the problem continued to be a problem. Parish priests were still hesitating. Even in 1846, after some priests of Turin had gone to see what was being done in Milan, they would conclude: “The parish priests of the city of Turin, gathered in conference, debated the convenience of opening oratories. Having weighed the fears and hopes, and seeing the impossibility of providing oratories in each parish, they encourage Fr John Bosco to carry on (with his own oratory) until some new decision has been reached.”

But while the parish priests hesitated, some young priests acted.

Fr Cocchi’s Experiment

The first was Fr John Cocchi, a lively priest from Druent. He had been ordained in 1836, while John Bosco was reaching the end of his first year of philosophy in the seminary.

Fr Cocchi founded the first oratory in Turin in 1841, after a failed attempt a year earlier. It was located at Moschino in Borgo Vanchiglia, a miserable place of ill-repute. It

was under the patronage of the Guardian Angel, and was situated in the parish of the Annunciation on the bank of the Po.

Fr Cocchi was a sensitive and ingenious priest. He had the brilliant ideas and strokes of genius of a founder, but lacked the perseverance and far-sightedness of an achiever. He was also somewhat liberal, dissenting from the political line of the archbishop and of the pope. He was therefore ‘suspect,’ even though his practical charity was a contrast to the inertia of so many other ecclesiastics.

In 1849-50, he would be one of the animators of the ‘Charitable association for orphans and abandoned youth,’ and later of the *Collegio degli Artigianelli*, St Martin’s Oratory and the ‘Agricultural Colony’ of Moncucco, all initiatives in favour of youth and of the depressed classes.

Together with Fr Cocchi, other priests were also beginning to exercise pastoral ministry for the young. They were priests ‘free’ of parochial duties. Many had been or were still at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, bound into a kind of brotherhood by their common experiences.

“For several years during the summer,” Don Bosco remembers, “Fr Cafasso himself used to give catechism classes to bricklayer-apprentices in the sacristy of the Church of St Francis of Assisi. The excessive burden of his occupations compelled him to give up this ministry that was so dear to him.”

Don Bosco himself, as we have seen, had begun roaming the streets as soon as he entered the Convitto. He met with diffidence and hostility, but also with boys who became attached to him: “I found myself at the centre of a group of boys who would follow me everywhere I went, even into the sacristy of the church of the Convitto.”

Fr Cafasso would have liked him to continue his catechism classes for the young bricklayers, but Don Bosco, after the traumatic experience of the prisons, was thinking of something more durable.

As he had told Cafasso, he wanted to establish a centre in which boys abandoned by their families could find a friend, where young ex-prisoners could find help and support. A centre linked not to a parish but to his person. One that would function not only for catechism on Sundays but also during the week, through friendly contact, assistance and meetings at their places of work.

A Hail Mary to Begin With

This idea contained in a nutshell the originality of Don Bosco’s Oratory.

It received a timid start on the morning of 8 December 1841, the same year in which Fr Cocchi had founded his first oratory in Turin, and 35 days after Don Bosco had entered the Convitto.

He himself describes the scene with the exquisiteness and simplicity of a page from antiquity.¹⁷

On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, I was vesting for Mass in the sacristy. The sacristan, Joseph Comotti, seeing a young boy in a corner, invited him to come and serve my Mass.

¹⁷ Translator’s note: The description of this scene is one of the most touching and important of Don Bosco’s story and history.

“I don’t know how to,” he answered, embarrassed.

“Come,” said the sacristan, “I want you to serve Mass.”

“I don’t know how to,” repeated the boy. “I’ve never served Mass.”

“You dunce!” said the sacristan furiously. “If you don’t know how to serve Mass, what are you doing in the sacristy?” He grabbed a stick and began raining blows on the poor fellow. The boy took to his heels.

“What are you doing?” I shouted. “Why are you beating him?”

“Why does he come to the sacristy if he doesn’t know how to serve Mass?”

“You have done wrong.”

“What’s that to you?”

“He is a friend of mine. Call him back immediately, I want to talk to him.”

The boy came back, mortified. His hair was closely cropped, and his jacket was white with lime. He was a young immigrant. Before leaving home, perhaps his relatives had said to him, “When at Turin, go for Mass.” He had come, but had not dared enter the church full of well-dressed people. He had tried to enter the sacristy, as men and boys do in the countryside.

I asked him kindly, “Have you heard Mass already?”

“No.”

“Come and hear my Mass. Afterwards I want to speak to you about something that might interest you.”

He agreed. After Mass and thanksgiving, I took him aside and spoke to him with a smile:

“My dear friend, what’s your name?”

“Bartholomew Garelli.”

“Where are you from?”

“Asti.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a bricklayer.”

“Your father?”

“He’s dead.”

“And your mother?”

“She’s dead too.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Can you read and write?”

“No.”

“Can you sing?” Wiping his eyes, the boy looked at me surprised.

“No.”

“Can you whistle?” Bartholomew laughed. That’s what I was after. I knew now that we were friends.

“Have you made your first communion?”

“Not yet.”

“Have you made your confession?”

“Yes, when I was small.”

“Do you go to catechism?”
 “I don’t dare to. The smaller boys make fun of me.”
 “If I were to teach you separately, would you come?”
 “Very willingly.”
 “Even here?”
 “Provided no one beats me!”
 “Don’t worry. Now that you are my friend, no one will hurt you. When shall we begin?”
 “Whenever you like.”
 “At once?”
 “With pleasure.”

Don Bosco knelt and recited a Hail Mary. Forty-five years later he would say to his Salesians: “All the blessings we have received from heaven are fruit of that first Hail Mary said with fervour and right intention.”

After the Hail Mary, Don Bosco made the sign of the cross, but noticed that Bartholomew made only a vague gesture. With gentleness he taught him to do it properly. In the Asti dialect common to them both, he explained why we call God ‘Father.’ At the end he added:

“I would like you to come next Sunday too, Bartholomew.”
 “Willingly.”
 “But not alone. Bring some of your friends too.”

Bartholomew Garelli, the young bricklayer from Asti, was Don Bosco’s first ambassador to the young workers of his neighbourhood. He told his friends about the nice young priest “who could even whistle,” and passed on the invitation.

Four days later, on Sunday, nine boys entered the sacristy. They were coming not to “the Church of St Francis of Assisi” but “to see Don Bosco.” The Oratory was born.

‘At Once’: Don Bosco’s Trademark

In Don Bosco’s dialogue with Bartholomew Garelli, we find the expression ‘at once.’¹⁸ This looks like any other expression, but it is not. It is more like a seed that, when planted, grows into a tree.

In the year 1841, ‘at once’ was a key word for a whole group of priests in Turin. In the midst of the uncertainties generated by the first industrial revolution, in the absence of readymade plans and programs of action, these priests directed all their energies to doing something ‘at once’ for the benefit of poor youth and people in need.

But this ‘at once’ would, in a special way, be the trademark of Don Bosco and later of his Salesians, who would specialize in ‘immediate interventions’ on behalf of poor boys.

We will say something later about Don Bosco and the social question. But we would like to note right away that Don Bosco was drawn to action by the urgency of the moment, by the impossibility of waiting.

“To do something AT ONCE” would always be Don Bosco’s way of acting,

¹⁸ *Subito*, in Italian, meaning ‘immediately, at once, right away.’

because boys in need do not have the luxury of waiting for reforms, organic plans, or revolutionary changes in the system. Doing something 'at once' is not enough, of course. "If you meet someone dying of hunger, instead of giving him a fish, teach him how to fish," it will be pointed out. But the reverse is also true: give him a fish now, so that he may live to learn the art of fishing. 'Immediate intervention' alone is not enough, but neither is 'working towards a better future' enough by itself, for the poor keep dying in the meantime.

Don Bosco and his first Salesians would specialize in the 'at once,' in immediate intervention. They would provide poor young people with catechism, bread, professional training, jobs protected by labour contracts. And they would leave to other Catholics—with socialists, communists and anarchists and sometimes against them—the task of transforming the 'liberal' state, which hypocritically refused to interfere in questions of labour and allowed the powerful to grow even more powerful and the weak to be crushed.

17

THE ORATORY OF THE YOUNG BRICKLAYERS

A young priest was delivering a learned homily from the pulpit of the Church of St Francis. On the steps of a side altar, a group of young apprentice bricklayers could be seen sleeping, falling over one another.

Don Bosco passed by and tapped one of them on the shoulder. All the boys awoke in embarrassment. He smiled and whispered:

“Why are you sleeping?”

“We don’t understand a thing,” mumbled the oldest.

“Anyway, that priest there is not talking to us,” added another.

“Come with me.”

They tip-toed to the sacristy. “They were Charles Buzzetti, John Gariboldi, Germano,” Don Bosco would tell his young Salesians in later years. These young bricklayers from Lombardy would stay with him for 30 or 40 years and would become well-known at Valdocco. “They were simple apprentices then, now they are all master builders.”¹⁹

In the sacristy they were joined by Bartholomew and his friends. The number was growing. Don Bosco helped them to pray, gave a homily meant just for them, lively, conversational and full of facts and interesting stories. Afterwards they sat in the front pews of the church to hear Don Bosco’s Mass.

But the morning was long, and after Mass and a loaf of bread for breakfast, the boys were raring to play. They began in the courtyard of the Convitto, but froze every time they saw a priest passing by.

Fr Guala and Fr Cafasso understood. They issued a formal permission to the effect that Don Bosco’s boys could play in the courtyard every Sunday. That permission would never be revoked the 3 years that Don Bosco remained at the Convitto. At the time it was granted, the boys were 15; after three months they were 25, and in summer their number reached 80.

This meant that the priests had to renounce all thought of peace and of the afternoon nap on Sundays. 80 boys playing under the windows might sound like music the first time, but can become nerve-racking after a while.

Holy Pictures and Loaves

Don Bosco understood that there were limits to patience, so whenever the weather permitted, he took his boys for afternoon walks to the hills, along the river or to some shrine

¹⁹ *Memorie per l’oratorio* 129 = *Memoirs of the Oratory* 197.

of Our Lady.

During the first winter, he had decided to gather only those youngsters “who were in greatest moral danger, giving preference to those who were just out of prison.” But Don Bosco was not and would never be capable of sending away a boy who came to him. In a short time, therefore, the bulk of his ‘troop’ consisted of “stone-cutters, bricklayers, plasterers, and pavers hailing from distant places,” and who for some reason had not been able to return home during the dead season.

Fr Guala and Fr Cafasso encouraged their young priests to imitate Don Bosco. Thus Fr Carpano and Fr Ponte, six years junior to Don Bosco, soon began gathering the chimney-sweeps coming from the Val d’Aosta. Guala and Cafasso did their bit by hearing confessions, talking to the boys, and even giving a little financial help at times.

Don Bosco writes, a little embarrassed: “They were generous with holy pictures, leaflets, pamphlets, medals and little crosses.” But his young bricklayers and ex-prisoners had more urgent needs. He mentioned it to them, and “they contributed to clothe those who were most in need, and to feed others who were still in search of work.”

Looking for work for those who were unemployed, and obtaining better conditions for those who were, became Don Bosco’s main occupation during the week. “I went to visit them in their workshops or building sites. The boys were delighted, and so were their employers, who were happy to give work to youngsters who they knew would be looked after during the week and on Sundays.”

The question of the ex-prisoners was more delicate. Don Bosco tried “to place them one by one with some honest employer” and kept close contact with them during the week. The results were good. “They began to live an honest life, forgetting their past and becoming good Christians and honest citizens.”²⁰

Every Saturday Don Bosco went back to the prisons for the hardest part of his apostolate. “I went to the prisons with my pockets full of tobacco, fruit or buns. My aim was always the same: to do some good to those poor fellows who had ended up inside, to befriend them, and to convince them to come to the Oratory once they got out.”

A Hymn of Twelve Bars

2 February 1842 was the feast of the Purification of Mary, and a day of obligation at the time. Don Bosco taught his 25 boys to sing. “Without music,” he writes, “our meetings would have been like a body without a soul.” The boys sang at the top of their voices when out on the hills, but they had also learnt to sing with devotion a simple hymn to Our Lady, *Lodate Maria*.

During the Mass on the day of the feast, the congregation was astonished to see 25 scamps singing so well.

The twelve bars of that modest Marian ode would travel from oratory to oratory and from Salesian school to Salesian school. It can be heard even today on the Khasi hills of North-East India and in the slums of Brasilia or Corumbà.²¹

One cannot help smiling at the thought that this modest musical achievement of Don Bosco was contemporaneous with a great piece of music. The young Verdi’s *Nabucco* opened at the Scala in Milan on 9 March, and within days all Europe was humming the

²⁰ *Memorie per l’oratorio* 127 = *Memoirs of the Oratory* 190.

²¹ Translator’s note: Teresio Bosco wrote in 1979; but what he wrote is still valid today (2005).

chorus “Va’ pensiero.”

The Little Boy from Caronno

With the arrival of spring, the young bricklayers who had gone to their villages in the dead season were back in the city. Don Bosco’s band swelled with every passing Sunday. From Caronno Ghiringhello (now Caronno Varesino) arrived also Joseph Buzzetti, the younger brother of Charles. Joseph was only 10 years old. He took to Don Bosco like a puppy. He would never leave Don Bosco’s side.

From the spring of 1842 up to Don Bosco’s death on 31 January 1888, Joseph Buzzetti would always be near him, a calm and quiet witness of the divine and human story of the priest “who loved him so much.” Many of the remarkable events of Don Bosco’s life would have been dismissed as ‘legends’ by our diffident and demythologizing culture, were it not for the simple witness of the young bricklayer from Caronno, who never lost sight of ‘his’ Don Bosco.

“If I Had One Last Chunk of Bread”

What bound the boys to Don Bosco was his deep and cordial goodness. The boys ‘felt’ this goodness, they saw it in concrete acts and in touching gestures. Every instant of Don Bosco’s day belonged to them.

If they needed to be coached in reading or in arithmetic, Don Bosco would either find the time to do it himself or else get someone to do it for them.

If they had a cantankerous boss or were unemployed, he got busy contacting friends to find a job or an honest Christian employer.

Even when they urgently needed money, they knew that Don Bosco was ready to empty his little purse into their hands.

If their work was hard and dull, they would ask him to visit them, and he would go, entering their workshops and building sites. Seeing him and speaking to him was itself a relief.

They would often hear him say: “I love you so much that if one day I had only one last chunk of bread, I would share it with you.” They would cherish this all their life.

When he had to correct someone, he would do it, but never in public, so as not to mortify the boy. If he made a promise, he would keep it, come what may.

There were many priests in those years who were beginning to do good for poor boys. They all had one thing in common: they were kind and loving but serious. It is enough to look at the rules of St Louis Pavoni, for example, or the educational manuals of the Christian Brothers: boys were to be treated with kindness, but should never be allowed to raise their voices lest they became boisterous. Silence and recollection were to be imposed, lest the ‘little beast’ within them get loose.

The loving kindness of Don Bosco was different: it was ‘cheerful.’ As founder of the *Società dell’Allegria* he already knew the value of a noisy kind of joy, of the cheerful unleashing of the explosive energies of youth. He himself urged them: “Play, romp, make noise, but keep far from sin. That’s enough for me.”

Lots of fresh air and large open spaces were, for Don Bosco, the ideal environment for boys. He was always present, of course, making sure that they did not hurt themselves or

others. But his was a presence that was stimulating rather than dampening. He sensed that an educator must not remain a stranger to the fun, that he must take part in it, that he must organize it when it does not arise spontaneously, and that he must impede anything that might ruin it.

The boys in turn loved him and became completely attached to him. To meet him in the street was for them a moment of joy.

In Via Milano near the City Hall, he met a boy coming out of a shop with a bottle of oil in one hand and a glass of vinegar in the other. As soon as he saw Don Bosco, the boy ran to him shouting, "Good morning, Don Bosco!" The oil and the vinegar sloshed about perilously in their containers.

Seeing him so happy, Don Bosco smiled. "I bet you can't do what I am doing," he said, clapping his hands. The boy did not understand it was only a joke. Putting the oily bottle under his arm, he tried his best to clap, shouting "*Viva Don Bosco!*"

Bottle and glass came crashing down. The boy was in tears.

"My mother will thrash me!"

"Don't worry, we can fix that immediately," Don Bosco consoled him. He entered a shop and bought oil and vinegar for the boy.

"The Presidency to the Pope and the Sword to Charles Albert"

In April 1842 Turin was celebrating the marriage of the Crown Prince Victor Emmanuel to Adelaide, daughter of Archduke Ranieri of Austria, Viceroy of Lombardo-Veneto. Two major events marked the festivities: the Holy Shroud was exposed from the gallery of Palazzo Madama, and amnesty was granted to the revolutionaries of 1821 who were still in exile.

It was one more cautious step taken by Charles Albert towards moderate liberalism. The following year, 1843, the exiled Piedmontese V. Gioberti would publish a book in Brussels that would arouse great interest, *Del Primato morale e civile degli italiani*.²² Those pages contained the main ideas of the moderate liberal reformism that would go by the name of 'neo-Guelphism.' According to Gioberti, the greatness of Italy was inseparably joined to the greatness of the papacy. The independence of Italy, he went on to affirm, should therefore be realized through a federal union of the Italian states under the presidency of the pope. "The presidency to the pope and the sword to Charles Albert" would become the slogan of the neo-Guelphs.

Charles Albert was pleased, but continued to keep a suspicious eye on Austria. At Turin another moderate liberal, Cesare Balbo, was working at a book that would also cause a stir: *Le speranze d'Italia*.²³ The king discreetly conveyed his compliments, but also advised that the book be printed in Paris. At the same time he sent an official protest to the French government of Louis Philippe against the military commission given to Perrone, a general "who has been condemned by our government to death for treason." Perrone, a liberal, would eventually come back to Piedmont with full honours in 1848. In October and November of that same year, he would even become Charles Albert's prime minister.

Don Bosco watched all this, and his aversion to politics grew stronger.

²² *The Moral and Civil Primacy of the Italians*.

²³ *The Hopes of Italy*.

“Your Cassock is Too Thin”

On 30 April 1842 Canon Cottolengo died at Chieri. His Little House contained several hundreds of incurables. Some years earlier, he had been summoned by the minister for finance.

“You are the director of the Little House of Divine Providence?”

“No. I am just an instrument in the hands of providence.”

“Maybe. But where do you get the money to provide for all those sick people?”

“I have just told you: from providence.”

The minister, so accustomed to keep his feet solidly on the ground and to check incomes and expenditures, budgets and balance sheets, lost his patience:

“But the money, Reverend Father, where does the money come from?”

“Again? But I have told you twice already. Divine providence supplies us with everything, we have never been in want. I will die one day, and so will you, Mr Minister, but providence will continue to look after the poor of the Little House.”

When the health of Canon Cottolengo began to fail, Charles Albert himself sent for him.

“Canon,” he said to him in his rather brusque way, “Please remember that you too are subject to the common law of death. What will happen then to the hundreds of orphans, invalids and incurables you have gathered in your House?”

As the king was speaking, the sharp rhythmic steps of soldiers wafted up through the large window of the room.

“Your Majesty, what is going on down there?”

“It’s the change of guard. A new platoon is taking the place of the other.”

Canon Cottolengo smiled.

“That is the answer to your question, your Majesty. At the Little House too there will be a change of guard. Canon Cottolengo will go and providence will send another to take his place.”

That is exactly what happened. When Cottolengo died, he was succeeded by Canon Anglesio, and the Little House continued its life peacefully between the city market and the buildings of Marchioness Barolo.

Don Bosco remembered his first encounter with Canon Cottolengo. He had just come to Turin and had gone to pay a visit to the Little House. The Canon had asked him his name and where he was coming from, and had then added in his jocular absent-minded way: “You have the face of an honest man. Why don’t you come to work at the Little House? You will never be idle.”

Don Bosco returned many times to hear confessions and to spend some time with the sick boys. One day Canon Cottolengo met him (Dominic Bosso, one of Don Bosco’s boys, was present on the occasion). Taking hold of Don Bosco’s cassock, the Canon said:

“It’s too thin. Get a thicker one, because many boys will be hanging from it.”

He Spoke of God

And the boys did hang on to him. With every passing month the boys of the Oratory kept increasing. They were now more than 100. They needed not only bread and work, but also the faith that sustains when bread is scarce. And Don Bosco’s first preoccupation was to

lead them to God, because he was not a philanthropist but a priest.

“It was such a strange thing,” he writes, “to see my confessional surrounded by boys, forty or fifty of them, not only on feast days but also during the week, waiting to make their confession.”

Confession was not an easy thing for the boys. Don Bosco would help them with simple hints: “If you don’t know how to begin, you only have to tell your confessor to help you. The confessor will understand, he will ask you a few questions, and everything will be fine.”

“Don Bosco,” says Peter Stella, “administered the sacrament with a vivid sense of sin and of grace. He was not there merely as a judge; he was there especially as a father, eager to see his boys grow in the life of grace. His years at the Convitto helped him strengthen his persuasion that souls could be brought to God not by rigour but with goodness.”

The natural crowning of confession was communion, which many of his boys received every week.

Even in his ordinary conversations, during walks or games, Don Bosco could speak freely of God. Effortlessly he could pass from telling jokes and amusing stories to speaking of heaven. In moments of great joy he would look at his boys and exclaim: “How happy we will be together in heaven!”

Sometimes the conversation would veer to the topic of good and evil, life and eternity, and someone would ask:

“Will I be saved?”

And Don Bosco would reply:

“What a question! Do you think that God has created heaven to leave it empty? Of course, climbing up there calls for some effort, but I want all of us to get there. What a feast that will be!”

18

THE MARCHIONESS AND THE YOUNG PRIEST

In the summer of 1844, Don Bosco finished his three-year stay at the Convitto. Fr Cafasso paid a visit to Fr Borel, spiritual director of the Refuge founded by Marchioness Barolo.

“I would like to send you a first class priest. Could you find him a room and a salary?”

“But there is not enough work here even for me! How will I keep him busy?”

“Leave him free. If the salary is a problem, I’ll pay him myself. His name is Bosco. He has begun a sort of oratory for poor boys at the Convitto. If we don’t find him a place in the city, the archbishop will send him as assistant parish priest to some village, and the boys of the oratory will take to the streets again. That would be a real pity.”

“All right then. I’ll speak to the Marchioness.”

Back at the Convitto, Fr Cafasso called Don Bosco:

“Pack your things and go to the Refuge. You will be with Fr Borel, and you will have ample time to look after your boys.”

Hair-shirt under the Finery

Marchioness Julie Frances de Colbert was, at the time, one of the most outstanding ladies of Turin high society. She had escaped from France during the revolution and had married Marquis Charles Tancredi Falletti di Barolo, who had been mayor of Turin in 1825.

The Marquis died in 1838, leaving his wife childless but with an immense fortune. At the age of 53, the Marchioness began wearing a hair-shirt under her finery and dedicated herself entirely to the service of the poor. “I must pay for all the privileges of my ancestors and square accounts with the poor whom they have defrauded for so long,” she wrote in her *Memoirs*.

For many years she spent three hours every day in the prisons for women. She had to put up with humiliations, insults and even beatings in her efforts to help and teach those unfortunate women. She finally succeeded in getting the authorities to effect a complete separation of the prisons for women from those for men. She shifted the women to a better building which she herself had put up.

She opened orphanages and residences for working girls.

At Valdocco, near the Little House of Cottolengo, she built a place called the ‘Refuge’ for streetwalkers willing to start a new life. Next to it, she opened a house called the ‘Little Magdalenes’ for girls at risk below the age of 14.

In 1844, she had started a third project, the ‘Little Hospital of St Philomena,’ for

girls who were sickly and crippled.

While being personally involved in these great works of charity, the Marchioness never ceased to be an elegant and lively woman. Her parlour was the meeting place of the most prominent intellectuals of the time. Silvio Pellico served as her secretary, and had written his masterpiece, *Le mie prigioni*, in her palace. Camillo Cavour was her friend and confidante. The writers Balzac and Lamartine maintained a correspondence with her, keeping her informed about affairs in France.

Fr Borel went to see the Marchioness.

“I have found a spiritual director for your Little Hospital. His name is Don Bosco and he comes from the Convitto.”

“Good. But the Hospital is still under construction. We can discuss the matter in six months time.”

“No, Marchioness. We either take Don Bosco now or he will be sent elsewhere. He was recommended to me by none other than Fr Cafasso. It seems that this young priest has founded an oratory, which it would be a pity to let go of.”

The Marchioness asked for more information. Satisfied, she fixed a yearly salary of 600 *lire* and a room next to Fr Borel’s near the Refuge.

In his first meeting with the Marchioness, Don Bosco also asked for information and assurances. He accepted to minister to the Refuge, but asked that he be not obliged to abandon his boys. He also asked that they be free to approach him during the week.

The Marchioness was nearing 60 but had lost none of her energy and decisiveness. She liked the frankness of Don Bosco, and allowed him the use of a strip of land next to the Little Hospital under construction. As soon as possible, she would also give him two rooms in the new building for use as a chapel.

It was a beginning, even though somewhat tentative.

Lambs into Shepherds

It was Saturday, 12 October 1844. Don Bosco was pensive. The next day he had to tell his boys that the Oratory would be shifting to the outskirts of Valdocco. “The uncertainty about the place, the means and the people of the locality left me restless. That night I had another dream, which seemed like an appendix to the one I had at Becchi at the age of nine.”

Once again he saw a pack of wolves. He wanted to run away.

But a lady dressed as a shepherdess, motioned to me to take charge of that strange flock. She walked ahead of us. We stopped three times. At every stop, several of those animals changed to lambs. Completely exhausted, I wanted to sit down, but the shepherdess urged me to keep walking. At last we entered a vast courtyard surrounded with porticos, with a church at the far end. The number of lambs had become huge. Several shepherds appeared to look after them, but they did not stay long. Then something marvellous happened. Many of the lambs changed into shepherds and began taking care of the rest. The shepherdess invited me to look towards the south. I looked and saw a field... “Look again,” she said... I saw a large and splendid church... Inside the church was a white band with an inscription in block letters: *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea* (This is my house, from here my

glory will go forth).

Ten lines later Don Bosco concludes: "I hardly paid attention to what I had seen. But as things went on, I began to understand. This dream, in fact, together with another one, served as a guideline for my decisions."

Don Bosco narrated this other dream to Fr Barberis and Fr Lemoyne, who immediately wrote it down. It can be read today in volume 2 of the *Biographical Memoirs*.²⁴ It is largely a repetition of the first dream, with some interesting variations.

A lady said to me: "Look." I saw a small low church, with a little playground and a large number of boys... As the church had become too small, I turned again to her, and she showed me a much bigger church with a house next to it... I saw myself surrounded by an immense number of boys, and a huge church in the midst of many buildings, with a beautiful monument in the middle.

"Where is Don Bosco? Where is the Oratory?"

On Sunday, 13 October, Don Bosco told his boys about the new location of the Oratory, near the Refuge. The boys seemed a little disturbed, so Don Bosco decided to take a risk. Cheerfully he announced to them what he had seen in the dream: "a big new place where they could sing, run and jump at will. The boys were pleased and were impatient to see the place."

The next Sunday, 20 October, bands of boys crossed the city limits and walked towards Valdocco. The right bank of the river Dora was an expanse of meadows and fields with scattered houses. It was a peaceful area, with the Little House of Cottolengo and the Refuge of Barolo flanked by taverns and rustic cottages. Not knowing where to go, the boys began knocking at doors:

"Don Bosco! Where is Don Bosco? Where is the Oratory?"

The people, accustomed to seeing gangs of hooligans, feared the worst and raised their voices:

"What oratory, and what Don Bosco! Get out of here! Take to your heels, or you will get a taste of our pitchforks!"

"Hearing the commotion I came out of the house with Fr Borel. Seeing us, the boys rushed to us."

There was plenty of place for playing and for running about. But there was none for praying, for hearing confessions and celebrating Mass.

"Yes, I know," said Don Bosco. "The vast place I promised you is not yet ready. But you can always come up to my room or to Fr Borel's if you need to."

The results were disastrous. "Rooms, corridors and stairways were choked with boys. There were two of us hearing confessions and two hundred who wanted to confess." And who could keep control over two hundred boys waiting their turn?

"One wanted to light the fire and another would put it out. One would stack the firewood, while another spilt the water. Buckets, tongs, shovel, jugs, basins, chairs, shoes, books, everything was turned upside down, because everyone wanted to put them in order."

There is a note of joyful exaggeration in these lines of Don Bosco, but not very

²⁴ *Memorie Biografiche* (henceforth MB) 2:298 = *Biographical Memoirs* (henceforth BM) 2:232-33.

much, as anyone who has lived long among boys knows.

Six Sundays went on like this. Towards the middle of the morning, two hundred boys would march out behind Don Bosco on their way to Mass at the Monte dei Capuccini, the Consolata, or Sassi.

Fr Borel often went with them. He was a good sort, simple and popular, affectionately called the ‘little priest’ because of his stature. But he was a tireless worker. He took the young Don Bosco under his protection, gave him all the help he could with friendly affection, often digging into his own savings.

The boys loved the sermons of the little priest, drawled out in the rich dialect of Porta Palazzo, peppered with proverbs, jokes and witty sayings. Someone had told him that he ought to preach in a more dignified way, and he had answered: “The world is a clumsy place, and we must preach to it in a clumsy way.”

Snowflakes in the Brazier

On 8 December the two rooms promised by Marchioness Barolo were finally ready, done up as a chapel, and none too soon, because it had begun snowing heavily in the night.

By morning there were piles of snow and a bitter cold. A big brazier was brought into the chapel. Joseph Buzzetti remembered the sound of the snowflakes crackling as they fell into the brazier on the way to the chapel.

The boys arrived, undaunted. They found a small altar, a little tabernacle and a few benches. “We celebrated Mass,” Don Bosco writes with simplicity. “Many boys made their confession and received communion, and I wept, because it seemed to me that the Oratory had at last found a permanent place.”

He was mistaken. He would have to cry once more, not for joy but for sadness, before finding a truly permanent place for the Oratory.

But that 8 December 1944, Don Bosco’s Oratory acquired something definite: a name of its own. It would henceforward be known as the ‘Oratory of St Francis of Sales.’ Don Bosco himself gives us the reasons for this name: “The Marchioness had placed a painting of the Saint at the entrance to the place. Our ministry also called for great calmness and kindness. And so we placed ourselves under the protection of St Francis of Sales, that he might obtain for us the grace of his extraordinary meekness.”

To keep his boys cheerful, Don Bosco bought bowls, quoits and stilts. The football had not yet been invented! He also continued to help the poorer ones with food, clothing and shoes.

Now that he had a room of his own, he thought of giving classes to the more intelligent boys. They came to him in the evenings, stealing a couple of hours from their sleep, their faces still black with soot or white with lime, cloaks on their shoulders to fight off the bitter cold, happy to have a chance to learn something.

But books, clothes and games cost money. Don Bosco was at a loss. He hated the idea of going to anyone to ask for money. It was Fr Borel who pushed him:

“If you really love your boys, you must be ready to make this sacrifice too.”

Don Bosco went. The first family he approached was that of Cavaliere Gonnella.²⁵ They had been quietly prepared by Fr Borel. But Don Bosco felt his cheeks burning as he stretched out his hand to receive the first 300 *lire*.

²⁵ *Cavaliere* would be the equivalent of ‘Sir’ in English.

Forty two years later, when one of his rectors told him that he did not have “the cheek of Don Bosco” in collecting offerings from families, Don Bosco would turn very serious and answer:

“You will never know how much it cost me to go begging.”

He would never get over this embarrassment, but neither would he ever lose his dignity. He was neither timid nor brash. The upper class families that received him would say:

“He entered our houses like an angel.”

While thinking of his boys, Don Bosco did not neglect his duties. He had been given living quarters and a salary, and his job was to minister to the unfortunate women and girls of the Refuge. He always said clearly that that was not his mission, but he performed his duties conscientiously.

A passing observation. Don Bosco always stressed the point that his mission was for boys and not for girls. But this ‘exclusiveness’ never became ‘misogyny.’ He accepted the presence and collaboration of women with simplicity, from the young girl who looked after his cows at the Sussambrino while he was studying, to the precious work of the ‘mothers’ at Valdocco—his own mother, the mothers of Fr Rua and Canon Gastaldi, Aunt Marianna, sister of Mamma Margaret. The ‘women’s room’ was near the boys’ infirmary. In the winter of 1857, a feverish Dominic Savio would get up to warm himself at the fireplace of Aunt Marianna, who was herself unwell. With his teenage directness, he would chide her for complaining about the aches and pains “that God had sent her.” Don Bosco’s alleged misogyny and his uneasiness in the presence of women is a myth invented by some biographer under the influence of ascetical tendencies of doubtful value.

Failure at St Peter in Chains

During his first months at the Refuge, Don Bosco probably entertained the hope that the Marchioness would change her mind and allocate the building under construction to abandoned boys rather than to sick girls. The Marchioness, on the other hand, was hoping for exactly the opposite: that Don Bosco would eventually abandon his boys and dedicate all his time to her institutions.

Both were under an illusion. With the passage of time, the number and the noise of the boys kept increasing. Rose bushes were devastated. Some Sister expressed her apprehension at the presence of so many young boys near the ‘little Magdalenes.’ The Marchioness became impatient: the Oratory had to go.

But where? The dreams nourished Don Bosco’s hopes, but they were certainly not precise topographical charts.

A partial solution was attempted in the Lent of 1845. The daily Lenten catechism classes (obligatory at the time) for the bigger boys would be held at the Church of St Peter in Chains. The church was actually dedicated to the Crucified Saviour. Next to it was a cemetery in which no one had been buried for the last ten years. The cemetery (still visible in the Valdocco area today) was surrounded by porticos and had a hall and an ample ground.

The experiment was successful, and the chaplain of the cemetery, Fr Tesio, was a friend of Don Bosco. In May, therefore, Don Bosco asked to be allowed to repeat the experiment on a larger scale: he would transplant the whole Oratory to the church and courtyard of St Peter in Chains.

Fr Tesio was going to be away on Sunday, 25 May. He said to Don Bosco:
 “Come with your boys on the 25th. That way you can also substitute me for the Mass.”

The chaplain probably committed two mistakes. He must have thought that the Oratory of Don Bosco consisted solely of the few quiet and attentive boys he had seen at the Lenten catechism classes. And he must have also assumed that after Mass and perhaps a bun in the courtyard, the boys would go home.

Things turned out quite differently. The priest’s housekeeper witnessed the arrival of an enormous horde of boys that filled the church. After Mass, they grabbed their loaf of bread and swarmed noisily into the ground and the porticos. The woman, who was keeping chickens in a corner of the portico, was first dismayed and then flew into a rage. She began shouting and chasing the boys with her broom, while the startled hens scattered cackling everywhere.

In the midst of her chase she came upon Don Bosco himself, and abused him lustily. ‘Desecrator of sacred sites’ was perhaps the most polite of all the things she managed to say.

Don Bosco understood that it was best to leave. “I stopped the games. We left with the hope of finding a better place the next Sunday.”

A banal incident, were it not for a startling circumstance. During the process for the beatification of Don Bosco, Fr Rua made the following deposition: “A certain Melanotte from Lanzo told me, many years later, that he had been present at the scene, and had witnessed Don Bosco saying to his boys, calmly and without anger: ‘Poor woman! She orders us out, not knowing that she herself will be dead and buried by next Sunday.’”

On Fr Tesio’s return, the woman gave him such a catastrophic account of things that he, (perhaps not wanting to go back on his word to Don Bosco) wrote to the municipality asking them to forbid all sorts of recreation within the precincts of the cemetery.

“It pains me to say it,” writes Don Bosco, “but that letter was Fr Tesio’s last.” Both the priest and his housekeeper died within the week.

19

THE WANDERING ORATORY

After the unfortunate experiment at the cemetery of St Peter in Chains, the Oratory fell back to the Refuge. The Marchioness did not object. However, she reminded Don Bosco that the 'Little Hospital' was to be inaugurated on 10 August. Obviously, the boys could not be allowed to gather there after that.

On 12 July 1845, Don Bosco received a letter from the municipality. Thanks to the archbishop's recommendation, Don Bosco was granted permission "to make use of the chapel of the City Mills for the purpose of catechizing his boys, from noon to 3.00 p.m. The boys were forbidden to enter the second courtyard of the edifice."

So they had the use of a church for three afternoon hours every Sunday. It was certainly not a royal palace, but it was something to go on. "We got hold of benches, kneelers, candlesticks, some chairs, pictures big and small," remembers Don Bosco. "Each one carrying what he could, like a migrating crowd we went to take possession of our new headquarters."

The City Mills, commonly known as the *Molassi*, were situated on the Emmanuel Philibert Square at Porta Palazzo, on the right side if one goes down towards the Dora. Even today this huge square is the site of the colourful daily market of the city, with rows upon rows of stalls.

"Cabbages, My Dear Boys"

Don Bosco was not happy with this new arrangement, and neither were the boys. He writes: "We could neither celebrate Mass nor give benediction in the evening. Hence there could be no communion, the essential element in our system. Even the recreation was chaotic: the boys had to play on the street or in the square in front of the church in the midst of passing carriages and horses." He concludes: "We were helpless. All we could do was wait for something better."

Don Bosco rented a room on the ground floor of the building, where he taught catechism and conducted classes as best as he could.

Fr Borel tried to revive everyone's morale with a homily that became famous. The boys dubbed it 'the sermon of cabbages.'

"Cabbages, my dear boys, never grow unless they are transplanted," began the 'little priest,' to the laughter of all. "That's what is happening to our Oratory. It has been transferred from place to place, and every time it has only grown bigger." Running through the history of the Oratory, he concluded: "Are we going to remain long in this place? Let's not worry. Let's trust in the Lord. One thing is certain: he blesses us, helps us and thinks of us."

But a few Sundays later serious trouble began.

The Mills office sent a letter to the municipality with a long list of accusations. The boys were damaging the church and the buildings. They were a group “that could possibly be used for revolutionary activities” (a damning accusation in those days). They were “a seedbed of immorality.”

The mayor immediately sent a commission to investigate. They found everything quite normal. The boys were noisy. One wall had been scratched with a nail. There was no trace of any revolution, much less of immorality. The real cause of complaint was that the neighbours were irritated: the singing, the hollering and the noisy games ruined their Sunday rest.

Don Bosco was hurt more by the calumnies (which always leave a mark) than by the decision of the municipality. They did not cancel the permission, but noted that it would not be renewed on 1 January. The official letter would be sent by November. In the meantime, he was invited “to be reasonable.”

Don Bosco tried his best. From that day he used the church of the Mills only as a rallying point. He would then take his boys to play in the open fields on the bank of the Dora. To pray, they would go to the Madonna del Pilone, to Sassi, to the Madonna di Campagna. “In those churches,” he writes, “I would celebrate Mass and explain the gospel. In the afternoon I would teach a little catechism, tell stories and sing hymns. Then we would go for walks until it was time for the boys to return home. It looked as if this arrangement would mark the end of the Oratory, but instead the number of boys simply increased.”

“Michelino, Take This!”

In September, near the Mills, Don Bosco had a meeting that would affect his life profoundly. As the boys were jostling around him for a medal, he noticed a pale 8 year old standing a little apart, with a black band on his left arm. He had lost his father about two months before. He did not feel like joining in the fray. The medals were soon over and he was left without one.

Don Bosco approached him, smiling:

“Take this, Michelino, take this!”

Take what? This strange priest, who he was seeing for the first time, was giving him nothing. He was only stretching out his left hand towards him, and with the right pretending to cut it into two.

The lad stared curiously. And the priest said:

“You and I will always go halves in everything.”

What did Don Bosco see at that moment? He never ever revealed it to anyone. But that boy would become his right hand, his first successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation.

His name was Michael Rua. He did not understand the meaning of what Don Bosco had said, neither then nor for a long while after. But he grew fond of that priest who made him so happy inside and filled him with unusual warmth.

Michael lived at the Royal Arsenal, where his father had been working. Four of his brothers had died young, and he himself was very frail. His mother did not allow him to go to the Oratory often, but he met Don Bosco again at the Christian Brothers’ School where he was studying in the third elementary class. Later he would recall:

Whenever Don Bosco came to celebrate Mass and preach, it was as if an electric current had passed through all of us. We would jump to our feet, leave our places and swarm all around him. It took him quite some time to reach the sacristy. The good Brothers were helpless against that breach of order. When other priests came, nothing of the sort ever happened.

Books Written by Candlelight

In October there was an important event, the publication of *A Church History for Schools*. It was the first of the school books that Don Bosco would produce for his boys, written by candlelight with hours robbed from sleep and drafted in great hurry in a handwriting that was impossible. The *Church History* was not a scientific book—none of Don Bosco's books would ever be scientific. It was a popular work, suited to the simple mind and modest culture of his boys. It dwelt on the popes and the more luminous events in the history of the church; it contained profiles of saints, and gave descriptions the works of charity that flourish among the people of God at all times.

This book was followed by the *Sacred History* (1847), *The Metric Decimal System* (1849), and *The History of Italy* (1855).

Besides these school books, Don Bosco would also find time to write a large number of other books and pamphlets: lives of saints, books of amusing stories, manuals of prayer and of religious instruction. None of them was a masterpiece, but each one was an act of love for his boys, for simple people and for the church. And many of them would cause him serious trouble, to the point of even being beaten up that he might stop writing.

Three Rooms in Casa Moretta

The letter from the municipality arrived duly in November, and with it also the bad weather. "The climate," writes Don Bosco, "put a stop to our outings and walks outside the city. Together with Fr Borel, we rented three rooms in a house belonging to Fr Moretta."

This building does not exist any more. Its last wall was incorporated into the structure of the subsidiary church of the parish of Mary Help of Christians, on the right as one goes towards the great basilica.

In the three rooms of Fr Moretta, "we spent four months, rather cramped but happy to be able to at least gather the boys, teach them and hear confessions."

With a smile Don Bosco recalls that in those rooms he had been forced to go against the second of the resolutions made in his seminary days: to keep the boys happy in those cramped rooms, he had to resort to his sleight-of-hand and conjuring tricks. The effect on the boys was fabulous, and he never stopped again.

With the help of Fr Carpano, he also began regular evening classes, which were a great improvement on the casual tuitions he had given so far.

On the issue of popular education and evening classes, Don Bosco found himself more in line with the liberals than with the conservatives. The archbishop was a little worried, but Don Bosco reassured him: "It does not matter where the initiative comes from. What is important is to study it, and if good, give it a Christian direction, thus making sure that it is not ruined by any anti-religious spirit."

A Big Question Mark

In December Don Bosco fell seriously ill. He was the chaplain of the Little Hospital for sick girls between the ages of 3 and 12. He was busy in the prisons, the Cottolengo and some of the educational institutes in the city. He worked in his Oratory, gave evening classes, and visited his boys at work. And the winter of 1855-56 threatened to be a severe one.

The winter comes late to Turin, but covers its narrow lanes with thick piles of grey snow that give the city months of continuous and depressing cold.

Don Bosco's lungs began to suffer alarmingly. Fr Borel brought it to the notice of Marchioness Barolo, who summoned Don Bosco, gave him one hundred *lire* for his Oratory, and ordered him to "desist from all his occupations until he was completely recovered."

Don Bosco obeyed, breaking off all his engagements except those of the Oratory, but he was soon forced to admit that he was not getting any better.

But the worry about his health was nothing compared to the storm clouds gathering over the Oratory. "It was during this period that strange rumours began to spread. Some called Don Bosco a revolutionary, others thought him mad or even a heretic."

The first ones to question his work were the parish priests of the area. In a conference held at the beginning of 1846, one of the items discussed was catechism for youngsters. The curate of the Carmel expressed his perplexity about Don Bosco's Oratory: boys were detaching themselves from their parishes, they did not even know their parish priest. Was this really something to be encouraged? Quite a few of the others shared his preoccupation.

"They were not speaking out of jealousy or ambition," Don Bosco hastens to explain. "They were sincerely interested in the salvation of souls."

Two parish priests were sent to investigate the situation.

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco reconstructs the dialogue (which he must have repeated many times during those years—it was vital for his work). We reproduce the main points.

"This Oratory of yours draws the boys away from their parishes. Don Bosco, why don't you send them there?"

"Because most of them know neither the priest nor the parish. Almost all of them are outsiders who have come in search of work. They come from Val d'Aosta, from Savoy, from Biella, Novara and Lombardy."

"Why don't you help them to insert themselves into their respective parishes?"

"It's impossible. The many dialects and lack of fixed abode are great obstacles. We could try, though, provided every parish priest comes to gather his own boys and leads them to his parish. Even so, it would be rather difficult. Not a few of them are scatter-brained and unruly. Only when attracted by means of games and outings do they accept prayer and catechism. Every parish should have a pleasant place to gather them and entertain them."

"That's impossible. We don't have the place, and the priests are busy on Sundays."

We have already mentioned the conclusion. Don Bosco received the following communication after a few days: “Since it is impossible to provide an Oratory in every parish, the parish priests encourage Don Bosco to carry on.”

One question mark had been answered. Other questions, more menacing, would arise in the spring.

A Different Type of Oratory

By this time, the main traits of the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales had been defined. Don Bosco had drawn on the experience of the oratories of Milan and Brescia, and of St Philip Neri in Rome. He had followed the line traced by Fr Cocchi at Turin. But he had stamped his work with his own personality. In his hands, the Oratory had become something truly original, different from all the others.

Here is an attempt at listing the ‘Bosconian’ characteristics of the Oratory.

Traditional oratories were parochial. Don Bosco created an oratory that went beyond the parish as an institution. His Oratory would be “a parish for youngsters who had no parish,” as Archbishop Fransoni would say.

In traditional oratories, the presence of the priest took inspiration from ‘a stern sort of kindness,’ one that dampened gaiety and distrusted noise. Don Bosco inaugurated a ‘cheerful loving kindness’ in which the priest himself fostered noisy games and unleashed youthful joy.

The traditional oratories were exclusively on Sundays, often only for two or three hours in the afternoon. Don Bosco began by occupying first the whole of Sunday, and then slowly the whole week, with evening classes and visits to boys at their work-sites.

The boys frequenting a traditional oratory went to a given parish with its own church. The boys of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, instead, paradoxically favoured by the migratory phenomenon, *went to look for Don Bosco*, to pass the day with him. The centre of the Oratory was not the parish church but Don Bosco himself with his constant and stimulating presence. In today’s language, we could say that the rapport was not institutional but personal.

The other oratories selected and catered to the best boys. It was the parents who introduced them and vouched for their good conduct. Don Bosco, we are tempted to say, did just the opposite. He began with ex-prisoners who did not know where to find a friend. Next he took in young bricklayers far away from their families. Boys who were ‘abandoned and at risk’ formed the core of his Oratory, and its gates were always open to all. Obviously Don Bosco had to demand a certain amount of responsibility and cooperation from his boys. He was not able to absorb hooligans belonging to gangs, or those who never wanted to set foot in a church. But he did not lose sight of them, trying to win them over one by one, with varying degrees of success and failure.

A Hanging at Alessandria

During that year 1846, a young man of 22 whom Don Bosco had befriended in prison was condemned to death together with his father. The execution was to take place at Alessandria. Anguished, Don Bosco went to see him. The young man broke down and

asked Don Bosco to accompany him during the last journey. Don Bosco's courage failed him, and he could not bring himself to make that promise.

The condemned men were sent off. Fr Cafasso was due to join them to be able to assist them in their last moments. When he came to know that Don Bosco had refused to go, he sent for him and scolded him.

“But don't you see how cruel you are? Get ready, we are going to Alessandria.”

“I shall never be able to bear that sight.”

“Hurry up, the coach won't wait for us.”

They reached Alessandria on the eve of the execution. The young man, seeing Don Bosco entering his cell, flung his arms around his neck and burst into tears. Don Bosco wept himself. They spent the night praying and talking of God.

At 2.00 a.m. Don Bosco gave him absolution, celebrated Mass for him in the cell, gave him communion, and made thanksgiving together with him. The bells of the cathedral tolled. The door of the cell opened and the guards entered, the hangman with them. The latter, as is the custom, knelt before the condemned and asked for pardon. He then tied his hands and slipped the noose around his neck. A few minutes later, the cart rolled out of the prison gates with the condemned boy. Don Bosco was beside him. Soon after followed the cart carrying the boy's father, assisted by Cafasso. A silent crowd lined the streets. When the scaffold with the gallows came into sight, Don Bosco blanched and fainted. Fr Cafasso, who was keeping an eye on him, promptly stopped the carts and helped Don Bosco down.

The tragic procession continued and the executions were performed. When Don Bosco came to, it was all over. He was deeply mortified, and murmured to Fr Cafasso:

“I feel so sorry for that boy. He trusted me so much...”

“You have done all you could. Leave the rest to God.”

In March 1846, good Fr Moretta went to see Don Bosco with a sheaf of letters in his hand. “The tenants,” writes Don Bosco, “were at the end of their tether because of the noise, the shouts, the constant going and coming of my boys. They were threatening to leave if our gatherings were not stopped immediately.”

Don Bosco experienced a moment of rebellion. Could it be that no one could bear up with the young? Were not those adults once youngsters themselves? He did not know where to go. But fortunately spring was at hand, and it was no longer necessary to remain indoors.

The Dialogues of Don Bosco—A Note

Some of the readers of the first edition of the present book have gently brought to my notice that “the frequent dialogues are dramatizations that make the text lively, but damage its historical value, because they are an arbitrary reconstruction.”

I respond that these dialogues are neither invented, nor are they ‘arbitrary reconstructions,’ for the following reasons.

1. Don Bosco's own *Memoirs*, published in 1946, run into 238 printed pages, of which a good 106 contain dialogues, many of them long and detailed. This was Don Bosco's style of writing.

2. Half the *Life of Mamma Margaret*, written by Fr Lemoyne when Don Bosco was still alive, consists of dialogues. Fr Lemoyne writes: “The writer came to know all that appears here about Mamma Margaret from Don Bosco himself, having had the fortune of spending more than six years conversing familiarly with him

every evening; ... interrogating him now and then about what he had said some years before—which I had faithfully recorded—I was astonished to hear him repeat the same things and the same words about his mother, with such exactitude as to seem that he were reading from a book. I can say the same thing about many other facts that he in his goodness confided to me, and which I preserved for my confreres” (*MB* 1:121 = *BM* 1:92-93). Don Bosco himself corrected the booklet, “weeping with emotion,” as eyewitness aver.

3. Fr Lemoyne published the first 9 volumes (7,700 pages in all) of the *Biographical Memoirs*, which narrate the story of Don Bosco up to 1870. In the preface to volume 1 he asserts: “The narrations, the *dialogues*, everything that I considered worth remembering, are but the faithful and literal expositions of eyewitness accounts.” And in the preface to volume 8: “Let us repeat that everything written here and earlier is a faithful account of what actually happened. The eyewitnesses of Don Bosco’s life are in the hundreds... many of whom left written records of what they saw of him and heard from him. Even the very dialogues as recorded and handed down to us are told as they happened in their presence.” The 9 volumes were published when the protagonists of those dialogues, from Fr Rua to Fr Cagliari, were still alive. The drafts were revised by Fr Paul Albera himself—the very same ‘Paolino’ who lived at Don Bosco’s side from 1858 onwards. Presenting the ninth volume to the Salesians (Fr Lemoyne had died while it was in the press), Fr Albera wrote: “If only everyone knew the diligence with which Fr Lemoyne gathered the *Memoirs*, and the love and affection which he invested in this work, they would appreciate them more and more” (*Acts of the Superior Chapter*, 24 April 1917).

4. While Don Bosco was still alive, Fr Bonetti narrated the history of the Oratory in the Salesian Bulletin. His accounts are full of dialogues. Don Bosco himself personally revised every issue. He gave so much importance to this revision that he had the drafts sent to him even during his trip to Spain in 1886, returning them with his observations. In his preface to volume 12, Fr Ceria, compiler of the last 9 volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs*, confirms Don Bosco’s typical way of telling stories: “The blessed Don Bosco, in narrating his experiences, used to repeat every cut and thrust to the best of his memory. Fr Lemoyne and others who recorded these narratives reproduced them as they were, word for word.”

I found ‘the dialogues of Don Bosco’ in the sources mentioned above, and I think I have reported them faithfully. I have only retouched the archaic Italian of the nineteenth century here and there, and I have often condensed them.

20

AGONY IN THE MEADOW, RESURRECTION UNDER THE SHED

Don Bosco managed to rent a meadow surrounded by a hedge. It was not far from Casa Moretta, just fifty steps.

If you walk down Via Maria Ausiliatrice today, on your right, at the corner of Via Cigna, you can see a big block alongside the SEI Publishing House. That used to be the meadow of the Filippi Brothers.

There was a kind of shed in the middle where the games equipment was kept. Around this shed, some 300 boys would run and jump about on Sundays. In one corner, sitting on a bench, Don Bosco would hear confessions.

Towards 10.00 a.m. the boys would line up at the roll of a drum. At the sound of a bugle they would begin marching towards the Consolata or the Monte dei Cappuccini. There Don Bosco would celebrate Mass and distribute communion. Breakfast would follow.

Apprentice bricklayer Paul C., freshly arrived from the countryside, one day joined the throng which was proceeding towards the Monte dei Cappuccini. Here is how he describes the scene:

Mass was celebrated, many received Holy Communion and then everybody rushed into the courtyard of the friars for breakfast. I felt I had no right to it, so I stood on one side waiting to join the boys again on the way back. But Don Bosco had seen me. He approached me:

“What’s your name?”

“Paolino.”

“Did you have breakfast?”

“No, sir. I have neither confessed nor received communion.”

“But you do not need to confess or receive communion to have breakfast.”

“What’s needed then?”

“To be hungry.” He led me to the basket and filled my hands with bread and fruit. I went down with him and played in the meadow till it was dark.

From that day onwards, for many years, I never left the Oratory and dear Don Bosco, who did so much for me.”

Another evening, as the boys were playing, Don Bosco noticed a boy of about 15 on the other side of the hedge. He called out to him:

“Come in here. Where are you from? What’s your name?”

The boy would not answer. Don Bosco insisted.

“What’s the matter with you? Are you feeling all right?”

The boy still hesitated. Then with an effort he said:

“I’m hungry.”

The basket was empty. Don Bosco sent for bread from a nearby house and let the boy eat in peace. The boy himself began to speak, getting a weight off his chest:

“I work as a saddler, but my master sacked me because my work was not good enough. My family is far away in the countryside. I spent the night on the steps of the cathedral. This morning I was so hungry that I thought of stealing. But I was afraid. I tried to beg, but people told me that I was strong and healthy and that I should work. Then I heard the boys shouting here, and I came this way.”

“Listen, I’ll take care of you this evening. Tomorrow I’ll take you to a good man, and I’m sure he’ll give you work. And if you want to come back here on Sundays, you will make me very happy.”

“I’ll come most willingly.”

During the period at the Filippi meadow, the rumours about Don Bosco crystallized into three serious threats: opposition from the civil authority; the conviction that Don Bosco had gone mad (this led to his helpers leaving him); and the possibility of having to shut down permanently following yet another eviction.

The Marquis and the Guards

Those were years in which revolution was in the air. Three hundred boys marching into the city to the sound of the bugle and the drum could not escape the attention of the chief of police. “They were not all young boys,” writes Fr Lemoyne. “Some were strapping youths, full of life, and many of them carried the inevitable knife.”

The Marquis Michele di Cavour (father of Camillo and Gustavo), vicar of the city and chief of police, sent for Don Bosco. The conversation began pleasantly enough, but soon came down to business. Don Bosco heard himself being brusquely ordered to limit the number of his boys, not to allow them to march in and out of the city in columns, and to exclude the bigger boys because they were the most dangerous. He refused. Cavour began to shout.

“But why should you bother about those rascals? Let them fend for themselves. Leave them alone, or you will get us all into trouble.”

“I teach catechism to poor boys,” answered Don Bosco stubbornly. “This cannot create trouble for anybody. Moreover, I do everything with the permission of the archbishop.”

“The archbishop knows about all this? Very well then! I will talk to Fransoni myself, and he will put an end to this nonsense.”

But Archbishop Fransoni refused to do any such thing; on the contrary, he stood by Don Bosco.

From that day onwards, the police began patrolling the zone around the meadow. Don Bosco made jokes about this, but he was on edge: the smallest irregularity discovered would mean the end of the Oratory. Cavour was very powerful.

Is Don Bosco Mad?

Unwittingly, it was Don Bosco himself who gave grounds for the rumour that he had become mad. In order to keep up the morale of his boys as they moved from a cemetery to a mill, and from a house to a meadow, Don Bosco began relating his dreams.

He spoke of a vast and spacious oratory, of churches, houses, schools, workshops, thousands of boys, and priests completely at their disposal. All things that were quite the opposite of the precarious reality of those days.

Boys are the only ones capable of daydreaming, and so they believed Don Bosco. At home and at work, they repeated Don Bosco's dreams. Naturally people began to exclaim: "The poor fellow, he must be getting obsessed. With that awful mess all around him, he will end up in the asylum."

It was not therefore really a malicious rumour hatched by someone. Michael Rua remembers: "I had finished serving Mass at the Arms Factory and was making for the door, when the chaplain asked me: 'Where are you going?' 'It's Sunday, I'm going to Don Bosco.' 'Don't you know?' he said. 'He is suffering from a disease that is difficult to cure.' The news cut me to the heart, causing a sharp pain. If someone had said that about my father, I don't think I would have suffered more. I ran to the Oratory, but to my great surprise I found Don Bosco smiling and cheerful as usual. 'He is so crazy about his boys that he has gone off his head'—that was the rumour making the rounds of Turin in those days."

Fr Borel, his collaborator and friend, tried to prevent him from narrating his dreams.

"You speak of a church, a house, a playground. But where are they?"

"I don't know, but they must exist, because I see them," murmured Don Bosco.

One day, after a useless attempt to make him see reason, Fr Borel burst into tears. He left the room saying: "O my poor Don Bosco! He is gone, gone ..."

It would seem that even the diocesan office had quietly despatched someone to evaluate Don Bosco's mental equilibrium. At this point, two good friends of his, Fr Vincent Ponzato and Fr Louis Nasi, resolved to get Don Bosco out of this painful situation.

They had probably arranged for a medical check and a careful examination at the psychiatric hospital, followed by treatment.

One evening Don Bosco was teaching catechism to a group of boys, when a closed carriage arrived. Fr Ponzato and Fr Nasi emerged from the carriage and invited Don Bosco for a ride.

"You are tired. A breath of fresh air will do you good."

"Good idea. I'll get my hat and be with you in a moment."

One of them opened the door and invited Don Bosco to get in. But Don Bosco had already smelt the trap.

"After you two, thank you!"

After some hesitation the two agreed, not wanting to spoil the game. Don Bosco banged the door shut and ordered the coachman:

"To the mental hospital, quick! They are waiting for them."

The psychiatric hospital was not far away. The nurses were expecting one priest. They found two instead. The chaplain of the hospital had to intervene before the two priests could be set free.

The joke had gone a little too far, and Don Bosco's two friends did not take it kindly at the moment. Later, they restored their friendship with Don Bosco. Fr Nasi became, in

fact, music director of the Oratory.

But in the meantime Don Bosco was abandoned by everybody. He writes with a trace of bitterness: "I was shunned by everyone. My collaborators left me alone with 400 boys."

It was the kind of moment when 'common sense' collapses. Was Don Bosco a saint, or was he a madman? It was hard to guess. It was a variation of the moment in which Francis of Assisi had flung his clothes in the face of his father and had walked away naked, saying, "Now I can truly say, Our Father, who art in heaven"; or of the moment in which Cottolengo had thrown his last few coins out of the window, saying, "Now we shall see whether the Little House is my work or the work of God!" Who could blame small-minded people of prudence and common sense for calling these men mad?

The situation became so difficult that Don Bosco himself began to doubt his dreams. In a conference held on 10 May 1864, at once summarized and put into writing by deacon Bonetti, Don Bosco recounted that during those days he dreamt of a house not far from the meadow, for himself and for his boys. The following morning he said to Fr Borel: "This time there is certainly a house." Fr Borel suggested they go and see it. They went: it was a house of ill-repute. Mortified, Don Bosco exclaimed: "Then I must be under diabolical delusions!" He was very embarrassed. The dream came back twice more, and Don Bosco cried, "Lord, pull me out of this mess!" But the dream returned a fourth time, and a voice said to him, "Do not be afraid. With God, everything is possible."

Agony in the Meadow

One fine day, the owners of the meadow turned up at the Oratory (had they been sent by the Marquis?). They carefully examined the sod, mercilessly pounded by 800 clogs and boots. They sent for Don Bosco:

"This place is becoming a desert!"

"At this rate our meadow will soon turn into a road of beaten soil."

"Sorry, dear Father, but we cannot go on like this. We are ready to waive the rent, but you have to go."

They gave him fifteen days to clear out.

Don Bosco was thunderstruck. As if all the humiliations were not enough, he had to now once again find a new playground. But this time he found none. No one was ready to rent a field to a madman.

5 April 1846, the last Sunday on the Filippi meadow, was one of the bitterest days of Don Bosco's life.

He went with his boys to the Madonna di Campagna. He did speak during Mass, but he was not his usual cheerful self, and he did not speak of cabbages to be transplanted. He told the boys that he was looking at them as one looks at little birds whose nest is about to be destroyed. He invited them to pray to the Madonna. They were in her hands.

At midday he made a last attempt with the Filippi brothers. But they would not budge. Had the time come to really say goodbye to his boys?

"Towards the evening of that day," he writes, "I looked at the multitude of boys playing contentedly. I was alone, exhausted, and in poor health. I walked up and down alone and could not hold back my tears. My God, I exclaimed, tell me what I am to do."

The Humble Root

At that very moment there arrived, not an archangel, but a little man with a heavy stutter. It was Pancras Soave, manufacturer of washing soda and detergents.

“You are looking for a place to set up a laboratory?”

“Not a laboratory, but an oratory.”

“Can’t see the difference, but the fact is that there is a place. Come and see it. It belongs to Mr Francis Pinardi, an honest man.”

Don Bosco walked about 200 metres and found himself in front of “a small one-storey building, with a worm-eaten staircase and balcony, surrounded by orchards, meadows and fields.” Not far from it was the ‘house of ill-repute’ that he had seen in the dream. “I wanted to climb the stairs, but Mr Pinardi and the trusty Soave directed me elsewhere. ‘Not there. The place we intend for you is at the back.’ It was a shack.”

Pilgrims who cross the courtyard alongside the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, can still see this shack, lost in a maze of buildings, the obscure little root from which sprang the gigantic work of Don Bosco. A sign on it reads, ‘Pinardi Chapel.’ That is what the place is now, a little chapel, full of decorations and paintings. It was refurbished by the Salesians in 1929.

But when Don Bosco saw it on 5 April 1846, it was merely a humble, low shed, leaning against the northern side of the Pinardi house. A little wall running around it gave it the appearance of a cabin. It had been built very recently, and had served first as a hatter’s workshop and then as a store for the washerwomen who worked alongside a canal that ran near the shed and drained into the nearby Dora. The shed measured 15 metres by 6 and had two small rooms attached.

Don Bosco was about to refuse the offer.

“It’s too low. I can’t use it.”

“We can fix it as you wish,” said Pinardi. “I will dig it out, build steps, put in a new floor. But I am keen that you set up your laboratory here.”

“Not a laboratory, but an oratory,” repeated Don Bosco. “A small church in which to gather my boys.”

Pinardi’s confusion was understandable. Rivers and canals attracted mainly workshops and laboratories in those days. He hesitated a moment, but then went on:

“A church? So much the better! I am a singer, and I will come to give you a hand. And I’ll bring two chairs, one for me and one for my wife.”

Don Bosco was still uncertain.

“Look, if you assure me that you will lower the floor by 50 centimetres, I’ll accept it.”

He was tired of taking places on monthly rent. He paid 320 *lire* for a year’s rent (more than half his annual salary as chaplain at the Little Hospital). He got the use of the shed and also of a strip of land around, where the boys could play.

He ran back to his boys, shouting:

“Cheer up, boys! We’ve found a place for the Oratory! We will have a church and a school and a playground as well. Next Sunday we shall meet there, at the Pinardi house!”

It was Palm Sunday. The next Sunday would be Easter.

When the Bells Pealed

Francis Pinardi was a man of his word. He brought in workers and masons, lowered the floor and strengthened the walls and the roof. Carpenters laid a new wooden floor and put up a little dais. In six days' time, by Saturday evening, the shed was ready. An impossible task, till one remembers that the working day used to consist of 12 to 14 hours at that time.

On the little altar of the chapel Don Bosco placed the candlesticks, the cross, the lamp and a picture of St Francis of Sales.

12 April was the great day. It was Easter morning, and all the bells of the city were chiming. At the Pinardi shed there was no bell, but there was the love of Don Bosco calling his boys to lowly Valdocco.

They arrived in droves. They filled up the little church, the strip of land around and the surrounding meadows. In hushed silence they assisted at the blessing of the chapel and at the Mass that Don Bosco celebrated for them immediately after. Then, snatching up their breakfast loaves, they swarmed over the meadows and exploded with joy. Finally they had a place they could call their own.

21

THE MIRACLE OF THE YOUNG BRICKLAYERS

The timetable Don Bosco drafted for the Oratory filled five pages of his *Memoirs*. It was a rather demanding affair. Few today would dare propose such a timetable to the boys of a festive oratory.

“Early in the morning the church opened for confessions, which carried on till Mass time. Mass was at 8.00 a.m., but it often began only by 9.00 a.m., because of the number of those who wanted to confess.”

There was Mass, communion and explanation of the gospel, which, after a while, was replaced by stories from the history of the church. Classes followed up till noon.

At 1.00 p.m. (which meant that Don Bosco allowed himself just about an hour for lunch and a bit of relaxation) the games began: bowls, stilts, drills with wooden guns and swords, gymnastics. Catechism began at 2.30 p.m., and was followed by the rosary, until the boys learnt to sing vespers. There was then a short sermon, the litanies and benediction.

After church, there was free time. Some attended extra classes of catechism, reading or singing. Most played, running and jumping about till it was dark.

“I took advantage of these spontaneous recreations to approach each boy individually. I whispered a word in the ear, reminding one to be more obedient, another to be more punctual for catechism, a third to come for confession, and so on.”

Priestly Concerns

Don Bosco joined in the games, and occasionally also indulged in acrobatics, as he himself avers. But he was above all a priest. He knew how to be firm when necessary, as the following episode demonstrates.

He had repeatedly invited one of the boys to fulfil his Easter precept. The boy promised but never kept his word. One afternoon, as he was playing with great abandon, Don Bosco stopped him and asked him to give him some help in the sacristy.

He wanted to come as he was, in shirt-sleeves. “No,” I told him, “put on your jacket and come.” He came to the sacristy. I said to him:

“Kneel on this kneeler.”

“What for?”

“To make your confession.”

“But I’m not prepared.”

“I know. Prepare yourself now, and then I will hear your confession.”

“You did well to catch me this way. I would never have come otherwise.”

As I was saying the breviary, he prepared himself. He then made a good confession and some thanksgiving. From that day onwards he was regular in the fulfilment of his religious duties.”

Goodbye at the Circle

At nightfall, all the boys would gather once again in the chapel for night prayers and a hymn. Then, in front of the shed, a happy and moving scene would take place. Don Bosco recalls those moments:

As we came out of the chapel, each one would say goodnight a thousand times, making no effort to move away. I would try to tell them, “Go home, it’s getting dark and your people will be waiting for you.” It was useless. I had to let them mill around, and then six of the stronger fellows would make a sort of chair with their arms and hoist me on to it. Then they would move out in a sort of procession, singing, laughing and making a racket till they reached the circle [the intersection of Corso Regina Margherita—San Massimo at the time—with other streets]. There they would sing some hymns, and then stand in deep silence as I wished them goodnight and a good week. At that point they would answer me back at the top of their voices, let me down from my throne, and then proceed, each one to his own home. Some of the bigger boys would accompany me to my lodgings. I would arrive there half dead with fatigue.

Many of the boys had whispered to him privately: “Don Bosco, don’t leave me alone during the week. Come and see me.” So from Monday to Saturday, the building sites in Turin would witness the strange sight of a priest tucking up his cassock and climbing the scaffolding amidst buckets of mortar and piles of bricks. After finishing his work at the Little Hospital, visiting the prisons and some schools in the city, Don Bosco would climb the scaffoldings to see ‘his boys.’

The boys would be thrilled. The ‘family’ to which they returned at night was not their natural family, which was far away in their native village. They usually lived with some uncle or relative or neighbour. At times they were put up in the house of the employer himself, to whom they had been entrusted by their parents. There was not much to be found by way of affection and warmth in these ‘families.’ It was a delight for them, therefore, to meet someone who was a real friend, who loved them and helped them in whatever way he could.

Precisely because of his love for them, Don Bosco also stopped to chat a while with their bosses. He wanted to know about their wages, their free time, the possibility they had of going to Mass on Sundays. He would be one of the first to draw up regular contracts for his young apprentices, and to see that they were observed.

He would meet his old friends on these visits, and also look out for new ones. “He would visit the factories,” recounts Fr Rua, “where there were numerous apprentices, and would invite all of them to the Oratory. He was especially interested in those youngsters who had just recently arrived from the countryside.”

Don Bosco Spits Blood

But Don Bosco was only human, and the physical resistance of a man has its limits. After the stress of the spring of that year, when summer finally set in, Don Bosco's health began to deteriorate dangerously.

Marchioness Barolo, who thought highly of him, sent for him at the beginning of May. Fr Borel was present at the meeting. She placed before Don Bosco the huge sum of 5,000 *lire* (equivalent to eight years of his salary) and ordered him imperiously:

"You may take this money and go. Go wherever you want, but make sure you have absolute rest." Don Bosco answered:

"Thank you. You are very kind. But I did not become a priest to look after my health."

"Neither did you become a priest to kill yourself. I am told that you spit blood. Your lungs are giving way. How long do you think you can carry on like this? Stop visiting the prisons and the Cottolengo. But above all, let your boys alone for some time. Fr Borel will look after them."

Don Bosco thought this was yet another attempt to separate him from his boys. He reacted brusquely:

"No, never. I will never accept that."

The Marchioness lost her patience.

"Since you refuse to listen to kind words, I will use harsh ones. You are in need of my salary to carry on. So I warn you: either leave your Oratory and take some rest, or else I dismiss you."

"All right then. You will always find many priests to take my place. But my boys have no one. I cannot abandon them."

Don Bosco's words were heroic, but he was in the wrong. The Marchioness seemed to be cruel, but she was right, as the coming months would show. At 31, Don Bosco was a saintly priest but still very young and quite stubborn. He had not acquired a sense of his limits. The Marchioness, at the age of 61, showed greater wisdom. And she was a saintly woman, if after this outburst "she knelt before Don Bosco and asked for his blessing." Fr Giacomelli testifies to this, adding: "She never did that with me."

In a letter that she handed over to Fr Borel soon after this encounter (clearly hoping it would reach Don Bosco), the Marchioness summarized her position:

1. I appreciate and praise the work for the education of youth, even though I do not find it advisable to have it so close to my work for girls at risk.
2. Since I believe, in conscience, that Don Bosco's lungs need absolute rest, I will not continue his salary unless he leaves Turin for a period long enough to regain his health. I have this very much at heart, because I esteem him much.

If Don Bosco refused, within three months she would find a substitute for the work at the Little Hospital. In the meantime, she sent him an offering of 800 *lire* in a roundabout way.

Don Bosco was indeed spitting blood. He was probably suffering from a tubercular infection. And still he continued to think of the future. On 5 June 1846, he rented three rooms on the upper floor of the Pinardi house for 15 *lire* a month.

Marquis Cavour also made himself felt during this period. On Sundays, he would

send half a dozen guards to keep an eye on Don Bosco. In 1877, Don Bosco would say to Fr Barberis:

If only I had a camera at that time! What amusing scenes we would have had of those days! There was I with hundreds of boys hanging **from** my lips, and six policemen in full uniform standing two by two at three different points of the church, arms akimbo but listening attentively to my sermon. They came in handy to assist the boys, even though they had been sent there to watch over me! Every now and then one of them would furtively wipe away a tear with the back of his hand. It would have been wonderful to have photographed them kneeling in the midst of the boys, awaiting their turn at the confessional. Because my sermons were directed more at them than at the boys. I would speak of sin, of death, of judgment and of hell...

“Lord, Don’t Let Him Die”

It was the first Sunday of July 1846. After an exhausting day at the Oratory in the torrid heat, on his way back to his rooms at the Refuge, Don Bosco fainted. They lifted him up and laid him in bed. “He was racked by cough, violent inflammation of the lungs and continuous loss of blood.” It was probably a severe attack of pleurisy, with high fever and hemoptysis. A fatal combination in those days, especially if we consider that Don Bosco had suffered loss of blood before.

“In a few days I was at the point of death.” He was given viaticum and the anointing of the sick. The news spread everywhere, on the building scaffolds, in the workshops: “Don Bosco is dying.”

In the evenings, groups of frightened boys made their way to the room where Don Bosco was struggling for life. They came as they were, with dirty clothes and faces white with lime. They skipped their supper to rush down to Valdocco. They cried and prayed: “Lord, don’t let him die!”

The doctor had prohibited all visits, and the attendant (placed there immediately by the Marchioness) followed instructions to the letter. The boys despaired.

“I only want to have a look at him.”

“I won’t make him speak.”

“I want to have just one word with him, just one.”

“If Don Bosco knew I was here, he would certainly call me in.”

For eight days Don Bosco was between life and death. There were boys who, in those eight days did not drink a drop of water despite their work under the scorching sun, hoping to snatch from heaven the grace of a cure. Young bricklayers prayed in shifts, day and night, in the church of the *Consolata*. There was always someone kneeling before the Madonna. Sometimes their eyes would close because of the fatigue of a twelve-hour working day, but they would not give up, because Don Bosco *must not die*.

Some, with the thoughtless generosity of youth, promised Our Lady that they would recite the rosary every day of their lives. Others vowed to fast on bread and water for a whole year.

On Saturday, Don Bosco’s condition became critical. He had no strength left, and any little movement caused him to bleed. Many feared that he would not survive the night.

But the end did not come.

He recovered instead. It was the ‘grace’ wrenched from the Madonna by those boys who could not be left without a father.

One fine Sunday afternoon at the end July, Don Bosco walked slowly towards the Oratory with the help of a walking stick. The boys rushed towards him. The bigger ones forced him to sit on an armchair, they hoisted him on their shoulders and carried him in triumph to the courtyard. They wept and they sang, those splendid ragamuffins, and Don Bosco wept with them.

They entered the little chapel and thanked the Lord together. In the expectant silence that followed, Don Bosco managed to say a few words:

“I owe my life to you. But be sure of this: from now on, I will spend it entirely for you.”

These, according to me, are the greatest words of his life. They are the ‘solemn vow’ by which he consecrated himself to the young and to no one else. He would cap them with those he uttered on his deathbed: “Tell my boys that I shall be waiting for them all in heaven.”

Marshalling whatever little strength he had, he spoke to the boys one by one, “to change into something sensible the vows and promises they had made without much reflection when I was in danger of death.” It was a delicate gesture worthy of a great educator.

The doctors ordered a long period of convalescence with absolute rest. Don Bosco went back to Becchi, to the house of his brother and mother, but not before promising his boys: “When the leaves begin to fall, I’ll be here again in your midst.”

“Your Money or Your Life!”

Don Bosco covered the distance on a donkey. He stopped a bit at Castelnuovo and reached Becchi toward evening.

He was given a noisy welcome by his nephews and nieces, children of Anthony and of Joseph. Anthony, who had built himself a small house in front of the one they had lived in as boys, had five children: Francis who was 14, Margaret, 12, Teresa, 9, John, 6, and Frances, a lively child of 3. Joseph had also built a house in front of the old one, where he lived with Mamma Margaret and four children: Philomena who was almost 11 years old, Rose Domenica, 8, Francis, 5, and Louis who was still in the cradle.

Don Bosco stayed with Joseph. The bracing air of the hills, the silent affection of his mother, the long evening walks among the rows of vines with the grapes just beginning to turn red, worked wonders for his health.

Every now and then he would write to Fr Borel for news of his boys. He did not forget to thank Frs Pacchiotti, Bosio, Vola and Trivero, who were helping Fr Borel.

In the month of August he walked as far as Capriglio, the birthplace of his mother. On his way back, while crossing a thicket, he heard a harsh voice:

“Your purse or your life!”

Don Bosco was startled. He answered:

“I am Don Bosco, and I have no money with me.” He looked at the man who had come out of a bush, sickle in hand, and continued in a different tone:

“Cortese, so it’s you who want to take my life?”

Despite the unkempt beard, he had recognized the young man he had befriended in the prisons of Turin. The young fellow also recognized Don Bosco and would gladly have vanished.

“Forgive me, Don Bosco. I’m just a miserable wretch.” In bits and pieces he told Don Bosco his bitter but familiar story. Out of prison, his family had disowned him. “Even my mother turned her back upon me. She said I had brought dishonour to the family.” There was no question of finding work. No one wanted to have an ex-prisoner.

By the time they arrived at Becchi, Don Bosco had heard his confession. He took him home and presented him to his family.

“I came across this good friend of mine. He will have supper with us tonight.”

Next morning, after Mass, he gave him a letter of recommendation to a parish priest and to some good employers that he knew in Turin, and sent him off with a big hug.

It was now October. During his long solitary walks, Don Bosco had done some serious thinking about the immediate future of his work. On going back to Turin, he would go to stay in the rooms he had rented from Pinardi. There, little by little, he would begin giving hospitality to boys who had no family.

The place, however, was not suitable for a lone priest. The Bellezza house with its loose women was not far away, with its Giardiniera pub where the drunkards sang late into the night. He needed someone who would protect him from suspicion. Nasty rumours did not take long to spread.

He was thinking of his mother. But how to tell her? Margaret was 58 years old, and at Becchi she was queen. How to uproot her from her house, her grandchildren, the serene daily routine? Perhaps Don Bosco drew courage from the sad season of autumn spreading over the countryside. 1846 had been a bad year for farmers, and the forecasts for 1847 were still worse.

“Mamma,” he said to her one evening, picking up courage. “Why don’t you come and stay with me for some time? I have rented three rooms at Valdocco, and soon I may give shelter to some abandoned boys. You once told me that if ever I became rich you would never enter my house. Look at me now: I am a poor man and full of debts, and it is risky for a priest to live alone in that place.”

The good woman became pensive. She had not expected such a request. Don Bosco pressed her gently:

“Wouldn’t you come to be a mother to my poor boys?”

“If you think that is God’s will,” she whispered, “I’ll come.”

Strangers without a Penny

Tuesday, 3 November 1846. The leaves had begun falling in the autumn wind. Don Bosco set out for Turin, carrying his missal and his breviary. Mamma Margaret walked at his side, carrying a basket with some clothes and a bit of food.

Don Bosco had written to Fr Borel about his plans, and the ‘little priest’ had kindly shifted Don Bosco’s few belongings from the Refuge to the Pinardi house.

The two pilgrims covered the long distance on foot. When they reached the circle, a priest friend of Don Bosco recognized them and came to wish them. He saw them dusty and tired.

“Welcome back, dear Don Bosco, how’s your health?”

“I’m much better, thank you. I’ve brought my mother with me.”

“But why come on foot?”

“We are rather short of this,” he said with a smile, rubbing thumb and index finger together.

“Where will you stay?”

“Here, at the Pinardi house.”

“But how will you carry on without resources?”

“I don’t know, but the good Lord will see to it.”

“Always the same,” murmured the good priest, shaking his head. He pulled out his watch from his pocket (a rare and precious object those days) and handed it over to Don Bosco.

“I wish I were rich and in a position to help you. This is the best I can do.”

Margaret entered first into her new house: three small rooms, bare and squalid; two beds, two chairs, and some pots and pans. She smiled and said to her son:

“At Becchi, I had to work hard to clean the furniture and wash the pots and pans. Here I’ll have plenty of time to rest.”

They rested a bit and then set themselves to work. While Mamma Margaret prepared something for supper, Don Bosco hung up a crucifix and a picture of Our Lady, and then prepared the beds for the night. Mother and son began singing together:

*There’ll be trouble—if they come to know
That we’re strangers—with no dough...²⁶*

A boy by the name of Stefano Castagno heard them, and the news spread like wild fire among the boys of Valdocco:

“Don Bosco is back!”

²⁶ *Guai al mondo—se ci sente / forestieri—senza niente...*

22

A POWDER KEG ABOUT TO BLOW UP

The following Sunday, 8 November 1846, there was a grand celebration. Don Bosco had to sit in an armchair in the middle of the meadow with the boys all around him, listening to their songs and their wishes.

Many of those boys had gone to visit him at Becchi and had compelled him to shorten his holidays, saying that if he did not come to Valdocco, they would shift the Oratory to Becchi.

Fr Cafasso had opposed such an early return, against all medical advice. He had even asked the archbishop to intervene. "I was allowed to return to the Oratory," writes Don Bosco, "on condition that I did not preach for two more years." But he confesses immediately: "I'm afraid I disobeyed."

Evening Classes

Don Bosco's first concern was to restart and enlarge the evening classes. "I rented one more room. There were classes everywhere, in the kitchen, in my room, in the sacristy, in the choir, in the church. Among the pupils there were also some little rascals who broke and upset everything. A few months later I managed to rent two more rooms."

Some of those who were present describe the scene: "It was a sight to see those rooms lit up in the evenings, with boys and young fellows everywhere, standing before charts, book in hand, or busy writing on benches or on the ground, painfully scrawling large letters on the page."

Frs Carpano, Nasi, Trivero and Pacchiotti were back helping him. The suspicion about Don Bosco's mental health had disappeared during the period of his illness and convalescence. If he did have a 'fixed idea,' he had shown himself capable of spitting blood to make it a reality.

With Marchioness Barolo, instead, some bad blood remained, as happens when both sides can claim they were right. The Marchioness had seen her predictions come true: Don Bosco had collapsed and had almost died; he had been forced to undergo a long convalescence; and the Oratory had continued under the guidance of Fr Borel. But Don Bosco also felt that he had been right in not giving up the Oratory at any cost. At any rate, in his present state of health he could not possibly resume work at the Little Hospital. Thus the contract which had tacitly expired in August was not renewed. Don Bosco would occasionally go to give a talk to the sick girls. The Marchioness no longer paid him a salary but through Fr Borel and Fr Cafasso she would covertly send generous offerings "for his unbearable urchins" right up to her death in 1864.

But these are little things when compared to the grave events around the corner. What really mattered was that Don Bosco had succeeded in giving stability to his Oratory and had regained his health before the outbreak of the great political storm.

Bishop Mastai-Ferretti Becomes Pope Pius IX

In the early months of 1846, the famous Turin journalist De Boni wrote: "I am bored stiff of having to walk about the squares of this square city, where all talk in whispers and walk on tiptoe. I detest the polar ice piling up in heaps, these city streets as straight as men are crooked, this prudent liberalism that listens to sermons on Sundays, and on Fridays recites the rosary of Catholic progress according to Count Balbo, may God bless him."

De Boni proved to be a poor prophet. Turin was actually a powder keg about to explode. Count Balbo was the representative of the moderate liberalism that within months would shake up Italy like an earthquake.

In June of that same year, Cardinal Mastai-Ferretti, the 'open-minded' bishop of Imola, was elected pope. He took the name of Pius IX. He was a very pious and simple man. He was neither a politician nor was he favourable to the ideas of the liberals. He had, instead, a deep sense of humanity, and so he quickly promulgated certain long-awaited reforms in the Papal States. These were taken as 'liberal reforms,' and that was the cause of a trail of misunderstandings.

A few days after his election on 17 July, against the advice of many cardinals, he granted a political amnesty. Many detainees, whose only fault was that they had taken part in 'liberal activities,' were set free.

In order to 'understand' the prisoners, the pope would often sneak incognito into the prison of Castel Sant'Angelo and talk with them, causing panic among the officers. To get a 'feeling' of the complaints of the people, he visited hospitals in the same way.

In the months that followed, he put a check on the high-handedness of the police, and made it abundantly clear that he wanted Austria to be more respectful of the independence of the Holy See.

In the spring of 1847, he granted a certain liberty to the press, and instituted a Council of State with some elected laypersons in it—something resembling a parliament. He also allowed the formation of a civic guard.

In the climate of ardent expectation created by Gioberti's book, Pius IX appeared to the liberals to be the long-awaited 'neo-Guelph' pontiff. Pope Mastai was acclaimed as the one who would bring about the unity and independence of Italy with a liberal stamp. Enthusiastic manifestations took place everywhere. Wherever he went, Pius IX was welcomed with parades, felicitations, and torchlight processions.

The liberals were not the only ones to interpret the new pope in this way. Even people with socialistic leanings and exponents of the 'democratic left' were astonished. Metternich himself, the powerful Austrian chancellor and guardian of absolutism and conservatism, was heard exclaiming in distress: "I would have expected anything, but not a liberal pope."

Pius IX was not a liberal pope, yet for almost two years he would be forced by events and circumstances to play a role that lent itself to misunderstanding.

In the summer of 1847, as a precaution against the 'liberal pope,' an Austrian garrison occupied the papal city of Ferrara on the orders of Metternich. The liberals

interpreted this move as the definitive break between the Holy See and Austria, and the spark of the imminent war of independence. Charles Albert offered his army to the pope. Garibaldi, writing from America, placed his legion of volunteers at the disposal of Pius IX, and from London, Mazzini wrote a fiery letter to the pope.

Pius IX became thus the banner of national freedom. Provoking a war was the last thing on his mind, but events were overtaking him. The war of independence, justified in his name, was already in the air.

Don Bosco's Clash with the 'Patriotic Priests'

Turin followed Rome. Manifestations were organized in favour of Pius IX and his 'liberal' gestures.

A rigid conservative, Archbishop Fransoni was perplexed by these developments. He nourished strong suspicions that the liberals were making use of the new pope. The other bishops of Piedmont—those of Fossano, Pinerolo, Biella—were, instead, decidedly and enthusiastically in favour of the church's 'new liberal line.' In 1848, almost all the Piedmontese and Sardinian bishops wrote patriotic pastoral letters.

"Don Bosco himself," writes Peter Stella, "around the year 1848, must have shared the common hopes of Italy in the neo-Guelph form, which looked respectful both of the pope and the old dynasties." In the second edition of his *Church History*, issued at the beginning of 1848, he referred to the theoretician of neo-Guelph liberalism as 'the great Gioberti.'

"But it could not have been a lasting sentiment," seeing that the sobriquet disappeared in the following edition. "Soon after, the collision with the patriotic priests must have taken place. A permanent chasm would henceforth separate him from Frs Cocchi, Trivero and Ponte."

The clash must have taken place when it became clear that the liberals were only 'making use' of the pope for their own political ends, and especially after the allocution of 29 April 1848, in which Pius IX clarified the misunderstanding once and for all.

Angry Showers of Stones

In the meanwhile, alongside the 'great history,' the 'little history' of the Oratory was unfolding in lowly Valdocco: the hidden work for the good of the boys, the silent struggle with debts.

By December 1846 Don Bosco had managed to rent from Pancras Soave all the rooms of the Pinaridi house and the land around it for an annual fee of 710 *lire*. He had built a wall all around the games yard with gates at both ends. The unholy crowd that frequented the Giardiniera and the surrounding houses on Sundays would no longer be able to intrude into the playground and disturb the boys.

Don Bosco set aside a corner of the grounds—today occupied by a shop selling religious articles—into a vegetable patch. The boys named it 'Mamma Margaret's orchard.' Between the rents and the help given to the boys, there was always very little money left for the kitchen. That good country woman tried to make do by cultivating what she could.

The fields all around were still invaded by young toughs on Sundays. They gambled, drank wine acquired from the Giardiniera, cursed, and abused the boys entering the Oratory.

Patiently Don Bosco tried to approach them. He would even sit with them for a card game. Little by little he succeeded in attracting some of them. More than once, however, while he was explaining catechism in the open, his boys had to take cover in the chapel to avoid angry showers of stones.

Don Bosco knew well that the 500 boys whom he could gather in the Oratory were but a fraction of those who wandered about the city, without faith and often without food.

Borgo Vanchiglia, not very far from Valdocco, was infested by gangs of hooligans who gave hell to the police, lived by snatching bags from people returning from the market, and often indulged in frightful stone-fights that easily ended up in knife battles.

Passing that way, Don Bosco would sometimes intervene by throwing himself into the fray, trying to disperse them by using his fists. On one occasion a wooden clog hit him on his face. "Not with blows," he had been told in the dream, but even dreams have their exceptions.

A Robber Priest

One of Don Bosco's tactics for bringing good boys to the Oratory was to enter workplaces and speak directly to the masters.

"Would you do me a favour?"

"If I can, Father."

"You certainly can. Send these boys on Sundays to my Oratory in Valdocco. They can learn some catechism and that will do them good."

"I think they are badly in need of that. Some of them are lazy and insolent."

"Not at all! They all look like gentlemen, can't you see? So that's settled: on Sunday I'll be waiting for all of you at the Oratory. We can play and have some fun."

With other types of boys, the strategy was different. Leaving Fr Borel in charge of the Oratory, Don Bosco would roam the streets and squares of the neighbourhood. He would find groups of boys gambling on the pavements. As cards were dealt out, the money (up to 15 or 20 *lire* at times) would be kept in the centre on a handkerchief.

Don Bosco would size up the situation and then, with lightning speed, he would grab the kerchief and money and take to his heels. The boys, stunned, would jump up and set out in hot pursuit.

"Our money, give us back our money!"

Those poor boys seen everything, but not a robber priest. Don Bosco in the meantime would run towards the Oratory, shouting back:

"If you catch me, I'll give you your money. Run!"

He would enter the Oratory and dash into the chapel, with the young fellows close on his heels. Fr Carpano or Fr Borel would be in the pulpit, preaching to the chapel packed with boys. The show would begin.

Don Bosco would pretend to be a passing vendor, raising the handkerchief with the money and shouting:

"Torrone! Torrone! Who wants torrone?"²⁷

The preacher would pretend to lose his temper.

"Get out of here, you scoundrel! This is not a public square!"

"But I live by selling torrone, and there are so many boys here. Anyone for torrone?"

²⁷ *Torrone* is a well-known Italian sweet, something like the Indian *chikki*.

The dialogue would be in dialect, and the boys would be in splits of laughter. The newcomers would stand there, flabbergasted. Where on earth had they landed up?

In the meantime the two priests went on 'dialoguing,' and between one quip and another they twisted the topic to gambling, or to cursing, or to the beauty of living in God's friendship. By that time those who had been chasing Don Bosco would join the others in hearty laughter and would begin to listen with interest.

Then the litanies would begin. The boys, edging up to Don Bosco, would ask:

"What about our money?"

"Just a few minutes more, after benediction."

Out in the courtyard he would return the money, give them a snack, and make them promise to return to the Oratory to play. Many did.

Songs and Yells of Drunkards

Stephen Castagno, a boy from the early times of the Oratory, testifies: "Don Bosco was always the first in the games. He was the soul of the recreation. I don't know how he managed it, but he seemed to be everywhere at once, in the middle of every group of boys. He kept an eye on everyone. We were dishevelled, often dirty, bothersome and naughty. It seemed as if he delighted to be with the worst. For the smaller ones he was like a mother. We often fought and quarrelled, and he was there to separate us. He would raise his hand as if he wanted to hit us, but he never did. He would grab us by the arms and pull us apart."

Joseph Buzzetti remembered: "I met hundreds of boys who came to the Oratory without any education and or religious feeling, and who changed for the better in a very short time. They grew so fond of the Oratory that they never wanted to leave it, and they would go to confession and communion every Sunday."

The biggest nuisance, especially in summer, was the Giardiniera, the much patronized tavern of the Bellezza house. When the doors and windows had to be kept open, the songs and yells of the drunkards could be heard in the chapel. Sometimes furious brawls drowned the voice of the preacher. More than once Don Bosco had to stop, take off his stole and surplice, and go to the tavern, threatening to call the police.

The problem of helpers became more and more acute. Fr Borel, Fr Carpano and others were often busy elsewhere on Sundays. Where to find persons for the assistance, the catechism and above all the evening classes?

Don Bosco remembered that in the dream "many of the lambs became shepherds." He began to look for collaborators among his boys. He chose the best from among the bigger boys, and gave them special classes. "Those young teachers," writes Fr Lemoyne, "eight or ten at the beginning, gave an excellent account of themselves. Some of them even went on to become wonderful priests."

Some good lay people of the city also came to give him a hand: a goldsmith, two sellers of knick-knacks, a grocer, a broker and a carpenter.

23

“I AM AN ORPHAN FROM VALSESIA”

Don Bosco remembers a dramatic episode from the winter of 1846-47.

A 14 year old boy, one of the regulars, was ordered by his father, who was drunk every evening, to stop going to Don Bosco. The boy ignored him and continued to come to the Oratory. The man, a shopkeeper, flew into a rage and threatened to kill him if he did not obey.

Late one Sunday evening, the boy returned home from the Oratory and found his father dead drunk, waiting for him with hatchet in hand. Brandishing it he shouted:

“You have been with Don Bosco!”

The frightened boy took to his heels, with his father giving him the chase.

“I’ll kill you if I catch you!”

The Tree and the Mist

The mother, who had seen everything, ran after her husband to disarm him. The boy got to the Oratory with a good lead over his father, but found the gate locked. He knocked desperately, but there was no answer. Exhausted, he shinned up a big mulberry tree that stood nearby. There were no leaves to cover him, but the darkness and the fog hid him well.

The father arrived, panting and still wielding the hatchet. He too hammered on the door. Margaret who, by chance had seen the boy climb the tree, went to open the door after alerting Don Bosco. The man rushed in, ran upstairs and barged into Don Bosco’s room.

“Where is my son?”

Don Bosco faced him resolutely.

“Your son is not here.”

“He is here, I’m telling you.” He threw open doors and cupboards. “I’ll find him and kill him.”

“Mister,” Don Bosco intervened strongly. “I said he is not here. But even if he were here, this is my house and you have no right whatsoever to enter. Get out or I’ll call the police.”

“Don’t get excited, Father, I am going to the police myself, and you will have to give me back my son.”

“Good, let’s go together. I have a thing or two to tell to them about your behaviour and this is just the right occasion.”

The man had more than one affair to hide and beat a quick retreat, still muttering threats. Don Bosco, with his mother, went to the mulberry tree and called out softly to the boy. There was no answer. He called out again, a little louder.

“Come down. He has gone away.” There was still no answer. They feared

something had happened. Don Bosco climbed up with a ladder and found the boy in shock, his eyes wide open. He shook him. As if awakening from a nightmare, the boy began shouting and flailing his arms and almost fell to the ground. Don Bosco had to hold him tight and reassure him.

“Your father is not here. It’s me, Don Bosco. Don’t be afraid.”

Slowly the boy calmed down and began to cry softly. Don Bosco managed to get him down and take him to the kitchen. Mamma Margaret prepared something hot for him and Don Bosco laid out a mattress near the fire. Next morning he found him a good employer in a nearby village. It was some time before the boy could go home.

It was this episode, probably, that reopened a wound in Don Bosco’s heart. Some of his boys had nowhere to spend the night. They ended up under the bridges or in the squalid public dormitories. For a long time he had entertained the thought of giving them hospitality.

He made the first experiment in April 1847. The Pinardi house had a small hayloft, where today there is a passage leading to the playground behind. There Don Bosco gave shelter to half a dozen young men. It was a fiasco. By morning the guests had disappeared, taking Mamma Margaret’s blankets with them.

Don Bosco made a second attempt after a few days. The result was worse. This time they took away also the hay and the straw.

Don Bosco did not give up.

Soaked to the Skin and Numb with Cold

It was raining cats and dogs that evening in May. Don Bosco and his mother had just finished supper, when there was a knock at the gate. (We follow here the written account of Don Bosco himself). It was a boy of about 15, soaked to the skin and numb with cold.

“I am an orphan. I come from Valsesia. I work as a bricklayer but have not yet found work. I am hungry and cold and don’t know where to go.”

“Come in,” said Don Bosco. “Sit by the fire, or you’ll catch your death of cold.”

Mamma Margaret prepared a bit of supper for him.

“And where will you go now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I had three *lire* when I arrived in Turin, but they are gone.” He began to cry quietly. “Please don’t send me away.”

Margaret thought of the stolen blankets.

“I could keep you, but how do I know you won’t run away with my pots and pans?”

“No, never, ma’am. I may be poor but I’ve never stolen anything.”

Don Bosco had already gone out in the pouring rain to gather some bricks. With a few boards he rigged up a bed and laid his own straw mattress on it.

“You will sleep here tonight, and you will stay as long as you want. Don Bosco will never send you away.”

Mamma Margaret invited him to say his prayers.

“I don’t know any prayers,” he said.

“Then pray with us.”

At the end, she gave him a little talk on the necessity of work, of loyalty and of religion.

Salesian tradition has always affectionately regarded this little sermon of Mamma Margaret as the first ‘good night.’ The ‘good night’ is a brief talk given by the rector at the conclusion of the day in Salesian houses. Don Bosco judged this to be “the key to morality and to the smooth running and success of the house.”

Mamma Margaret, however, wasn’t too convinced of the effectiveness of her words, for Don Bosco adds immediately: “To make sure everything would end in the right way, she locked up the door of the kitchen...”

This was the first orphan to stay in the house of Don Bosco. By the end of the year there would be seven. One day they would be counted in thousands.

The second boarder was a 12 year old boy from a middle class family. Don Bosco met him on Viale San Massimo (now Corso Regina Margherita). He was crying, his head resting against an elm. He had no father, and his mother had died the previous day. The landlord had turned him out, seizing all the belongings in lieu of rent. Don Bosco took him to Mamma Margaret and found employment for him as a shop assistant. He succeeded in life and always remained a great friend of Don Bosco.

The third boy was Joseph Buzzetti, the young bricklayer from Caronno Ghiringhello. Don Bosco himself invited him. One Sunday evening, as he was saying goodbye to the boys, Don Bosco took him by the hand.

“Would you like to stay with me?”

“Gladly!”

“In that case, I’ll talk to Charles.” The elder brother, who had been frequenting the Oratory for the past six years, agreed. Joseph was 15. He continued working as a bricklayer in the city, but the house of Mamma Margaret became his home.

The Little Barber

After them came Charles Gastini. One day in 1843, Don Bosco had entered a barber’s shop. A little fellow came forward to lather his face.

“What’s your name? How old are you?”

“My name is Carlino. I am 11 years old.”

“Good, Carlino, see that you lather me well. And how’s your dad?”

“My father is dead. I’ve only my mother.”

“Oh, my poor little fellow. I’m sorry.” The boy had finished lathering him. “And now, get hold of the razor and give me a good shave.”

The master was horrified.

“Father, for goodness sake! The boy can’t do it. He only applies the soap.”

“Yes, but he has to start sometime, hasn’t he? He might as well begin with me. Come on, Carlino!”

Carlino began the shave, trembling like a leaf. When he reached the chin, he broke into a sweat. Despite a few scrapes and minor cuts, he got to the end.

“Well done, Carlino!” smiled Don Bosco. “Now that we have become friends you must come and see me sometimes.”

Gastini began frequenting the Oratory and became a great friend of Don Bosco.

In the summer of that year, Don Bosco found him crying near the barber’s shop.

“What’s wrong?”

“My mother has died and the barber has sacked me. My elder brother is away in the army. Where shall I go now?”

“Come with me.” As they were walking down to Valdocco, Charles Gastini heard the famous phrase that so many boys would hear. It was something he never forgot. “You see, I am a poor priest. But even when I have only one last piece of bread, I’ll share it with you.”

Mamma Margaret prepared another bed. Carlino remained more than 50 years at the Oratory. Cheerful and lively, he became the official compere at every celebration. His skits were irresistible. But whenever he spoke of Don Bosco, he would cry like a little boy. “He really loved me,” he used to say. He would sing a little rhyme that everybody knew by heart:

*I'm sure to live to be seventy,
Papà Giovanni has told me!*

It was one of the many ‘prophecies’ that Don Bosco made to his boys, half seriously and half in jest. Charles Gastini died on 28 January 1902. He was seventy years and a day old.

For those first boys who came to live with him, Don Bosco transformed two rooms into a dormitory: eight beds, a crucifix, a picture of Our Lady, and a poster saying “God sees you.”

Early in the morning Don Bosco would celebrate Mass. The boys assisted, saying the morning prayers and the rosary. They would pocket a loaf of bread and go off to work in the city. They returned for lunch, and later for supper. Soup was always in abundance. The next dish varied with the produce of Mamma Margaret’s orchard and the state of Don Bosco’s purse.

Money became a serious problem for Don Bosco during those first months. It would continue to be a problem till the end of his life. His first helper was not a countess, but his mother. That poor country woman sent for the few things she had left behind when coming to Turin: her trousseau, the ring, the ear-rings and a chain, which she had always guarded jealously. She had never used them from the day her husband died. She sold them to feed the first boys.

The Archbishop Hits the Ceiling

This first attempt at a Salesian house was called by Don Bosco, ‘House annexed to the Oratory of St Francis of Sales.’ Morand Wirth calls it a very significant title: “It shows that in the mind of the founder, the Oratory continued to keep its privileged place”.

In May of that year, Don Bosco founded the ‘Sodality of St Aloysius’ for his boys. Its members committed themselves to three things: to give good example, to avoid bad talk, and to receive the sacraments frequently. In a short time, the sodality became a group of boys who helped one another to become better.

A month later, on 21 June, the feast of St Aloysius was kept with great solemnity. Don Bosco always presented this young saint to his boys as a model of purity. The archbishop came to confirm those who had not yet received the sacrament.

“On that occasion,” writes Don Bosco, “the archbishop, forgetting that he was not in

the cathedral, stood up after putting on his mitre and hit the low ceiling of the chapel. He laughed and all of us laughed too.” The good archbishop quipped: “I must respect the boys of Don Bosco, and preach to them bareheaded.”

Don Bosco remembers another detail of great importance to him: “After the confirmation, cards were written out containing the name of the celebrant, the name and surname of the godfather, the place and the date. The cards were then divided according to the various parishes, and taken to the diocesan office for transmission to the respective parish priests.”

With this gesture, the archbishop practically approved the Oratory as “the parish for abandoned boys” and confirmed his support to Don Bosco in front of the parish priests of the city, who were still hesitant in his regard.

In September, Don Bosco bought the first small statue of Our Lady. It cost him 27 *lire*. It may still be found in the Pinardi Chapel, on the right side as one enters. The boys used to take this statue out in procession on the big feasts of Our Lady. The procession would go round a few houses, the ill-famed Giardiniera with its noisy clientele, two small canals watering the fields and orchards, and a little avenue of mulberry trees (via della Giardiniera) now incorporated into the courtyard of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

Tricolour Cockades at the Pontifical Mass

In those months of the year 1847, the liberals were putting pressure on King Charles Albert to initiate a program of reforms. But the king was wary of Austria and did not intend to lose control. He was more hesitant than ever, taking one step forward and one backward.

In September, Maestro Novaro (working in via Rosa Rossa, 10, now via XX Settembre, 68) set to music a hymn sent him from Genoa by Goffredo Mameli. The outcome was not a masterpiece, but those lines of music with the title *Fratelli d'Italia* would become the hymn of Italian Risorgimento.

In the evening of 1 October, a huge crowd gathered in the garden of the *Ripari* to sing to the pope and the king. The crowd was brutally dispersed by the police on the orders of the king.

In the same month, Charles Albert dismissed Count Solaro della Margherita, his foreign minister for 12 years and chief representative of the conservative pro-Austrian line.

During the following days the police dispersed all popular manifestations shouting “Viva Pius IX.” The king let it be known that he was thinking of great reforms, but that he wanted the people to be quiet.

On 29 October, a bill was presented granting a significant degree of freedom to municipalities. The councils would be elected by the people. The electors, however, would be only those who owned land and paid taxes, teachers and civil servants, amounting to barely 2% of the population. A cautious freedom of the press was also granted.

On 1 November, Charles Albert set out for Genoa. A crowd of over 50,000 accompanied him up to the road to Moncalieri, singing and waving banners.

During the same month, Charles Albert, Leopold of Tuscany and Pius IX signed the first draft of the ‘Italian League,’ unifying the customs formalities of the three states. It looked as if the federation of Italian states prophesied by Gioberti was about to become a reality.

On 4 December, Charles Albert returned from Genoa. The whole city came out to

welcome him with enthusiasm. The seminarians too asked permission to take part in the demonstrations, but the archbishop forbade them. 80 of them disobeyed and mixed with the crowd.

The challenge became a provocation when the seminarians appeared for the archbishop's Christmas Mass in the cathedral wearing tricolour cockades. Franson closed down the seminary in the early months of 1848.

A Good Brazier in the Sacristy

Don Bosco did not allow himself to be paralysed by all this turmoil. He kept at his work with humility. The boys of the Oratory were by now several hundreds, 800 according to Fr Lemoyne. Some of them came from far away suburbs. Don Bosco consulted Fr Borel and Fr Carpano and came to conclusion that another oratory had to be opened in the southern part of the city.

The avenue which today bears the name of Corso Vittorio was at the time flanked by the poor houses of washerwomen. The long lines of laundry hanging out to dry gave a lively country atmosphere to the Porta Nuova suburb. Well-bred people used to come there for walks on Sunday afternoons, and gangs of unemployed boys liked to play at war.

In agreement with the archbishop, Don Bosco rented from Mrs Valenti a little house with a shed and a field "near the iron bridge" for the sum of 450 *lire* a year. Then he told the boys:

My dear boys, when bees multiply and become too many in a single hive, some of them go elsewhere and begin a new hive. We shall do the same. We shall open a second oratory, we shall form a second family. Those of you who live in the southern part of the city won't have to walk so far any more. From the feast of the Immaculate onwards, they can go to the Oratory of St Aloysius, at Porta Nuova, near the iron bridge.

Fr Borel blessed the new oratory on 8 December 1847. Fr Carpano was appointed director. He went there on foot, carrying a bundle of firewood under his cloak to light a fire in the sacristy for himself and the first boys.

24

THE FEVER OF 1848

In 1848 the nations of Europe exploded like ammunition dumps.

The flames of revolution spread especially to the great cities: Paris (23-24 February), Vienna (13 March), Berlin (15 March), Budapest (15 March), Venice (17 March), Milan (18 March).

There was heavy fighting at the barricades. In a couple of months the whole of Europe was in flames.

The explosion was so widespread that on 3 April Czar Nicholas of Russia exclaimed: “Is there anything still standing in Europe?” Chaotic situations are still referred to as *quarantotto* in Italian.²⁸

Once again, it is not our intention to provide a complete picture of the Italian and European history of the time. Our aim is only to touch upon the events—especially events occurring in Turin and Piedmont—which had a profound influence on the work of Don Bosco, which conditioned his attitude and his choices.

Liberals, Patriots and Workers at the Barricades

It is impossible to understand the upheaval of 1848 if we do not keep in mind the three forces that were involved: the liberals who were struggling to establish constitutional and representative systems in place of absolutism; the aspirations of individual nations to independence from the Austrian empire; and the workers’ movement for greater social justice.

To put it more simply, people of very different inspiration fought side by side at the barricades on the streets of the cities of Europe: liberals who wanted a constitution, patriots who clamoured for independence from a foreign power, and workers who were fighting against their bosses for the abolition of a 12-14 hour day.

The workers’ movement was particularly active in Paris. The barricades of 24 February inaugurated the *quarantotto*, and a lightning victory was won. The monarchy of Louis Philippe was overthrown. Workers and the bourgeoisie fraternized around ‘liberty trees’ blessed by the priests. The right to work was proclaimed, the work day was reduced to 10 hours, and the ‘nationalized factories’²⁹ were inaugurated.

But grave mistakes on the part of the workers and the intolerance of the bourgeoisie caused this new state of affairs to collapse as quickly as it had arisen. There was a severe reprisal. General Cavaignac took Paris by storm after a furious four-day battle (23-26 June).

²⁸ *Quarantotto* = forty-eight, from the year 1848 when the revolutions broke out.

²⁹ Government-sponsored factories, something like our present day public sector enterprises.

The repression was harsh and the work day was brought back to 12 hours.

It was this kind of repression that pushed the workers away from ‘humanitarian socialism’ towards the harder and more pitiless Marxism. Karl Marx had, in fact, written his *Communist Manifesto* in January of that year.

In Italy, the workers’ movement participated only in the barricades of Milan. The Italian *quarantotto* was dominated instead by the liberals who wanted the kings to grant a constitution, and the patriots who preached a war of independence from Austria. Austria was occupying Lombardy and Veneto, and was controlling all the other states too.

The granting of the constitution, the popular insurrections against Austria, and the first war of independence led by Charles Albert are the three milestones marking the year 1848 in Italy.

The Constitution will be Called ‘Statute’

The year 1848 began in Turin with rumours of war. Everyone was talking about politics. The great novelty was the ‘free’ political newspapers, which multiplied over the months as a consequence of the freedom of press and played an important role in the formation of public opinion.

The young Camillo Benso di Cavour spearheaded the liberal movement with his *Risorgimento* (first issue 15 December 1847). On 1 January *La Concordia* was born, directed by Valerio of the democratic and populist left. On 26 January the *Opinione* was launched by Durando; in June the rash and carefree *Gazzetta del Popolo* by Botero; in July the *Conciliatore* directed by Canon Gastaldi, future archbishop of Turin, and the clearly Catholic *Armonia* of Gustavo Cavour, brother of Camillo.

On 30 January news reached Turin that in Naples King Ferdinand had granted the constitution, and that in Milan citizens had begun boycotting the Austrians. Turin’s Council of Ten approached Charles Albert and asked for the constitution.

After days of anguish, Charles Albert considered abdicating. He did not think it right to break the oath he had made to Charles Felix 25 years earlier. He was opposed by the crown prince, Victor Emmanuel: his father had never allowed him any say in the matters of state; how could he leave him now when the storm was raging?

On 7 February Charles Albert called a meeting of the extraordinary council of the crown and said that he was ready to examine a draft of the constitution (to be called ‘statute’) that safeguarded religion and the honour of the monarchy. But he invited the Council of Ten to keep the squares free from gatherings and crowds: he would not tolerate any pressure.

On 10 February in Rome, Pius IX sent out a proclamation to a people restless with expectation. He invited them “not to ask for reforms which he could not possibly grant,” and concluded: “Bless Italy, great God, and help her keep the most precious gift of faith.” The leaders of public opinion, who had already decided to make use of Pius IX to promote a war against Austria, conveniently forgot the “reforms which he could not possibly grant” and the “gift of faith,” and spread throughout Italy the words, “Bless Italy, great God.”

This invocation became the slogan of the liberals and a call for war. Pius IX was deeply hurt and tried in vain to clarify the misunderstanding. It was perhaps at this juncture that Don Bosco began to doubt the neo-Guelph movement and to take his distance from the liberals.

In the days that followed, news reached Turin of the constitution being granted at Florence (17 February) and of the outbreak of revolution in Paris (23 February).

A great day of thanksgiving for the promise of the statute was being planned for 27 February. The huge Piazza Vittorio would be filled with delegations coming from Piedmont, Liguria, Sardinia and Savoy. All the organizations of Turin were invited to participate *en masse*. Marquis Roberto Massimo D'Azeglio himself came down to Valdocco to invite Don Bosco with all his boys.

The Marquis and the Priest

In his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco gives an account of his dialogue with the Marquis. Given that the account was written some 25 years after the event, most probably it is a reconstruction. But we consider this dialogue extremely important, because Don Bosco, who reflects on it at a distance of 25 years, reveals his attitude towards politics right from that time. We report the dialogue here in its essential parts.

A place had been reserved for us in Piazza Vittorio, together with other institutes of every name, scope and condition. What was I to do? To refuse amounted to declaring myself an enemy of Italy; to comply meant the acceptance of principles which I considered baneful.

“Let the city know [said d'Azeglio] that your work is not against modern institutions. It will do you good: contributions will increase; the municipality, and I myself, will come generously to your aid.”

“Sir, it is my firm habit to keep out of anything that refers to politics. I am neither in favour nor against.”

“What do you intend doing then?”

“To do the little I can for abandoned boys, using all my energies to make them good Christians in what pertains to religion and honest citizens in the midst of civil society.”

“You are making a mistake. If you persist in this attitude you will be abandoned by all.”

Don Bosco was convinced of exactly the contrary. He would have been abandoned if he had entered politics, especially if he showed a leaning towards the liberals. He went on stubbornly:

“Invite me to participate in anything where a priest can practice charity, and you will find me ready to sacrifice my life and all I have. But as for politics, I intend to stay out of it, now and forever.”

Anticlerical Bands on the Rampage

The defile towards Piazza Vittorio was impressive: 50,000 citizens wove their way through the streets and passed before the statue of the king on his horse. The archbishop gave permission for Eucharistic benediction, but refused to celebrate Mass and sing the *Te Deum* in the Church of the Gran Madre that dominated the piazza.

Against the archbishop's will, the seminarians joined the parade wearing the tricolour cockade. The archbishop retaliated soon after by closing down the seminary.

These measures were greeted by an explosion of anticlericalism.

On the evening of 2 March, bands of hooligans assaulted two Jesuit residences, smashing windows and breaking doors.

The following day, the same rabble surrounded the convent of the nuns of the Sacred Heart. They kept renewing the siege for seven days, despite being repulsed by the police.

Both Jesuits and nuns left the city a few days later.

The anticlerical squads continued their assaults. Under the windows of the Convitto they shouted, "Death to Fr Guala!" They tried to attack the palace of Marchioness Barolo because of a rumour that she was sheltering 15 Jesuits.

On 4 March, Charles Albert signed the statute in the presence of the council of the crown. The absolute power of the king came to an end, and the parliamentary system was inaugurated.

Paradoxically, Turin did not respond with manifestations of joy. Instead, angry outbursts against the archbishop, priests and all in favour of absolutism continued and increased.

On 8 March, in an attempt to restore normalcy, a National Guard was set up. Within hours, 500 citizens enlisted in Piazza San Carlo.

Milan Revolts and Asks For Help

The days that followed were rocked by a series of mammoth events. Staid Vienna revolted and the Emperor sacked Metternich (13 March). Pius IX granted the constitution (14 March). Revolution broke out in Berlin and Budapest (15 March). Finally the most shocking: Venice arose against the Austrians (17 March), and Milan revolted against the Austrian troops of Radetsky (18 March).

Cesare Balbo, author of *Speranze d'Italia*, was nominated prime minister by Charles Albert. Abbot Anthony Rosmini was sent to Rome as Piedmontese envoy to the pope.

On 19 March, Count Arese arrived from Milan with news and requests. In the central committee of the revolution, he said, there was a strong current against Charles Albert, but the milder current of Gabrio Casati, a friend of Piedmont, had prevailed. Casati had sent him to ask for military help from Charles Albert.

The council of ministers examined the situation together with the king. They decided to first send troops to the frontier to prevent Austrian infiltrations. A brigade of the Royal Guards left for Ticino.

Fighting continued in Milan. On 20 March, General Radetsky, commander-in-chief of the imperial troops, proposed an armistice. It was refused. On 22 March, Porta Tosa was taken by the men of Luciano Manara. The Austrians abandoned Milan.

At Venice also the Austrians were thrown out. Daniele Manin, liberated from prison, was proclaimed president of the 'Republic of St Mark.'

Crowds took to the streets of Turin calling for war.

On the evening of 23 March, a committee representing victorious Milan arrived. They asked for an immediate intervention of the army before the Austrians could launch a counterattack. They put only two conditions: the adoption of the Italian tricolour in place of the blue flag of the Savoys, and a delayed entry of the Piedmontese troops into Milan after

the victory.

War against Austria

The council of ministers decided in favour of intervention. The king accepted. War was declared on Austria. The king made an appearance on the balcony of the royal palace giving on Piazza Castello. Waving the tricolour he greeted the crowd to the shouts of “War against Austria!”

Charles Albert confided to a friend that night: “If I had not proclaimed war, revolution would have broken out and I would have lost the state. Now that it has been proclaimed, if we do not win, my throne is at risk. But I am prepared for this.”

General Passalacqua was ordered to cross the Ticino, hoisting the tricolour with the Savoy coat of arms against a white background.

On 24 March, the archbishop presided over a solemn function in the cathedral, in the presence of the king and crown prince. At his exit, the archbishop was booed and insulted.

During the night, Charles Albert and the crown prince left for the front at the head of 60,000 men. An immense crowd thronged Via Po and Piazza Vittoria to see them off. The atmosphere was festive.

But war is another kettle of fish. All the regiments left Turin in the days that followed. All available horses were requisitioned for the artillery and transport. The city, left without transport, was enveloped in an eerie silence shot through with fear.

In the evening, riots broke out once again under the windows of the archbishop. The minister of the interior advised the archbishop that a period of absence on his part would be welcome. On 29 March Msgr Frasoni left for Switzerland.

The vicar general who substituted him announced public prayers for the combatants. He exhorted the parish priests to help the families of those who had been recalled to arms, and authorized farmers to work on Sundays in the fields of those who were away fighting.

The political authorities proceeded to “take measures that were painful but necessary.” The higher state officials who were considered ‘reactionary’ (up to a few months before they had been the trusted confidants of the king) were removed from public office. Even the governor of Turin, Marshal La Tour, was discharged.

Real and Mock Battles at Valdocco

War fever spread among the youth. Real battles took place in the fields around Valdocco between the gangs of Borgo Vanchiglia, Borgo Dora and Porta Susa. Armed with sticks, knives and stones, they knocked the living daylight out of one another. Don Bosco would often come out of the house to call the police and go with them to try and separate the fighters.

On one occasion he saw a 15 year old boy plunge his knife into the belly of another. The boy was rushed to the hospital. He died mumbling, “You’ll pay for it!”

Don Bosco remembered with sadness those days of endless fighting. There were times when the two gangs would join and suddenly turn against his house, pelting stones on tiles and windows, making Joseph Buzzetti and the other boarders tremble with fear.

To attract boys to the Oratory, Don Bosco exploited the climate of war and invented a new game. A friend of his, Joseph Brosio, had been a *bersagliere*. He would come to the

Oratory in his colourful uniform, which immediately aroused admiration and enthusiasm. Don Bosco asked him to form the boys into a regiment and teach them manoeuvres and battle plans.

Brosio accepted. He obtained two hundred old military muskets fitted with mock barrels. He blew on his bugle and began the training: marches and counter marches, bayonet charges, retreats and attacks. The 'regiment' became very efficient, and would even help in keeping order in church.

All went well till one Sunday afternoon. A number of people had gathered, attracted by the sound of the bugle, to see the manoeuvres, when disaster struck. The losing side ended their rout in Mamma Margaret's orchard, with the victors in hot pursuit. Between them, they reduced lettuce, parsley and tomatoes to a pulp.

Mamma Margaret, who had been watching the whole thing, was very upset. "Look, look, Johnny, what they have done to me," she said to Don Bosco. "They have destroyed everything."

"Let Me Go Home"

Margaret could not take it any more. The boys had gone to sleep, and she had before her, as usual, a heap of things to mend: torn shirts, ripped pants, socks with gaping holes. She had to work by lamp light, because the boys had nothing else to wear in the morning. Don Bosco was beside her, sewing patches on to the elbows of jackets and repairing shoes.

"John," she murmured, "I am tired. Let me go back to Becchi. I work from morning to night, I am a poor old woman and those wild boys ruin everything. I really can't bear it any longer."

Don Bosco did not try to cheer her up with a joke. He did not say a word, because there were no words to console that poor woman. He simply pointed to the crucifix hanging on the wall. And that poor old country woman understood. She bent her head over a pair of socks with holes and went on mending.

She never repeated that request again. She would spend the last years of her life among those boys, noisy and ill-bred, but in need of a mother. She would only raise her eyes more often to the crucifix, where she found new strength.

An Italian War in Lombardy

26 March 1848. From the information that was coming in, it seemed that the neo-Guelph dreams were about to come true. 17,000 men arrived from the Papal States led by General Durando, and 7,000 volunteers from Tuscany led by Montanelli, in support of Charles Albert in the war "for the liberation of Italy." By means of plebiscites, the Grand Duchies of Parma and Modena declared their willingness to join Piedmont.

On 6 April, carried away by the general enthusiasm, Ferdinand of Naples declared war on Austria and sent 16,000 men under the leadership of General Guglielmo Pepe. The war fought in Lombardy was 'an Italian war.'

Good news arrived in Turin: the army had won its first two battles at Mozambano and Goito (8-9 April), and Garibaldi had set out from America with his 'Italian Legion' (15 April).

On 27 April, the first political elections were held in Piedmont, for 204 deputies.

Gioberti won from the city of Turin, while Cavour lost.

On 30 April, Gioberti returned from exile and was received in triumph as the man of the hour. The House of Deputies gathered in the hall of Palazzo Carignano, and the Senate in the great Sala degli Svizzeri at Palazzo Madama. Gioberti was elected president of the House of Deputies.

The 'democratic left' was headed by the demagogues Valerio, Brofferio and Urbano Rattazzi. They began by attacking Charles Albert, labelling him a traitor. They clamoured for a revision of the trials of 1821 and 1831. Their papers spewed violence. An inopportune attitude in the midst of a war, to say the least.

The royal family was frightened, and Queen Adelaide, daughter of an Austrian archduke, burned her private correspondence. Charles Albert was furious.

But a cold shower was in store for the enthusiasms and the irritations of the Italians.

25

THE COLLAPSE OF ALL HOPES

On 17 April 1848 Count Rignon, envoy of Charles Albert, met Pius IX and requested material and moral support for the war. The pope answered that he had already given his material support by sending Durando with 17,000 men to the Po. But as far as moral support was concerned, he would have to reflect. "If I could still sign *Mastai*, I would most willingly help, because I also am Italian. But I must sign *Pius IX*, and the head of the church must be a minister of peace, not of war."

He thought it over for two days. Two days which have been subjected to microscopic study by historians, with no clear results. It would seem that during those 48 hours, reports from Austria and Germany had spoken of masses of Catholics in revolt against the Holy See and the danger of a schism.

End of a Misunderstanding

On 29 April, in a speech to the cardinals, Pius IX declared that his reforms had been prompted not by 'liberal' intentions but by humane and Christian sentiments. The idea of a war against the Germans had disturbed him very much. He asked of God not war but harmony and peace. He also declared that he could not possibly become "the president of a certain new republic consisting of all the peoples of Italy."

With these words the pope put an end to the misunderstanding. Liberal pressure had fostered it beyond limits, as had also his personal hesitations. Even though he had refused only the presidency of a 'republic' and not that of a 'federation of monarchies,' his words dealt a mortal blow to the neo-Guelph dream.

Soon after, Pius IX sent a letter to the emperor of Austria. He asked that the Italian territories be allowed to unite peaceably into a single nation. It was a move that was in keeping with his desire for peace, but it was too naïve and useless.

The flame had shot up suddenly, and just as suddenly it died out. Grave disorders took place in the theatre of war and in several Italian capitals. Leopold of Tuscany and Ferdinand of Naples recalled their troops. The king of Naples went one step further. With a coup that caused tragic clashes between demonstrators and police, he dissolved parliament (15 May).

Forces from Naples under the command of Pepe and the papal troops under the command of Durando continued to help Charles Albert as volunteers, together with university students from Tuscany.

30 May was the last joyful day for Turin. News was received of the victory of Goito and the surrender of Peschiera. Flags were hung out on the streets and windows were

illuminated, to the cries of “Long live Charles Albert, king of Italy!”

Bitter days followed immediately. Radetsky conquered Vicenza and entered Padova, Treviso and Mestre.

The war had begun to tell on the life of Turin. Business was stagnant, there was no money in circulation, many establishments closed down, and the number of unemployed increased. Tailors and shoemakers went on strike, protesting against miserably low wages.

The alarming rumour began to spread that the capital would be shifted to Milan. A Turin without the court and without government offices meant a city half unemployed. Landowners who had invested in a construction boom, whose collective mortgages amounted to some 637 million, were gripped by fear.

Tiffin Boxes and Rations at the Oratory

In this climate of general poverty, the Oratory of Valdocco also had to tighten its belt. When the young workers who lived with Don Bosco came home at midday, they would go to the kitchen with their tiffin boxes to claim their rations. The pot bubbling on the fire contained rice and potatoes, pasta and beans, or a ‘highly nourishing’ concoction of maize flour and dry chestnuts specially designed for wartime consumption.

Don Bosco joked while ladling out the soup: “Encourage the cook!” “Eat plenty, you have to grow.” “I would like to give you a chunk of meat but I haven’t any. If one of these days we find a stray cow we shall have a grand feast.”

The fruit consisted of an apple. Not, however, an apple each, but a single apple for all. Don Bosco would throw it up in the air for anyone who could catch it.

The bar was just around the corner: a tap which never ran dry of good fresh water.

Sometimes, while they were eating, one of Mamma Margaret’s hens would jump cackling on to the table to peck at her share of the crumbs.

There was no bread. Don Bosco used to give 25 cents to each boy to buy bread. Tastes and needs were different. Those who had stronger stomachs and good appetites bought army biscuits, which were cheaper. Others preferred ordinary bread.

After lunch and after supper (which was a carbon copy of lunch), each boy washed his tiffin box and pocketed his spoon.

Those with larger appetites could get themselves some lettuce from Mamma Margaret’s orchard and make themselves some salad with oil and vinegar bought from their own savings.

Times were hard. The boys learnt how to make the most of every cent and take advantage of situations. One boy tried to sell his pallet for 40 cents (Don Bosco stopped him in time). Mamma Margaret helped with free haircuts. “I complained to Mamma Margaret about all the ‘steps’ she had left in my hair,” remembers Dr Frederick Cigna. “The saintly woman replied: ‘Those steps will take you to heaven’.”

Despite his cheerful remarks, Don Bosco suffered because he was not able to feed his boys better. But a much greater sorrow was in store for him in those months.

Fidelity to the Pope Brings Woes

After the discourse of Pope Pius IX, “moments of grave tension between the priests spearheading the work for youth could not be avoided. On one side there were the likes of

Frs Cocchi and Ponte, and on the other there was Don Bosco,” observes Peter Stella. “But all of them were vividly aware of the delicate moment the church of Turin was going through. The ‘patriotic priests’ felt it was imperative to follow the people in their aspirations for unity, if the success of religion was to be guaranteed.”

Don Bosco, instead, considered loyalty to the pope as his first priority. He in fact instructed the boys not to shout “Long live Pius IX” but rather “Long live the pope.” And his misgivings towards the liberals only became stronger.

Today, at a distance of more than a hundred years, we learn from historians that the unity of Italy was a great victory, but that it was certainly not achieved in the best possible way. The Risorgimento was a phenomenon of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes. The common people participated only in a few cities. The great mass of farmers that constituted 70% of the population remained indifferent, if not actually hostile.

Don Bosco was a farmer at heart. He felt an instinctive aversion towards all these ‘movements’ led by shrewd lawyers and political intriguers, in which the ‘real people’ were called in only to shed their blood on the battlefield. War, for him, was a punishment of God and the ruin of the poor, nothing else.

By judging events in this way, probably Don Bosco betrayed some limitations. But he also showed farsightedness. He chose the path of loyalty to the pope and freedom from all political parties, and it was this that allowed his modest Oratory to develop into a worldwide congregation. History cannot be based on possibilities, but we are convinced that if Don Bosco had taken to the streets with his boys waving the tricolour, we would have remembered him today merely as a good assistant parish priest in the suburbs of Turin.

His diehard loyalty to the pope, however, brought Don Bosco no end of trouble. Despite his prohibition, two priests who worked in the new oratory of St Aloysius took the boys with flags and cockades to political demonstrations and changed their sermons into fervent party speeches. Don Bosco had a row with them.

Something worse happened at Valdocco. One of the helpers of Don Bosco delivered a sermon full of words like liberty, emancipation and independence. “I was in the sacristy,” writes Don Bosco, “waiting to put an end to this disorder. But as soon as benediction was over, the preacher invited priests and boys to go out with him. Singing patriotic hymns at the top of their voices and waving flags frenetically, they made their way to the Monte dei Cappuccini. There they made a solemn promise not to return to the Oratory unless they were received with *national* insignia.”

The Oratory of Valdocco remained almost deserted for several Sundays, writes Fr Lemoyne. From 500 boys the numbers had come down to less than 100.

“None of the priests tried to come back. The boys, instead, came back. They apologised, saying that they had been deceived, and promised to obey and behave themselves. But I was left alone,” writes Don Bosco sadly, “with 500 boys and only Fr Borel to help me. I still cannot understand how he was able to bear the strain of all that work.” Fr Lemoyne points out that the bigger boys did not return. As a result, the average age of the Oratory dropped considerably.

One Dramatic Piece of News after Another

One dramatic piece of news after another characterized the second half of the year 1848. In June, the insurrections in Paris and Prague were brutally put down with cannons.

On 23-26 July, the final clash between the Austrians and the Piedmontese took place on the heights of Custoza. Charles Albert was defeated so severely that he could not even organize the defence of Milan.

The news reached Turin on 29 July and led to severe social disorder. The National Guard had to occupy Piazza Castello. On 1 August, 56 battalions of the National Guard were mobilized. A commission under the command of Roberto D'Azeglio undertook to keep the peace.

The rioting continued in the remoter parts of the city, targeting especially the houses of the aristocracy and of the priests.

On 6 August, Gioberti rushed to the king's headquarters to entreat him not to sign the armistice. But Charles Albert, convinced that the army was no more in a position to fight, issued orders to General Salasco on 9 August to sign the armistice. It was the recognition of defeat and the end of all hopes.

At Turin, politicians assailed the ineptitude of the leaders and the subterfuges of the priests. They demanded parliamentary inquiries and punishment of the culprits. The capital was in turmoil. "It had become necessary," writes Francis Cagnasso, "to take drastic measures: a change of government and a ban on the distribution of newspapers, political posters and public gatherings."

A Gunshot in the Pinardi Chapel

About those months, Don Bosco writes: "It became the fashion to insult priests and religion. I myself was assaulted more than once in the house and on the streets. Once, while I was teaching catechism, a harquebus shot fired through the window tore through my cassock between the arm and the ribs, and made a large hole in the wall." The incident took place in the Pinardi chapel, and the boys were terrified. It fell to Don Bosco, himself shaken by the gunshot which had missed him by a hair's breadth, to reassure them.

"That was a bad joke. I am sorry for my cassock, which is the only one I have. But Our Lady loves us."

A boy pried the bullet from the wall. It was a rough homemade bullet of iron.

"On another occasion, I was in the midst of a group of boys, when someone assaulted me with a long knife in full daylight. Escaping by a miracle, I rushed up and shut myself in my room. Fr Borel too barely escaped a pistol shot."

Many papers kindled hatred against priests. Don Bosco also found himself under attack: "Revolution uncovered at Valdocco." "The Valdocco priest and the enemies of the fatherland."

A New Brand of Priests

This rabid anticlericalism hurt Don Bosco, but it also helped him to think. "A giddy spirit of hatred," he writes, "arose against religious orders and congregations, and in general against the clergy and the authority of the church. This attitude of contempt and hatred for religion drove the youth away from morality and from piety, and consequently from the vocation to the ecclesiastical life."

This dearth of priestly vocations was, for him, the real danger. But instead of joining the crowd of those who deplored the evil times, Don Bosco asked himself: "What can I do

to help vocations?”

He felt that the people were against the clergy not so much because they did not take part in the struggle for independence, but because the majority of the clergy “was not of the people.” Vocations were mostly from the nobility and aristocracy, or at least from well-to-do families. The protagonists of the new epoch being ushered in, well beyond the Risorgimento, were the workers.

If this was the cause, the solution hardly consisted in trying to take part in the battle of Novara, as Fr Cocchi would try to do.

“During this period,” writes Don Bosco, “God made known very clearly the new militia of his choice: no more recruits from among the well-to-do, but from among those who wielded hammer and hoe. These had to be chosen to join the ecclesiastical state.” A proletarian clergy, in short.

With the modest means at his disposal, Don Bosco began working along these lines.

From among the hundreds of boys who came to the Oratory, he singled out thirteen, and invited them to make a spiritual retreat. They were his guests during the day. Only at night, “since there were no beds for all, some went home to sleep.”

He set himself a priority: to “study, know and choose some boys” who gave hopes of a vocation. “The serenity of those days,” writes Fr Lemoyne, “was in sharp contrast with the turmoil reigning in the city.”

In the following year, he would choose four out of the thirteen, and the experiment would proceed.

“In this way,” he writes, “our humble Oratory was consolidating itself, while outside grave events were taking place which would change the political scene not only of Italy but of the world.”

Tragic News from Rome

On 18 August, the first of the vanquished troops re-entered the city. While the mood was not festive, the people received the tired and dusty soldiers with sympathy.

On 15 September, the king returned to a cold and sad reception. Strange rumours were in circulation: French troops were on their way, the war would start again, the king was about to abdicate, the revolution was near.

On 11 October, Charles Albert appointed General Perrone as prime minister. He was the one who had been condemned to death by hanging in 1821. Another one who had been condemned to death in 1834, Giuseppe Garibaldi, was now engaging the Austrians in skirmishes on Lago Maggiore. In parliament, the left wanted the war to continue. There was agitation all over the city. “The Genoese of the Savoy Brigade,” writes Cagnasso, “left their quarters and joined the tumult in Piazza Castello: Long live the king! Long live the republic! We want war! We want peace! We are badly lodged! We are badly fed!”

Tragic news arrived from Rome in mid-November. Pellegrino Rossi, the moderate prime minister of Pius IX, had been assassinated by the people. They wanted the pope to convoke a constituent assembly and participate in the war against Austria.

Crowds of hotheads roamed the streets of Turin shouting, “Down with Pius IX! Down with retrograde ministers! Long live the killer of Pellegrino Rossi! War! War!”

Fear began to spread once again: fear that the revolution might break out, fear that the Terror might be repeated.

The end of November brought the news that Pius IX had fled Rome. He had pretended to give in to the people and then, dressed as a simple priest, had taken refuge at Gaeta in the kingdom of Naples.

Charles Albert, under pressure from democratic circles and from the crowds in the streets, accepted the resignation of Perrone and nominated Gioberti as prime minister. On 30 December he dissolved parliament and called for new elections.

The year 1848 had begun full of hope but had ended in Italy with clouds of uncertainty. In other nations it had ended under fire and iron repression. After Paris and Prague, Vienna too was conquered by the cannons of a general. The parliament of Berlin was dissolved in December.

Two Signs of Hope at Valdocco

In the lowland of Valdocco, where the mist lay thick throughout winter, Don Bosco humbly acknowledged two signs of hope.

For the first time, one of his boys donned the clerical habit. He was Ascanio Savio, a fellow villager. He had been attending the Oratory from the days of the Refuge. He was to enter the seminary now, but the one at Turin was closed and the one at Chieri was about to close down too. The diocesan office allowed him to have the vestition ceremony at the Cottolengo, and then to remain at the Oratory to help Don Bosco.

He would not remain there forever. After four years he would enter the seminary and become a diocesan priest. But he would say of Don Bosco: "I loved him as my own father." And Don Bosco writes about him: "I at once entrusted to him part of the supervision and of the catechism classes, and put him in charge of various other things. He was of great help to me." He was the first lamb to become a shepherd.

The second sign was of a completely different nature.

The Oratory was preparing to celebrate a solemn occasion. Many hundreds of boys had been prepared for their first communion. Don Bosco celebrated Mass, convinced that the tabernacle contained a ciborium full of consecrated hosts. But the ciborium was, instead, almost empty. Joseph Buzzetti who was in charge of the sacristy and of many more things besides, had forgotten to prepare another ciborium. He realized his mistake too late, only after the consecration.

When the boys began to come forward for communion, Don Bosco realized that he would have to send them back to their places. Not being able to resign himself to that, he began distributing the few hosts left in the ciborium.

To the immense surprise and delight of Buzzetti who was holding the plate, the hosts did not diminish. There were enough for all.

It was a stunned Joseph Buzzetti who revealed this to his companions. In 1864 he narrated the incident to the early Salesians in Don Bosco's presence, who confirmed the story.

Yes, there were few hosts in the ciborium. In spite of that I was able to give communion to all who came to receive, and they were many. I was deeply moved, but calm. I thought: which is the greater miracle, that of consecration or that of multiplication. May the Lord be praised in everything.

While Italy was being shaken by sensational events, in a lost corner of the outskirts of Turin the Lord was silently multiplying his presence among the boys of a poor priest. It was a sign, mysterious but also very luminous.

26

DON BOSCO, POLITICS, AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

In 1848 Don Bosco had his first dramatic clash with politics, and had chosen a line of conduct that he would hand down to his first Salesians.

Many years later, he would summarize his thoughts to Bishop Bonomelli of Cremona. "I realized that if I wanted to do good, I had to leave politics aside. I have always kept my distance from politics and so have managed to do something. I did not meet with obstacles; on the contrary, I received help from the most unexpected quarters."

After having reflected long on Don Bosco's attitude towards politics not only during the happenings of 1848 but also on other important occasions, I think it can be summarized in this way.

First: Don Bosco was convinced of the 'relativity' of party politics. He considered it a very unstable component of life. (Perrone became prime minister of the same king who had condemned him to death by hanging; La Tour, great confidant of Charles Albert, was dismissed by the king because "he was no more reliable"...). Don Bosco declared resolutely: "No party will ever get me." He therefore relied on bases more solid than *right* or *left*: souls to be saved, poor boys to be fed and educated. This was what he called 'the politics of the Our Father.'

Second: Some scholars have observed that Don Bosco, while professing to keep out of politics, was actually up to his neck in politics, and almost always on the side of the conservatives, of the Austria-lovers. This observation seems to be true enough, provided the term 'Austria-lover' is not taken negatively, but only in the sense that Don Bosco was often sympathetic towards Austria. As we have noted, he had been formed to conservatism in the seminary. From papal encyclicals and discourses he had learnt to look at Austria as protector of the pope.

It was therefore natural that he should have this leaning. He probably looked at it not as a political attitude but as a question of faith, or at least of fidelity to the pope. Exactly as in 1948, when many Catholics looked with sympathy to the U.S.A., not because they shared their politics or their racist feelings against the blacks, but because they saw in the U.S.A. the only defence of 'Christian civilization' against the Soviet Union of Stalin.

Further, Don Bosco knew many liberals and democrats of Turin, not as mythicized in the history books of today, but as they were in reality, crafty, full of intrigue, and of doubtful rectitude (think, for example, of a figure like Brofferio).

Third: Despite honestly wanting to follow the 'politics of the Our Father,' a person like Don Bosco had to make statements and take sides. In these cases Don Bosco sided 'with the pope.' He followed the opinion of the pope.

In Fr Bonetti's chronicle (7 July 1862) we read these words of Don Bosco:

Today I found myself in a house, surrounded by a host of democrats. After having spoken of this and that, the conversation turned to the politics of the day. Those liberal diehards wanted to know what Don Bosco thought of a Piedmontese takeover of Rome [in 1870 this would, in fact, happen]. I answered clearly: I am with the pope. I am a Catholic. I blindly obey the pope. If the pope were to say to the Piedmontese, "Come to Rome," I too would say, "Go." But if the pope were to say that the Piedmontese takeover of Rome would be a theft, I would say the same without hesitation... If we want to be Catholics, we must think and believe as the pope thinks and believes.

Even before reasoning, even before appealing to his mentality, Don Bosco *is with the pope*. In 1847-48, Don Bosco sympathized for some time with the neo-Guelphs, not because he thought this was better, but because it seemed to him the attitude of the pope. After the allocution of 29 April 1848, he went back to being a conservative, not because that was his mentality, but because it was the mind of the pope. If the pope changed, he changed with him, without giving it a second thought. "If the pope were to tell the Piedmontese, 'Come to Rome,' I would say that too."

Don Bosco and the Social Question

In 1848, Karl Marx published his *Communist Manifesto*. It was the beginning of a revolution that was less noisy than the uprisings of 1948, but one that would go much deeper and last much longer. The communists took up a definite and violent position with regard to the 'social question' that was troubling the nations of northern Europe for decades. It was a drastic denunciation of the exploiting classes and a call to a violent revolution to 'overturn the system' founded on injustice.

What was the attitude of Don Bosco with regard to the 'social question'? Peter Stella affirms: "It does not seem that he posed the problem in terms of the transformation of classes... it does not seem that he grasped the vast import of the phenomenon of pauperism on social upheavals."³⁰

If by this we mean to say that Don Bosco did not have a scientific vision of the socio-economic situation, and that he did not express himself in technical terms such as 'capital' and 'labour,' we agree. But if we want to say that Don Bosco was a man who did not understand his time and was led only by good intentions, we disagree.

Fr Lemoyne, who enjoyed Don Bosco's confidence, states: "He was one of those who had understood from the beginning, and who repeated it a thousand times, that the revolutionary movement was not a passing whirlwind, because not all the promises made to the people were dishonest; many, in fact, responded to the universal and lively aspirations of the proletariat. They wanted equality with all, without distinctions of classes. They wanted greater justice and the betterment of their conditions. Further, he saw how wealth was becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of pitiless capitalists, and how employers were imposing unjust agreements on workers who were isolated and defenceless, both as

³⁰ P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* (Zurich 1969) 2:95-96.

regards the salary and the duration of work.”³¹

Don Bosco found himself on the divide between two eras of world history and hence also of the church.

In the centuries immediately preceding the industrial revolution, artisans were incorporated into guilds, societies which were rather rigid and medieval in flavour, but which provided a certain social security to their members. There were many poor people. But their number could never be compared to the shocking masses of miserable proletarians, abandoned to their own devices, created by the introduction of factories in the first hundred years of the industrial revolution. The model of church intervention in favour of the poor, in those centuries, was that of ‘organized charity’ as practiced by St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660).

In the new industrial age—thanks also in part to the principles of liberalism—the guilds ended up on the scrap heap, so that the only freedom left to the masses of workers was that of letting themselves be oppressed by powerful employers. Liberalism carefully prevented the formation of structures that could defend the rights of workers on the lines of the ancient guilds.

Given the absence of readymade plans and programs of action—as we have said before—in the uncertainties that prevail at the beginning of every new historical period, many church people launched into doing something ‘at once’ to help the most miserable, dusting and resetting the old system of St Vincent de Paul. Hence, for example, the ‘Conferences of St Vincent de Paul’ founded in Paris by Frederick Ozanam to help the proletariat.

But it soon became clear that beneficence alone would never do, even in its new and socially advanced form of professional schools and of workshops. It was necessary to fight for social justice, for institutions and laws to guarantee the rights of workers. It was a long journey, both because of incomprehension in the ranks of the hierarchy and because of the rabid resistance of the liberal states.

Don Bosco began his work at the very beginning of the industrial revolution in Italy. He threw himself into this new situation, carried away by the urgency of what he could see and by his great desire to work for poor boys. The strategy of the ‘at once,’ of ‘immediate intervention,’ became the hallmark of Don Bosco and his first Salesians because, we repeat, the poor do not have the luxury of waiting for reforms and organic programs. Catechism, bread, professional education, jobs protected by sound contracts, all these and more became the ‘urgent’ program that the sons of Don Bosco set afoot for the benefit of young proletarians.

But this choice was not merely instinctive. The situation became clearer with the passage of years, and Don Bosco became more and more conscious both of his times and of his mission, and of the greatness of his mission as well as of its limitations.

“Avoiding All Politics”

Let us, for a while, go back to what Don Bosco said to Monsignor Bonomelli, many years after 1848: “I realized that if I wanted to do some good, I had to set aside all politics.”

What does Don Bosco mean by ‘politics’ here? Only ‘party politics’? We think not. The word ‘politics’ at the time meant also one’s attitude towards ‘the social question’: being

³¹ MB 4:80 = BM 4:55-56.

for or against the free market, the intervention of the state in questions of labour, strikes, socialist workers' societies, Owen-inspired cooperatives,³² trade unions, the social legislation advocated in Germany by Bishop Ketteler³³...

'To leave politics aside' also meant not allowing himself be drawn into the debates surrounding the social question, which, at that time, were already a major part of the programs of political parties. When asked what he thought of Mazzini, Don Bosco could not ignore the fact that this uncomfortable republican was head of the 'federation of Italian workers' societies' and member of the First International founded in 1864 by Karl Marx. 'Politics' referred not only to Solaro della Margherita and Cavour, but also to socialist revolutionaries, to the Mazzinian socialist Pisacane who landed in the south in 1857 to "stir up the oppressed people." Don Bosco refused to allow himself to be dragged into these debates. It was also the attitude he imposed on his Salesians.

It is not our opinion, therefore, that Don Bosco "did not pose the problem in terms of the transformation of classes." He did not pose it at once, nor did he ever pose it scientifically, but the words said to Bonomelli and repeated a thousand times to his Salesians, show that he had grasped the problem in the concrete and had given a solution to it. It was his own solution, of course, and one that can be subjected to endless debate; but there was no doubt that he felt the problem and gave a solution to it. To plunge into the social debate meant taking sides 'with' someone and therefore, inevitably, 'against' someone else. To project himself as a 'socially minded priest' would have meant depriving himself of all help from the bourgeoisie and the well-to-do. But Don Bosco needed help, immediately and *from all sides*, because he did not want to send his poor boys back to the streets.

With this help he managed to do an untold amount of practical good to the poor.

A Simple Argument

He adopted a very simple, elementary argument to convince the rich and the well-to-do that they had to help him. "The poor run the risk of being swept away by the revolution because they live in intolerable misery. This situation is unbecoming of a Christian society. The rich must put their wealth at the disposal of the poor. If they do not, they are not Christians. The poor, driven by want, will claim their share of wealth at knife point. They will, in other words, unleash a revolution which will bring disorder and violence like the Jacobin Terror. All this will have been provoked by the insensitivity of the rich who refuse to help the poor come out of their plight."

Don Bosco is the 'good Samaritan' who, coming upon the man wounded by thieves, picked him up, took him to an inn and paid for his treatment. He is not the politician who runs to organize a legislative plan for the suppression of banditry.

With the passing of years, Don Bosco became aware that the 'at once' was not enough, and that beneficence had its limits. But he also knew that he was not alone in the church, and he said this repeatedly to his Salesians: "Obviously there is need of people who take interest in politics, give advice and point out dangers; but this task is not for us poor

³² Robert Owen (1771-1858), Welsh manufacturer turned social reformer, father of the cooperative movement.

³³ Wilhelm von Ketteler (1811-77), Bishop of Mainz, tireless fighter for the rights of the working class.

people.”³⁴ “In the church there are people competent enough to tackle such hard and dangerous questions. In an army some do the fighting, others look after the baggage, and still others perform tasks equally important for attaining victory.”³⁵

The option for immediate intervention and for not letting oneself be drawn into the social debate in order to ensure help from all sides, can still be discussed. The results of this option, however, are there for all to see: a true miracle of good for poor boys, acknowledged even by those with different ideas, even by those who opted out of his works ‘of charity’ to fight for the welfare of the poor in other ways.

We limit ourselves to two examples.

Sandro Pertini, past pupil of the Salesian school of Varazze, socialist and non-believer, who would rise to become president of the Italian Republic, wrote to his old teacher Fr Borella: “I know today that the boundless love I feel for all the oppressed and the needy began to blossom in me when I was living in your midst. The admirable life of your saint initiated me to this love.”

The historian Giacomo Martina observes that when the Salesians of the first generation made their entry into certain towns of Romagna full of communists and anticlericals, it looked like certain disaster. Instead they began with the oratory and the brass-band, and in a short time made friends with everyone. “These priests are different,” the people said. “They are not like the rest.”

And What If He Had Chosen Differently?

One thing seems certain: if Don Bosco had chosen to enter into the social debate, there would not have been so many schools and workshops to his name. And perhaps that choice would have appeared even more debatable today. Don Bosco himself declared on 24 June 1883: “What is the use of entering politics? What could we achieve with all our efforts? We would only make it impossible to continue our charitable work.”³⁶

Oversimplifying, we could say that ‘in theory’ Don Bosco found himself before a dilemma:

—either fight *the effects of social injustice* (by helping poor boys, asking for and accepting help from anybody to set up schools and workshops);

—or fight *the causes of social injustice* (by publicly denouncing them, forming associations of young workers, and refusing the collaboration and generosity of all those involved in one way or other in a system based on exploitation). The evident outcome would be the drying up of the sources of charity and the abandonment of poor boys to their own devices.

In the first case he would save the boys from immediate dangers, but run the risk of being absorbed into the system, producing obedient and docile workers who would never disturb the powerful.

In the second case he would work to change the system, but run the risk of not being able to meet the immediate and pressing needs of the poor.

The choice, not only for Don Bosco but also for many in the church at that time, was dramatic: whatever the option, one could never do ‘all’ that had to be done.

³⁴ MB 16:291 = BM 16:227.

³⁵ MB 3:487 = BM 3:487-88.

³⁶ MB 16:291 = BM 16:227.

Don Bosco, impelled by the urgency of the moment, took the first path. When he became aware of its limitations, he felt reassured by the action of the church as a whole: “Let us leave to other religious orders, better equipped than us, to engage in denunciations and in political action. We go straight to the poor.”

In conclusion, we might affirm that, if in the church there are many charisms, many gifts given to individuals for the good of the community, Don Bosco received the charism of immediate intervention in favour of poor boys. Different but not opposed to the more clearly social charisms of Msgr Ketteler (1811-77), Toniolo (1845-1918), or Sturzo (1871-1959), the Piedmontese priest compares well with them. Four different charisms in the church, lived out with honesty and transparency, bearing rich fruits for the people of God.

27

A BLEAK AND THORNY YEAR

“The year 1849 was bleak and thorny,” writes Don Bosco, “even though we put in great toil and made enormous sacrifices.”

It began for him with a sad loss in the family. On 18 January his brother Anthony died suddenly at the age of 41. Of late, he used to come often to the Oratory to visit Mamma Margaret and his brother. They would talk of the meagre harvest and the heavy taxes imposed on farmers to finance the war. He also brought news of the seven children God had given him. The last but one, Nicholas, had died a few hours after birth, but the others seemed to be growing well.

The years and the ups and downs of life had drawn the brothers together. The old ice between them had melted.

On 1 February 1849, Charles Albert inaugurated the new Chamber of Deputies. The left with its strong majority listened to him in hostile silence. In the streets people cried out, “Long live the war! Down with the priests! Long live the republic!” The papers published obscene caricatures of Pius IX, “the betrayer of Italy.” Don Bosco himself was attacked in the *Fischietto*. He was called ‘the Saint’ and ‘the wonderworker of Valdocco.’

Gangs of hooligans began throwing stones once again on the Pinardi house, which by now Don Bosco had rented completely.

Whenever he had to go out, Don Bosco would take Brosio the *bersagliere* along with him. Brosio remembers: “When we went along the avenue now known as Regina Margherita, a horde of little urchins would insult Don Bosco, hurling indecent epithets at him or singing revolting songs. One day I wanted to box their ears. Don Bosco instead stopped, bought some fruit from a nearby stall, and gave it to ‘his friends,’ as he called them.”

The Friend of Youth Folds Up

Don Bosco was worried by the havoc caused by the anticlerical papers even among the young. These papers were everywhere, sold in the streets, pasted on the walls. The Catholic papers were few and lacked that touch of aggressiveness that made a paper readable.

Don Bosco already had his hands full, but in the month of February he took up one more enterprise: he started a paper called *The Friend of Youth*. The paper appeared thrice a week. It was prepared with the help of Fr Carpano and Fr Chiaves, and was printed at the Speirani- Ferrero press.

The paper was a failure. It had 137 subscribers in the first trimester, and 116 in the

second. It folded up after 61 issues, with a deficit of 272 *lire*. But Don Bosco never regretted it. He had tried to do some good and had encountered, for the first time, the ‘peaceful apathy’ of the ‘good.’ The Catholic press in Italy is still dragging that dead weight after more than one hundred years.

War Again

War was once again in the air in Turin.

On 20 February, Gioberti resigned from the post of prime minister. The minister of war, Chiodo, took his place. The democratic left, from its position of command, pressed for a resumption of war. On 2 March, the Chamber of Deputies presented a petition to the king: “The deputies of the people exhort you to overcome all hesitation and declare war. We have full trust in your armies.”

On 12 March, the armistice was ‘denounced,’ and eight days later war broke out. 75,000 men were sent to the frontier, while the king left for Alessandria. But there was no enthusiasm this time among the troops. The Savoy Regiment refused to march. Some deserted. A few were shot.

In Lombardy, Radetzky gave his soldiers a new battle cry: To Turin!

On 23 March, the battle of Novara flared up along a four kilometre front. The Bicocca, centre of the most ferocious fighting, was lost and re-taken several times. There were episodes of authentic heroism. General Passalacqua fell in a bayonet counterattack. Ex-prime minister General Perrone, mortally wounded, asked to be taken to the king to salute him before he died. By evening everything was over. Radetzky’s more powerful artillery had decided the day. General Durando would tell how he had to several times drag the king out of the fray.

Battle and war were both lost. Chaos reigned during the night. From Novara to Oleggio to Momo, the ground was covered with abandoned carriages. Bands of disoriented soldiers walked about the streets without commandants and without arms, shouting: “Home, home! Pius IX will pay for this! The rich will pay for this! We are going home.”

At 1.00 a.m. Charles Albert abdicated. With a travelling coat over his shoulders he boarded a gig and went into exile.

On hearing of the abdication, Radetzky granted a six-hour truce. It took four hours to flush out the new king from among the bivouacking soldiers.

The young Victor Emmanuel, upset and bewildered, beard and hair in disarray, bruised and exhausted by the fighting, met the Austrian general in a farmyard. He asked that impossible conditions be avoided, otherwise he too would abdicate and leave Piedmont in the hands of the revolutionaries. After he had left, 82 year old Radetsky murmured to General Hess: “Poor boy!”

Last Shred of Liberty

The country was devastated. In Turin the situation was tense. When it became known that the Austrians were asking 200 million as war compensation besides occupying Alessandria, the ‘democratic’ opposition was aroused. There was open speech of a republic and of war to the bitter end. Genoa rose in revolt.

The young king reached Turin unexpectedly. He would have liked “to kick out all

the deputies,” but did not. Genoa was retaken with cannons. Massimo D’Azeglio was appointed prime minister. Peace was signed only on 6 August. After a long and dramatic tug-of-war, the Austrians accepted to abandon all occupied territories including Alessandria, and to reduce the compensation to 75 million.

Only a few embers were left of the great fire of 1848. The combatants who had fought side by side on the barricades in spring were by now almost all defeated. The patriots who wanted independence had been silenced by the Austrian artillery. The workers went back to their 12 hour workday. The liberal constitutions were revoked almost everywhere, except in Piedmont where the statute remained.

That little shred of liberty would prove extremely important: Italy would coagulate around Piedmont. Other seeds of liberty and equality, seemingly lost in the waves of repression, would sprout again with the passing of years.

Shipwreck of the ‘Patriotic Priests’

Novara also signalled the end of the patriotic priests. Wanting “to march with the people,” Fr Cocchi had led a large contingent of 200 young men from the oratory of Vanchiglia to take part in the battle of Novara. The commandant of the division at Vercelli, however, refused to accept them as soldiers. The youth did not know where to eat or spend the night. After the Piedmontese debacle they returned to Turin in the middle of the night, half dead with fatigue. It was a real defeat for the enterprising priest of Druent.

The oratory of Vanchiglia remained closed for several months, while Fr Cocchi went into hiding. He would resurface in October to begin a hospice for the benefit of young artisans together with two other priests. This was the beginning of the great *Istituto degli Artigianelli*. It was a tacit acknowledgement that the ‘non-political’ line of Don Bosco was the right one.

33 Lire for the Pope

Tens of thousands of refugees inflated the population of Turin in those months following the war. Life was difficult. Rents soared while salaries stayed low. A French socialist refugee, Coeurderoy, has left a description of the abject misery in which the workers lived. Industry was stagnant. Money in circulation was sucked up by exorbitant taxes. Labour was plentiful despite the boom in construction. Houses were rented out even before they were completed.

Pius IX continued in exile at Gaeta. Marquis Gustavo Cavour and Canon Valinotti launched a collection called ‘Peter’s Pence.’ Even the boys of the Oratory did their part. Putting their little coins together, they handed over 33 *lire* to the committee at the end of March, together with a letter to the Holy Father.

On 2 May, Don Bosco received a letter from the nuncio. “The Holy Father is overcome by emotion at the affectionate and candid offering of the young workers, and at the words of devotion expressed in their letter. Please let them know how much their offering has been appreciated, all the more precious because coming from the poor.”

The pope reciprocated with 720 rosaries, which reached Turin only on 21 April 1850.

Two Little Hearts ‘For Favours Received’

24 June was the feast of St John the Baptist and name day of Don Bosco. Despite the hard times, Charles Gastini and Felix Reviglio decided to give Don Bosco a present. They had been planning for months, economizing on their meals and saving the occasional tip. But what could they buy, with the prices in the shop windows so high? In the end they settled for two little silver hearts of the type people give to Our Lady ‘for favours received.’ It was a strange choice, but ingenious and moving.

On the eve of the feast, after all were in bed, they timidly knocked at Don Bosco’s door and gave him their present, blushing to the tip of their ears.

“The following day all their companions teased them about the present,” writes Fr Lemoyne, “but not without a bit of jealousy.”

Four Boys and a White Kerchief

Don Bosco had an eye on Gastini and Reviglio. They had made their retreat in 1848 with 11 others. This year they would repeat the experience with 69 others, in two shifts.

One of Don Bosco’s ‘fixed ideas’ was “to study, know and select some individuals” who gave signs of a priestly vocation.

At the end of the retreat he called aside Joseph Buzzetti, James Bellia, Charles Gastini and Felix Reviglio, and said to them:

“I need someone to give me a hand in the Oratory. What would you say to that?”

“Give you a hand, in what way?”

“First of all, by resuming your studies. You need to do a quick course that includes Latin. Then, if it is God’s will, by being ordained priests.”

The four looked at each other for a moment. They accepted.

Don Bosco laid down only one condition. He pulled out a white kerchief and twisted it in his hands:

“I ask you to be like this kerchief in my hands: obedient in everything.”

Of the four, only Bellia had finished primary school. In August, Don Bosco entrusted them to Fr Chiaves for an intensive course in Italian. In September he took them with him to his brother Joseph’s house at Becchi for an intensive course in Latin.

They got back to Turin in October, in time to take part in the grand funeral of Charles Albert who had died in exile at Oporto, Portugal.

The Battalion of Borgo Vanchiglia

That same October, in agreement with Fr Cocchi and with the archbishop’s written approval, Don Bosco reopened the oratory of the Guardian Angel in Borgo Vanchiglia. It consisted of two sheds, two rooms and a large hall made into a chapel, all for a rent of 900 *lire* a year. Fr Carpano was appointed director, leaving the Oratory of St Aloysius to Fr Ponte.

Fierce fights between gangs were the hallmark of Borgo Vanchiglia. To help Fr Carpano, Don Bosco sent him *besagliere* Brosio, who set up one more bellicose ‘battalion,’ ready to engage in mock battles, but also to hit out in earnest if necessary. Brosio remembers:

On one occasion there appeared 40 louts armed with stones, sticks and knives, determined to invade the oratory. The director was so afraid that he began shaking like a leaf. Seeing that they were raring for a fight, I barred the door, assembled the older boys, and distributed the wooden guns. I divided them into patrols and gave them the order that, in case they were attacked, at my signal they should counterattack simultaneously from all sides, raining blows without mercy. The smaller boys were crying with fear. I hid them in the church, and stood guard at the gate, which the hooligans were trying to batter down with loud yells. In the meantime, someone had gone to alert the cavalry, who soon arrived with unsheathed sabres.”

Everything went well that time.

On 18 November 1849, Fr Giacomelli, who had been with Don Bosco in the seminary at Chieri, came to live at the Oratory. He stayed there two years. With help from him and from the seminarian Ascanio Savio, Don Bosco was able to increase the number of boarders to 30.

They would be 36 in 1852, 76 in 1853, and 115 in 1854. In 1860 they would be 470, and in 1861, 600. They would peak at 800.

The life of these boarders would continue to be extremely poor. They froze in winter in the church and elsewhere, except in the kitchen and one of the rooms where there was a wood stove. Mattresses of wool or horsehair were the luxuries of a few. Most slept on sacks full of dry leaves or straw. Don Bosco had entrusted the little money that he had to Joseph Buzzetti. Joseph turned 17 in 1849, and was stunned at the trust that was put in him.

On Sundays, the boarders would join the 500 boys who invaded the Oratory, playing with them and going out for excursions.

On 20 November, Victor Emmanuel dissolved parliament with the edict of Moncalieri and called for fresh elections. He strongly rebuked the ‘democratic left’ for ruining the nation, and invited the electors to send more moderate persons to the chambers.

The elections were held on 9 December, at the beginning of a cold and desolate winter. The new deputies approved the peace treaty in silence. “It was not really peace,” writes Cognasso. “It was an armistice of 10 years. Ten years to be passed working silently.”

Twenty Cents of *Polenta*

Towards the end of 1849—we read in the chronicles—while many people starved in the poorer peripheries of Turin, the story of Don Bosco was marked by some mysterious events. If it were not too bombastic, we could call them “the poor miracles obtained by a priest for the poor.”

The first one is narrated by Joseph Brosio, the *bersagliere*, in a letter to Fr Bonetti.

Once while I was with Don Bosco, a man came in asking for help. He said he had 5 children and they had been starving a whole day. Don Bosco rummaged in his pockets. All he found were twenty cents. He gave them to the man with his

blessing.

When the man had gone out, Don Bosco said he was sorry that he did not have more money: he would have given him anything, even 100 *lire*.

“And how do you know that he was telling the truth?” I asked him. “He could have been a cheat.”

“No. That man is sincere and loyal. What more, he is a hardworking man and very loyal to his family.”

“How do you know?”

Don Bosco took me by the hand, looked me straight in the eye and whispered:

“I read it in his heart.”

“That’s a good one! Do you see also my sins?”

“Yes. I can smell them,” he said, laughing. And I must say that it was true because if, in my confessions, I forgot something, he would point it out to me unfailingly. And I lived more than a kilometre away. Once I had done a work of charity that had cost me a great deal. When I went to the Oratory, and when Don Bosco saw me he caught me by the hand and said: “What a beautiful thing you have done for paradise!” “What have I done?” I asked him. And he told me every detail of what I had done.

Not long afterwards, somewhere in Turin, I came across the man to whom Don Bosco had given the twenty cents. He recognized me, stopped and told me that with those few coins he had bought maize flour to make *polenta*, and that he and his whole family had eaten their fill.

“At home we call him ‘the priest of the miracle of the *polenta*.’ Twenty cents can buy maize flour for no more than two, and yet all seven of us had our fill.”

“I Called Him By Name: Charles!”

The second event was written down in French by Marchioness Maria Fassati née De Maistre. She declares:

I have heard this from Don Bosco himself, and I have tried to put it down in writing with utmost fidelity.

One day someone came to summon Don Bosco to the bedside of one of the boys of the Oratory who was seriously ill. Don Bosco was out of town and returned only two days later. He was able to visit the sick boy only the next day, at 4.00 p.m.

On reaching the house he found a black drape over the door with the boy’s name on it. He went up all the same to console the parents. He found them in tears. They told him that the boy had died that very morning. Don Bosco asked whether he could see the body for the last time. A member of the family took him there.

“On entering the room,” Don Bosco recounted, “somehow I got the thought that the boy was not dead. I approached the bed and called him by name: Charles! At that, he opened his eyes and greeted me with a smile full of surprise. “Oh, Don Bosco,” he said loudly, “you have woken me up from a bad dream!”

Those present fled in terror, shouting and upsetting the candlesticks. Don Bosco quickly ripped off the sheet wrapping the body. The boy went on:

“I felt I was being pushed into a long dark cave, so narrow that I could hardly breathe. At the end, I could see a larger space with more light, where many souls were being judged. My anguish and terror were increasing because I saw that many were being condemned. Suddenly my turn came, and I was terrified because I had made my last confession badly. At that moment, you woke me up!”

In the meantime the father and mother of Charles had rushed in. The boy greeted them cordially but told them not to hope for a recovery. He embraced them and asked to be left alone with Don Bosco.

He then told him that he had had the disgrace to fall into what he thought was a mortal sin. Feeling very bad, he had sent for him with the firm intention of making his confession. But Don Bosco was not to be found, and another priest had come instead, to whom he had not had the courage to confess it. God had made him see that he deserved hell for that sacrilegious confession.

He made his confession with great sorrow, and after having received the grace of absolution, closed his eyes and gently breathed his last.³⁷

A Miraculous Basket of Chestnuts

The third event was reported by Joseph Buzzetti, and was confirmed in writing by Charles Tomatis, one of Don Bosco’s first boarders.

On All Souls Day, Don Bosco had taken all the boys of the festive Oratory to pray at the cemetery. He had promised boiled chestnuts for all upon their return. He had bought three big sacks of them.

But Mamma Margaret had misunderstood, and had boiled only three or four kilos.

Joseph Buzzetti, the young ‘administrator’ of the Oratory who had run ahead to keep things ready, realized the problem.

“Don Bosco will feel it. I must inform him immediately.”

But in the confusion of the returning mob of hungry boys, Buzzetti could not manage to make himself understood. Don Bosco took the small basket from his hands and began distributing chestnuts with a big ladle. In the general bedlam, Buzzetti kept shouting:

“Not like that! There won’t be enough for all!”

“But there are three bags in the kitchen.”

“No, only these, only these,” Buzzetti kept saying while the boys shouted and pressed from all sides. Don Bosco was perplexed.

“But I have promised! Let’s go on till they last.”

He went on giving a big ladleful to each boy. Buzzetti kept looking nervously at the diminishing chestnuts at the bottom of the basket, and at the line of the boys that seemed to be getting longer and longer. Someone else suddenly noticed. A sudden silence descended upon the crowd of boys. Hundreds of eyes were glued to that basket that was never emptying.

³⁷ Peter Stella, after sifting through this episode in 25 pages of historical criticism, comes to the conclusion that certain details in the ‘official narration’ of Lemoyne in Vol. 3 of the *Biographical Memoirs* are unreliable. He concludes: “To go back to Don Bosco’s own narration and to the historical fact, it would be advisable to follow the Fassati account” (Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* 1:282 = Stella, *Don Bosco and the Death of Charles*, New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1985, 31). We have followed this suggestion.

There were enough chestnuts for all. And that evening, perhaps for the first time, those boys with their hands full of chestnuts shouted: "Don Bosco is a saint!"

28

A HOUSE AND A CHURCH

During the last months of 1849, Don Bosco petitioned the ministry of the interior for a subsidy.

One Sunday afternoon in January 1850, a commission consisting of Senators Sclopis, Pallavicini and Collegno went down to Valdocco to observe and report to the ministry.

They were positively impressed. They saw boys playing on the grounds and surrounding fields; they saw them praying in the chapel and around; they inquired minutely about the boarding school which had about 30 inmates.

Count Sclopis questioned one of the boys at random. Joseph Vanzino was from Varese; he was a stonecutter and had lost his father. When asked about his mother, he burst into tears: she was in prison.

“Where do you sleep at night?” asked the count, himself quite moved.

“Up to a few days ago I slept at my employer’s place, but now Don Bosco has taken me in.”

The report for the senate was drawn up by Pallavicini and may be found in the Official Acts of 1 March. It reads: “The institution of the distinguished and zealous priest John Bosco appears to be an eminently religious, moral and useful one. It would be a great loss for the city if it should fail for lack of funds. Our commission recommends that the ministry of the interior come to the help of such a useful and profitable work.”

Those words fetched 300 *lire* from the Senate and 2000 *lire* from the Minister, Urbano Rattazzi.

But the money, however welcome, was not the main benefit. A long and tormented struggle was about to break out in Piedmont between state and church. The visit of the three senators and their report would allow the Oratory to weather the storm without excessive damage.

The Archbishop under Arrest

In December 1849, one thousand ecclesiastics and ten thousand citizens of Turin signed a petition to Prime Minister D’Azeglio, asking for the return of Archbishop Fransoni from exile at Geneva.

After a tug of war between the king, the ministers and the archbishop of Genoa, Archbishop Fransoni was able to return to Turin in March 1850.

The political climate was heated. The Siccardi Bill was being debated in both the House and the Senate. It proposed the abolition of certain ancient ecclesiastical privileges:

the *foro ecclesiastico* (henceforward bishops and priests accused of common crimes would not be tried anymore by church tribunals but by public courts) and the right of asylum (by which the police could not arrest anyone accused of a crime if they sought refuge in a church or convent), and studied the possibility of increasing church properties.

The bill was approved by the House on 9 March and by the Senate on 8 April. On 9 April it was signed by the king. Anticlerical bands went on a rampage in the city. Processions were organized with people shouting, "Down with the priests! Long live Siccardi!" As the mob converged on the archbishop's palace, they began shouting, "Death to Frasoni! Away with the nuncio!" Slogans were followed by stones. Windows were smashed and the mob tried to batter down the main door. The cavalry had to intervene with drawn swords.

The clergy reacted at once. Pius IX protested strongly through Cardinal Antonelli. The pontifical nuncio left Piedmont. On 18 March, the archbishop sent a private circular to all parish priests, forbidding priests to appear before a public tribunal without his permission.

On 21 April, the police broke into the Botta press where the circular had been printed, into the post offices and into the palace of the archbishop. The circular was confiscated and judged as instigation to rebellion. Summoned to appear before a civil tribunal, the archbishop refused. He was condemned to a fine of 500 *lire* and a month in prison. On 4 May he was arrested and taken to the military citadel.

Tension ran high in Turin. There was strong opposition from Catholics, even though poorly represented in parliament (only 2% of the population had the vote). Major Count Villardi, guardian of the citadel, burst into tears as he received the archbishop. The Commandant General Imperor ceded him his own private quarters. Several delegations petitioned the king for permission to visit the prisoner. Don Bosco himself visited the archbishop, and sent several delegations of his boys.

Relations between the government and the archbishop became tense again towards the end of July. Peter Derossi di Santarosa, Minister of Agriculture, fell seriously ill and asked for the sacraments. The parish priest, belonging to the congregation of the Servites, received an order from the archbishop to exact from the sick man a public retraction of his approval of the Siccardi Law. Santarosa refused and died on 5 August without viaticum.

Riots began once again on the streets of Turin. The Servites were expelled. The minister of war, Alphonse La Marmora, demanded the resignation of Archbishop Frasoni. The archbishop refused. On 7 August he was arrested and taken to the fortress of Fenestrelle near the French border. From there, he would be banished from the state on 28 September.

Squads of thugs assaulted the religious houses of the city. The Oblates, Barnabites and Dominicans had to barricade themselves inside their houses. On 14 August, a certain Volpato warned Don Bosco that the Oratory would be attacked in the evening. It would be better for him to leave immediately with his boys.

Don Bosco thought it over and decided to stay. At about 4.00 p.m. the column of demonstrators began approaching the outskirts. But, Fr Lemoyne testifies, in the mob there was someone whom Don Bosco had helped in the past. This person halted the first groups and said:

"It's no use attacking the Oratory. All we'll find there are some poor boys and a priest looking after them. Don Bosco is one of us. Let us leave him in peace!"

After a short argument the column headed for another street.

The Second Squad

While the storm raged all around, Don Bosco continued working in silence. Reviglio, Belia, Buzzetti and Gastini were at the end of their intensive course, and almost ready to take the examination for vestition in the clerical habit. Michael Rua, in the summer 1850, had completed the elementary classes with the Brothers of Christian Schools, and Don Bosco continued to keep an eye on him. One day he called him aside:

“What do you plan to do in the coming year?”

“My mother had a talk with the director of the Arms Factory. They will give me a clerical job, so I’ll be in a position to help my family.”

“I also have had a talk with someone. Your teachers told me that the Lord has blessed you with a good mind, and that it would be a real pity if you did not continue studying. Would you like to do that?”

“Yes, of course. But my mother is poor, and my father is no more. Where would I get the money for school?”

“I will see to that. You have only to ask your mother permission to study Latin.”

Rua’s mother looked her lanky young son in the eye. She heard him talk with enthusiasm about Don Bosco. She answered:

“I would be happy about it, Michelino. But your health? The Lord has already taken four of your brothers and you look even weaker than they did. Tell Don Bosco not to keep you at your books the whole time.”

Since Michael lived close to the Oratory, and since he was really not very strong, Don Bosco left him at home for two more years. In November he began sending him to the private classes of Joseph Bonzanino. In the evening he personally coached him in arithmetic and the decimal system. With Rua, there were three others: Francesia, Angelo Savio and Anfossi. It was the second squad that Don Bosco hoped to lead up to the priesthood.

On Sundays, while Buzzetti and the others helped Don Bosco, Rua and Angelo Savio went to the oratories of Vanchiglia and Porta Nuova to assist the boys and give catechism classes.

On 2 February 1851, after 14 months of intensive coaching, the first four boys passed the examination brilliantly before the curia of Turin. Buzzetti, Gastini, Bellia and Reviglio received the clerical habit at the Oratory. Don Bosco was radiant. It seemed to him that, at last, the first lambs had become shepherds. But he was mistaken. Of those four boys, who would be beginning their course of philosophy the following day, only Bellia and Reviglio would become priests, but would not remain at the Oratory. Gastini would lose heart and drop out. Buzzetti would stay with Don Bosco, but without becoming a priest. The first one to keep going would be the tall pale boy still living with his mother, Michael Rua.

30,000 Lire and a Spell of Dizziness

After the vestition of the first four ‘clerics,’ Don Bosco turned his thoughts to the house. He could not go on living for long in a rented place. He could be turned out at any time and the house sold to others. One Sunday afternoon, while Fr Borel preached to the boys, Don Bosco approached Francis Pinardi:

“If you quote me an honest price, I will buy your whole house.”

“And I’ll quote you an honest price. What’s your offer?”

“I had the place appraised by an expert, Engineer Spezia. He says the place is worth between 26,000 and 28,000 *lire*. I will offer you 30,000.”

“Cash down, in one payment?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s shake on it. Within fifteen days, we will sign the deed.”

Don Bosco shook hands. His head was spinning. 30,000 *lire* was a huge sum in those times, something like 10,000 Euros today. Where would he find all that money in 15 days? Here is what he wrote with childlike simplicity: “Divine providence intervened at once. That same evening Fr Cafasso came to pay me a visit, something unusual on a Sunday. He told me that a pious person, Countess Casazza-Riccardi, had asked him to give me 10,000 *lire* to be spent as I thought best for the glory of God. The following day, a religious of the Rosminian congregation came to give me a loan of 20,000 *lire*.” The loan was with an interest of 4%. Abbot Rosmini never asked for either the interest or the capital. “The transaction fees amounting to 3,000 *lire* were paid by Cav. Cotta, at whose bank the deed was signed.”

It was 19 February 1851. How could one fail to see the hand of providence? For Don Bosco, it was a sign that he should go straight ahead on the path he had chosen.

The Salesian *Porziuncola*³⁸

One evening that same month, as he was mending the clothes of the boys with Mamma Margaret, Don Bosco mumbled to himself:

“And now it’s time to begin building a beautiful church to St Francis of Sales.”

Margaret started and dropped needle and thread.

“A church! But where will you get the money? We are hardly able to give bread and clothes to these poor fellows, and you talk of a new church. Think well about it and have a clear understanding with the Lord, before you embark on any business of that kind.”

“Mamma, if you had any money would you give it to me?”

“Of course I would. But I have nothing left, you know that.”

“And God who is more loving and generous than you, do you think he won’t give it to me?”

How does one ‘reason’ with a son like that?

On the other hand, Don Bosco was right. The Pinardi chapel had been enlarged, but it would not have contained all the boys even if it had been three-storeyed. Besides, “since one had to go down two steps to get into the chapel, in winter and on rainy days we were flooded, while in summer we were suffocated by the heat and overpowered by the stench.”

Chevalier Blanchier drew up the plans, while Frederick Bocca was the contractor.

“I warn you,” Don Bosco told him laughing, “that sometimes I won’t have the money to pay you.”

“Well, in that case we shall slow down the work.”

“No, no. I want you to hurry and finish the church within a year.”

Frederick Bocca shrugged his shoulders.

“In that case we shall hurry up. But you do the same with the *lire*.”

³⁸ The *Porziuncola* is the place where Franciscanism developed, and where St Francis of Assisi lived and died.

“We dug the foundations,” Don Bosco writes, “and blessed the foundation stone on 20 July 1851. It was laid by Chevalier Cotta, one of Don Bosco’s greatest benefactors. Michael Rua, 14, read the vote of thanks. The speech was delivered by a famous orator, Fr Barrera. Exaggerations are never wanting on such occasions. Speakers look for images to create an effect. But Barrera did not realize that he was not exaggerating: “This stone is the mustard seed. It will grow into a huge tree under which many boys will find shelter.”

Money was the great headache. Don Bosco knocked on all doors, known and unknown, but managed to put together only 35,000 *lire*. He needed 30,000 more.

The bishop of Biella, Msgr Losana, sent a circular to all his priests. He reminded them of all the “young bricklayers from Biella, helped by the Oratory.” He asked for a special Sunday collection. Don Bosco waited with expectation. All he got was 1,000 *lire*.

The boys helped in whatever way they could. Fr John Turchi remembers: “The walls of the new church had reached the height of the big windows, and I too joined my companions in passing bricks up the scaffolding.”

To find the missing 30,000 *lire*, Don Bosco began a public lottery for the first time. “We collected 3,300 prizes. The pope, the king, the queen mother and the queen consort were generous with their offerings. The prizes were exposed publicly in a big hall behind the church of St Dominic. The list of prizes was published in an attractive folder.

The distribution of tickets cost Don Bosco many humiliations, but he collected a notable sum, making a net profit of 26,000 *lire*. From then on, whenever he found himself in the red, he would have recourse to a lottery. Even in his last letters, written in a shaky hand, we find him requesting friends “to accept a block of tickets for my lottery.”

The church was consecrated on 20 June 1852—exactly 11 months from the laying of the foundation stone. It still stands at the end of the Pinardi house today, dwarfed by the great basilica of Mary Help of Christians which comes up to within three metres of its main door. It is the Salesian *Porziuncola*. For 16 years, from June 1852 to June 1868, it was the heart of the work of Don Bosco.

A very young Dominic Savio came here to pray. He consecrated himself to Our Lady at the little altar of the Madonna on the right. Michael Magone, the little rascal from Carmagnola, also prayed here, as did Francis Besucco, the boy from Argentera who in 1863 would repeat the heroic goodness of Dominic Savio.

Here Fr Michael Rua celebrated his first Mass. Mamma Margaret, older and more tired with the passing of days, prayed here several times a day for over four years. Here she found the strength to start again every day, working for her son’s poor boys.

The Devil Perhaps?

“With the new church,” writes Don Bosco, “we could improve our church functions and also provide more space for the classes we were running for the boys (the Pinardi chapel, the new church and the sacristy were used as classrooms during the day). But what about the number of poor boys constantly asking for shelter?” He concludes calmly: “Looking at the urgent need, we took the decision to add a new wing to the existing house.”

“It was late autumn, yet we went on at full speed and reached the roof in no time.” Then the bad weather set in. “The rain fell in torrents night and day for several days, and washed the mortar from the joints leaving only bricks and gravel. At about midnight on 2 December, we heard an ominous roar, which became louder and more frightful. The walls

had crumbled down.”

Don Bosco addressed the terrified boys. “The devil has played us a bad trick, but with the help of God and the Madonna, we shall rebuild everything.”

The devil may have had a hand in it, but our famous economist Fr Giraudi, who had a chance to examine some portions of those walls, pointed out that they were packed with stones and river sand, with very little mortar. Don Bosco had tried to save as much as he could, and the contractor wanted to get something out of it too.

The damage amounted to 10,000 *lire*. The work could be resumed in only in springtime, and the building was eventually completed in October 1853. “Being hard pressed for space, we took possession of it immediately,” wrote Don Bosco. “We reorganized the classrooms, the refectory and the dormitory, and the number of boarders rose to 65.”

29

AND GOD SENT A DOG

On 17 February and 29 March 1848 respectively, Charles Albert had granted parity of civil rights to Protestants and Jews, who up to that time had been merely tolerated.

Catholics thought that, after obtaining equal rights, Protestants would continue to be quiet and peaceful. They realized with apprehension, instead, that the Waldensian sect had at once launched into an aggressive proselytizing campaign.

The Waldensians founded three papers: *La buona Novella*, *La Luce Evangelica* and *Il Rogantino Piemontese*. They published a number of cheap popular books of propaganda, and organized series of conferences.

It was the first impact of 'pluralism.' Piedmontese Catholics were angry, but did not know what to do. "Relying on civil laws which had protected them up to then," writes Don Bosco, "they owned only a few papers and some cultural publications. They had no periodicals and no books to put into the hands of simple people."

The Piedmontese bishops met in 1849 at Villanovetta, Cuneo. "Indignation alone is useless," they said. "We have to react and get moving with our press and our preaching."

The concrete fruits of this meeting were the publication of the *Collection of Good Books* (September 1849), the paper *La Campana* (March 1850) and the *Letture Cattoliche* or *Catholic Readings* (March 1853).

Catholic Readings, a series of booklets, were the brainchild of Don Bosco, and were actively supported by the bishop of Ivrea. The 'program' explained the intention of the editors:

1. The booklets will be written in a simple style, using a language accessible to the people, and will deal exclusively with matters relating to the Catholic religion.
2. A booklet of 100-108 pages will be published every month. Yearly subscription: 1.80 *lire*.

Not Dialogue But a Head-on Clash

The first six booklets were written by Don Bosco. They were published between March and August 1853 and bore the title, *The Catholic Instructed in his Religion*.

Don Bosco recalled with a smile how hard it was to get ecclesiastical approval for those first six booklets. The vicar general of Turin told him: "I do not want to sign that. You challenge and confront the enemy head on!" Don Bosco had written the booklets in a fighting mood. He did not even know the word 'dialogue.' His style was to force the enemy between a rock and a hard place. "The people and especially the young were to be saved for God, for the church, for eternal life. It was necessary to oppose with all means "the torrent

which threatens to sweep away both society and religion.”

Don Bosco had not forgotten the failure of *The Friend of Youth*, and was a bit apprehensive. But the *Catholic Readings* were received with enthusiasm, and the number of subscribers was extraordinary. “It was this that caused the fury of the Protestants.”

The Waldensian Pastors Bert and Meille came down to Valdocco, together with the Evangelical Pugno. They tried to persuade Don Bosco to stop the *Readings*, or at least to moderate their tone, but Don Bosco refused.

One Sunday evening in January, two gentlemen were announced. They came in and straight away began with compliments: “You, sir, possess the great gift of making yourself understood by the people. You should dedicate yourself to the exposition of history, geography, science. You should lay aside the *Catholic Readings*: those topics are stale news.”

“Yes, it is true, these topics have been discussed in learned treatises. But no one has ever brought them down to the people.”

“We are ready to sponsor your writings if you undertake to write a work of history,” they said, offering me four 1,000 *lire* bills, “and give up this useless work.”

“But if my work is useless, why are you offering me so much money to stop it? You see, by becoming a priest, I have dedicated myself to work for the good of the church and of the poor, and I intend to continue writing and publishing the *Catholic Readings*.”

Their tone changed and their voices became threatening:

“You are making a mistake. When you go out of your house, are you sure you will come back?”

I stood up and opened the door.

“Buzzetti, please show these gentlemen the way to the gate.”

Wine and Chestnuts

On their way out, the ‘gentlemen’ muttered, “You’ll hear from us again.” In the last chapter of his *Memoirs*, Don Bosco tells us how they made themselves felt again, commenting: “It looked like they had something personal against me.” We will follow his account, summarizing where necessary.

One evening as I was busy teaching, two men came to call me in a hurry to the pub *Cuor d’oro* (via Cottolengo, 34) where a man lay dying. I went, but insisted on taking some of the bigger boys with me, much as they tried to dissuade me.

When we got to the *Cuor d’Oro*, they took me to a room on the ground floor where several jolly fellows were enjoying chestnuts. They invited me to join them, but I refused.

“Then have at least a glass of our wine. A little sip will not do you any harm.”

They poured for all, but one clumsily served me from another bottle. I said “Cheers” and put the glass on the table.

“Don’t do that. You are hurting us.”

“You are insulting us.”

“I am not in a mood to drink,” I said.

They became threatening.

“You have to drink, at all costs.” They grabbed me by the shoulders. “Drink, whether you like it or not.”

“If you absolutely want me to drink, at least let my arms free,” I said, shaking them off. “And since I don’t want to drink, I will give it to one of my boys who will drink for me.” Saying these words, I made a long stride to the door and threw it open, asking my boys to come in.

At the sight of those well-built young men, the rascals changed their tune. They apologized, saying that the sick man would make his confession the following day.

A friend of mine made discreet inquiries and came to know that a man had paid them a dinner, on condition that they made me drink some wine that he had prepared specially for me.

“They Wanted to Kill Me”

These attempts at my life sound like fiction, but unfortunately they were true and were witnessed by many.

One Sunday evening in September, I was called in a hurry to the Sardi house near the Refuge, to hear the confession of a dying woman. I took a number of big boys with me: by now I was suspicious of everything.

I left some of the boys at the foot of the stairs. Joseph Buzzetti and Hyacinth Arnaud came with me up to the landing, not far from the sick woman’s door.

I entered the room and saw a woman gasping as if breathing her last. I requested the four people there to leave us alone for confession.

“Before I make my confession,” screamed the woman, “I want that rascal to ask pardon of me.”

“I’ve done you no wrong.”

“Shut up!” shouted another, getting to his feet. A furious quarrel broke out, and before I could understand what was happening, someone put off the lights and I found myself at the receiving end of a rain of blows. I grabbed a chair just in time, and protecting my head with it, I made a dash for the door. The chair was smashed with the blows meant for my head. I lost the nail of my left thumb together with a piece of flesh. Surrounded by my boys, I managed to get home.

“It was,” comments Don Bosco, “yet another attempt to make me desist from writing against the Protestants.”

Grigio

The frequent attempts on my life prompted me not to go out alone into the city. [Between the Oratory and the city, in those days, there was a broad stretch of fields covered with bushes and acacias.]

One dark evening I was returning home all alone, not without some

misgivings, when all of a sudden a huge dog came up to me. At first I was frightened, but when I patted him as if I were his master, he soon became friendly and accompanied me as far as the Oratory. This happened several other times. I can say that *Grigio* [*l Gris*, as Don Bosco called him in the Piedmontese dialect] did me great service. What I relate here about him is the pure truth.

Towards the end of November 1854, one rainy and misty evening I was returning from the city alone. All of a sudden I became aware of two men walking a short distance ahead of me. They fitted their gait to mine, slowing down or hurrying up accordingly. I tried to turn back, but was too late. Jumping towards me, they silently threw a mantle over my head. I tried to break free and shout, but did not succeed. At that very moment *Grigio* appeared. Howling, he savaged the face of one, while sinking his fangs into the other.

“Call the dog away!” they began to shout.

“Only if you leave me alone,” I answered.

“Call him at once!” they pleaded.

Grigio continued howling like a mad wolf. They took to their heels, while *Grigio*, walking by my side, accompanied me home.

Whenever I went out alone, as soon as I entered the bushy patch, *Grigio* would appear. The boys of the Oratory saw him enter the courtyard many times. On one occasion two boys, frightened, wanted to throw stones at him, but Buzzetti intervened:

“Leave him alone, he is Don Bosco’s dog.”

They began stroking him and brought him to the refectory where I was having my supper with some seminarians and my mother. They all looked at the dog, astonished:

“Don’t be afraid,” I said, “he is my *Grigio*, let him come.”

He went all round the table and stopped by me, wagging his tail happily. I offered him food, but he would not touch it. He rested his head on the table as if he wanted to say good night, and then went to the door and was let out by the boys. I remember that on that particular evening I had been very late, and a friend of mine had reached me home in his carriage.”

Charles Tomatis, who was a student at the Oratory in those years, testified: “He was a formidable looking dog. More than once Mamma Margaret was heard exclaiming: “What a frightful animal!” He looked more wolf than dog, with his long snout, straight ears and grey coat. He was almost a metre in height.”

Michael Rua saw the dog twice. He testifies that one evening Don Bosco had to go out on business, but found the dog sprawled across the threshold. He tried to walk over him, to push him aside, but the dog would not budge and would push him back.

Mamma Margaret, who by now knew the dog, told her son:

“If you do not want to listen to me, at least listen to the dog: don’t go out!”³⁹

On the following day, Don Bosco came to know that a man with a pistol had been waiting for him at a bend of the road.

More than once Don Bosco thought of finding out where the dog was coming from, but he never found an answer. As late as 1872, Baroness Azelia Fassati asked him what he

³⁹ *Se t’veuli nen scouteme mi, scouta almen ‘l can; seurt nen.*

thought of that dog. Don Bosco smiled and answered:

“To say that it was an angel would make one laugh. But neither can we dismiss him as just an ordinary dog.”

A Nap at the Shoemaker’s

Don Bosco spent his days working for his boys, asking for help, hearing confessions and preaching in many institutes of the city. At night he would steal hours from his sleep to mend clothes and shoes, and to write books. His lost sleep kept piling up, and at times caught him by surprise.

“After lunch,” remembers John Cagliero, “he would sometimes fall asleep suddenly, sitting there at table, head bent forward. Those present would tiptoe out of the room, trying not to disturb him.”

It was the heaviest hour of the day for him. That was the time he would go out, do some jobs, and visit benefactors. “Walking keeps me awake,” he used to say, smiling. But not always!

One afternoon he had reached the square of the Consolata, so tired that he did not remember any more where he was or where he was heading to. There was a shoemaker’s shop nearby. He entered and asked to be allowed to sleep on a chair for a while.

“Come in, Father. I’m afraid I’ll disturb you with my hammering.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t.”

He sat down at a small table and slept from 2.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. When he awoke, he looked around and then at the watch.

“Oh poor me! Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“My good Father,” said the shoemaker, “you were sleeping so soundly that it would have been wicked to wake you up. I wish I could sleep like that!”

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THE FIRST WORKSHOPS

In the archives of the Salesian Congregation there are two rare documents: a contract of apprenticeship on plain paper, dated November 1851; and a second contract of apprenticeship on stamp paper of 40 cents, dated 8 February 1852. Both bear the signatures of the employer, the apprentice and Don Bosco. Here are the essential parts of the first:

On the strength of the present private deed, drawn up at the House of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, it is agreed:

1. Mr Charles Armino receives as apprentice in his art of glass-making the young man Joseph Bordone of Biella, promising and binding himself to instruct him in the art mentioned *in the space of three years*, and to give him, during the course of apprenticeship, the necessary instructions and the best rules regarding his art and at the same time opportune counsels regarding good conduct, undertaking *to correct him*, should he be at fault, *with words and nothing more*; he also binds himself to keep him continuously occupied in works *relative to his art only and no other*, taking care they should not be beyond his strength.

2. The aforementioned master will leave the apprentice entirely *free on all Sundays and feast days of the year*.

3. The aforementioned master undertakes to pay the apprentice during the first year one *lira* a day; during the second, one *lira* and fifty cents; during the third, two *lire*; he will be given fifteen days of holiday every year.

5. The youth Joseph Bordone, promises for the whole duration of the apprenticeship, to render his services to his master with promptness, assiduity and attention; to be docile, respectful and obedient.

7. The Director of the Oratory promises his assistance for the good conduct of the apprentice.

Touching Many Sore Points

In this private deed, Don Bosco put his finger on many sore spots. Some masters were using their apprentices as servants and scullery boys. Don Bosco obliged them to employ them only in their profession. Masters used to beat the boys; Don Bosco demanded that correction be done by word only. He is concerned about their health, weekly rest and yearly holidays. He also demanded a 'progressive' stipend, because the third year of apprenticeship was, in practice, a year of full work.

The second contract, alongside the stamp with the royal arms, bears the following heading: “Agreement between Mr Joseph Bertolino, master joiner residing in Turin, and the youth Joseph Odasso, born at Mondovi, with the participation of Rev Fr John Bosco, and with the assistance and warranty of the father of the youth, Vincent Odasso, native of Garesio and domiciled in this capital.”

The text is practically a carbon copy of the first. There is only one significant difference. Don Bosco obliges the employer to behave not as ‘master’ but as ‘father.’ We read in Art. 1:

Mr Bertolino Joseph, master joiner... binds himself to give to the youth Joseph Odasso, during the course of his apprenticeship... those opportune and beneficial counsels relative to his civil and moral conduct that a good father would give to his own son; to correct him lovingly in case of failure, but always and only with simple words of admonition and never with any act of ill-treatment.

Don Bosco was not the inventor of these contracts of apprenticeship. The Institute for the Education of Mendicants, founded in 1774, was stipulating such contracts for quite some time. But the two contracts signed by Don Bosco are among the most ancient preserved in Turin. We are perhaps entitled to think (at least until corrected by new data) that besides the Institute for the Education of Mendicants and Don Bosco, almost no one else cared for the rights of apprentices. The parents did not care because they were mostly poor and ignorant. The civil authorities did not care because, toeing the liberal line, they allowed the young to be exploited according to the laws of the ‘free market.’

Alone and Defenceless in the Hands of the Employer

At the beginning, the ‘house of the Oratory,’ which Don Bosco referred to as ‘hospice’ and which we shall call ‘boarding school,’ gave preference to young workers. After the first boy from Valsesia, sheltered in Mamma Margaret’s kitchen on a stormy night, after Buzzetti and Gastini, every year they arrived by the dozens. Some stayed for three years, others for a few months, others for life. Only after 1856 would students form the majority of the boarders.

The preference given to young workers was motivated by their miserable condition. The royal edicts of 1844 had suppressed the guilds, leaving the workers, and especially the young workers, alone and defenceless in the hands of employers. Charles Albert had with difficulty granted the formation of ‘welfare societies’ in the face of strong opposition from the liberals.

Don Bosco found employers for his boys, protected them with sound contracts, visited them at work every week, and stood guarantee for them on behalf of their families. If the employers failed to respect the contract, he withdrew the apprentice.

In 1853, once the new building was completed, he decided to start his own workshops. The reasons were mainly two: the ‘immorality and irreligion’ which the boys had to face from adults in their workshops, and the help that workshops of tailors, cobblers and printers could give to the Oratory.

Two Desks to Begin With

In the autumn of 1853, Don Bosco began his workshops for cobblers and tailors. The cobblers were put in a small narrow room which now is used as a mini-sacristy for the Pinardi chapel, near the belfry. There were two desks and four low chairs. Don Bosco himself was the first master: he sat at a desk and hammered out a sole before four youngsters. Next he taught them to handle awl and twine. A few days later he handed over the post to Dominic Goffi, the doorkeeper of the Oratory.

The tailors' shop was set up in the old kitchen in the midst of the transfer of pots and pans to the new building. The first teachers were Mamma Margaret and Don Bosco once again, who made use of what he had once learnt at Castelnuovo from John Roberto.

In the early months of 1854, rather casually, he began the bookbinders' shop. None of his boys knew anything about the trade. One day, surrounded by them, he laid on the table the printed sheets of his latest booklet, *The Guardian Angels*. Then he pointed to one of the boys and said:

“You will be a bookbinder.”

“Me? I don't even know what that is.”

“Easy. Come here. See this? These big sheets are called ‘signatures.’ They must be folded in half, then again in half, then yet again, and then a fourth time. Go ahead, try it.”

With the help of the other boys all the sheets were folded. Don Bosco placed the folded signatures one on top of the other.

“Here is the book. Now we have to stitch it.”

Mamma Margaret was called in. With a thick needle and after a few needle pricks, the folded sheets were stitched. Some white flour and water provided the glue for the cover.

One last thing remained: the trimming of the edges. How to do it? What to use? The boys suggested all sorts of techniques: scissors, knife, rasp file. Don Bosco went to the kitchen and came back with the half-round mincing knife, the one used for onions, parsley, etc. With a few clever strokes he trimmed the edges. The boys laughed and Don Bosco with them. But a new workshop had been opened. A place was found for it in the new building.

The Long Awaited Printing Press

The carpentry workshop was inaugurated towards the end of 1856. Many boys were withdrawn from workshops in the city and placed in a biggish hall well furnished with benches, tools and a timber. The first master was Mr Corio.

The fifth workshop, the most awaited, was the printing press. Don Bosco had to run around for almost a year before obtaining the official authorization on 31 December 1861. Work began under the guidance of the master printer Andrew Giardino, with Joseph Buzzetti as his assistant.

We do not know the exact date of the opening, but the news was spread to the benefactors by the young printers themselves through a printed circular.

The first book printed by the ‘Press of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales’ was by Canon C. Schmid, *Teofilo, ossia il giovane romito, ameno racconto*.⁴⁰ It was published as the May 1862 number of the *Catholic Readings*. From then on, the *Catholic Readings* were always printed by the Oratory Press, with few exceptions.

⁴⁰ *Theophilus, the Young Hermit: An Amusing Tale.*

The beginnings were modest: two hand-driven machines rotated by hand. But already in Don Bosco's lifetime, the press became a big and modern affair which could compete with the best in the city, with its four presses, twelve power-driven machines, stereotyping, type foundry and engraving.

In 1862 Don Bosco opened his sixth and last workshop: a smithy, forerunner of the modern machine-tools workshop.

Four Attempts to Get Going

Don Bosco encountered many difficulties before hitting on the right formula for his workshops.

At first he employed professionals on ordinary salary. But they worried more about the work than about the progress of the pupils and the good running of the workshop.

In his second attempt, he handed over the whole responsibility of running the workshop to the masters, including the finding of work. It was as if they were the owners of the shop. The drawback was that the boys were treated like labourers and withdrawn from the authority of the rector.

In the third attempt, Don Bosco assumed the whole responsibility and administration of the workshop, leaving to the masters only the professional formation of the boys. The problem was that the masters, afraid of being ousted by the smarter pupils, taught as little as they could and left the boys idle.

Don Bosco found the right formula when he managed to form masters completely bound to his person. They were the Salesian Brothers, equal to the priests and clerics in all things, but entirely dedicated to the professional schools.

“Those who are not Really Poor are Out of Place Here”

The Oratory boarding school was not meant to merely churn out workers; it was supposed to be a true educational institution. To this end, during the year 1854-55, Don Bosco drew up the first ‘regulations’ defining the traits of the institution for young artisans. (What pertained to the students was dealt with in an appendix to these regulations.)

The young worker had to be between the ages of 12 and 18. He had to be “orphan of both father and mother, and totally poor and abandoned. If he has brothers or uncles who can look after him, he is outside the scope of this House.”

The regulations then introduced to the boys “the persons to whom each son had to submit himself, considering them as superiors of the House.” They were the *Rector*, who was responsible for the duties of everyone and the morality of all the sons of the House; the *Prefect or Economist*; the *Catechist or Spiritual Director*, who was in charge of the spiritual needs of the boys; the *Assistant*, who distributes bread, assists at table, in the workshops and in the dormitories.

The virtues recommended as basic were piety towards God, work, obedience to the superiors, love towards all companions, and modesty. The regulations gave norms of conduct to be followed both inside the House and outside, and listed “three evils to be absolutely avoided”: blasphemy, dishonesty and theft.

The timetable contemplated early rising, Mass with prayers and the rosary, breakfast and work. All met for lunch and for the long afternoon recreation. A second shift of work

followed. In the evening there were classes and study. The day ended with evening prayers and a few words by Don Bosco to the whole family: the 'good night.'

The boys were invited to take part every month in a short recollection, called the 'Exercise for a Happy Death,' and every year in a short spiritual retreat.

In religious matters, Don Bosco was always more lenient with the young workers than with the students. But after noticing some exceptional boys among the workers, he founded a 'Sodality of St Joseph' for them, a group that could bring these boys together and help them deepen their Christian and apostolic life.

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STUDENTS IN MILITARY COATS

It was the first day of November 1851. Don Bosco arrived at his hometown of Castelnuovo d’Asti to preach at the feast of All Souls.

One of the altar boys who accompanied him to the pulpit kept staring at him the whole of his sermon. Back in the sacristy, he continued to stare at Don Bosco in silence. Don Bosco called him aside:

“I think you want to tell me something. Am I right?”

“Yes, Father. I want to go to Turin with you, because I want to study and become a priest.”

“Right. Tell your mother to meet me at the parish house after supper.”

The boy was John Cagliero. He had no father. The mother came with him to the parish house after supper, and Don Bosco joked.

“I’ve heard you want to sell me your son?”

“No,” she answered laughing. “Here we sell only calves. Children, well, we give them away!”

“That’s even better. Now go home, bundle up something for him, and tomorrow morning I’ll take him with me.”

Next morning at daybreak, John Cagliero was already in the church. He served Don Bosco’s Mass and had breakfast with him. Then he kissed his mother goodbye, grabbed up his bundle and said:

“So, Don Bosco, are we ready?”

A *Grissini* Basket for a Bed

They covered the long distance to Turin on foot. But John must have done at least double the distance, because as he was answering Don Bosco’s questions, he would be running ahead, chasing the birds and jumping ditches. Years later he would recall:

During that journey Don Bosco asked me a thousand questions and I gave him a thousand answers. From that day on I had no secrets from him. Hearing about some of my boyish escapades, he commented with a twinkle in his eye that the time had come for straightening up. Finally we reached Turin.

It was the evening of 2 November, and we were tired. Don Bosco introduced me to Mamma Margaret:

“See, mother, here’s a boy from Castelnuovo.”

“Yes, of course,” she answered, “all you do is to go and look for boys. I just

don't know where to put them.”

“This one here is so small,” joked Don Bosco, “that we shall put him to sleep in the *grissini* basket. With a piece of rope and a nail we shall hang the basket from a beam, as we do with the canaries.”

Mamma Margaret laughed and went to find me a place. There was truly no place, and for that evening I had to lie down at the foot of the bed of one of my companions.

On the following day I saw the poverty of that house. Our dormitories were on the ground floor. They were narrow and paved with stones like those used for roads. In the kitchen there were a few tin bowls and spoons. Forks, knives, napkins—all these we began to use only many years later. The refectory was a shed. Don Bosco used to dish out our meals, help us keep our dormitories in order, clean and mend our clothes, and do all the other most menial services.

Ours was a true common life. More than a boarding school, it was a family, under a father who loved us very much and whose first concern was our spiritual and material welfare.

From the very first days John Cagliero revealed a vivacious mind and a cheerful disposition, with an irresistible love of fun and games.

Michael Rua continued to live with his mother, but in the morning he would lead the little group of students to professor Bonzanino's house. Rua had been appointed 'assistant' by Don Bosco: he had to see that no one played truant. But he seldom succeeded in keeping Cagliero under control. Once out of the Oratory gate, Cagliero would dart ahead to Porta Palazzo to have a good look at the charlatans and the booths at the fair. Then he would make a dash for the school, reaching the gate before his companions, perspiring but happy. Michael was stern with him:

“Why don't you come with us?”

“Because I like to take another road. What's wrong with that?”

“You have to be obedient.”

“Am I not? I have to come to school, and I come. I have to be punctual, and I am. If I like to see what's new at the market, why should that worry you?”

Cagliero would become the first Salesian bishop and cardinal. Together with Rua, he would become one of the pillars of the Salesian Congregation. But their temperaments would always remain different: Michael, diligent, steady, thoughtful; John, extrovert, enthusiastic, exuberant. But both ready to jump into the fire for Don Bosco.

“Through the Red Sea and the Desert”

On 22 September 1852, Michael Rua came to stay permanently at the Oratory. On the following day, together with Mamma Margaret, Don Bosco, and 26 companions he left for Becchi on foot. Don Bosco would preach the novena of the rosary at Castelnuovo, and the boys would be guests of his brother Joseph.

Before leaving Don Bosco had a word with Michael.

“During the coming school year, I want you to give me a hand to keep things going here. On 3 October, we shall celebrate the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. The parish priest of Castelnuovo will come to Becchi, and in our little chapel, he will bless and give you the

clerical habit. When we return to the Oratory, you will be the assistant and teacher of your companions. What do you say to that?"

"Whatever you say, Don Bosco."

On the evening of that feast, as they were going back to Turin by coach, Don Bosco said to Rua:

"My dear Rua, you are beginning a new life. Remember one thing: before entering the Promised Land, you will have to cross the Red Sea and the desert. If you help me, we shall cross both quite peacefully, and we shall reach the Promised Land."

Michael reflected a bit. He did not understand much. Then, breaking the silence, he asked:

"Do you remember, Father, when we met the first time? You were distributing medals and there was none for me. Then you made a strange gesture, as if you wanted to give me half your hand. What did you mean by that?"

"Haven't you understood yet? I wanted to tell you that the two of us will always go halves in everything. All that is mine will be yours, including debts, worries and responsibilities." And Don Bosco smiled. "But there will be also many beautiful things, you'll see. And at the end, the most beautiful thing of all: Paradise."

Fifty Years Warranty

It happened on Easter Tuesday morning, 1853. The Turin sky was black and menacing.

John Francesia and Michael Rua, thick pals, were revising their Italian lesson together. Michael couldn't concentrate, his mind wandered far away. He appeared to be weighed down by a heavy sadness. Francesia had repeated the same question twice, receiving no answer. Puzzled, he closed the book.

"What's wrong with you today, Rua?"

Biting his lips to check his tears, Michael murmured:

"My brother John has just died. I am next on the list."

John was the last of his brothers living at home. Now his mother was left alone, in the small apartment given them by the Arms Factory. Don Bosco came to know of this and, in order to distract Michael, took him out with him to Turin. He had some urgent business near the Church of the Gran Madre on the bank of the Po. They walked fast and talked of the Oratory. During those days Turin was celebrating the eighth jubilee of the famous miracle of the Blessed Sacrament. Don Bosco had published a booklet on the occurrence. It had sold out in a matter of days. All of a sudden, Don Bosco stopped and said slowly, weighing every word:

"In fifty years' time, the ninth jubilee will be celebrated. I won't be around then. But you will be. Make sure that you reprint my booklet."

Michael thought for a moment of that date so far away yet: 1903! Disconsolately he shook his head.

"It's all very well, Don Bosco, to talk of my being around. I, for my part, have a feeling that death will play a bad trick on me."

"There will be no trick, either good or bad," Don Bosco cut in. "I assure you that fifty years hence you will still be around. You will reprint that booklet, okay?"

Fr Rua was very much alive in 1903. He was 66 years old and was the successor of

Don Bosco at the head of the Salesian Congregation. He had the booklet reprinted.

Little Lords and Ragamuffins

While continuing to look after the welfare of young workers, Don Bosco did not neglect the students. As we have repeatedly pointed out, his aim was to prepare future collaborators, seminarians and priests who would help him in his work. He also wanted to prepare priestly vocations for the dioceses, choosing them from among those who “were raised between hoe and hammer” to make up for the dwindling number of vocations.

The first group of four that he had prepared left him rather disappointed, as we have seen. But Rua, Cagliari and Francesca would make up for that failure. Side by side there were others: Angelo Savio, Rocchiotti, Turchi, Durando, Cerruti...

The boarding school for students was born quietly but grew vigorously. There were 12 boarders in 1850; 35 in 1854; 63 in 1855; 121 in 1857...

The pupils of the first three years of Latin went to the school of Professor Bonzanino. They then passed over to the classes of humanity and rhetoric conducted by Fr Matthew Picco near the Church of the Consolata.

Both schools were attended by the sons of the well-to-do families of Turin, who could afford the fees. The boys of Don Bosco were, instead, accepted free.

In the beginning the ‘little lords’ made fun of the ragamuffins who came to school in discarded military coats that make them look like smugglers or clowns. Don Bosco had received these coats, together with soldiers’ berets, from the ministry. They were quite shapeless, reports Fr Lemoyne, but they were a protection from the rain and snow. Bonzanino, however, stood no nonsense. He soon made it clear that the value of a student was measured by what he wrote, and not by the colour of his coat. And looking at the marks, the ragamuffins often scored higher than the ‘little lords.’ Don Bosco’s boys applied themselves seriously to study. Don Bosco knew how to be exacting; he had no time for idlers. In 1863, Professor Prieri of the University of Turin would declare: “At Don Bosco’s Oratory, pupils study, and study hard.”

“I Feel At Home among the Boys”

This going and coming from the city was not exactly what Don Bosco had envisaged. Also, very soon the classes of Bonzanino and Picco could not accommodate the growing numbers of the boys from the Oratory.

And so it happened that, as soon as John Baptist Francesca completed his Latin studies (brilliantly!) at the age of 17, he was entrusted with Latin class three. That was in November 1855.

Classes one and two were provided for during the following year and entrusted to a friend of Don Bosco, Professor Bianchi.

By 1861, these three classes had more than 200 students. They were manned by the young seminarians Francesca, Provera, Anfossi, Durando, and Cerruti.

The appendix to the regulations of the house listed the three qualities necessary for a student to be accepted into the Oratory: a special talent for study, outstanding piety, and a desire to join the ecclesiastical state, full freedom of choice being left to the students, however, at the end of the Latin course.

There was no insistence that the students be orphans or poor. But the majority of the students did come from poor families, as is confirmed by the episode of the military coats.

The timetables for artisans and students were the same, with the difference that the time spent by the former in the workshops was spent by the latter at school or in study.

Fr Lemoyne writes: “Up to the years 1858, Don Bosco ran his Oratory as a father runs his family. The youngsters did not feel any great difference between life at home and life in the boarding school. There were no lines when moving from one place to another, assistance was flexible and there were no rules for everything.”

Don Bosco spent time with his boys whenever he could. “I cannot live without my boys,” he would say. Only very grave reasons would prevent him from being in their midst, talking with them, playing with them. For quite some time he would work in their study hall—not for want of assistants, but because “he felt at home” in their midst. He would sit down at one of the desks and “write or reflect on his next book.”

After supper (and this went on till 1870) the boys used to invade the room where Don Bosco would be finishing his supper. All wanted to be near him, to see him, ask him questions, hear what he had to say, laugh at his jokes. They would be everywhere, on the chairs around him, on the tables, sitting, standing, even kneeling. Don Bosco enjoyed this moment very much, which he called “the best course of his poor meal.”

“Don Bosco Could Not Understand”

There was a very intense religious atmosphere in the students’ section of the Oratory. The boys were the tender buds of future priestly vocations, and Don Bosco wanted them immersed in a climate of sacramental, Marian and ecclesial religiosity.

Confession was a weekly or fortnightly habit for all. Don Bosco himself heard confessions for two or three hours every day, and for whole afternoons on the eve of feast days. The fame he enjoyed of having the power to ‘read sins’ encouraged total sincerity. Many of the boys used to go to communion every day. Those who did not receive the Eucharist at least once a week were very few.

Devotion to Our Lady was in the air: one could breathe it. It would reach moments of rare intensity during the years of Dominic Savio and also during the building of the great shrine of Mary Help of Christians.

Love for the pope was an integral part of the Christian mentality of Don Bosco. Many called him “more papal than the pope,” and they were not entirely mistaken. Don Bosco’s love for the pope was more than mere lip-service: he would burn the last years of his life in order to obey the pope. The boys could not help absorbing this mentality.

Don Bosco also had the right to make mistakes, and according to modern psychologists and ecclesiologists, one of his big mistakes regarded the home holidays of his students: he would try to shorten them as much as possible. Home holidays, in his opinion, were a ‘serious danger’ to vocations.

“Don Bosco, man of his times,” the experts say today, “could not understand the importance of the family and of the parish in the growth of vocations.” But perhaps the statistics might make us hesitate before passing such a drastic judgment: in 1861 alone, there were 34 vocations to the priesthood from the Oratory. The anticlericals called Don Bosco’s house the ‘priest factory.’ By the end of his life Don Bosco could boast of having given several thousand priests to the church. And no one could call them an army of ill-fitting,

repressed individuals.

It was Don Bosco's conviction that if the priest is expected to be chaste for life, young seminarians had to be protected during the delicate period of puberty. It is a view that needs to be given serious consideration again, without belittling the values of the family and the local church.

32

“WE SHALL CALL OURSELVES SALESIANS”

On 26 January 1854 the streets of Turin were freezing, but the rooms of Don Bosco were filled with a strange warmth. Don Bosco was speaking to four of his boys, and they were hanging **from** his lips, their imaginations inflamed.

“You can see for yourself that Don Bosco does what he can, but he is alone. If the four of you are ready to give me a hand, we could, together, work miracles. There are thousands of poor boys waiting for us. I promise you that Our Lady will give us vast and spacious oratories, churches, houses, schools, workshops, and many priests eager to help. And all this not only in Italy but also in Europe and in America. Among you, I can already see a mitre...”

The four looked at one another, nonplussed. It sounded like a dream. And yet Don Bosco was not joking. He was serious, and it looked like he was reading into the future:

“It is the will of the Madonna that we begin a society. I have thought a long time about the name. I have decided that we shall call ourselves *Salesians*.”

Among those four young men we find the foundation stones of the Salesian Congregation. That same evening Michael Rua wrote in his book: “We, Rocchietti, Artiglia, Cagliero and Rua, gathered in the room of Don Bosco. We were asked, with the help of God and St Francis of Sales, to make a practical experiment of Christian charity towards our neighbour. Later we shall make a promise and, if possible, a vow to the Lord. Those who are doing this, or will do so in future, will be called Salesians.”

The Pergola of Roses

The visions of the future which Don Bosco described to his young men that evening were the same that, some years earlier, had almost sent him to the madhouse.

But Don Bosco repeated his predictions with stubborn assurance, because, as he had explained to Fr Borel, “I see all this in my dreams.” In 1847 he had an ‘important dream’ which became a guideline—in his own words—in deciding what to do. Only in 1864 would he narrate this dream to his first Salesians, among whom were Rua, Cagliero, Durando and Barberis.

One day, in the year 1847, having given a lot of thought to what could be done to help the young, the Queen of Heaven appeared to me [a most unusual

expression in Don Bosco's mouth. He generally says: I dreamt of a most beautiful Lady ...]. She led me to a delightful garden. There was a most beautiful portico with creepers loaded with leaves and flowers. The portico was the entrance to a marvellous pergola, bordered and covered with rich rose bowers in full bloom. The ground too was covered with roses. The Blessed Virgin said to me:

"Take off your shoes and walk along this pergola. This is the road you have to follow."

I liked the idea of taking my shoes off. It would have been a pity to tread on those beautiful roses. I began to walk, but immediately realized that those roses hid very sharp thorns. I was forced to stop.

"One needs shoes here," I said to my guide.

"Of course," she answered, "one needs good shoes."

I put on my shoes and began walking again with a number of companions who had somehow turned up at that moment, asking to walk with me.

Many branches descended from above like festoons. All I could see were roses: roses above, roses beside me, roses in front of me. But my legs were getting caught in the branches on the ground. I tried to remove the branches blocking my way and got my hand pricked. By now I was bleeding everywhere. Those roses hid a huge number of thorns.

All those who saw me walking kept saying: "Don Bosco always walks on roses! Everything turns out right for him!" They could not see that the thorns were tearing my limbs.

I invited many seminarians, priests and laypersons to follow me. They began joyfully, attracted by the beauty of those flowers, but soon realized they had to walk on thorns and began to shout, "We have been cheated!" Many turned back. I was left practically alone. I began to cry: "Must I walk this way all alone?"

But soon I was consoled. Coming towards me I saw a crowd of priests, seminarians, lay people... They said to me, "We are yours. We are ready to follow you." I plucked up courage and resumed walking. Only a few lost heart and gave up. Most of them reached the end with me.

At the end of the pergola, I found myself in a beautiful garden. My followers were lean, dishevelled and bleeding. Suddenly a gentle breeze arose, and all were cured by it. Then a gust of wind came and, as if by magic, I found myself surrounded by numberless youths, seminarians, lay brothers and priests who began to work with me among those boys. I saw many who were familiar, but there were many more I did not know.

At this moment, the Holy Virgin who had been my guide asked me:

"Do you know the meaning of what you see now and have seen before?"

"No."

"Know that the way you have walked among roses and thorns signifies the care you have to take of the young. You will have to walk with the shoes of mortification. The thorns signify the obstacles, the sufferings, the afflictions that are in store for you. But do not be discouraged. With charity and mortification, you will overcome all obstacles and will reach the roses without thorns."

As soon as the Mother of God stopped talking, I came to, and found myself in my room.

I have told you this so that each one of us might have the assurance that it is Our Lady who wants our congregation, and that we are encouraged more and more to work for the greater glory of God.

Guided by this quiet assurance, Don Bosco would cast his net among his boys to increase the number of his future Salesians. He would say casually, “Do you love Don Bosco? Would you like to remain with me?” Or, “Wouldn’t you like to give me a hand to work among boys? You know, if I had a hundred priests and a hundred seminarians, I would still have work enough for every one of them. We could go out to the whole world.”

The boys were familiar with such invitations. Talk of ‘future oratories,’ of the dreams of Don Bosco, of ‘staying or not staying’ with him was quite common and normal. One evening in 1851, from a window on the first floor, Don Bosco threw a handful of sweets. There was a great melee. One of the boys, looking up at Don Bosco smiling at the window, shouted: “Oh, Don Bosco, if only you could see all the parts of the world and everywhere, so many oratories!” Don Bosco, with his eyes fixed far away, said calmly: “Who knows but the day will come, when the sons of the Oratory will truly be spread all over the world.”

“What Will You Pay Me?”

At Avigliana there lived a priest called Victor Alasonatti. He was senior to Don Bosco by three years. They had met several times during the Spiritual Exercises at St Ignatius, Lanzo, and had become friends. Fr Alasonatti ran the elementary school at Avigliana and got along well with the children. He was just a bit on the stern side and wanted the children to behave, but they loved him.

Don Bosco had often teased him:

“How many children have you got here? Thirty? Aren’t you ashamed? I have six hundred. How can you bear to work for only thirty kids? Come on. Come with me to Turin and help me.”

“What will you pay me?”

“Bread, work and paradise. You won’t be able to set aside many *lire*, but you’ll certainly be able to cut down on many hours of sleep.”

The joke went on for some time, but Alasonatti began to give it serious thought. Don Bosco understood at once, and in early 1854 wrote him a letter in which he simply said, “Come and help me say my breviary.”

After carefully settling all his private business, Fr Alasonatti arrived at the Oratory on 14 August with a small suitcase and his breviary. He embraced Don Bosco and said:

“Here I am. Where shall I sit and say my breviary?”

Don Bosco took him to the room where the account books were kept and told him:

“Here you are! This is your kingdom. You have taught so much arithmetic that adding and subtracting will be child’s play to you.”

Fr Alasonatti did not smile. Gravely he said to Don Bosco:

“From today, you order and I obey. Don’t spare me, because I am determined to earn my paradise.”

From that day Fr Alasonatti became the meek and somewhat stern shadow of Don Bosco. He tried to relieve him of all the burdens he could: the general administration of the

house, assistance, accounts, the difficult bits of correspondence.

When he felt tired, when his health began declining, he would refer to a bookmark in his breviary: "Victor, why have you come here?" Below, he had written a saying that Don Bosco would repeat very often when he saw someone tired: "We shall rest in heaven."

On the day following his arrival, Fr Alasonatti had to begin his work in a rather unusual way: he was called to assist a cholera case. There had been a violent outbreak of cholera in Turin.

Death on the Streets of Borgo Dora

In July, a frightening piece of news had seeped into Turin. Cholera had hit Liguria, causing 3,000 deaths in Genoa alone. The first cases in Turin were detected on 30 and 31 July. The king, the queen and the royal household left the city in closed carriages and took refuge at the castle of Caselette, at the entrance of the valleys of Lanzo and Susa.

The epicentre of the disease was Borgo Dora, a stone's throw away from Valdocco. Borgo Dora was filled with immigrants living in hovels and barracks, poor people who were undernourished and without sanitation. Within a month 800 people were stricken, of which 500 succumbed.

The mayor launched an appeal: he needed courageous people who would assist the sick and take them to the *lazzaretti*, so that the contagion might not spread like wild fire.

On 5 August, feast of Our Lady of Snows, Don Bosco addressed the boys. He began with a promise:

"If you purify your souls and keep away from mortal sin, I promise that no one of you will be attacked by cholera."

He then made an invitation.

"You have heard that the mayor has made an appeal. People are needed to act as hospital assistants and assist the cholera patients. Many of you are too small for that. But if among the bigger boys there are those who want to come with me to the hospitals and to private houses, we will together do something very pleasing to God."

That same evening, 14 boys gave their names. Later, 30 more managed to get permission to join the first group, even though some were rather small.

There followed days full of hard and none too pleasant work. The doctors suggested that friction and massages be applied to the legs of patients to provoke abundant perspiration. The boys were divided into three groups. The bigger boys were to give full-time service in the hospitals and private houses. The second group went scouting through streets and houses for new cases. The third group, made up of the smallest boys, would be standing by at the Oratory, ready to intervene when called.

Don Bosco wanted them to take full precautions. Everyone was provided with a small bottle of strong vinegar; they were asked to disinfect their hands every time they had touched a sick person.

Fr Lemoyne writes: "Very often the sick had no bed sheets, covers, or linen. The boys would inform Mamma Margaret, who would look for something to give. In a few days the store was exhausted. One of the young attendants came to her one day saying he had found a sick man without a rag to cover himself, and was there anything left... That holy woman stopped and thought for a moment, then went to the chapel, removed the white altar cloth and gave it to the boy. 'Go take it to your sick man. I don't think the Lord will

complain,' she said.”

Two Giants with a Sad Look

One evening, John Cagliero came back from the *lazaretto* and took ill. He was then 16. He had probably eaten some overripe fruit. The doctor’s verdict was clear: it was typhoid.

The boy was racked by fever the whole month of September. Reduced to skin and bones, he felt he was sinking. The doctors called in to examine him declared that the case was desperate. They advised that he be given the last sacraments.

Don Bosco was deeply shaken. He loved that boy dearly, and did not have the courage to give him the bad news. He asked Joseph Buzzetti to break the news, with great delicacy. In the meantime, he would go down to the church for the viaticum.

Buzzetti had just finished talking to Cagliero, when Don Bosco appeared at the door with the Blessed Sacrament. Strangely, he stopped in his stride, and stood there for some seconds, his eyes looking into the void as if seeing something the others could not see. He then approached the bed of the sick boy, but his face had changed. Gone was the sadness and the disturbance. He was smiling. Cagliero whispered:

“Is this my last confession? Do I really have to die?”

Don Bosco answered with assurance:

“No, your time has not yet come. You still have plenty to do: you will get well, you will don the cassock, you will become a priest... and then... and then, breviary under the arm, you will make many journeys... and give it to many others to use... and you will go far ... yes ...very far.”

With these words, Don Bosco took the viaticum back to the church.

A few days later the fever dropped suddenly, and John was sent back to his native place, Castelnuovo, for a long convalescence.

For some time, Cagliero and Buzzetti kept asking themselves what it was that Don Bosco ‘saw’ upon entering the room. The answer was given by Don Bosco himself, much later:

I was just stepping into the room, when all of a sudden I saw a great light. A white dove, carrying an olive branch, was descending on the bed of the sick boy. It hovered a few centimetres over the pale face of Cagliero and dropped the twig on his forehead. At once I saw the walls of the room open up into distant and mysterious horizons. Around the bed there appeared a crowd of strange primitive people. They seemed huge and uncouth. Some had their dark skins tattooed with mysterious red symbols. Two of those giants, proud of mien and sad, were bending over the sick boy and murmuring with anguish:

“If he dies, who will come to help us?”

The vision lasted only a few instants, but gave me absolute certainty that Cagliero would get well.

Eight Minutes for a Page

With the first rains of autumn, the cases of cholera began to diminish. Even though

there were still some cases, on 21 November the state of emergency was declared terminated. From 1 August to 21 November, 2,500 cases had been registered, and 1,400 people had died.

None of Don Bosco's boys had been affected, and all returned healthy and sound to their books. Some were allowed to go home for a short holiday.

Don Bosco, as was his custom, went to Becchi for the feast of the rosary. One of his old seminary companions, Fr Cugliero, teacher at Mondonio, came to see him there.

"Listen," he said, after the usual pleasantries, "I am told that together with your little rascals at the Oratory, you also accept boys who give some hope of becoming priests. At Mondonio I have a boy meant just for you. His name is Dominic Savio. He is not very strong, but as for goodness, I am ready to bet that you have never seen anyone like him. He is another St Aloysius."

"You never change!" answered Don Bosco, smiling. "Anyway, I'll be here for a few days. Send your wonder-boy over to me with his father. I'll see for myself what stuff he is made of."

Don Bosco and the boy met on 2 October 1954, in the little courtyard in front of Joseph's house at Becchi. Don Bosco was so impressed that he narrated the event with all its minute details, as if he had recorded it. The language is of the 1800's, but the description is so vivid that it makes the scene appear before our eyes:

It was the first Monday of October, rather early in the morning, when I saw a boy approaching me together with his father. His smiling face, his happy yet respectful attitude, caught my attention at once.

"Who are you?" I asked, "And where are you coming from?"

"I am Dominic Savio. Fr Cugliero spoke to you about me. We come from Mondonio."

I took him aside and enquired about his studies, the kind of life he had led; we soon felt at home with each other, he with me and I with him.

I recognized in that young boy a soul completely in accord with the spirit of the Lord, and I was struck by the wonders that divine grace had worked in a boy at such a tender age.

We spoke at some length, but before I could call the father to join us, the boy said to me:

"Well, what do you think of me? Will you take me with you to study at Turin?"

"I think you are good stuff."⁴¹

"For what could this cloth be used?"

"To stitch a good garment for the Lord."

"So, I am the cloth, and you will be the tailor. Take me with you and prepare a good garment for the Lord."

"But once you finish your Latin course, what will you do?"

"If the Lord gives me the grace, I would like very much to become a priest."

"Good. Now I want to see whether you will be able to cope with your studies. Take this booklet [it was an issue of the *Catholic Readings*], learn this page, and recite it to me tomorrow."

⁴¹ In Italian, the word *stoffa*, stuff, also means 'fabric' or 'cloth.'

I let him off and stopped to speak with the father. Not more than seven or eight minutes had gone by, when Dominic approached me, all smiles, and said:

“If you want I can recite the page for you, now.”

I took the book, and to my great surprise, I saw that he had not only learnt the page perfectly, but had also grasped its meaning.

“Good,” I told him, “you have anticipated the study of the lesson, and so I will anticipate my answer. Yes, I am going to take you to Turin with me and from now on, you will be one of my dear boys. Pray that both of us, you and I, may in everything do God’s holy will.”

Not knowing how to show his gratitude and happiness, he took my hand, pressed it, kissed it repeatedly, and said to me:

“I promise to behave in such a way that you never have to complain about my conduct.”

Remembering the words of Fr Cugliero, Don Bosco had to conclude that the priest had not exaggerated. Had St Aloysius been born on the hills of Monferrato, in a family of country people, he could not have been very different from that smiling boy who wanted to become ‘a beautiful garment’ for the Lord.

A Mysterious Poster

During his convalescence at Castelnuovo, Cagliari got into trouble again. He stuffed himself with grapes (it was grape-gathering time), and the fever came back with a vengeance. Don Bosco came to know of it and went to see him. He met the distraught mother.

“There goes my Johnny. He raves about donning the cassock, while the fever is taking him away...”

“No, my good Theresa. He is not raving. Go ahead and get his cassock ready, because I will give it to him in November at the Oratory. The fever will not take him away: he has still much to do in this world.”

And so it was. On the feast of St Cecilia, 22 November, John Cagliari, back to perfect health, donned the clerical habit. The rector of the diocesan seminary, Canon Vogliotti, granted him the privilege of frequenting classes at the seminary while continuing to stay with Don Bosco.

In the meantime, on 29 October, Dominic Savio had entered the Oratory. He had gone up to Don Bosco’s office with his father, and had seen a poster with the mysterious words: *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*.

After his father had left, the boy, overcoming his hesitation, asked Don Bosco what those words might mean. Don Bosco helped him translate: “Lord, give me souls and take away the rest.” It was the motto Don Bosco had chosen for his apostolate. Savio became thoughtful for a moment, and then said: “I think I understand: here you deal not with money but with souls. I hope that my soul will also become part of this business.”

It was in this way that Dominic entered the daily routine. He was probably given one of the famous military coats, and every morning followed Rua to Bonzanino’s school. His day was that of a young student: home-works, lessons, school, books, companions. But Don Bosco followed his progress daily. He wrote: “From the day he entered the Oratory, he went

about fulfilling his duties with an exactness that can hardly be surpassed.”

Coloured Balloons by the Po

There was a special atmosphere in the Oratory towards the end of November. It was the beginning of the novena of the Immaculate Conception, and it was the year 1854. Pius IX had announced that he would solemnly define the dogma of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December. The Catholic world was experiencing a revival of love for Our Lady, and great celebrations were being prepared.

Don Bosco, who felt very specially the guidance of the Blessed Virgin, spoke of her every evening to his youngsters, and the novena was followed with extraordinary fervour. Conversing with the boys privately or on the playground, he would ask what present they were preparing to give her on her feast day. Dominic Savio had responded: “I will wage a total war on mortal sin and ask Our Lord and the Madonna that I might die rather than fall into sin.”

It was a renewal of the resolution he had taken on the day of his first communion: “Death rather than sin!” This was not an expression original to him, but the conclusion of the *Act of Contrition* then in use at the end of confession. Many boys used to make such a resolution to mark their first encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. We find these words even among the resolutions suggested by the queen to Crown Prince Hubert of Savoy (later King Hubert I), who, incidentally, was almost the same age as Dominic Savio (Savio was born in 1842, Hubert in 1844). But what strikes us here is the fact that, while thousands of youngsters forget these words with their childhood toys, Dominic instead remained heroically faithful till the end of his life.

On 8 December, surrounded by a great number of cardinals and bishops, Pius IX proclaimed as a dogma of faith that Mary, from the very first moment of her existence, was kept free from original sin.

During a break in the festivities, Dominic Savio quietly entered the Church of St Francis of Sales, knelt at the altar of Our Lady, and pulled out a piece of paper on which he had written something. It was his dedication to the Blessed Virgin, a simple prayer destined to become famous throughout the Salesian world:

“O Mary, I give you my heart. Make it yours for ever. Jesus and Mary, be for ever my friends. But, I beg you, allow me to die rather than have the misfortune of committing even one only sin.”

That night, the whole city of Turin was resplendent with lights. Thousands of coloured balloons shone in the windows, on the terraces, and along the river Po. People poured out into the streets and a huge procession made its way to the Shrine of the Consolata. Don Bosco and his boys too joined the crowd singing Mary’s praises through the streets of the city.

The Little Orphan Boy of St Dominic

The year 1854 had been an eventful one for Don Bosco. It ended with a touching, bitter-sweet episode. The municipality had been forced to hurriedly open a makeshift orphanage near the Church of St Dominic, to shelter about a hundred boys who had lost both parents during the cholera epidemic. When the cold set in, mayor Notta approached

Catholic institutions asking them to accept some of these boys into their boarding schools. Don Bosco opened his door to twenty. One of them, Peter Enria, would later remember:

One day, Don Bosco came. I had never seen him. He asked me my name and surname and then said:

“Would you like to come with me? We shall always be friends.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“And this one, is he your brother?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell him to come too.”

A few days later, together with several others, we were taken to the Oratory. My mother had died of cholera and my father had contracted it too. I remember Don Bosco’s mother scolding him:

“You go on accepting children, how are we to feed and clothe them all?”

I remember that for several nights I slept on a heap of maize leaves with only a small blanket as cover. Don Bosco and his mother used to patch up our pants and coats at night, because we had nothing else to put on.

Don Bosco opened a separate section for the orphans in the new building. For more than a year he taught them, alone at first and later with the help of seminarians and friends. The other boys of the Oratory used to call them ‘shorties,’ because they were rather small.

Peter Enria remained with Don Bosco to the end of his life. He was the one who attended to him during his last illness, and who closed his eyes when he died.

Cholera had played havoc in the city. In a way, for the Oratory, it brought some advantages. People came to know and admire the services rendered by the boys to the stricken. The mayor officially praised them in front of the authorities and the public. The almost unbelievable fact that none of them had been taken ill, in spite of being in close contact with the sick, convinced many that some of the ‘foolish things’ said by Don Bosco deserved to be taken more seriously.

33

THE YOUNG DELINQUENTS OF THE *GENERALA*

The year 1855 witnessed another clash between state and church. In October 1852, Camillo Cavour had replaced Massimo D'Azeglio as prime minister. This restless and very rich scion of the aristocracy was waking up sleepy Piedmont. The little provincial lawyers who used to intervene in parliament quoting Dante and Mameli, were unceremoniously asked to discuss budgets, deficits, customs facilities and capital investments. The railways developed a network of 850 kilometres, equal to the sum of all the other railways of Italy. In Liguria, the Ansaldo industrial complex had been set up, the largest in Italy, and also the docks of Odero and Orlando. Canals multiplied in the Vercelli region, and agriculture received a boost because of the abolition of octroi on wheat.

On 28 November 1854, camouflaged as an economic measure, the draft of a bill was presented to the House by Urbano Rattazzi. The historian Francesco Traniello describes this as "a clever scheme to undermine the influence of the church." It proposed the dissolution of the contemplative religious orders on the grounds that they were involved neither in education, nor in preaching nor in assisting the infirm. All their possessions would be taken over by the state, "which would thus be in a position to provide for those parishes most in need."

It was a clear interference of the state in the affairs of the church, writes Traniello, especially since the state was arrogating to itself the power of deciding, on the basis of productivity, which religious orders were useful to society. In fact, Cavour went so far as to declare that these orders had become useless even to the church. Catholics, led by their bishops, protested that this 'law about the friars' was glaringly against the principle of separation between church and state touted by Cavour as the basis of his politics.

In spite of the strong Catholic opposition, it was expected that the law would be passed by the House and the Senate. The king alone could block it.

Funerals at the Court

It was a freezing afternoon in December 1854. Those present remember that Don Bosco had slipped on a threadbare pair of gloves and that he had a bundle of letters in his hand. The group was made up of Alasonatti, Rua, Cagliari, Francesia, Buzzetti and Anfossi. Don Bosco began to tell them about a strange dream: he had been standing in the playground when suddenly he saw a royal valet come forward, all decked up in red. The valet stood and shouted: "Funeral at court! Funeral at court!" On waking up, Don Bosco had written a letter to the king, telling him of the dream.

Five days later, the dream was repeated. The valet entered on horseback this time,

and shouted: “Hear, hear: not funeral at court, but funerals at court.” In the morning, Don Bosco wrote again to the king, asking him to act in such manner as to avoid the threatened punishment. He entreated him to ensure that the law against religious was not passed.

On 5 January 1855, Maria Teresa, the queen mother, was taken ill. She died on 12 January. She was 54. Her remains were taken to the Savoy crypt at Superga on 16 January.

On 20 January, Queen Maria Adelaide, wife of the king, was administered the last sacraments. She had given birth to a son 12 days before and had not recovered since. She died that same day. She was only 33 years old.

On 11 February, Prince Ferdinand of Savoy, Duke of Genoa, brother of the king, died after twenty days of illness. He too was only 33 years old.

The seminarians at the Oratory, who were the only ones who knew about the dreams and the letters, were tremendously shaken at seeing the words of Don Bosco fulfilled with such inexorable immediacy. Not even during the cholera epidemic had the royal crypt been opened three times in the space of a month.

Fr Francesca asserts that the king himself came down twice to Valdocco to meet Don Bosco, and that he was furious with him.

The law of suppression was passed by the House, with 95 votes against 23, and by the Senate with 53 votes against 42. The king ratified it on 29 May. 351 religious houses harbouring a total of 4540 persons were suppressed. Rome announced a ‘major excommunication’ (which can be lifted only by the pope) against all, authors, supporters and executors of the law.

Meanwhile on 17 May, the little son of the king, Victor Emmanuel Leopold, also died. He was barely four months old.

Saint or villain, Don Bosco’s prophecies had sadly come true.

The First Salesian

Don Bosco continued to gather his seminarians quietly every week. He spoke to them of poverty, chastity and obedience, the three virtues that the church had always considered a ‘highway to God.’ He explained to them that to become ‘religious’ meant ‘taking vows,’ solemnly promising God to practice these virtues for life.

At the end of a year of such conferences, Don Bosco judged that Rua was the one who seemed most ready. He asked him: “Would you like to take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for three years?” Rua thought that it was only a question of “binding himself closer to Don Bosco,” and accepted.

On 25 March 1855, feast of the Annunciation, a simple ceremony took place in the humble room of Don Bosco. Don Bosco was on his feet. Michael Rua, kneeling before the crucifix, recited a formula: “I make a vow to God to be poor, chaste and obedient, and place myself in your hands, Don Bosco...” There were no witnesses. Yet at that moment a new religious congregation was born. Don Bosco was its founder, and Michael Rua the first member, the first Salesian.

From that moment, for him, as for Cagliari and Francesca, sleep became the most pressing need. Not that they felt sleepless: they could have slept standing. It was just that they could not find the time to sleep.

They had to continue with their studies and give all the exams, which were frequent and stiff. At the same time Don Bosco wanted them to teach religion, assist in the refectory,

in the workshops and in the school for orphans.

On Sundays they were sent to the oratories. The Oratory of the Guardian Angel was suddenly left without a director in 1855. Don Bosco nominated Michael Rua, just 17, to the post. The oratory was attended for the most part by young chimney-sweeps who came to town in autumn from the Val d'Aosta, with rope and rasp on their shoulders. They plied the streets, hoping that families would call them in to clean the chimneys before winter set in.

The chimney-sweeps were generally small, because they had to climb through the chimney wells. They soon became black and stayed so for the season.

Very early on Sunday mornings, Michael would come to the oratory. He would sweep and put the rooms in order and prepare the chapel for Mass. When the first boys got there, he would help them prepare for confession. By 9.00 a.m. about one hundred boys would be present and Michael would play 'little Don Bosco' among them the whole day, starting the games, speaking to individuals, getting to know their problems, and teaching them catechism.

In the evening, as the gaslights were being lit in the streets, the boys would return to their dwellings. Some would accompany Michael to Valdocco. "See you next Sunday, Michael!"

Rua used to come home exhausted. He would find some food kept hot for him and for Cagliari, Francesca, and Anfossi who came home from the other oratories in no better condition. Then they would climb to the attic where they had their beds. Michael remembered that he would fall asleep immediately, as if struck by lightning. Cagliari woke up one Monday morning still sitting on his chair, with his socks in his hands. He had not made it to the bed.

The rising bell was always frightfully too early, at 4.00 a.m. Cagliari writes:

The Turin winter is not to be taken lightly. In our garret which gave on to the roof, we had neither heating nor running water. We used to fill our basins in the evening, but by morning the water would have turned to ice. To wash our faces, we had to open our dormer-windows, scoop up some snow from the roof and rub our faces, neck and hands till they tingled. We would then curl up in our blankets and open our books. Rua struggled with his Hebrew translations; Francesca polished his Latin verses, and I filled scores with music.

In November 1855 the Oratory began its own classes. In addition to his other tasks, Francesca was given one more, that of professor of letters; Rua was given mathematics, and Cagliari music.

A thought often nags our minds when we go through these pages: was Don Bosco mad to have put his young helpers through so much pressure of work and of study? But then we follow them through the years. Cagliari, cardinal, died at the age of 88. Rua, head of the Salesian Congregation, died at the age of 73 (like Don Bosco, we must add). Francesca, Latinist of European fame, reached the age of 92. Don Bosco 'knew' that hard work would not kill them.

Meeting with the Minister

Political cartoonists had settled on representing Camillo Cavour as a big cat, with

long whiskers and Urbano Rattazzi, minister for the interior, as a big rat. In the Piedmontese dialect it worked out beautifully: *Gatàss and Ratàss*, big cat and big rat.

Although worlds apart ideologically, Don Bosco had free access to Rattazzi. The minister, in his turn, esteemed Don Bosco because “he worked for the good of the people,” sparing the government no end of trouble by keeping boys at risk off the streets.

In 1845 the government had built a new prison on the road to Stupinigi called the *Generala*. It was a reformatory for boys and could shelter up to 300 of them. Don Bosco visited it often, trying to win over those youngsters who were usually locked up for petty theft or vagrancy.

The youngsters were divided into three categories: those under special surveillance, who were locked up in cells at night; those under simple surveillance, who followed the usual prison routine; and the ‘those at risk,’ who were there simply because somebody, sick of their conduct, had handed them over to the police. These were made to work in the fields or in the workshops.

During the Lent of 1855, Don Bosco had given the young prisoners a well-prepared catechism course crowned by a three day spiritual retreat. Almost all had confessed and received communion.

Don Bosco was so impressed by their response that he promised them ‘an exceptional surprise.’ He went to the director and proposed a full day outing to Stupinigi.

“Are you serious, Father?” the man asked.

“Never been more so!”

“And do you realize that I will be held responsible for all those who run away?”

“No one will run away. You have my word for it.”

“Look, it is perfectly useless wasting our breath on this. If you want permission, you’ll have to see the minister.”

Don Bosco went to Rattazzi and calmly told him of his plan.

“Good, agreed,” said the minister. “An outing will certainly do them some good. I will give orders that the road and whole zone be patrolled by policemen in disguise.”

“No,” said Don Bosco firmly. “The only condition I put is that there be no one to ‘protect’ us. And I want your word for it. The risk is all mine: should anyone run away, you can lock me up!”

They had a good laugh over that. Then Rattazzi became serious:

“Don Bosco, think a bit. Without the police, not one will come back.”

“And I say that all will come back. Would you like to bet on it?”

Rattazzi thought for a moment, and then agreed.

“Okay, you win. I trust you, and I trust also the police. If anyone should make a run for it, they will round him up in no time.”

A Day of Freedom

Don Bosco went back to the *Generala* with the good news. The boys nearly lifted the roof with their cheers. When silence had been re-established, Don Bosco went on.

“I have given my word that you will behave yourselves, and that no one will run away. The minister has given me his word that he will not send any police, neither in uniform nor in plain clothes. Now it is your turn to give me your word. If one of you, just one, runs away, I will be disgraced and won’t be allowed to set foot here again. Can I trust

you?”

The boys broke into a discussion among themselves for a moment. Then the bigger boys spoke up for all:

“We give you our word. All of us will come back and we will all behave ourselves.”

It was a splendid spring day with a tepid sun. They took off for Stupinigi, jumping, running, shouting. Don Bosco was in the midst of them, joking, telling stories. A donkey well loaded with provisions led the crowd.

At Stupinigi Don Bosco celebrated Mass. Lunch followed on the grassy slope, then games. They visited the park and the royal castle. After a good snack, they set off on the return journey. The donkey was free and Don Bosco was tired. The boys helped him on to it, and singing they reached the gate. The director anxiously took the roll-call: no one was missing.

Sadly the boys said goodbye. Don Bosco wished them all one by one and turned towards home. His heart was heavy, because he could give them only one day of liberty.

The minister received a report and was overjoyed as though it were a personal success.

“Why is it that you can do this kind of things and we can’t?” he asked Don Bosco.

“Because the state gives orders and punishes. It cannot do more. I, instead, love these boys. And as a priest, I have a moral power which you cannot understand.”

Nine Pages to Explain His ‘System’

Repeatedly Don Bosco was asked to write a book explaining his ‘system of education.’ Lack of time and the impossibility of stopping long enough to think, made it difficult for Don Bosco to give us a scientific work.

In 1876 he plucked up courage enough to give us a sketch of the system of education ‘in use in Salesian houses.’ It consists of nine pages which the Salesians find in the appendix to their Rules, and which they are urged to read often.

We summarize them, repeating once again that we are dealing not with a scientific work but with jottings conditioned by the pressing needs and great problems of that year. Still, these points convey something ‘alive,’ they give a glimpse of the interior energy of Don Bosco that no page could probably capture.

Don Bosco begins by classifying (rather roughly we might say) educational systems into two main types:

—*The repressive system* (used by the state, the army, etc.).

This consists in making the law known to the subjects and then watching for transgressions in order to punish them. In this system the words must be severe; the superior must avoid all familiarity with his dependents, and must be rarely found among them.

—*The preventive system* (advocated by Don Bosco for his institutions).

This system is based on *reason, religion and loving kindness*. It excludes all harsh punishments, and strives to do away also with the lighter punishments.

The director and the assistants are like loving fathers, they speak, guide, advise and correct with love.

The pupil is never disheartened, he becomes a friend, and in the assistant he sees a benefactor who aims at making him better, freeing him from setbacks, punishments and loss of face.

Once he has found a way to the heart of the young, the educator will be in a position to follow him even as an adult, advise him and correct him.

The practice of this system is completely based on the words of St Paul who says, 'Charity is patient and kind... it bears all things... hopes all things, endures all things.' It follows that only a Christian can successfully apply the preventive system. Reason and religion are the means the educator must have constantly at his disposal.

The director, consequently, must be wholly dedicated to his charges, and be always with his pupils whenever they have periods of free time.

In what follows it is clear that Don Bosco has in mind especially the boarding schools, which were monopolizing the greater part of the Salesian forces in 1876. The 'Don Bosco of the oratories' is not so evident here.

The teachers, craft masters and assistants must be of acknowledged morality. Let them avoid like the plague every sort of affection or sentimental friendship with the pupils. As far as possible, the assistants ought to precede the boys to the place where they assemble, and never leave the pupils unoccupied.

Let the boys have full liberty to jump, run and make as much noise as they please. Gymnastics, music, theatricals and outings are most efficacious means of obtaining discipline and of benefiting spiritual and bodily health. "Do anything you like," St Philip Neri used to say, "as long as you do not sin."

Frequent confession and communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education. Never force the boys to frequent the sacraments, but encourage them and give them every opportunity to do so.

An educator is one who is consecrated to the welfare of his pupils. Therefore he should be ready to face every difficulty and fatigue in order to attain his object, which is the civic, moral and intellectual education of his pupils.

Let the educator seek to win the love of his pupils if he wishes to inspire fear in them.⁴² The withholding of some token of kindness is a kind of punishment which stimulates emulation, gives courage and never degrades. Praise for a job well done and blame in the case of carelessness are already a reward or punishment.

Except in very rare cases, corrections should never be given in public, but always privately in the absence of companions; and the greatest prudence and patience should be used to bring the pupil to see his fault, with the aid of reason and religion.

To strike a boy in any way must be absolutely avoided because it greatly irritates the boys and degrades the educator.

The Dream of the Old Oratory

Don Bosco may have found it difficult to write treatises, but was a wizard when it came to describing real life. Because of this, several experts hold that, while *The Little*

⁴² Elsewhere Don Bosco wrote: "rather than make himself feared," "before he makes himself feared."

Treatise on the Preventive System is rather spare, the dream he narrated in his letter of 1884 is the most vivid and fascinating expression of his educative sensibilities.

In the month of May of that year, Don Bosco was in Rome to deal with some important matters regarding the congregation. One night, he dreamt about the old Oratory (the one at the time of Dominic Savio, Michael Rua and John Cagliero) and compared it with the current state of affairs in Valdocco. He dictated a letter dated 10 May 1884. Peter Stella writes: “This letter can be considered as one of the most efficacious and richest of Don Bosco’s pedagogical documents.” We condense it here.

I seemed to be in the old Oratory at recreation time. I saw a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun. Some boys were running, some were jumping, some were skipping. In one place they were playing leap-frog, in another tag, and in another a ball-game. In one corner a group of youngsters was gathered around a priest, hanging on to his every word. In another a seminarian was playing with a number of lads, evidently having a lot of fun. There was singing and laughter on all sides, there were priests and seminarians everywhere, and the boys were yelling and shouting around them at will. You could see that the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors. I was overjoyed at the sight, and my guide told me:

“You see, closeness leads to affection and affection brings confidence. It opens the hearts of the young so that they express everything without fear to the teachers, the assistants and to the superiors. They become frank, both in the confessional and out of it, and they will do anything they are asked by one who they know loves them.”

At that moment another past pupil, Joseph Buzzetti, came up to me and said:

“Would you like to see the boys who are at the Oratory at the present time?”

I saw all of you in recreation. But no more could I hear the joyful shouts and singing, no longer was there the lively activity of the previous scene. On the faces and in the actions of many boys there was weary boredom, surliness, and suspicion. It was painful.

I saw many, it is true, running about and playing in light-hearted joy. But I saw quite a number of others on their own, leaning against the pillars, a prey to depressing thoughts. Others were on the steps, casting suspicious glances in every direction: St Aloysius would have found himself ill at ease in their company.

“How different they are from what we used to be!” Buzzetti exclaimed.

“Too true! But how can we bring these youngsters to life again?”

“With charity.”

“But don’t my boys get enough love? You know the hardships and the humiliations I have suffered and still suffer to give them bread, a home, teachers, and especially to provide for the salvation of their souls.”

“The best thing is missing,” insisted Buzzetti. “The youngsters should not only be loved, but should know and see that they are loved.”

“Don’t they see that all we are doing for them is done out of love?”

“No.”

“What else is needed, then?”

“That, being loved in the things they like, seeing you taking part in their

youthful interests, they are led to love also those things that they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial. I'll try to put it in a better way: look at the youngsters in recreation. Where are the Salesians?"

I looked and saw that very few priests and seminarians mixed with the boys and fewer still were joining in their games. The superiors were no longer the heart and soul of the recreation. Most of them were walking up and down chatting among themselves, without taking any notice of what the pupils were doing. Some did take notice from afar and were correcting in a threatening manner. Some Salesian wanted to mix with the groups but the boys tried to keep their distance.

Buzzetti took over again:

"In the old days, at the Oratory, you were always among the boys, especially in recreation. Do you remember those wonderful years? They were a foretaste of heaven, a period of which we have fond memories because then love was the rule and we had no secrets from you."

"Yes, indeed! Everything was a joy for me then. But don't you see that now, because of never-ending interviews, business matters and my poor health, I cannot do it anymore."

"Well and good; but if you cannot do it, why don't your Salesians take your place? Let them love what pleases the youngsters and the youngsters will come to love what pleases the superiors. Now the superiors are thought of precisely as superiors and no longer as fathers, brothers and friends; they are feared and little loved. And so, if you want everyone to be of one heart and one soul again, for the love of Jesus, you must break down this fatal barrier of mistrust, and replace it with a happy spirit of confidence. Obedience will guide the pupil as a mother guides her baby; and the old peace and happiness will reign again in the Oratory."

"How then are we to set about breaking this barrier?"

"By a friendly relationship with the boys especially in recreation. You cannot have affection without this familiarity, and where affection is not evident, there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of friendly approach. The teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more; but if he joins the pupils' recreation he becomes their brother. One who knows he is loved, loves in return, and he who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between the youngsters and their superiors. This love enables the superiors to put up with the weariness, the annoyance, the ingratitude, the troubles that youngsters cause. Jesus Christ did not crush the bruised reed nor did he quench the smouldering flax. He is our model. Then you will not see anyone working for his own glory; you will not see anyone punish out of wounded self-love, or people who let their hearts be stolen by one individual and neglect all the other boys to cultivate that particular one; no one will fail, through human respect, to reprimand those who need reprimanding. Why do people want to replace love with cold rules?"

Don Bosco concluded the long letter with the following words, which (the secretary tells us) he dictated amidst tears:

The moment a youngster enters a Salesian house, Mary Most Holy takes him under her special protection. My dear children, the time is drawing near when I shall have to leave you and enter eternity. Do you know what this poor old man, who has spent his whole life for his dear boys, wants from you? Nothing else than that we should go back to the happy days of the Oratory, the days of affection and confidence between boys and superiors, the days when we accepted to put up with difficulties for the love of Jesus Christ, for the love of everyone towards the others; the days when hearts were open with simplicity and candour, days of love and true cheer for all.

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TWO PAINFUL GOODBYES

On the first Sunday of April 1855, Don Bosco gave his boys a sermon on sanctity. Not all appreciated it. Dominic Savio, instead, listened very attentively. As Don Bosco continued speaking, Savio was becoming more and more convinced that the sermon was meant especially for him. He wanted to become a saint, like the little prince Aloysius, like the great Francis Xavier, like the martyrs of the church...

From that day Dominic began to dream, and he dreamt of *sanctity*.

On 24 June, the Oratory celebrated Don Bosco's name day with the customary festivities. Don Bosco, as a sign of appreciation, invited each boy to ask for a gift: "I assure you that I will do my best to please you."

A Five-Word Message

Going through the requests, Don Bosco found several that were serious and meaningful. There were also extravagant ones, like the boy who wanted 100 kilos of torrone so that he could have enough for the whole year! On Savio's slip, instead, he found five words: "Help me to become a saint."

Don Bosco took the request seriously and sent for Savio. "Yes," he said, "I'll give you the formula for sanctity. It's this: *First: cheerfulness*. Anything that disturbs you and deprives you of peace is not from God. *Second: your duties of study and piety*. Pay attention in class; study your lessons well; pray well. All this, not for the sake of appearances, but for the love of God. *Third: do good to others*. Help your companions always, even when it costs. This is all it takes to become a saint."

Dominic took the advice very seriously. In *The Life of Dominic Savio*, which Don Bosco wrote soon after the death of the boy, there are several little touching episodes. We recount only one.

One day a boy had brought to the Oratory an illustrated magazine with some indecent pictures. A few boys flocked to him at once, looking at the pictures and laughing. Dominic drew near, took the magazine from the boy's hands, and tore it to pieces. The boy protested, but Savio raised his voice:

"Nice of you to bring things like this into the Oratory! Don Bosco wears himself out to help us grow into good citizens and good Christians, and you come in with this. These pictures offend God and have no place inside here!"

The holidays of 1855 came and went like a dream. When the boys returned to the Oratory in October, Don Bosco saw Savio and was worried about him.

"You have not rested during the holidays?"

“Yes, Father, I did. Why?”

“You look paler than usual. How come?”

“It could be the journey,” the boy answered calmly.

But it wasn't a passing tiredness. His sunken shining eyes, his paleness, were clear signs that something was wrong. Don Bosco decided to take some precautions.

“This year you will not go out to school. You cannot stand the rain and the snow. Study with Francesia here at home. That way, you can have a little extra sleep in the morning. And don't overdo things. Health is a gift of God, we can't waste it.”

Savio obeyed. But a few days later, he approached Don Bosco and begged with a sense of urgency: “Make me a saint in a hurry!”

The Sodality of the Immaculate

Dominic Savio had become a close friend of Rua and Cagliero, even though the latter were older by four or five years. Other friends of his were also excellent boys who had entered the Oratory in those years: Bongiovanni, Durando, Cerruti, Gavio, Massaglia.

The 1856 opened with 153 boarders at the Oratory. 63 of them were students and 90 artisans.

In the spring of that year, Dominic Savio had an idea: he thought of creating a sort of ‘secret society’ of boys chosen from among the best, for the purpose of becoming a little compact group of apostles among the others. He talked this over with some of his friends. They liked the idea and decided to call the group the ‘Sodality of the Immaculate.’

Don Bosco gave his permission, but suggested that they proceed with caution. They could jot down some rules, try them out, and discuss the matter with him again.

They did just that. At the first meeting they decided on whom to invite: not too many, trustworthy, and capable of keeping the secret. The name of Francesia came up, the young professor of letters, sincere, outgoing, but... quite incapable of keeping a secret. Francesia could not be taken.

The assembly appointed three members to draw up the rules: Michael Rua, 19; Joseph Bongiovanni, 18; and Dominic Savio, 14. According to Don Bosco, it was Savio who wrote the whole thing. The others touched it up.

There were 21 articles all together. The members committed themselves to become better under the protection of the Madonna and with the help of the Eucharistic Lord; to help Don Bosco prudently and delicately by becoming apostles among their companions; and to spread joy and serenity.

Article 21 summarized the spirit of the sodality: “A sincere, filial and boundless trust in Mary, a special tenderness towards her, a constant devotion, will help us overcome all obstacles, be steadfast in our resolutions, strict with ourselves, loving towards others and exact in everything.”

The sodality was inaugurated on 8 June 1856 in front of the altar of Our Lady in the Church of St Francis of Sales. Each one made his promise to be faithful.

The sodality was Dominic's spiritual masterpiece. He himself would live only nine months more, but the sodality of Mary Immaculate would live for over a century (till the year 1967 to be precise). It would unite the more committed boys in the oratories and Salesian houses, and would be a fertile ground for priestly vocations.

The members of the sodality chose to take special care of those boys (‘clients’ in the

secret jargon of the sodality) who were too ready with words or were too prompt at using their hands. Each member would take charge of one and become his ‘guardian angel’ till he showed some improvement. A second category of clients were the new-comers. These would be helped to tide over the first few days at the Oratory. Many of these boys knew only their native dialect and felt easily homesick, not knowing anyone, not knowing sometimes even how to play.

During the Lent of that year, Dominic Savio—who reminded Don Bosco of the pale and tense figure of Louis Comollo—overdid it. Hearing the continuous invitations to penance in the liturgical readings, he wanted to do something. An assistant informed Don Bosco that the boy was fasting.

Don Bosco called Dominic immediately. He came to know from him that he was not only “fasting on bread and water on Saturdays,” but also that he was making do without his blanket (it was still very cold), and putting shards in his bed to make his sleep uncomfortable. Don Bosco intervened decisively:

“I *absolutely* forbid you all sorts of penance. Or better still, I am giving you one that makes up for all: obedience. It is a penance that costs; it pleases Our Lord; and it will not ruin your health.”

Goodbye to Mamma Margaret

On 15 November 1856, Mamma Margaret took to bed with a violent attack of pneumonia. She was 68 years old, and worn out by a life of hard work and privation. The life of the Oratory seemed to come to a standstill. How would they manage without her? The seminarians and the bigger boys took turns by her bedside. How many times those boys had come to the kitchen to ask for something:

“Mamma, may I have an apple?”

“Mamma, please, will you give me my soup.”

“Mamma, look here, I have torn my pants!”

The heroism of this great woman, who now lay dying, consisted entirely in mending heaps of clothes, mowing the hay and the grain, washing and cooking. She carried out all those humble tasks, never giving up, always putting her trust in divine Providence. Whether peeling potatoes or stirring *polenta*, her mind was always full of thoughts of faith and practical common sense which she dispensed with loving lips.

Don Bosco had picked up from her his system of education. It was he who was first brought up with *reason, religion* and *loving kindness*. The Salesian Congregation was cradled upon the knees of Mamma Margaret. She was now burning out like a candle.

Joseph came from Becchi with the older grandchildren. Fr Borel, who had been her confessor from the day she had arrived in Turin, brought her viaticum.

Margaret gathered her strength and spoke to her Johnny:

“John, you must be careful. There are many who look for their own advantage instead of the glory of God. Around you, there are some who love poverty in others but not in themselves. What we expect of others, we should first do ourselves.”

She did not want her son to stay there and see her suffering.

“Go, John... You suffer too much looking at me. *Remember that life consists of suffering. True joys are reserved for eternal life.* Please go... and don’t forget to pray for me. Goodbye.”

In these simple words, Margaret Bosco was expressing the ‘Christian conception of life’ of the humble people of the fields. This conviction had for centuries helped men and women in the countryside to go ahead with life in spite of want and hunger, the death of children and loved ones, and the unending round of work.

Joseph and Fr Alasonatti watched by the bed of the dying mother. She passed away at 3.00 a.m., 25 November. Joseph went to the room of Don Bosco and the two brothers embraced in tears.

Two hours later Don Bosco called Joseph Buzzetti, the one who accompanied him in his most difficult moments, and the only one before whom Don Bosco was not ashamed to cry. He went to celebrate Mass for his mother in the crypt of the Shrine of the *Consolata*. After Mass they knelt at the foot of the Madonna, and Don Bosco murmured those famous words: “Now my boys and I are without an earthly mother. You be near us now, be our mother.”

A few days later, Michael Rua went to visit his mother, Joanna Maria:

“You know, mother, we don’t know what to do since Mamma Margaret died. There is no one to prepare our soup, to mend our clothes. Mamma, would you come to help us?”

At the age of 56, Mrs Rua followed her son and became the second ‘mother of the Oratory’. She would be there for 20 years.

A Boy Who Talks With God

It was a cold December night. The streets of Turin were already covered with a fine layer of snow. The street lamps looked small and distant. Don Bosco, as usual, was working at a heap of letters which would keep him up well after midnight. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in. Who is it?”

“It’s me,” said Dominic Savio, entering. “Come quickly, Father, there’s a work of mercy to be done.”

“Now? So late? Where do you want to take me?”

“Come quickly, Don Bosco, there’s no time.”

Don Bosco hesitated. He saw that Savio’s usually serene face was tense and earnest. His words were firm, like a command. Don Bosco rose, took his hat and followed Savio.

They slid down the steps, crossed the playground, passed through the gate and headed towards town. One turn and then another and another. Savio led in silence without hesitating. They reached a building. Savio climbed a staircase and Don Bosco followed him to the third floor. Dominic stopped and knocked.

“You must enter here,” he told Don Bosco, and glided down the steps to return home.

The door opened and a dishevelled woman appeared. Seeing Don Bosco she exclaimed:

“God has sent you, Father! Quick, come in. My husband had the misfortune of abandoning his faith, years ago. He is dying now, and has been asking for confession.”

Don Bosco found the man frightened and on the brink of despair. He heard his confession and absolved him. A few minutes later the man died.

Some days later Don Bosco was still puzzling over the event. How could Savio have known of that dying man? Catching him alone one day, he asked:

“Dominic, the other night when you came to my room to call me, who had told you about that sick man? How did you know?”

Don Bosco was not prepared for what happened next. The boy gave him a pained look and began to cry. Don Bosco did not press him with other questions but understood that in his Oratory there was a boy who spoke with God.

“From Heaven Will I See My Companions?”

In February 1857 the winter of Turin became exceptionally severe. Savio was becoming paler by the day. He had a racking cough and was exhausted. Preoccupied, Don Bosco called in some good doctors.

After an accurate examination, Professor Vallauri gave his opinion:

“This boy is not strong by nature, and he is under constant tension of mind. It acts like a file wearing away his life.”

“What can I do for him?” asked Don Bosco.

Vallauri was at a loss for words. Medicine at that time was what it was, practically non-existent.

“Send him to his native place and let him give up his books for some time.”

Savio accepted the decision with resignation but was evidently not pleased with it. He did not like the idea of interrupting his studies and being away from his companions and Don Bosco.

“Why don’t you want to spend some time with your parents?”

“Because I want to end my life here, at the Oratory.”

“Don’t say that. Now go home, regain your strength and then come back.”

“It’s not like that,” said Savio shaking his head. “If I go I won’t come back. This is the last time we can talk. Tell me: what can I still do for the love of Our Lord?”

“Offer him your sufferings.”

“And what else?”

“Offer him your life too.”

“From heaven, will I be able to see my companions here at the Oratory and my parents?”

“Yes,” answered Don Bosco, trying to hide his emotion.

“And will I be able to come and visit you all?”

“If God permits, yes.”

This conversation took place on 1 March, a Sunday. He said farewell to his companions of the sodality. His father came with the jig that would take him to Mondonio. Before rounding the corner, he waved out once more to the Oratory, his friends, ‘his’ Don Bosco, who stood there motionless, with a searing pain in his heart. His best pupil had gone. The little saint that the Madonna had gifted to the Oratory for three years was no more with them.

Savio died suddenly on 9 March 1857, assisted by his father. His last words were:

“Goodbye, papa... the parish priest told me... but I don’t remember... what a beautiful thing I see...”

Pope Pius XII declared him a saint on 12 June 1954. For some years he would be the youngest saint confessor in the church.

The Scarlet Sash

Don Bosco saw Dominic Savio once more in the great dream he had at Lanzo, on the night of 6 December 1876. His narration takes up twelve pages of close print in volume 12 of the *Biographical Memoirs*. Here we can give only the bare essentials.

I seemed to be at the edge of a vast plain, blue as the sea. It was not water: it looked more like shining polished crystal. Soothing music came through the air.

An immense multitude of youngsters appeared. I knew many of them because they had been at the Oratory or in some of our houses, but most were unknown to me. They all moved towards me. Dominic Savio was leading them, and behind him were many priests and seminarians, each leading a group of youngsters.

Savio came forward alone and stopped so close to me that, had I wanted, I could have touched him. How beautiful he looked! A snow-white tunic covered him from shoulder to foot. Around his waist was a scarlet sash. His head was crowned with roses. He looked like an angel.

Savio was the first to speak:

“How is it that you stand there so silent? Are you not the man who was once not afraid of anything, who would bravely face calumnies, persecutions, enemies, hardships and dangers of all kinds? Why don’t you speak?”

I answered stammering:

“So you are Dominic Savio, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am! Don’t you know me anymore? I have come to speak to you. We spoke so often on earth. So many times you gave me tokens of your friendship. And did I not return your love? Oh, how much I trusted you!”

“But where are we?”

“You are in the land of happiness.”

“How is it you are dressed in this shining gown? And why the scarlet sash?”

A voice sang the quotation of the Bible: “They are virgins and they follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” It was then that I understood that scarlet, the colour of blood, was the sign of the many sacrifices made to preserve the virtue of purity. The shining robe was the sign of the preservation of baptismal innocence.

“And why are you at the head of the others?”

“I come as God’s ambassador. As regards the past, I want to tell you that your congregation has done much good. You see this multitude of youngsters? All of them have been saved by you, your priests, your seminarians or others whom you have guided in their vocation. They would be even more numerous if you had shown more confidence in the Lord.”

“And the present?”

Savio gave me a bouquet of flowers: roses, violets, lilies, gentians, ears of wheat... and said:

“Give this to your boys. The rose is charity, the violet humility, the gentian is penance, the lily chastity and the wheat love for the Eucharist.”

“What about the future?”

“God is preparing a great future for your congregation. Great glory is in store for it. But make sure that your Salesians do not abandon the path traced out by you.

If they continue being worthy of their mission, the future will be splendid and will bring salvation to numberless persons. The condition is that your sons continue being devoted children of the Blessed Virgin and strive to preserve the virtue of chastity, which is so pleasing in God's sight."

"What about me?"

"Oh, if only you knew how much you have to go through!"

I stretched out my hand to touch that dear boy, but his hands escaped through my fingers, and I could not hold them...

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“MONK OR NO MONK, I’LL STAY WITH DON BOSCO”

One day in the summer of 1857, Don Bosco was received by Minister Rattazzi. The conversation was about the work of the oratories, which the minister admired especially after what the boys had done for the cholera victims, and Don Bosco’s success at the *Generala*. Fr Lemoyne gives the following report of the conversation:

“Don Bosco, I wish you a long life. But what will happen to your boys when you are no more?”

“Let me put the question back to you, Sir. What do you think I can do to ensure the future of my work?”

“According to me, you should choose some ecclesiastics and lay people who enjoy your trust, and form a society. You must imbue them with your spirit and form them into your system. They will be your helpers for the time being, and later on your successors.”

Don Bosco smiled.

“Two years ago you passed a law suppressing so many religious communities. And now you propose that I start a new religious community! Will the government allow it to survive?”

“The law of suppression is well known to me,” said Rattazzi, smiling. “But you can start a society that no law will ever be able to sink.”

“And how?”

“A lay state will never recognize a ‘religious society’ which owes allegiance to the church, i.e. to an authority different from its own. But if there is a society in which the members keep their civil rights, are subject to the laws of the state and pay taxes, the state cannot have any objection. Before the government, this society would be an association of free citizens who gather and live together in order to do good, as others gather for commerce, industry, or mutual help. If among themselves these members decide to accept also the authority of the bishops and the pope, that is not the concern of the state. Any association of free citizens is allowed, as long as it respects the laws and the authority of the state.”

Don Bosco thanked the minister and assured him he would think about his suggestion. Rattazzi had given clear and limpid form to the ideas that had been playing in Don Bosco’s mind for years. He had been studying how to found a congregation which would be truly religious before the church, while at the same time consisting of free citizens before the state. The main difficulty was: would the church accept this new concept, which

amounted to admitting in practice the liberal tenet of separation of state and church, and which turned the classical schemes of religious life upside down?

Rules for the New Congregation

While looking for the right *formula*, Don Bosco did not forget to give attention to the *persons* who would form part of his congregation. His adult collaborators had left him, one by one. The solution had been indicated by Our Lady in dreams: find shepherds from among the flock.

In March 1855, Michael Rua had become the first to take vows.

A few months later Fr Alasonatti became the second.

In 1856 it was the turn of John Baptist Francesia, who composed a solemn Latin poem for the occasion.

Yet none of these were aware of belonging to a congregation. They thought they had only united themselves more closely to Don Bosco “in order to give him a hand.”

Don Bosco continued to be very prudent: congregations and friars were not in fashion at the moment. He carefully avoided even the “appearances of religious life: regular meditations, long prayers, austerities” (E. Ceria).

On the other hand, up to 1859, there was nothing to authorize Don Bosco to declare himself ‘head of a religious congregation.’ He was surrounded by a number of seminarians who had received from him the clerical habit. But this had been possible only because the archbishop had seen it necessary for the work of the oratories. All the seminarians had to face an examination at the diocesan curia and attend classes at the seminary, except the few who were dispensed because of the nature of their work at the Oratory. Don Bosco governed the oratories, the boarding school at Valdocco and the seminarians under the authority of the archbishop of Turin, Msgr Frasoni.

So the congregation had not yet appeared; but the substance was being formed. It had become necessary now to put something down in writing, a ‘rule’ that would fix the essentials of the spirit and the method.

Don Bosco had begun this silent work in 1855, drawing from his own experience and from the rules he had framed for the Oratory. He asked advice, made a careful study of the rules of both the ancient orders and the more recent congregations like Rosmini’s *Institute of Charity* and Lanteri’s *Oblates*.

The talk with Rattazzi (in which the minister had merely repeated what he had said publicly in parliament) had come like a ‘ray of light’: Don Bosco understood now how he could adapt the substance of religious life to the new political conditions. He would stand firmly for the ‘civil rights’ of his religious.

By the end of 1857, the first draft of the Salesian Rule (also known as *Constitutions*) was ready. But the uphill task of obtaining approval from the religious authorities still lay ahead.

Archbishop Frasoni, from his exile at Lyon, assured Don Bosco of his support. He advised him to go to Rome and discuss his project with Pope Pius IX.

Meeting with the Pope

In February 1858, Michael Rua spent long hours copying out the manuscript of Don

Bosco. “See that you do a good job, Rua. We will present it together to the pope,” Don Bosco had told him.

On 18 February they left for Rome. The journey was long and difficult, partly by land and partly by sea, with passports needed to cross the different states. Before leaving, Don Bosco had even thought it best to make his will. The Oratory had been entrusted to Fr Alasonatti.

On 9 March 1858, Don Bosco had his first audience with Pope Pius IX. The pope showed him a benevolence that would only increase with the passing years. He did not hide his admiration for the extraordinary activity of the priest from Turin. He approved of the idea of founding a congregation in keeping with the times, but made some recommendations, the first being to bind the members not merely with simple ‘promises’ as Rattazzi had suggested, but with real religious vows. He added that he too needed time to think. “Go, pray, and come back after some days, and I will tell you my opinion.”

Don Bosco, happy with the outcome of the audience, made corrections to the text of the Rules, and had Rua copy it out again.

On 21 March, he had his second audience with Pius IX. The pope had given thought to the matter.

“I am convinced that your project will do much good to the young. You must implement it by all means. Let the Rules be mild and of easy observance. The way of dressing, the practices of piety should not be such as to attract undue attention. To this end, it would perhaps be better to call it a *society* instead of a *congregation*. In short, do it in such manner that each member be a religious before the church and a citizen like any other before the state.”

The pope and Rattazzi had come very close indeed, thought Don Bosco. He gave the pope the short text of the Rules.

“These regulations, touched up according to your observations,” he explained, “contain the spirit and discipline that have been guiding us during the past twenty years.”

The Rules had nothing monastic about them. They described a society of ecclesiastics and lay people united by vows and dedicated to the good of poor youth. Before the state they were citizens: “On entering, members will not lose their civil rights. Even after making the vows, they do not give up the ownership of their possessions.” Before the church they were religious: “The fruits of what they own are given to the congregation as long as they remain in it.”

“In a third and last audience on 6 April,” writes Ceria in the *Annali della Società Salesiana*, “the pope gave back the manuscript to Don Bosco, telling him to give it to Cardinal Gaude.”

The cardinal, himself a Piedmontese, was on friendly terms with Don Bosco. He read the Rules, touched them up here and there, and told Don Bosco to try them out. Later they could again be presented to the pope.

Don Bosco left Rome on 14 April.

A Week to Think About It

It was 9 December 1859. Don Bosco felt the time had come to speak openly of a religious congregation. He addressed the 19 ‘Salesians’ gathered in his room in more or less these words:

“For quite some time I have been thinking of founding a congregation. Now at last the moment has arrived. The Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, has praised and encouraged my resolve. To be frank, the congregation is not being born today: it has already existed, in the rules and traditions which you have always observed... The moment has come now to go ahead, by *formally* constituting the congregation and accepting its Rules. Let it be clear that only those will be accepted who, after serious reflection, feel ready to emit, in due time, the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience... I give you one week to think it over.”

At the end of the meeting there was an unusual silence. As people began to speak, it became clear that Don Bosco had been right in proceeding slowly and with great prudence. Some were mumbling that Don Bosco wanted to turn all of them into friars. Cagliero was seen furiously walking up and down the playground, struggling with himself.

Slowly, the desire to ‘stay with Don Bosco’ won out in the majority of cases. Cagliero came out with a phrase that was to become classical: “Monk or no monk, I’ll stay with Don Bosco.”

At the next meeting, held the evening of 18 December, only two were missing from the 19 who had participated in the previous conference. From the minutes written by Fr Alasonatti we gather:

At 9 p.m. the following met in the room of Fr John Bosco: Fr Alasonatti Victor, the seminarians Savio Angelo, deacon; Rua Michael, subdeacon; Cagliero John, Francesca John Baptist, Provera Francis, Ghivarello Charles, Lazzero Joseph, Bonetti John, Anfossi John, Marcellino Louis, Cerruti Francis, Durando Celestine, Pettiva Secondo, Rovetto Anthony, Bongiovanni Caesar Joseph; and Chianale Louis.

It pleased the same to unite themselves into a society or congregation.

Unanimously they begged Don Bosco, the founder and promoter, to accept the charge of major superior. He accepted on condition of being allowed to choose his prefect: he thought the writer of these lines should continue in office.

Subdeacon Rua Michael was unanimously chosen as spiritual director. Angelo Savio was appointed administrator. Three councillors were chosen by ballot: Cagliero John, Bonetti John and Ghivarello Charles. This is how the administrative body⁴³ of our society was constituted.

“What Are You Doing There?”

The congregation was born. Don Bosco was overjoyed. But there must have been a note of sadness in his heart: among the seventeen, the name of his beloved Joseph Buzzetti was missing.

Buzzetti had lost the index finger of his left hand while handling a pistol kept to look after the prizes of the first lottery. This was a serious impediment to priestly ordination in those years. The accident—together with his humility, remarks Fr Lemoyne—had

⁴³ The ‘superior chapter’ (*capitolo superiore*), now referred to as the general council (*consiglio generale*), “cooperates with the Rector Major in animating and governing the congregation.”

convinced him that he could not receive the clerical habit.

But his days, every minute of them, were for ‘his’ Don Bosco and the Oratory. He looked after the upkeep of the house—the list, again, is by Fr Lemoyne—assisted in the refectory, set the tables, supervised the cleanliness, taught catechism, kept the account books and saw to the mailing of the *Catholic Readings*. He also directed the singing lessons till the year 1860, when Cagliero took over. “With his quick insight and prompt responses, he was the soul of all the lotteries, he looked for orders for the workshops, and was in charge of the bread and the daily purchases.”

The Oratory was ‘flesh of his flesh.’ When the first building crumbled, he undertook to go through all the bills with a fine comb and found that inferior material had been used. He attacked the contractor with strong language. Don Bosco himself had to intervene.

“We have to be patient. God will help us, you will see.”

“Yes, yes he will help us. In the meantime you work day and night to find a few hundred *lire*, while they rob you of thousands without any effort. They deserve a good lesson.”

“If they deserve a lesson, God will give it to them.”

Buzzetti (continues Lemoyne, from whom we have taken the dialogue) was also Don Bosco’s bodyguard, accompanying him whenever there was some danger. He would often go out to bring him back to the house at night. His imposing figure and the thick red beard served as a deterrent to many of those waiting to harm Don Bosco.

His brothers were all bricklayers, and Charles was even a well-known contractor. “If you don’t want to become a priest,” they used to say to him, “what are you doing at the Oratory? If Don Bosco dies, you will find yourself alone and without a job.” And he would reply: “Don Bosco has assured me that even after his death there will be a piece of bread for me. That’s quite enough.”

And yet this young man (he was 27 in 1859), who would have given his life for Don Bosco, did not want to make the vows to become a Salesian.

The first ‘layman’ to be admitted to the Salesian Society was Joseph Rossi. The ‘chapter of the Salesian Society’ gathered on 2 February 1860 to decide about his admission. With him, the word ‘coadjutor’ entered the vocabulary of the congregation, meaning ‘lay Salesian’ or ‘Salesian Brother.’

Buzzetti’s Crisis

On 14 May 1862, one more step was taken towards the consolidation of the Salesian Society. Gathered as usual in Don Bosco’s ‘little room,’ the ‘confreres,’ responding to Don Bosco’s invitation, “promised God to observe the Rules, and made the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, for three years.” There were 22 of them, not counting the founder.

At the end of the ceremony Don Bosco told them: “As you were making your vows to me, I was making them, in my heart, before this crucifix, for all my life, offering myself as a sacrifice to God.”

Among the 22, there were two more laymen, as different one from the other as could be. One, Joseph Gaia would for many years be the cook of the Oratory. The other, Frederick Oreglia di Santo Stefano, belonged to the aristocracy of Turin. Don Bosco had won him over during a spiritual retreat, helping him put a stop to an adventurous period in his life. For nine years he would serve the Oratory, after which he would enter the Society of Jesus.

An easy temptation during that period (and even after), was to consider those laymen who became Salesians as ‘servants’ of the house or at least as belonging to a lower category. This was probably what caused Buzzetti’s crisis. The story is told in volume 5 of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

Buzzetti sensed that the old family way of doing things would slowly be modified by the new regulations. The seminarians were gradually taking over the different jobs of the house, things that used to be earlier entrusted to him. Depressed and discouraged, he decided to leave. He found himself a place in Turin and went to take leave of Don Bosco. With his natural directness, he told him that he had come to count for nothing; he had to obey youngsters he had seen arriving as little boys, he, who had taught to them how to blow their noses. He poured out his great pain at having to leave the house he had seen coming up since the days of the Pinaridi shed.

Don Bosco did not say to him, “You are leaving me alone, how will I manage without you?” He did not think about *himself*. He thought only about Buzzetti, his very dear friend. “Have you found a place? Will they pay you well? You have no money, but surely you will need something to start out with.” Then, opening the drawers of the desk, he said to Buzzetti: “You know these drawers better than I. Take what you need. If you do not find enough, tell me what you need and I will find it. I do not want you to suffer, Buzzetti, because of me.” He then looked at him with that love that only he could have for his boys. “We have always been friends. I hope you will never forget me.”

Buzzetti burst into tears. It took him a while to calm down. Then he said: “No, I don’t want to leave Don Bosco. I’ll stay with you forever.”

The ‘Coadjutor’ After Don Bosco’s Heart

Perhaps this event led Don Bosco to define better the figure of the ‘coadjutor’ in the Salesian Congregation.

On 31 March 1876, in a good night talk given to the artisans, he explained the meaning of the vocation of the lay Salesian. “Look well and you will see that among the members of the congregation there is no distinction, all are treated in the same way, artisans, seminarians and priests; we consider ourselves as brothers.”

In 1877, Buzzetti made up his mind to join the Salesian Society. Don Bosco himself presented his request to the ‘superior chapter,’ almost completely made up of those boys whom Buzzetti “had taught to blow their noses.” He was accepted unanimously. I am inclined to believe that this must have been one of the happiest days of Don Bosco’s life.

There were many other ‘coadjutors’ who, by this time, belonged to the Salesian Society in a multitude of capacities: Pelazza and Gambino were in charge of the workshops; Marcello Rossi was the porter; Nasi the infirmary attendant; Joseph Rossi was administrator; Enria factotum; Falco and Ruffato were cooks. But all were ‘helping the priests’ with apostolic responsibilities: they were teaching catechism, they were assistants, they were educators.

The ‘temptation’ which we mentioned above returned during the last years of Don Bosco’s life. During the third general chapter of the congregation held in 1883, someone said: “Coadjutors should be kept in their place, they should form a distinct category.” Don Bosco reacted with energy: “No, no, no! Coadjutor confreres are like all the others.” And speaking to lay Salesians that same year he insisted: “You are not supposed to do the work

directly, you are those who must get it done. You are like masters over the workers, not like servants... This is the idea of the Salesian coadjutor. I am in need of many to come and help me in this capacity. I am happy to see you wearing clean, well-fitting clothes; that you have cells and beds befitting your status. You must be not servants but masters, not subjects but superiors.”

Peter Braidò, an expert in the matter, affirms: “The figure of the coadjutor [in the mind of Don Bosco] was not born all of a sudden, like a new and original creation, but emerged gradually in the midst of uncertainties and hesitations.”

We dare say that the ‘ideal figure’ of the Salesian coadjutor that Don Bosco carried in his heart for years was that of Joseph Buzzetti: absolutely trustworthy, humble, present when most needed, one who considered the Oratory his family, life of his life; one who felt fulfilled seeing ‘his family’ fulfilled, one who perhaps did not understand much about juridical subtleties, but wanted above all else ‘to stay with Don Bosco.’

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GENERAL MICKEY

In the years after 1850, Don Bosco concentrated his energies on setting up the congregation. But it would be a grave mistake to think that the thoughts, journeys and meetings for founding the congregation were distancing him from his boys. Don Bosco was never a ‘business manager,’ but always the ‘father of a family.’ And in his family, the boys were at the centre.

As soon as he returned from journeys, meetings and business dealings, he would sit down to hear confessions. The boys were always on his mind, in the antechambers of Roman palaces as on the railway stations waiting for a train.

One foggy autumn evening in 1857, he was at the station of Carmagnola, waiting for the train to Turin. Any other passenger would have sought the comfort of the waiting room. Don Bosco, instead, had heard the voices of boys playing, and was trying his best to spot them in the fog.

“Among those voices and shouts,” he writes, “I could hear one which dominated all others. It was like the voice of a captain whom all promptly obeyed. I could not resist the need to find out who it was that could impose order on such chaos.”

He drew near to the site of the game. No sooner did his cassock become visible through the fog, than the rascals scattered. “All except one, who stood his ground and came towards me. Hands akimbo, he addressed me imperiously: ‘Who are you? And what do you want from us?’”

To Miss a Train or Lose a Boy

Don Bosco looked at that boy with ruffled hair, and read in his proud eyes a burning desire for life. In the space of a few minutes he overcame the diffidence, learnt his name, (Michael Magone), his situation (13 years of age and fatherless), his future prospects (“I’ve learnt to waste my time”).

The train whistle blew, Don Bosco was in danger of missing it. But to lose that boy would have been a far greater disgrace. Putting a medal of our Lady in his hand, he said hurriedly:

“Go to Fr Ariccio, your assistant parish priest. Tell him that the priest who gave you this medal wants to know more about you.”

A few days later, Don Bosco received a letter from the assistant parish priest of Carmagnola:

Michael Magone is a poor boy who has lost his father. His mother is busy

working, and is not able to look after him. His inconstancy and carelessness have caused him to be expelled from school several times. In spite of that he has done well enough in his third elementary class.

Morally, I think he has a good heart and is simple, but hard to bend. In the school and at catechism, generally, he is a nuisance. As long as he keeps his mouth shut, we have peace, but when he leaves, we feel relieved.

His age, his poverty, his character and his intelligence make him worthy of any charitable attention.

Don Bosco answered that if the boy and his mother were agreeable, he was ready to accept him at the Oratory.

Fr Ariccio called Michael and told him about the priest from Turin who had a big house with hundreds of boys who were having a good time, but who also studied or learnt a trade. "He is ready to accept you. Would you like to go?" The answer came like a shot: "You bet I'll go."

His mother accompanied him to the train with his little bundle of clothes and a heavy heart. And so Michael reached Valdocco. Seeing Don Bosco he rushed towards him:

"Here I am: that Michael Magone you met at the station of Carmagnola."

"Of course, my dear boy. Have you come willingly?"

"Yes, yes, very willingly."

"Wonderful. Only one thing, please: don't you turn the whole place upside down!"

"Don't worry, Father, I won't trouble you. I know what I have been in the past. I don't want to go on like that. Two of my buddies are already in the lock-up, and I, well, who knows?"

"Cheer up. Tell me just one thing: do you prefer to study, or would you like to learn a trade?"

"I'm ready to do anything you want. If you give me a choice, though, I'd prefer to study."

"And after that, what would you like to do?"

"If a scoundrel ...," he began saying, and lowered his head shyly.

"Go on," coaxed Don Bosco. "If a scoundrel..."

"If a scoundrel could become good enough to be a priest, I would love to be a priest."

"In that case, we'll see what a scoundrel can do. I'll put you to study."

From that moment, singing, shouting, running, jumping, making a racket became his life. He wasn't a little saint. The sodality of the Immaculate put a sturdy young man to help him and to correct him gently. The helper had a hard time of it. Foul language, dirty talk, even bordering on blasphemy... But every time he was corrected, Michael was always thankful, and tried his best.

There was one thing that Michael hated with all his heart: the sound of the bell that put an end to recreation and called to class or study. With his books under his arm, he looked like someone condemned to forced labour.

A Cloud of Sadness

The bell signaling the end of school was much more to his liking. Don Bosco, who

followed him with loving concern, writes: “He would shoot out as if from a cannon: he was all over the place, he could not be contained.” He was captain of one of the teams, and from the time he arrived, no one could defeat them.

A month went by like this. Then the unpredictable happened. Michael wilted. He followed the games from a lonely corner, he would avoid his noisier companions, and sometimes he would be crying quietly in a corner. It was as if a veil of sadness had descended upon him. We turn again to Don Bosco for the real story:

I was following him closely. One day I sent for him:

“Dear Magone, I would like you to do me a favour. Don’t say no to me.”

“Speak, Father. I would do anything for you.”

“I would like you to give me your heart for a moment, and allow me to see why you have become so sad.”

“Yes, you are right, Father. I am feeling desperate and don’t know what to do.”

At this, he burst into tears. I gave him all the time he needed to calm down, and then, teasingly, I said:

“And you are General Michael Magone, leader of the whole gang of Carmagnola! What kind of a general are you? Can’t you tell me clearly what makes you so sad?”

“I would like to say it, but words fail me.”

“Just say one word.”

“My conscience is in a mess.”

“That’s enough for me. I know what you need. It’s not as difficult as you think. You tell your confessor that you have something which troubles you from the past and he will take it up from there. You will only have to follow him saying yes or no.”

There were several priests who came to the Oratory to hear confessions, but most of the boys went to Don Bosco. That evening Michael knocked at the door of Don Bosco’s room. “Sorry to trouble you, Father,” he said, “but the Lord has been waiting for me for a long time, and I don’t want to make him wait till tomorrow.”

With the help of Don Bosco, Michael lay at the feet of the Lord his bundle of boyish miseries, which to him seemed enormous, and asked for pardon. Don Bosco, witness of that youthful resurrection, writes: “Michael had lost the taste for games when he came to understand that true joy does not come from jumping about, but from peace of conscience and friendship with God. He could see his companions going to communion and becoming better, while he with his troubled conscience remained always the same. At the end of his confession he breathed: “How happy I feel!”

On the following day, Michael was back at the head of his team, and led them to a memorable victory. Joy had come back to stay!

Fisticuffs in Piazza Castello

Narrating his encounter with Michael Magone, Don Bosco revealed the way he approached hundreds of boys “in whom evil had begun its work.” He knew how to bring

them back to God and set them on the way to sanctity.

“Michael now no longer hated the bell calling to church,” continues Don Bosco. “It had become for him the call to go and meet Jesus, his friend.”

With the help of Don Bosco he drew up a ‘battle plan’ to preserve and develop this friendship: he resolved to keep his life perfectly pure, and to spread goodness and joy among his companions.

On a little notebook, Michael wrote seven resolutions which he called the ‘seven *carabinieri*’ that would defend his friendship with God:

1. To meet Jesus frequently in confession and communion.
2. To love the Holy Virgin tenderly.
3. To pray much.
4. To call on the name of Jesus and Mary frequently.
5. Not to be too soft with the body.
6. To be always doing something.
7. To give a wide berth to bad companions.

It is easy to see in these seven points the means which Don Bosco suggested to most of his boys for keeping on the right path.

Michael Magone lived his program of goodness and joy following his own impetuous, free and easy temperament, quite different from that of Dominic Savio. In a little group under the portico, there was a boy entertaining his friends with sleazy stories. Some were smirking, while others would have liked to go away but did not dare to. Michael understood the situation. He walked up quietly behind the boy and, fingers in his mouth, let out an ear-piercing whistle. The boy jumped and said angrily:

“Are you mad?”

“Am I mad, or is it you who are mad to tell these stories?”

One day Don Bosco had taken him along when going out to town. They were crossing Piazza Castello. A couple of boys were gambling, and one broke out loudly into curses and blasphemies. Michael went straight to him and gave him two slaps. The young offender was taken by surprise but soon reacted, and the two went at each other with a will, attracting the attention of all around. Don Bosco had to intervene and separate them. Michael hissed at his opponent:

“Be thankful this priest is here, otherwise I would have made mincemeat of you.”

Don Bosco had to persuade him that he could not possibly go around bashing up all who blasphemed.

But there was more that Michael could do besides using his hands. Every day he became more and more helpful and generous. He would help the smaller ones to make their bed and clean their shoes, and he would help those in difficulty with their lessons.

His Hand on Michael’s Head

Don Bosco was so happy with Michael’s progress that in the autumn of 1858 he took him with his best boys for a short vacation to Becchi.

In October 1858, Michael began his second year at Valdocco.

On the evening of 31 December, while giving the ‘good night,’ Don Bosco invited

the boys to begin the New Year well, “in God’s grace.” For some, he concluded, it could be the last year of life. As he said these words, his hand was resting on Michael’s head. The boy began thinking, “Was that advice meant for me?” He did not panic, but said to himself, “I must keep myself ready.”

Three days later, he experienced pain in the abdomen. It was an old illness that returned now and then, probably chronic appendicitis. He went to the infirmary. Don Bosco saw him through the window and inquired how he was. The boy answered: “Nothing special, the usual pain.”

On 19 January, however, Michael suddenly took a turn for the worse. His mother was informed immediately. The doctor, hearing the heavy and difficult breathing, declared his helplessness: “It is very serious.” (The first appendectomies were performed only at the end of the century).

On 21 January, Michael was sinking. All his friends were praying and viaticum was brought to him.

It was nearing midnight. His mother had to go home to look after his younger siblings. But Don Bosco was there, at his bedside.

“The time has come,” he said suddenly. “Don Bosco, help me... Tell mummy to forgive me for all the trouble I gave her. Tell her that I love her, that she should not lose courage... I’ll wait for her in paradise...”

It was almost midnight. Michael dozed for a while, and then, as if awakening from a deep sleep, he said serenely to Don Bosco:

“Tell my companions that I will be waiting for them in heaven. Jesus, Mary, Joseph...”

His face became still in the serenity of death.

Great Political Manoeuvres

The year 1859 opened at the Oratory with the little but painful tragedy of Michael Magone. It would end (as we have seen already in chapter 35) with the official foundation of the Salesian Society.

For Italy, 1859 was a year of turmoil.

What had begun in Italy and Europe in 1848, had continued to march on, silently at first, and then with increasing rumblings.

In December 1852 Louis Napoleon, nephew of Bonaparte, carried out a coup and declared himself Emperor of France, taking the name of Napoleon III. He introduced himself to Europe as the one who would fulfill the Napoleonic dream, ready to help those nations who wanted to break free from the clutches of the Austrian empire.

Gioberti had died in Paris in October 1852. Silvio Pellico and Cesare Balbo died in Turin the following year. With them the era of the romantic and neo-Guelphic *Risorgimento* died too. The new phase of the *Risorgimento* was dominated by Cavour, shrewd and cynically down-to-earth. In 1855 he had sent an expedition of Piedmontese volunteers to join France and England in the Crimean War against Russia. In parliament, both the rightist Solaro della Margherita and the leftist Brofferio had thundered against this ‘mad venture.’ From London Mazzini had raised his voice too: why send young men to die in a faraway war, when people were suffering in Piedmont (bread cost 80 cents a kilo, while the daily wage of a worker was three or four *lire* a day) and no one was helping Italy in her lawful

aspirations to integrity and independence?

But Cavour had been farsighted. In the spring of 1856, at the conference of Paris, he was able to sit with ‘the *grandées* of Europe.’ The casualties of Crimea had served as an entry ticket, and he was able to reopen the discussion about the problem of Italy.

On 14 January 1858 Orsini, a follower of Mazzini, threw bombs at the carriage of Napoleon III on its way to the opera. Some hundred persons were injured, while Napoleon escaped unharmed. Orsini was caught and executed on 13 March. But before dying he wrote two letters to the emperor, deploring his own mistake and inviting him to intervene in the liberation of Italy.

Cavour tried to make the best of the situation. He drew the attention of the emperor to the unsettled and dangerous situation in Italy. If something were not done, an extremist revolution might break out, for the Orsini’s were many.

In July 1858, in the secret meeting at Plombières, Napoleon III and Cavour agreed to declare war to Austria and settle once and for all the Italian question: in the north the kingdom of Piedmont-Lombardy-Veneto under the Savoy; in the centre a kingdom to be assigned to some French prince; in the south a third kingdom for some descendant of the Napoleonic general Joaquim Murat. The Papal States, reduced to Lazio, would remain with the pope, who would become president of the confederation of the three kingdoms. France would be rewarded with the territories of Nice and Savoy.

“Barricades in Turin if Necessary”

On 10 January 1859, King Victor Emmanuel made a speech in parliament: “We cannot remain insensitive to the cry of pain which rises imploringly towards us from many parts of Italy.” The expression had been agreed upon with Napoleon III, and was a clear challenge of war to Austria.

Volunteers began signing up everywhere in Piedmont. On 23 April, Austria sent an ultimatum, which was rejected the following day. The war began. The Piedmontese army of 60,000 reached the frontier. From France, on 30 April, came the Bataille division, vanguard of an army of 150,000 men led by the emperor himself.

Turin was delirious. Costanza D’Azeglio wrote: “I saw them marching through Piazza Castello amidst the acclamations of the people. I was on the balcony of the ministry with Farina and Ricasoli. Count Cavour, spotted by the crowd, received an enthusiastic salute. One could hardly recognize the staid city of Turin: lights, banners, applauses, hymns and songs were everywhere.”

The Austrians, 160,000 strong, tried to beat down the Piedmontese before the arrival of the French. By forced marches they reached Novara, Vercelli and Trino, threatened Ivrea and, with the vanguard, arrived at Chivasso, 25 km. from Turin. The flooding of the plains hampered but did not stop them. Turin was in panic. General de Sonnaz was charged with the preparation of a line of defence on the Dora Baltea. Cavour sent a telegraph to the king: if necessary, they would fight on the Stura, and raise barricades on the city streets.

But Napoleon arrived, transporting his troops rapidly by rail. The first great battle between the French and the Austrians took place on 4 June at Magenta. The French carried the day.

Four days later the news reached Turin: “the emperor and the king have entered Milan.”

Then another piece of news: emperor Francis Joseph of Austria had left Vienna to personally take command of the army. A terrible battle was in store.

Peter Enria, who was 18 at the time, gives us an idea of the situation at the Oratory:

In 1859, as in 1848-49, the youth of Turin were gripped by war fever. Hundreds of them would gather in the fields around the city, divide themselves into groups, and play at war. It should have been a game, but often the heat of battle got the upper hand and a real war of stones would break out. This would happen almost every Sunday.

One Sunday Don Bosco entered the church for the talk to the oratory boys, but to his surprise found only the boarders. "Where are the others?" he asked. No one knew. He went into the fields outside the city and found the boys of the Oratory busy pelting stones at one another. There were more than three hundred of them, and the stones flying about in the air were sizeable ones. Don Bosco advanced into the thickest part of the battle. I watched him from afar and was afraid for him. What if a stone caught him? He had taken some fifty steps into the centre of the battle, when the boys saw him and stopped. "Now that you have had your war," he said smiling, "let's go for catechism." They all followed him. No one tried to run away.

All Hell Breaks Loose

A terrible battle broke out between the Austrians and the Franco-Piedmontese on 24 June, on the southern side of Lake Garda. At dawn the first Piedmontese division, led by General Durando, attacked the Austrians at Madonna della Scoperta. The third and fifth divisions, under Molland and Cucchiari, launched the first vigorous assaults against the hill of San Martino, bristling with Austrian guns and bayonets. Napoleon III, at the foot of the Solferino hills, was about to throw in the bulk of his divisions against the Austrian centre, aiming at breaking it.

At about 10.00 a.m. all hell broke loose, with the booming of cannons, the crackling of rifles, and the shouts of tens of thousands of fighting men. Soon the air was rent with sound of regiments renewing their attacks, the anguished cries of the wounded, the pawing of cavalry squadrons charging with drawn swords, and the bursting of grenades amidst the compact lines of soldiers. The counterattacks of the white-coated Austrian infantry were terrible. They were a forest of bayonets advancing with the force of desperation. The French rifles, which for a moment had wavered, were pushed back into the thick of the fight by their own cavalry. The soldiers charged for the tenth or fifteenth time. Many, struggling to run with their heavy guns, were crying. Others were shouting to give themselves courage. The din was beyond description.

In the early afternoon, the French attack was transformed into savage hand to hand fighting for the possession of the cemetery, the hill of cypresses and the tower of Solferino. The *zouaves*, the African corps of Napoleon III, fought like drunken men, falling upon the Austrians and massacring them.

At 3.00 p.m. the French flag fluttered on the fortress of Solferino. But on the left flank, the Piedmontese were hard pressed. A massive new attack was planned for 5.00 p.m. Just as the attack was beginning, the sky turned black with clouds the colour of lead. Lightning flashes streaked the sky. As the Piedmontese brigades mounted a desperate attack

on the Austrians led by Fieldmarshall Benedek, rain and hail began to flood the battlefield. The clouds broke, revealing the first stars, and a new assault was launched around San Martino. At 9.00 p.m. Victor Emmanuel threw the Monferrato Cavalry into the fray, and that decided the day. After 14 hours of hellish fighting, the Austrians were finally defeated.

30,000 men lay on the fields of Solferino and San Martino. The cries of the wounded and the dying arose like a frightful chorus. Henri Dunant, a young Swiss gentleman and future founder of the Red Cross, roamed about the battlefield, lamp in hand, shocked and helpless. "It was like looking into hell," he would write, "the deepest part of hell. Dismembered bodies everywhere, the mutilated crying, praying, blaspheming; the wounded dragging themselves here and there asking for help that was nowhere to be found..." With the rising of the June sun, the scene became frightful: the stench of rotting corpses, swarms of flies, wounds turning gangrenous, and again, everywhere, savage cries of pain.

This was war, the true face of war, not the one described by the newspapers of Turin as a great victory. In a booklet published at the end of 1859, Don Bosco would go against all the exultation of the moment and write: "After the battle of Solferino, I have always held that war is a horrible thing, something that is, I believe, truly contrary to charity."

***Realpolitik* Gets the Upper Hand**

Napoleon III himself was shocked at the dimensions of the massacre. But that was not all. There was troubling news from other sides too. Toscana, Parma, Modena and the Pontifical Legations had risen and were asking to be annexed to Piedmont. The plan of Plombières to entrust a central kingdom to a French prince had gone awry. Worse still, Austria's defeat was provoking a concentration of Prussian troops on the border of the Rhine.

Without informing his Piedmontese allies, Napoleon III signed the Armistice of Villafranca on 8 July. Only Lombardy would be given over to Victor Emanuel.

The news fell like a freezing shower on the enthusiasm in Turin. Cavour, in a moment of depression, thought of suicide. Napoleon III passed through Turin on his way back to France. He received a glacial reception. The king accompanied the emperor as far as Susa, thanking him for his help. No sooner was Napoleon on the train the king murmured, "At last he's gone!"

During the restless months that followed, Emilia-Romagna joined Piedmont, followed by Liguria, Sardinia and Lombardy. In the following year, 1860, Garibaldi conquered Sicily and Southern Italy with his expedition named *dei Mille*. In February 1861 the new parliament would proclaim Victor Emmanuel 'king of Italy.'

The *realpolitik* of Cavour had been successful. Grazia Mancini describes Cavour walking in Piazza San Carlo in the first months of 1861: "His good-natured, expressive, satisfied face was saying clearly: everything is all right. His lively eyes were shining behind his glasses; he walked slowly, balancing his massive frame on his slender legs, rubbing his small aristocratic hands with visible satisfaction."

Then, on 7 June, the news hit Turin: Count Cavour was dead. It was a severe blow for the infant kingdom of Italy.

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OUTINGS IN MONFERRATO AND LIFE AT THE ORATORY

Every year Don Bosco would spend the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary at Becchi, with groups of his best boys. In the early years these would be about twenty. The number went on increasing, till in 1858 it reached a hundred.

Fr Lemoyne writes: "In the first days of October, the singers, the band and a group of boys would leave the Oratory. Every one carried a bundle of clothes, a few loaves of bread, some cheese and a little fruit."

They would be put up by Joseph, always cordial and ever willing to close an eye to their forays into the vineyard.

On the first Sunday of October the feast was celebrated. The rest of the holiday, about 20 days, was given to long walks. Up to the year 1858, Becchi was the centre. The boys left in the morning, visited a nearby village, and came back in the evening. From the year 1859 the outings became a real 'itinerary' through the countryside of Monferrato.

Don Bosco would prepare the route before hand, informing the local priests and benefactors so that they would be ready to receive the crowd of tired and hungry youngsters. They would walk on country roads, over hills and vineyards. They walked in groups, singing, playing on tambourines, egging on the donkeys which carried the backdrops and equipment for the show they would put up at the village. Behind everyone came Don Bosco, surrounded by a group of youngsters who never tired of listening to him telling stories about the villages they were passing through.

When a village came in sight, the boys would get into formation and make a solemn entry, led by the band. Fr Anfossi recalls:

I always remember those wonderful outings, which would fill me with wonderment and happiness. I accompanied Don Bosco through the hills of Monferrato from 1854 to 1860. There were about one hundred of us, and we could see already then that Don Bosco was revered by all. His arrival in those villages was a triumph. The parish priests of the surrounding villages would turn out to see him go by, and usually also the civil authorities. The people would be at their windows or out on the streets, farmers would abandon their work to see the Saint, mothers would come forward with their children begging for a blessing. The first visit was always to the church. The people would follow and Don Bosco never missed a chance to mount the pulpit and give one of his stirring sermons. Then we would sing the *Tantum ergo* and receive the Eucharistic benediction.

People would then come with loaves of bread and baskets of fruit, cheese and good wine. No formal lunches, but the boys would eat abundantly.

The nights would be spent in sheds or in halls, stretched out on the hay or on sacks filled with leaves.

A Five Year Old

The itineraries were different every year. In 1859 and 1860 the boys visited the villages of Villa San Secondo, Montiglio, Marmorito, Piea, Moncucco, Albugnano, Montafia, Primeglio, Cortazzone, Pino d'Asti...

In 1861 they arrived as far as Casale Monferrato, Mirabello, Lu, San Salvatore and Valenza. They proceeded by rail up to Alessandria, and from Alessandria they returned to Turin.

In 1862 they touched Calliano, Grana, Montemagno, Vignale, Casorzo, Camagna and Mirabello. The railway authorities once again gave Don Bosco two carriages for the return from Alessandria to Turin.

In 1863 and 1864 the facility was offered to them also on their way out. In 1863 they could therefore reach Tortona, visiting Asti, Broni, Torre Garofoli, Villavernia and Mirabello on the way. In 1864 they reached as far as Genoa and Serravalle, and then proceeded on foot through the hills to Gavi, Mornese and Ovada.

After that year the situation changed and those long outings became impossible. The boys would go only to Becchi and Mondonio, the village of Dominic Savio.

For his boys, those outings through the countryside were something unforgettable. For Don Bosco they were an entry into the villages of Monferrato, from which he succeeded in bringing to the Oratory many splendid Salesian vocations.

When Don Bosco came to Lu in 1861, in front of the Rinaldi house he saw nine boys lined up like the pipes of an organ. The last but one, a little tot of five, was Philip. He kept staring spellbound at the priest who could make the band play, and at the end of the march, joined happily in the applause. Don Bosco saw the little fellow again half an hour later at the Rinaldi house, where Christopher Rinaldi, his father, had offered the use of the jig. Before leaving, Don Bosco gave a little pat and a good word to all the boys, but lingered a bit longer, looking intently into the eyes of little Philip. That little boy would one day become his third successor, Fr Philip Rinaldi.

A Red-Haired Lad and Heavy Rain

In 1862 the crowd of boys reached Montemagno. A 12 year old boy was playing in a little dale outside the village. Hearing the sound of the band, he left his companions and his shoes and rushed to the village square. He elbowed his way through the crowd and reached the front row. Don Bosco noticed the gaze of curiosity and that head of red hair, and before letting him go, asked him:

“Who are you?”

“Louis Lasagna.”

“Would you like to come with me to Turin?”

“To do what?”

“To study, like all these boys.”

“And why not?”

“Well then, tell your mother to come and meet me tomorrow at the parish house at Vignale.”

At the end of that month Louis Lasagna entered the Oratory. Very lively but also very sensitive, he became homesick after a few days and ran away. Some of the superiors were quite against readmitting him, but Don Bosco stood up for the boy: “There’s good stuff in that boy. Just wait and see.”

Louis came back. He became attached to Don Bosco. He became the second Salesian bishop and a very great missionary.

Two years later, Don Bosco would revisit Montemagno and would be the protagonist of an extraordinary event.

It had not rained for three months. The vines were wilting on the hills. Don Bosco came to preach the *triduum* in preparation for the feast of the Assumption. In his very first sermon he announced:

“If during these three days you all make a good confession, and on the feast day go to communion, I promise you, in the name of Mary, that it will rain abundantly.”

When he came down from the pulpit, he saw that the parish priest, Fr Clivio, was none too pleased.

“*Bravo!* What cheek!”

“And why, pray?”

“To make a public promise for rain on the day of the feast.”

“Did I say that?”

“We all heard it. And, frankly, I’m not much in favour of these things.”

The people responded with faith. Fr Rua and Fr Cagliari, who were accompanying Don Bosco, remembered even after years the long and tiring hours spent in the confessional.

The news of the ‘prophecy’ spread to the neighbouring villages. Many were curious, others merely skeptical.

The day of the feast dawned with a clear blue sky. Up to early afternoon there was not even the hint of a cloud.

Fr Louis Porta testified:

As I was going to church for vespers with Marquis Fassati, we were talking about the promised rain. Sweat was dripping down our faces, though it was just a ten minute walk to the church. Reaching the sacristy, the marquis said to Don Bosco:

“This time, Don Bosco, it will be a fiasco. Where is the rain?”

As vespers were getting over, Don Bosco donned surplice and stole and climbed the pulpit. As he started the Hail Mary before the sermon, it began to get dark. After a few sentences, the thunder and lightning began. Don Bosco, deeply moved, had to stop speaking. The rain began to lash the windows of the church in torrents, and don Bosco raised a hymn of thanksgiving to Mary.

After benediction the people had to wait in the church and under the portico, because the rain would not stop.

The sudden summer storms of Monferrato are often accompanied by hail. There was some on that day too. The curious went out immediately to investigate, and came back reporting that the hail had fallen on the vines of Grana, a nearby village which was

celebrating its patronal feast with a public dance in the village square, much to the annoyance of the priests.

A Girl from Mornese

In the autumn outing of that same year, 1864, Don Bosco and his boys reached Mornese. It was night when they arrived. People came out to welcome him, led by the parish priest Fr Valle and another priest, Fr Pestarino. The band played, and many knelt before Don Bosco, asking for his blessing. The boys and the people entered the church and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was given. Then all were taken to supper.

Encouraged by the people, the boys gave a short entertainment of cheerful musical pieces. In the front row was a girl of 27, Mary Mazzarello. At the end Don Bosco said a few words: “We are all tired, and my boys long for a good sleep. Tomorrow we can talk more at length.

The following morning, Fr Pestarino introduced the *Daughters of the Immaculate* to Don Bosco. Mary Mazzarello was one of them. Don Bosco was impressed by the goodness and zeal of the girls. He addressed them briefly, exhorting them to persevere in the life they had chosen and in the practice of virtue. Mary Mazzarello would become the first superior of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

So, one of his successors, Philip Rinaldi; a bishop, Louis Lasagna; and the co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians—all were fruits of Don Bosco’s October visits to the countryside.

Speaking of the outings in Monferrato, we had to take some steps ahead, bringing in events that occurred only much later. We now pick up the threads of our main story.

Fr Rua’s First Mass

The priestly ordination of Michael Rua had been fixed for 29 July 1860.

Don Bosco sent him to the Priests of the Mission, as they were called, to make his retreat in preparation for the great day. Towards the end of the retreat, Rua wrote Don Bosco a letter in French—the language used by those priests—asking for some special advice for the most solemn day of his life.

Don Bosco was himself making his retreat at St Ignatius, near Turin. He answered in Latin: “You wrote to me in French. Good. Be French, however, only in the language you use, but let your heart, soul and action be Roman, fearless and generous.”

Fr John Baptist Francesia writes:

On that day, 29 July, Don Bosco was coming back to Turin from St Ignatius, and I was with him. Since Don Bosco did not like to ride inside the coach, both of us were seated outside, near the coachman. How surprised we were to see three persons in cassock walking towards us on the road. As they drew near, we recognized them: deacon Rua and the seminarians Durando and Anfossi. Don Bosco told the coachman to stop and asked:

“Where are you going?”

“To Caselle. Bishop Balma is going to ordain me there,” answered Rua.

“How happy I am! I’ve prayed so much for you, dear Rua and I hope the

Lord will grant all your wishes. Greet bishop Balma for me.”

What a beautiful lesson: the three walking to the place of ordination like poor humble pilgrims.

The great feast for the ordination of Rua was held on the following Sunday at the Oratory. Near the altar was a huge bouquet of lily white flowers. It was a gift from the little chimney-sweeps of the Oratory of St Aloysius.

When Fr Rua entered his room on the evening of that festive day, he found a letter from Don Bosco on his desk. Among other things he read: “You, more than I, will see the Salesian work expand beyond the borders of Italy and reach out to many parts of the world. You will have plenty to do and not a little to suffer. But you know very well that it is only through the Red Sea and the desert that one reaches the Promised Land. Bear everything with courage, and even here on earth you will experience the consolations and the help of the Lord.”

After Rua’s ordination, Don Bosco seemed more relaxed and more sure of himself. The Oratory was already a huge institution with its 500 boarders. 300 of them were being trained in the four better established workshops. To provide for all of them was no small task, and Don Bosco had to absent himself from the Oratory often in order to ask for alms. But now he could do that in peace: Don Rua was already ‘another Don Bosco’ in the Oratory.

Joys and sorrows often come in pairs. On 23 June 1860 Don Bosco lost his long-time guide and friend, Fr Joseph Cafasso. He had not been informed in time of his serious condition and when, accompanied by Francis Cerruti, he rushed to Fr Cafasso’s side, he found that he had just expired. He knelt by his friend’s bedside and spent a long time in prayer. There were few to whom he owed as much as to Fr Cafasso. Fr Cafasso had believed in Don Bosco and in his mission even when Don Bosco himself was in doubt. He had always been by his side, with his support and encouragement. He had been his ‘spiritual father’ in the fullest sense of the word.

400 Loaves from an Empty Basket

On 22 October 1860, Francis Dalmazzo, 15, entered the Oratory. He was from Cavour and had done his studies at Pinerolo. He had come to know about life at the Oratory from the *Catholic Readings*. “I asked about Don Bosco, and coming to know about his boarding school, I resolved to join the ranks of his sons.” He was admitted to the last year of gymnasium.

But after about twenty days Francis lost his enthusiasm. “I was accustomed, at home, to a rather pampered life. I could not get accustomed to the food and ways at the Oratory, so I wrote to my mother to come and take me home.”

His mother came on 11 November. Francis recalls:

Before leaving I wanted to confess one last time to Don Bosco. I lined up and waited for my turn during the Mass. After Mass, while leaving the church, every boarder would receive a loaf of bread.

As I was waiting, the two boys in charge of distributing bread came and said to Don Bosco:

“There is no bread for breakfast.”

“What can I do?” replied Don Bosco. “Go to Magra, the baker, and get some.”

“Magra says he is not giving us any more, because we have not paid his bills.”

“In that case we shall see. Let me finish the confessions.”

I had overheard that dialogue. In the meanwhile my turn came, and I began my confession. Mass had reached the consecration, when the two boys came back.

“Don Bosco, we have nothing for breakfast.”

“Let me finish hearing confessions, then we’ll see. Go search the kitchen, the pantry, the refectory, gather all the bread you find.”

I finished my confession. One of the boys had come back a third time.

“We have done what you said. All we have is a few loaves.”

“Put the bread in the basket and bring it to the door. I’ll come myself for the distribution. And give me some peace to finish the confessions.”

Don Bosco finished the last boy’s confession. The basket was ready at the door near the altar of Our Lady. I had heard some fantastic tales about the Oratory. On a hunch, I said to myself: Let’s see what is going to happen. I got up and took a good position near the door, where I could see everything well.

My mother had already arrived.

“Come, Francis,” she said to me. But I made her a sign to wait. Don Bosco came. I was the first to receive a loaf. I took a good look into the basket, and saw that there were only about fifteen or twenty loaves. I placed myself just behind Don Bosco, on the step, all eyes. Don Bosco began the distribution. The boys filed past, happy to receive the bread from him. They kissed his hand, while he said a good word to each one, or gave a smile.

Each of the boys—and we were about 400 of us—received a loaf of bread. I ran to look into the basket once again, and with great wonder saw the same number of loaves I had seen in the beginning. I was nonplussed, shaken... I ran to my mother and said:

“Sorry, mummy, I’ve changed my mind, I don’t want to go away, I want to stay here. Sorry to have made you come for nothing.” And I told her what I had seen with my own eyes. “I would be a fool to leave a saint like Don Bosco.”

This was what caused me to stay on in the Oratory and later to join the ranks of the sons of Don Bosco.

Francis Dalmazzo became a Salesian. For eight years he was rector of Valsalice, and for seven procurator general of the Salesian Congregation with the Holy See.

Charity for the Poor and for Them Only

As the beginning of the new school year was approaching (1860-61), Don Bosco noticed that the applications for the students’ section had increased very much. He was afraid that money received for helping the poor would be used for those who did not need it. He therefore reprinted the prospectus for the boarding **school** with a new clause: for the first two months, students would pay a fixed fee. After having shown their worth by good

conduct, their dues would be reduced or even forfeited. Fr Lemoyne remarks, however, that Don Bosco in his charity made many exceptions even to this rule.

These were the conditions for admission as they were printed and distributed in 1860-61:

For apprentices:

- That they be orphans of both father and mother.
- That they be between the ages of 12 and 18.
- That they be poor and with no one to support them.

For students:

- That they have completed elementary school and be desirous of wanting to do the gymnasium [as the middle school was then called].
- That they be intelligent and of sound morality.
- That they be given a two months' trial period, at *lire* 24 a month. Later the rate would be fixed, according to merit.

Among the 'general dispositions' we read: "All pupils will have to provide themselves with their own items of clothing, unless they can prove their own inability to do so because of poverty."

The 'Secret Committee' of 1861

An unusual and important event took place at the Oratory in 1861. Fr Alasonatti, Fr Rua, seminarians Cagliero and Francesia and ten other Salesians formed a 'secret committee.' They were all convinced that what was happening around Don Bosco was something extraordinary, if not supernatural. To lose the memory of these events would be to throw away a treasure. They came to an agreement therefore to faithfully preserve the memory of these facts. Every member would make his own notes. At meetings, these notes would be read out to the others and corrected, to make sure that only exact and correct accounts of events were preserved.

Commenting on this in volume 6 of the *Biographical Memoirs*, Fr Lemoyne says: "We can therefore be certain of the truth of the events handed down to us by these witnesses. As years passed, other joined the commission, to maintain the flow of information with the same love and fidelity to Don Bosco."

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those first Salesians. They were already overburdened with work; they had to snatch more time from sleep in order to carry out this incomparable and most precious task, without which so many events regarding Don Bosco would have been lost, and others would have come down wrapped in the mists of legend.

Even so, we can and should make some observations about their work, and about those who made use of their notes to write the life of Don Bosco. This, not so much to accuse them—that would be mere foolishness on our part—but to understand better the wonderful story of Don Bosco.

First. Very often Don Bosco spoke familiarly, off hand. He had every right to do so. When one speaks to one's pupils, to boys, one is hardly 'dictating for history.' Don Bosco's

words are therefore to be taken in a ‘familiar’ way, not as rigorously historical documents. Take the example of Napoleon when he conversed at St Helena, or of Luther in his convivial conversations. Napoleon’s accounts are full of emotions, flashes of insight and remembrances, but they are not meant to be taken as detailed depositions for history. It is necessary to filter them through documents, battle plans, letters and treaties. It happened instead with Don Bosco that many of his off-hand accounts were taken as absolutely and rigorously exact in every particular.

Second. These diligent collectors of the words and remembrances of Don Bosco, all of them overworked, most of them ignorant of what was going on outside the Oratory walls, *took note of everything that Don Bosco was doing, but hardly anything of what was happening in the city and around.* Thus all that they wrote about Don Bosco is absolutely true, but from their writings one gets the impression that *only Don Bosco was doing such things*, while in actual fact there were many in Turin who were attempting similar apostolic and social enterprises. Now one who is alone always appears to be the first in the class, and so Don Bosco, in those memoirs, seems always to have been the first one to have these intuitions, the only one to begin to act on them. Instead, when we see the larger picture, we have to conclude that he was great, and even very great, but that side by side, ahead or behind him, there were many others who were working along similar lines.

The Shrine of Mary Help of Christians (of which we will speak in the next chapter), for example, appears to be a miraculous achievement: the money spent (890,000 *lire*), the number of offerings, the speed of construction, the enormous crowds for the inauguration. But the history of Turin shows that four other great churches were built at the same time, at large costs and in record time: the parish church of St Julia, 1863, at the cost of 650,000 *lire*; the parish church of Sts Peter and Paul, 1865, for 540,000 *lire*; the parish church of the Immaculate Conception, 1867, for 220,000 *lire*; the parish church of St Barbara in 1869, for 336,000 *lire*. The parish church of St Maxim had been completed in 1853 at the cost of 1,500,000 *lire*.

Not that the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians loses anything in comparison. It will stand forever as a miracle of will power, faith and generosity. But looked at in the context of the other four churches, it acquires another perspective. To put it graphically: it is one thing to have a pine tree standing alone in a deserted place; it is another thing to have a pine tree in the midst of a thicket of other pines. It is always the same beautiful tree, but it cannot be the only one to claim the title of ‘prodigious.’

We could say the same thing about the night schools, the workshops and the missionary expeditions: they are all impressive events, but all exist in the context of a vast Catholic activity of equally formidable proportions. Don Bosco, seen in this perspective, ceases to be an exception, but a saint who, in a vibrantly committed Catholic atmosphere, lived his faith to the point of miracles. He is flanked by many other priests who, though not always saints like him, worked with equal faith and commitment.

Third. Don Bosco had received mysterious gifts from God. He had dreams that lay the future open before him. He made prophetic announcements that came true. But there was also another side of him: he was a human being, a poor priest who very often strained to see just a little further than his nose, as all of us do. He also, like us, was entitled to express opinions, cherish hopes, and predict events which would be right at times and wrong at

others. A typical case is that of Fr Guanella, whom Don Bosco wanted to keep at the Oratory, while his mission was evidently another. To take note of all these predictions and hopes, and to expect that all should infallibly materialize, would be to distort the figure of Don Bosco. It would amount to denying him the right to be human, subject like all of us to the vicissitudes of life. This was perhaps a limitation in the 'spirit' in which the deeds and words of Don Bosco were collected. Today, especially, we would have been very grateful to those witnesses if they had passed on to us not only the sublime successes but also the doubts, the perplexities and mistakes of that very great and very human person we love as Don Bosco.

But all this does not and cannot amount to depreciating the labour of those first Salesians, which, with all its limitations, was of inestimable value.

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THE GREAT SHRINE OF THE DREAM

In October 1844 Don Bosco had two dreams. We made mention of them in chapter 18, but now we must go back to them, enlarging the quotations. The first quotation is from Don Bosco's own *Memoirs of the Oratory*; the other is from the account given by Barberis and Lemoyne.

The shepherd-girl invited me to look south. I looked and saw a field in which maize had been sown. There were also potatoes, cabbages, beetroots, lettuce and other vegetables. "Look again," she told me, and I looked. What I saw was a big and beautiful church. There was instrumental and vocal music in the air, inviting me to sing the Mass. Inside the church there was a white band with an inscription in capital letters: *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea.*⁴⁴

The Dream of the Three Churches

I seemed to be standing on a boundless plain filled with a vast number of youngsters. Some were fighting, others blaspheming. The air was full of stones being hurled by one side upon the other. I was about to get away, when a Lady approached me.

"Go among those boys and begin working," she said.

I went forward. But what could I do? I had no place where I could take any of them.

I turned to the Lady, who forestalled me by saying:

"Here is the place!" And she showed me a field.

"But that is only a bare field," I said. She answered:

"My Son and the apostles did not possess even a place on which to lay their head."

I began to work in that field, admonishing, preaching, and hearing confessions. But all the work would be useless unless I could find a fenced off place with some buildings in which to gather the boys. The Lady then said:

"Look!"

I looked and saw a small low church, a little courtyard, and boys in large number. I resumed my work. But the church had become too small, so I turned again

⁴⁴ This is my house. From here my glory shall go forth. *Memorie per l'oratorio* 136 = *Memoirs of the Oratory* 210.

to her, and she showed me another church, a much bigger one, with a house nearby. Then, leading me aside a bit, she pointed out a field under cultivation almost in front of the second church. She said to me:

“In this place, where the glorious martyrs of Turin, Adventor and Octavius, suffered martyrdom, on this soil which was bathed and sanctified by their blood, I want that God be honoured in a very special way.”

As she was talking, she moved her foot and rested it at the exact place where the martyrdom had taken place. I looked for something to put there as a marker, but found nothing. Nevertheless I kept it in my mind with precision.⁴⁵

In the meantime, I found myself being surrounded by an immense and always increasing number of boys, but looking at the Lady I could see that the equipment and buildings were increasing too. I then saw a huge church exactly on the spot she had pointed out as the place of martyrdom of the saints of the Thebean Legion, with many buildings all around and a beautiful monument in the middle.⁴⁶

Don Bosco had always kept an eye on the field “sown with maize, potatoes, cabbages, beetroots, lettuce and other vegetables” which he had recognized just outside the wall of his Oratory. He had baptized it ‘the field of dreams.’ As soon as he could, on 20 June 1850, he bought it. But in 1854 (the year of the cholera, when he had accepted 20 orphans), he was constrained to sell it in order to settle pressing debts. He bought it again on 11 February 1863. But something else had happened in the meantime.

“It Will Be the Mother Church of Our Congregation”

One evening in December 1862, Paolino Albera (a 17 year old lad who had been accepted into the society that year) heard something confidential from Don Bosco. It was a Saturday. Don Bosco had heard confessions till 11.00 p.m., and only then, accompanied by Paolino, could he come down to the dining room for a bit of supper. Something was on his mind, and all of a sudden he said: “I’ve heard so many confessions, but to tell the truth, I hardly remember what I have said or done, because I have been beset by one idea. It was distracting me and almost drawing me out of myself. I was thinking, our church is too small, it cannot hold all the boys. So we shall build another one, so big and so beautiful that it will be magnificent. We shall call it the Church of Mary Help of Christians. I don’t have a single cent, I don’t know from where the money will come, but that’s neither here nor there. If it is God’s will, it will be done.”

Not long after that, he spoke of this project also to John Cagliero. Here is Cagliero’s testimony:

In 1862, Don Bosco told me that he was thinking of building a magnificent church, one that was worthy of the Most Holy Virgin.

“Up to now,” he said, “we have celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception with solemnity. But Our Lady wants that we honour her under the title of Mary Help of Christians. We are living through very difficult times, and we need

⁴⁵ That spot, pointed out with precision by Don Bosco, can be seen in the Chapel of the Relics under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. The place is marked by a gilded cross.

⁴⁶ MB 2:298-99 = BM 2:232-33.

the help of the most Holy Virgin to preserve and defend the Christian faith. And do you know another reason?"

"I believe," I responded, "that it will be the 'Mother Church' of our future congregation, the centre from which all our works on behalf of youth will be born."

"You have guessed rightly," he said to me. "The Most Holy Virgin is the foundress and will be the one who sustains all our works."⁴⁷

A bigger church, one that could contain all the boys; the 'Mother Church' of the congregation. These are the basic reasons why Don Bosco wanted to build a Shrine to Mary Help of Christians. But he had also hinted at another motive: *we are living through very difficult times*... These words call for some explanation, lest they be taken as one more of those 'generic lamentations' which abound on the lips of certain people.

The Events of Spoleto and the Help of Christians

"The history of the church in the middle of the nineteenth century," writes the historian Giacomo Martina, "is marked by a violent clash between old and new, between the structures of a society that is officially Christian and the growing assertiveness of the secular city. The picture that emerges is that of a nodal period in the history of the church, one that recasts the terms of the encounter between Christianity and the cultures of the different historical epochs which it meets in the course of time."

One of the central elements of this 'violent clash' was question of Rome and of the Pontifical States. After the second war of independence, observes Peter Stella, the Pontifical States which Catholics regarded absolutely essential for the independence of the pope, seemed to be doomed to inevitable conquest by the 'Kingdom of Italy.' The bishops of Umbria, on 2 February 1860, exhorted the faithful to pray to God "through the intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of God and Help of Christians."

And it was precisely at Spoleto, a city in Umbria, that, according to the people, something extraordinary had happened. In March 1862, from an ancient image in a ruined church, Our Lady spoke to a 5 year old boy and cured the illness of a young farmer. That ruined church soon became the goal of pilgrimages.

The archbishop of Spoleto, Msgr Arnaldi, sent an enthusiastic account of the events to the *Armonia*, the Catholic newspaper of Turin. He spoke of numerous pilgrimages coming from places like Todi, Perugia, Foligno, Nocera, Narni and Norcia.

In September 1862, the same archbishop launched the idea of an imposing shrine on the place of the miracles, giving to the image of the Madonna (up to now known as 'Madonna della Stella') the name of *Help of Christians, Auxilium Christianorum*.

Don Bosco read out the archbishop's account to his boys "with great happiness." It was during this period that he had the dream of 'the Two Columns,' which he narrated to the boys on 30 May. The ship of the church, guided by the pope, sailed safely through rough seas, under the assaults of enemy ships, till it reached a safe haven between two columns, between which the pope cast anchor. On the first column was the Eucharist, on the second a statue of the Immaculate, bearing the inscription *Auxilium Christianorum*.

This mixture of 'difficult times' and great hopes was the third motive which led Don Bosco to begin the task of building the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians.

⁴⁷ MB 7:334 = BM 7:197.

A Title That Made Noses Turn Up

Architect Anthony Spezia drew up the plans for the new shrine in the shape of a Latin cross, with an overall length of 48 meters and an area of 1,200 square meters.

With the plans under his arm, Don Bosco approached the municipality for approval. No objections were raised; there was even a promise (in words only, and never fulfilled) to grant the usual subsidy of 30,000 *lire* given to new parish churches.

What made noses turn up instead was the title, ‘Church of Mary Help of Christians.’ The happenings at Spoleto, the letter of the bishops of Umbria, the coverage given by the newspaper *Armonia*, aroused the suspicions of the municipal authorities: the title smacked of a challenge.

“Wouldn’t it be advisable to change that strange title? Call it Church of the Rosary, of Peace or of Carmel ... there are so many titles.”

Don Bosco laughed. “Do me a favour, approve the project. About the title we can discuss later.”

The discussion never took place. Don Bosco left the title as it was.

Eight Cents to Start With

Once the building licence had been obtained, Don Bosco entrusted the work to Charles Buzzetti. Brother of Joseph, Charles was one of the first boys Don Bosco had met in the Church of St Francis of Assisi. He had become a skilled master bricklayer and contractor. Don Bosco called Fr Savio, the administrator, and told him to begin digging.

“But how shall we go about it, Don Bosco? We are not building a little chapel but a big church, a costly church. This morning I did not have money enough to buy even the stamps for the outgoing mail.”

“Begin digging,” replied Don Bosco. “When did we ever begin any work having all the money in hand? Let’s leave a little space to divine providence.”

Part of the digging was completed in autumn 1863; it was resumed in March 1864.

Towards the end of April Don Bosco, together with his priests and several boys, went down into the excavation for the laying of the foundation stone. Don Bosco then turned to Buzzetti and told him:

“I want to give you an advance.”

He pulled out his little purse and emptied it into the hands of the contractor: eight cents in all, not even half a *lira*. Seeing that Buzzetti had not taken it well, Don Bosco said soothingly:

“Don’t worry. The Madonna will see to it that the money will arrive.”

The Madonna did indeed see to it, but to make it arrive, she made use of the toil and sweat of Don Bosco.

Anyone who studies the figures of the two great saints of Turin, Cottolengo and Don Bosco, cannot help being struck by this glaring difference. Both of them witnessed miracles of providence every day, indeed they lived upon what providence provided. But while Cottolengo used to say, “Providence has already set aside the money we need, let’s wait till it comes,” Don Bosco said: “Providence has already set aside the money we need, let’s go and look for it.”

Fr Paul Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, who lived with him during those years, used to say: “Only those who saw with their own eyes can have an idea of the labour and the sacrifices that our father imposed on himself, in order to complete the Church of Mary Help of Christians, which many looked upon as a rash enterprise, far beyond the means of the humble priest who had undertaken it.”

In order to tap public charity, Don Bosco pushed his imagination to the limits. He flooded Turin and Piedmont with letters and circulars, opened subscriptions, solicited help from the high society of Turin, Florence and Rome, organized an impressive lottery. Contributions poured in, but not always as fast as needed. In May 1866, Don Bosco wrote to Chevalier Oreglia: “We had to reduce our forty workmen to eight for lack of funds. We are going through a very difficult moment.”

The Madonna Begs for Don Bosco

If ‘poor Don Bosco’ managed to overcome all difficulties, he owed it to the Auxiliatrix who intervened in a visible way. News about the graces and favours, small and great, which Our Lady granted to those who helped in the building of the church, spread rapidly throughout Turin and in many parts of Italy.

The most sensational grace was, perhaps, the one granted to Senator Joseph Cotta, long-standing benefactor of Don Bosco and well-known personality among the politicians and financiers of the city.

When the 80 year old Senator was lying in bed, practically given up by the doctors—Fr Lemoyne tells us—Don Bosco went to see him. The sick man, with a very weak voice, managed to say:

“A very short time, and then I will be off to eternity.”

“No, Senator,” answered Don Bosco quite cheerfully. “Our Lady is still in need of you in this world. You must live to help me finish her church.”

“No hope left,” the old man sighed.

“And what would you do, if Mary Help of Christians were to obtain the grace of a cure for you?”

The senator smiled and, gathering his ebbing energy, showed two fingers to Don Bosco:

“Two thousand *lire*, if I get well: two thousand *lire* a month, for six months, for the church at Valdocco.”

“Good. I go home and tell my boys to pray, and I will wait to see you at the Oratory.”

Three days later the senator entered the Oratory, completely cured.

“Here I am. Our Lady has cured me and I came in person to pay the first installment of my debt.”

We shall give an account below of only two more ‘graces,’ even though Don Bosco, writing to Chevalier Oreglia on 11 February 1868, affirmed: “Every day things happen, one more surprising than the other, wrought by Our Lady for her church. Volumes would not be enough to record them all.” At the process of the beatification of Don Bosco, Msgr Bertagna deposed under oath: “During the spiritual retreat at St Ignatius, Don Bosco sought my advice about whether he should continue to bless sick people with the pictures of Mary Help of Christians and of the Saviour. Much talk was going around about the many cures that

were taking place. I advised him to continue with his blessings, by all means.”

A Mother, a Child, and Some Poor Jewels

One day Don Bosco, coming back from some errand in the city, saw a poor woman by the porter’s lodge. In her arms was a little child about a year old, wan and covered with sores, too helpless to move or make any sound. It looked as if it were dead. Don Bosco stopped and asked the mother:

“How long has the child been ill?”

“From birth. He has never been well.”

“Did you show him to the doctors?”

“Yes, but they say that nothing can be done.”

“You want him to get cured?”

“What a question!” she said, and kissed her child tenderly.

“Do you believe Our Lady can cure your son?”

“Yes, but I am not worthy of such a grace. If you could cure him, I would give you the most precious things I have.”

“Good. As soon as you can, go to confession and communion. For nine days, say the Our Father and Hail Mary, inviting your husband to join you in the prayer. Our Lady will hear you.” And he gave the child the blessing of Mary Help of Christians.

A fortnight later, a Sunday, among those who were trying to speak to Don Bosco in the sacristy of the church was a woman with a lively child in her arms.

“Here is my child, Father.”

“What can I do for you, my good woman?”

Don Bosco had completely forgotten about the blessing given to the child. The mother had to remind him, and told him that on the third or fourth day of the novena the child had been cured.

“Today, I have come to fulfill my promise.” She pulled out a small box in which lay her poor jewels: a little gold chain, a ring and two ear-rings. Don Bosco was moved, remembering perhaps the poor jewels of his dear mother. The woman went on:

“I promised the Madonna to give her the things most dear to me, so now please accept them.” Don Bosco was shaking his head:

“My good woman, do you have something set aside in case of need?”

“No, Father. We live day by day with what my husband earns at the cast iron foundry.”

“Nothing saved?”

“What can we save with a wage of three *lire* a day? “

“And does your husband know you want to give these things to Our Lady?”

“Yes, he knows, and is quite happy about it.”

“But if you give everything away and something happens? Some sickness, some urgent need?”

“God knows we are poor and will provide. I must do what I have promised.”

By this time Don Bosco was visibly moved:

“Look, let’s do like this. Our Lady does not expect from you such a big sacrifice. If you are really determined to give her a sign of your gratitude, give me the ring. Take home the chain and ear-rings.”

“How can I do that, after promising?”

“Do as I say. Our Lady is pleased with this.”

“Is that true? I would never, never go back on my word.”

“You are not going back on your word, I promise you.”

The woman still looked undecided but then concluded:

“Do as you think best, Father, but if you want everything, take it.”

Don Bosco repeated his reassuring words and caressed the child.⁴⁸

The Day Labourer from Alba

A poor man had come from Alba, on foot, walking a whole day and night. He made his confession, received communion and then went to Don Bosco to fulfill a promise. He told him he had fallen sick. The doctors had told him that there was no hope. He had promised Our Lady that, if he got cured, he would give her all the money he had. He had been cured at once. Don Bosco looked at this man, evidently very poor. He had pulled out of his pocket a piece of paper and was trying to flatten it out properly. From the paper he extracted the money: one *lira*. He offered it to Don Bosco.

“This is all I have. It is all my wealth,” he said.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I am a day labourer. I live on daily wages.”

“How will you manage to go home?”

“As I came here, on foot.”

“Are you not tired?”

“A bit. The journey is a long one.”

“You are still fasting?”

“Of course. I wanted to receive communion. Before midnight I ate a piece of bread I had with me.”

“And for breakfast?”

“Nothing.”

“Let’s do it this way. Today you stay with me, and have lunch and supper. Tomorrow, if you wish, you can go home.”

“That’s a good one! I give you one *lira* and you give me food for two or three *lire*!”

“Listen to me. You have made your offering to the Madonna, and Don Bosco makes you his offering: a little soup and a glass of wine.”

“On no account. I know that Don Bosco and Our Lady have the same wallet. I go back on foot. If I feel hungry I’ll beg. When I feel tired I’ll rest under a tree. If I feel sleepy I’ll ask for a place on a haystack. I want to fulfill my promise the right way. Goodbye, Father, and pray for me.”

And with these words he left.⁴⁹

The dreams of Don Bosco: An explanatory note

⁴⁸ MB 10:94-95 = BM 10:74-75.

⁴⁹ MB 10:97-98 = BM 10:75-76.

In this chapter, we have mentioned three of Don Bosco's dreams: the one in which he saw a big church in a maize field; the dream of the three churches; and the dream of the two columns.

Allow me a personal reflection.

Pages and pages have been written about the dreams of Don Bosco. For the most part these are serious and reliable. At other times, instead, they are so strange as to give the impression that those who wrote them were dreaming more than Don Bosco himself.

To 'explain' these dreams and to eliminate every trace of the 'extraordinary' from the life of Don Bosco, some scholars have made use of all possible 'working hypotheses,' from parapsychology (which is today seriously being questioned by the best of scientists) to 'mythification' (no doubt, some of those who reported the words and deeds of Don Bosco did indulge in that) to the extreme accusation of false testimony.

It is quite legitimate to make use of 'working hypotheses' and to seek to verify them. However, it is not legitimate to take into consideration all working hypotheses except one: the intervention of the supernatural in Don Bosco's life. Honesty demands that we take into consideration also this hypothesis and verify it seriously. Now a serious historical verification has to rest on the trustworthiness of the testimonies, which, in the case of Don Bosco, are often given under oath during the process of beatification. To *a priori* reject sworn testimonies in favour of doubtful theories, indicates that the historical process is being influenced by preconceptions. It is to fall into the dogmas of positivism ("the supernatural is inadmissible, therefore it is useless taking it into consideration").

We do not claim to be specialists in the field. But we are convinced that, if we are to reach a proper estimation about Don Bosco's dreams, it is important to first of all hear the opinion of Don Bosco himself, and then that of those who lived with him. (Evidently this is not enough for the historian, but it is nevertheless a good starting point for any serious inquiry).

We will therefore quote from Don Bosco himself and from those who lived with him for many years. We refrain from touching up the text, even at the cost of clarity for those who are not familiar with the way of talking of the time.

The dream at the age of nine: Testimony of Don Bosco himself

"My granny was totally illiterate, but knew enough of theology to give the final sentence: 'You should not give credit to dreams.' I was of the same opinion; yet I could never free my mind from that dream. What I am going to write will give some meaning to all this" (*Memorie per l'oratorio* 25).

The dream of the church in the maize field: Testimony of Don Bosco himself

"This [dream] kept me busy practically the whole night, so many were the details that went with it. At the time I hardly understood its meaning, because I did not give it much credit, but as things kept happening I began to understand. In fact later, together with another dream, it helped me as a guideline for my decisions" (*Memorie per l'oratorio* 136).

The testimony of Don Bosco as reported by Fr Lemoyne

"At first, I was slow to give these dreams the credit they deserved. I often attributed them to tricks of my imagination. While narrating the dreams, predicting deaths or events of the future, I often felt uncertain, not trusting myself to have understood and fearing to tell lies. On some occasions I confessed to Father Cafasso about this my hazardous way speaking. He listened to me, thought for a while, and then said: 'Since what you say comes true, you can be at peace and continue as you have done so far.' But it was only years later, when young Casalegno died, and I saw his coffin resting on two chairs in the porch exactly as I had seen in the dream, that I overcame my doubts and began to believe firmly that those dreams were messages of God to me." (MB 5:376 = BM 5:242-43).

The testimony of Fr Lemoyne

"Up to the year 1880 or so, Don Bosco, in narrating his dreams, had never used the word 'visions'. But with me during the last years, though he was never the first to mention the word, he would nevertheless assent to my usage of it in our confidential conversations" (MB 17:12 = BM 17:xv).

The testimony of Fr Berto, Don Bosco's secretary for over 20 years

“He predicted, long before it happened, the death of almost all the young people who died in the Oratory, describing the time and circumstances in detail. On a couple of occasions he clearly brought it to the notice of the boy. Often he would get a good companion to keep an eye on him. Sometimes he would mention the initials of the boy's name in public. These predictions, as far as I remember, were always fulfilled. There were some very rare exceptions, but these were such as to strengthen the opinion about Don Bosco's prophetic powers. I, Fr Berto, write these things, having seen them and heard them myself” (MB 5:387 = BM 5:250).

Fr Ceria's opinion

This biographer of Don Bosco, who compiled the last nine volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs*, and who had joined the congregation three years before the death of Don Bosco, classifies the dreams of Don Bosco into three categories in his introduction to vol. 17:

—Dreams that are just dreams (like those we have because of bad digestion): strictly speaking these should not appear in Don Bosco's biographies. Some were included in the *Biographical Memoirs* to try and give us as many elements as possible about the life of Don Bosco.

—Dreams which were not dreams but real visions, which took place in broad daylight, like the revelation about the future of young John Cagliero.

—Dreams of the night, revealing obscure or future events.

It is difficult, however, says Fr Ceria, to distinguish between the three categories. Once, we do not know when, Don Bosco dreamt of finding himself in St Peter's Basilica, up in the niche under the cornice on the right side of the central nave, right above the bronze statue of St Peter and the mosaic medallion of Pius IX. He is not able to explain how he got there. He wants to come down. He calls out, he shouts, but no one answers. At last, overcome by anguish, he awakes. A dream caused by bad digestion, one might say. But anybody who looks at that niche in St Peter's today in 1936—continues Ceria—sees there the huge statue of Don Bosco sculpted by Canonica. And then he must conclude that it had nothing to do with bad digestion.

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FR RUA: FROM MIRABELLO TO THE INAUGURATION OF THE SHRINE

The parish priest of Mirabello, in the diocese of Casale Monferrato, wanted a boarding school in his territory. He invited Don Bosco, who accepted after making doubly sure that he would be master in his own house, and that the institution would be chiefly for boys who aspired to become priests.

Don Bosco had just launched into the work of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, yet he went out of his way to make sure that the new foundation would be a success. Bishop Calabiana of Casale, who had very few vocations in his diocese, gave his full consent. The house would be known as the ‘Minor Seminary.’

In the autumn of 1863, Don Bosco called Rua and told him:

“I am going to ask of you a big sacrifice. We have been asked to open a minor seminary at Mirabello, in Monferrato. I want to send you there as rector. It is the first house the Salesians are opening outside Turin. A thousand eyes will be following us to see how we manage. I have full faith in you. I will give you all the confreres you need to make sure that the house has a good start.”

Fr Rua was 26. Don Bosco carefully studied with him the list of Salesians who would form part of the new foundation. They chose the seminarians Provera, Bonetti, Cerruti, Albera, Dalmazzo and Cuffia.

For the boys too they worked out a formula which would ensure good results from the very beginning. Some of the best boys of the Oratory of Turin would go to Mirabello to act as ‘good leaven’ among the 90 boys accepted for the first year.

Four Pages That Look Like a Testament

Fr Rua left for Mirabello after the feast of the rosary. He carried with him four pages of precious advice that Don Bosco had written for him.

Peter Stella says of those four pages: “They have the value of a codex or a testament. Don Bosco reproduces in them the whole gamut of his preoccupations as a father, educator and priest whose sole aim is the salvation of souls.”

Don Bosco himself realized that he had succeeded in tracing, in those lines, one of the best syntheses of his ‘educative system,’ so much so that he would later rewrite them (with some changes and additions) for all Salesian rectors, with the title *Confidential Memoranda to Rectors*.

What follows is a brief synthesis of these reminders.

Here I am, speaking to you with the voice of a tender father who opens his heart to one of his most cherished sons.

For yourself:

- Let nothing disturb you.
- Avoid mortification in food. Every night take at least six hours of sleep.
- Celebrate Holy Mass and recite your breviary with piety, devotion and attention.
- Every morning, some meditation; during the day, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.
- Try to make yourself loved rather than feared. When you give orders and when you admonish, let it be known that you are trying to help and not merely following a whim. When prevention of sin is at issue, be ready to put up with anything.
- Before deciding in matters of importance, give it some serious thought.
- Whenever you receive a report about somebody, try to get a clear idea of the whole thing before arriving at a judgment.

With the teachers:

- See that you have frequent talks with them. When you see some need, try your best to meet it.
- Let them avoid special friendships and partiality.

With the assistants:

- Keep in touch with them in order to hear their opinion about the conduct of the boys. Let them be punctual at their posts. Let them spend the recreations with the boys.

With the young students:

- Never accept pupils who have been dismissed from other **boarding schools** or whom you know from other sources to be of immoral behaviour.
- Try your level best to spend recreation time with the boys; whisper a kind word to them privately, as you will know how, whenever you see the need. This is the great secret of becoming master of their hearts.
- Try to start the sodality of the Immaculate Conception.

With outsiders:

- Let charity and good manners be the distinctive trait of a rector, whether with residents or with outsiders.
- If material interests are at stake, be as accommodating as possible, even with some loss, for the sake of charity.
- In spiritual or moral matters, let everything be resolved for the greater glory of God and the good of souls. Towards this end, everything must be sacrificed: commitments, pettiness, vengeful desires, love of self, reason, claims, and even

honour itself.

And here are the principal ‘additions’ made by Don Bosco when he rewrote these lines as *Confidential Memoranda to Rectors*:

- Never order your subjects to do things beyond their strength or harmful to health.
- Raise your heart briefly to God before taking any decision.
- Make yourself loved by the pupils and get to know them by spending as much time with them as possible.
- Entrust unpleasant and disciplinary actions to others.
- Make it a point to foster the talents of each one, entrusting to each preferably those tasks that he likes best.
- Economy in everything, but let nothing be wanting to the sick.
- Study, time and experience have made me realize that gluttony, greed and vainglory were the ruin of very flourishing congregations and of respectable religious orders. The passage of time will teach you truths which, at the moment, may seem incredible.

Don Bosco’s ‘Word in the Ear’

One of Don Bosco’s suggestions to Don Rua was, “Whisper a kind word to them privately.” This ‘word in the ear’ was, according to his pupils, one of the secrets of his educational system. Fr Lemoyne tried to make a collection of these ‘little words’ by asking those who had been with Don Bosco during their formative years. Here are some of them.

“How are you? What about your soul?”

“I have something very important at hand and you must help me. Do you know what that is? It is the job of helping you to be good.”

“When will you begin to be my consolation?”

“When will you help me to break the tentacles of the devil with a good confession?”

“Shall we become friends in the things of the soul?”

“Are you afraid that the Lord is annoyed with you? Go to the Madonna.”

“Heaven is not for the lazy.”

“Pray, pray well, and you will be saved.”

“You are in a storm? Invoke the Madonna, she is the star of the sea.”

“Think of God’s judgment.”

“Don’t rely too much on your own strength.”

“Think of God. You’ll be better and happier.”

“If you help me, I’ll make you happy in this life and in the next.”

“If you help me, I’ll make of you another St Aloysius.”

“He who perseveres to the end will be saved.”

“Work, work, we shall rest in heaven.”

“Don’t give up! A piece of paradise will settle everything!”

A Mother and Much Work

It was Don Bosco's idea that the mother of Rua should go with him to Mirabello. It was a thoughtful gesture on his part. She continued there her job of looking after the boys' clothes, but above all, she acted as a calming and stabilizing influence in the inevitable moments of dejection that befell her son.

There were some initial difficulties created by the lack of teaching qualifications, but soon the Salesians showed excellent results, especially in the promotion of priestly vocations. Fr Rua was the one behind it all. A chronicler writes admiringly: "Don Rua at Mirabello is like Don Bosco at Turin." This went on for two years.

At the beginning of 1865, the Society had 80 members, 11 of whom were priests. Of the seminarians sent to Mirabello with Rua, 2 were ordained priests, Bonetti and Provera. In Turin, besides Don Bosco and Fr Alasonatti, there were 6 other priests: Cagliero, Savio, Francesia, Ruffino, Ghivarello and Durando.

Yet this year would be one of severe trials for the young society. In the space of a few months, five of the first Salesians would be knocked out of action, the number of boarders would cross 700, and the shrine would swallow huge sums, pushing Fr Rua to the limits of endurance.

The Picture of the Help of Christians

For months, Don Bosco's mind was obsessed with the thought of the big picture of the Help of Christians which would dominate the sanctuary. He had entrusted the execution to the painter Lorenzone, trying to tell him all that he wanted to see in that picture.

"On high, Our Lady among the angels; around, the apostles, the prophets, the virgins, the confessors. On the lower part, the peoples of the earth with hands raised towards her, asking for help."

Lorenzone let him finish and then asked:

"And where will you place the picture?"

"In the new church, of course."

"And do you think the church will hold it? And where shall I find a hall in which to paint it? To find a place for a picture of that size, we would have to use Piazza Castello!"

Don Bosco had to agree that the painter was right. He agreed that around Our Lady, only the apostles and evangelists would be painted, and at the bottom the Oratory.

Lorenzone rented a hall with a high ceiling in Palazzo Madama and set to work. It would take him three years. He succeeded in giving to the face of Our Lady an expression both maternal and of extraordinary sweetness. A priest from the Oratory had this to say:

One day I entered the studio in order to see the picture. Lorenzone was on a ladder intent on giving the last touches to the face of Our Lady. He did not hear me enter. After a while he stopped working, came down from the ladder and began observing. Suddenly, he saw me. He caught me by the arm and guided me to a place of full light:

"See how beautiful she is!" he said to me. "It is not my work. No, it is not I who paint. There is another hand that guides me. Tell Don Bosco that the picture will be very beautiful." He was enthralled beyond words. Then he resumed his work.

“When the picture was taken to the shrine and hoisted in place,” Fr Lemoyne writes, “Lorenzone fell on his knees and began crying like a child.”

The Departure of Alasonatti and the Return of Rua

On the morning of 8 October, the seminarian Cibrario arrived at the Oratory from Lanzo. He brought the sad news that Fr Alasonatti, who had gone there to convalesce, had died during the night. He gave Don Bosco a letter from him. Fr Alasonatti had spent the last eleven years of his life toiling away silently among bills, receipts, heaps of documents and papers. Of late he had often spent sleepless nights. On entering the Oratory he had asked for heaven, and he had truly earned it. In September he had suffered severely from an ulcer in the throat.

Moved with emotion, Don Bosco spoke to the boys. Alasonatti had been a brother to him. It was a very severe blow for the Oratory.

Fr Rua was busy planning for the new academic year at Mirabello, when he received a message from Turin brought by Fr Provera:

“Don Bosco wants you at the Oratory. Fr Bonetti will take over the direction of the college. Come as soon as possible.”

Fr Provera remembers: “Don Rua was writing at his desk. Without a moment of hesitation, without asking a question or seeking an explanation, he stood up, took his breviary and said: ‘I am ready.’” He left his mother at Mirabello till a substitute could be found to look after the boys’ laundry.

At Turin, Don Bosco told him matter-of-factly:

“You have played Don Bosco at Mirabello; now you have to do it here.”

He put everything into his hands: the workshops with 350 apprentices, the building of the shrine, the publication of the *Catholic Readings* (12,000 subscribers), even the task of reading and responding to most of Don Bosco’s letters.

Mornings Consumed by Audiences

By now, Don Bosco’s mornings were consumed by audiences.

Fr Lemoyne writes: “Such audiences had begun from the very beginning, that is, in 1846. Up to 1858, Don Bosco could still leave the house at about 10.00 or 11.00 a.m. But from 1860, visitors had become so numerous that he was compelled to stay in his room from 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. This went on right up to his last illness. At the death of Fr Cafasso, he became, so to say, the heir of his spirit. Whatever was going on in the city, anything good, any new initiatives, at whatever social level, everything found its way to Don Bosco.”

Fr Cagliero adds: “I always saw many people coming to visit him. They came for a prayer, for a blessing, for advice regarding some good undertaking, to bring some help for his boys, sometimes even just to see him and speak to him. There were ordinary people, but also authorities, ministers, rectors of seminaries and bishops.”

A lawyer who visited Don Bosco many times had this to say: “He certainly had many urgent things to attend to, yet he would never show impatience or any desire to cut short an interview. He was respectful, good-natured, and affectionate. I’ve often heard people saying: how good is Don Bosco at dealing with people.”

Fr Joaquim Berto, his secretary, often heard him consoling sick people, helping them as they entered: “The Lord is our good father. He will never allow us to be tried beyond our strength.” If they recounted to him the good works they had done, he would say: “God does not forget anything. He will repay you abundantly in paradise. He is the best master of all.”

Fr Dalmazzo recalls: “Once a very rich merchant came to see him. He had come just out of curiosity. I saw him leaving, all confused. He kept saying: ‘What a man, what an extraordinary man!’ I asked him what he had heard from Don Bosco. He replied: ‘I’ve heard from him words you never hear from other priests. As I was taking leave he said: Let’s see that one day, you with all your money and I with my poverty might both find ourselves together in paradise.’”

De Amicis Sees the Statue on the Dome

In 1866 the work on the shrine reached the dome and came to a standstill. Funds were exhausted. After a few days of hesitation, Don Bosco ordered that the dome be substituted with a simple vault. The contractor Buzzetti and Fr Savio, the administrator, were both painfully surprised: without the dome, the church would lose much of its beauty. They decided to wait a month, finishing other details in the meantime, hoping that Don Bosco would change his mind. One day Senator Cotta appeared on the spot:

“Is it true that you want to abolish the dome?”

“Nobody wants to abolish anything but we have no money, and we have to enclose the building before winter sets in.”

“Go ahead with the original plan. The means will not be wanting.”

And he added, turning to Don Bosco:

“The Lord is already giving me the hundredfold of what I do out of love for him.”

The construction of the dome went ahead as planned. On 23 September, a Sunday, Don Bosco climbed the scaffolding with the help of a boy and placed the final stone that closed the last ring of bricks.

In 1867 a big statue of Our Lady was placed on the dome. Don Bosco gives the details: “The statue is four metres tall. The head bears a halo of twelve stars. It is of gold plated copper. It can be seen shining from very far when the rays of the sun strike it. It looks as if she were about to speak and say: I am here to listen to the prayers of my children, and to fill with graces and blessings all those who love me.”

Valdocco, together with Borgo Dora, continued to be the periphery of the city, poor and often squalid. It contained fallow fields, the houses and barracks of the poor, the great Cottolengo, the Institutions of Marchioness Barolo, and the Oratory of Don Bosco.

On their outings towards the countryside, the well-to-do still passed that way.

One of these was Edmund de Amicis, the fashionable Italian writer of the time. In his book *La Città* he describes Valdocco: “The dreary sadness of that quarter is matched by the fields that surround it, flat and silent, especially in winter. But above the houses and snow-covered fields, already immersed in the bluish shades of evening, one thing still shines, touched by the last rays of the sun: the gilt statue of Mary Help of Christians, standing tall on its solitary church, with the hands stretched out towards the Alps.”

When ‘Mad Prophecies’ Came True

The Shrine of Mary Help of Christians was consecrated on 9 June 1868.

At 10.30 a.m. Archbishop Riccardi of Turin went up to the main altar for the first Mass in the shrine. Immediately after him followed Don Bosco, assisted by Frs Francesia and Lemoyne. The church was packed with 1,200 boys.

It was a moment of intense emotion for all. The ‘mad prophecies’ of Don Bosco had become a reality before the eyes of all. The “big and beautiful church” had arisen like a miracle “in the field sown with maize and potatoes.” Around the dome was the white band “in which in capital letters was written: *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea.*” The altar “was surrounded by an immense number of boys.”

Somebody said all this aloud to Don Bosco in the course of the day, as if to repay him for all the humiliations he had to swallow through the years. With simplicity he answered: “I am not the author of these great achievements. It is the Lord and Mary Most Holy who deigned to make use of a poor priest in order to accomplish all this. Every stone in this building is a grace of the Madonna.”

Two days later, the *Unità Cattolica* of Turin carried a report of the consecration. One sentence caught the eye of Don Bosco and pleased him very much: “The church was built by the poor and for the poor.”

That day of great rejoicing did not make Don Bosco lose his head. Even had he suffered that temptation, the sharp difficulties that arose the very day after the festivities would have taken it away. He wrote in those days: “The weight of the bread bill is unbearable. Between Turin, Mirabello and Lanzo [the third boarding school, founded in 1864], every month we have to pay 12,000 *lire* for bread alone.”

Fr Rua Collapses

The person who had silently borne the heaviest weight during this hectic time was Fr Rua. For a whole month he did not sleep more than three or four hours a night. The excessive work drained him of all his energies.

On 29 June he collapsed. He literally fell into the arms of a friend at the door of the Oratory. He was taken to his room and the doctor was called in. The diagnosis was alarming: it was an attack of peritonitis, and the disease was already far advanced.

Don Bosco was away, but was sent for immediately. He returned towards evening. When he arrived, he found the sacristy full of boys waiting to confess to him. He was strangely cheerful, and did not seem worried at all.

“Come at once to see Fr Rua,” said Fr Savio to Don Bosco. “Any moment may be his last.”

“Impossible, Rua will never go away without my permission. I have to hear the confessions of the boys now.”

He heard confessions till it was quite late. Then, instead of going up to the infirmary, he went for supper. Around him there was a tense silence. No one could understand why Don Bosco, always so attentive and caring towards the sick, showed himself so unbending towards his chief collaborator.

After supper Don Bosco went up to his own room to keep his bag, and only then went to see Rua. Rua was really very sick, he had broken into a cold sweat. On seeing Don Bosco he murmured:

“If my time has come, please tell me. I’m not afraid to die.”

“Die?” Don Bosco exclaimed. “Dear Rua, I don’t want that, do you hear me? I don’t want you to die. How could I manage without you? We still have plenty of work to do, and you speak of dying!” He saw the little container of Holy Oils on the bedside table and laughed: “Who is the good fellow who wants to anoint Rua?”

“That’s me,” answered Fr Savio.

“You are a bunch of people of little faith. Be of good heart, Rua. Look, even if I were to throw you out of the window, you wouldn’t die. And now take these oils away and leave him in peace.”

After three weeks, Rua was on his feet, cured. Six weeks of convalescence, and he was back on the playground with the boys. He could not run about yet, but he was able to play marbles with the younger ones.

In August 1876, after supper, a Salesian asked Don Bosco a pointed question:

“Is it true that several Salesians have died of overwork?”

“If it were true,” Don Bosco answered, “it would have been far from being a loss for our congregation. But it is not true. There is only one who could deserve the accolade of martyr of work: Fr Rua. But for our sakes, may God keep him strong and vigorous.”

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A NEW PHASE FOR THE SALESIANS

From the moment Don Bosco begins the construction of the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, one has the impression that he is cocooning himself in his works, untouched by the unfolded of events all around him.

It would seem that a 'Salesian history' is evolving, independently of the world's history, with its own stages, successes, and private battles: the foundation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the departure of the first missionaries, the establishment of the cooperators, the dignified but bitter struggle with the hierarchy of Turin for the independence of the congregation, the enervating Roman manoeuvres for the approval of the Salesian Constitutions.

The History outside the Gate

It would be a mistake, however, to give in to the impression that Don Bosco was isolating himself. Italy was continuing its laborious march towards unification. There were clashes between church authorities and political authorities. The unofficial history too rolled on, with its workers' struggles, massive waves of emigration, and the movement of the masses towards better education and culture. All these are intricately interwoven with the work of Don Bosco, giving it direction and bringing it new sensitivities.

For these reasons, it would seem dangerous and superficial to ignore the major events taking place outside the gate of the Oratory.

After the death of Cavour (6 June 1861), the government would be headed, for 15 years, by a group of persons who would become known as the 'historical right.' These persons had grown alongside Cavour and learnt the political game from him, but they lacked his spark of his genius. They were the Piedmontese politicians Sella, Lanza and Rattazzi; the Lombards Jacini and Visconti Venosta; Minghetti and Farini from Emilia; Ricasoli and Peruzzi from Tuscany; and Spaventa and Massari from the south. They had the mentality and the interests of the rich bourgeoisie and of the agrarian aristocracy.

As far as the church was concerned, they stood solidly for Cavour's separation of church and state, but did not fail to hit out hard at clergy and bishops suspected of standing for the rights of the pope.

Opposed to the 'historical right' was the 'left.' This 'left' was quite different from what we understand today by the 'left': its members also came from the aristocracy and the rich bourgeoisie. (Out of 22 million Italians, the right to vote belonged to about 400,000, and only half of these bothered to exercise it).

Crispi, Depretis, Bertani, the most outstanding members of the left, had a program of moderate democratic reforms (widening of the right to vote) and a more decisive anticlerical

attitude.

Even before the occupation of Lazio and the three Venetian provinces, Italy was reaching a population of 22 million. Of these, 80% did not know to read or write. There were only 6,500 university students. 70% of the population resided in the countryside and cultivated the land. Only 18% were employed in industry. The biggest industrial complex was the Ansaldo in Liguria with about 1000 workers. There were about 2000 kilometres of railways. The Italian mercantile fleet was the third largest in the world, after England and France.

Struggle against Brigands and Emigration

In 1861, the war against brigands broke out in southern Italy, perhaps the saddest and most painful page in Italian history. These 'brigands' were in some cases bands of armed men who had remained faithful to the Bourbons, but for the most part they were merely groups of outlaws who lived by extortion and plunder. "The awakening of this phenomenon," writes Francesco Traniello, "was a clear condemnation of the politics of the liberal right. In many parts of the south, national unification was felt as an imposition from above, a kind of 'conquest' in fact."

The politicians of the right entertained a deep-rooted contempt for the south: "You call that Italy?" Farini wrote in 1861. "It is Africa. The Bedouins, compared to them, seem to be paragons of civilization." They fought the brigands, therefore, without bothering to confront the root causes of the phenomenon: the illiteracy that plagued 90% of the population, the poverty of ages, and the desperate rebellion of the peasants against a state which had imposed heavy taxes and was taking away the youth by means of compulsory military service.

The campaign against the brigands amounted to a real war, carried out with an army of 120,000 men, with battles, sieges, military tribunals and executions.

More than 5000 brigands were killed in the five years between 1860 and 1865. The war was won, but the problems of the south remained. The people of the south, oppressed and humiliated, began the sad phenomenon called the 'emigration.' "During the years following 1861," wrote Michael Marotta, "emigration in Italy became a mass phenomenon, with an average of 123,000 persons leaving every year. After 1876, it would touch the figure of half a million a year."

Don Bosco, sending his first missionaries to Argentina, would say to them: "Look after these brethren of ours who have been driven abroad by poverty and misfortune."

Guerilla Warfare in Turin

In 1862, the friction between the Italian state and the Holy See for the possession of Rome aggravated. Garibaldi, with the tacit consent of Rattazzi, abandoned his exile at Caprera, landed at Palermo, and began preparing an expedition for the conquest of Lazio and the city of Rome. Taken aback, however, by the violent reactions of Napoleon III and of Italian Catholics, the government in Turin decided to intervene by sending regular troops to stop Garibaldi who had already landed in Calabria.

On 29 August, at the foot of Aspromonte, the *bersaglieri* of colonel Pallavicini wounded and captured Garibaldi.

On 15 September 1864 Italy signed a treaty with Napoleon. The emperor agreed to withdraw the troops he had sent to defend the pope, and the Italian government agreed to respect the pope's authority over Rome. As a sign of goodwill it agreed to transfer the capital of the kingdom from Turin to Florence.

As soon as this became known in Turin, the city exploded. On 20 September a 6000 strong crowd gathered in Piazza Castello to the cries of "Down with the king! Long live the republic!"

On the following day, the threatening crowd gathered again in Piazza San Carlo, this time against the paper *Gazzetta del Popolo*. Suddenly, from the roads leading to the square, squadrons of guards descended on the people with swords drawn, killing and maiming. The crowd dispersed, only to reassemble a few hours later to attack the police headquarters.

In Piazza Castello, meanwhile, a peaceful demonstration was going on. But nerves were on edge. A squadron of police received orders to open fire upon the crowd. Ten people were killed. The crowd went berserk: the offices of the *Gazzetta* were wrecked, the shops of arms dealers looted. The people were armed now. The minister of the interior, fearing a revolution, brought 28,000 soldiers and 100 cannons into the city. The artillery took its stand on the Monte dei Cappuccini, with guns trained on the centre of the city.

On the evening of 21 September, Don Bosco gathered all his boys under the porticos and prayed for Turin and its people.

On the following day, 22 September, trouble started again by 9.30 a.m. The *carabinieri* on guard at the police headquarters were pelted with stones. Two were gravely injured. Their companions lost their calm and began firing, leaving 26 people dead.

The king asked for the resignation of the government. General La Marmora was named the new prime minister. Order was re-established, but the capital was shifted in haste to Florence

The people of Turin felt betrayed.

A Religious Crisis

But the pope also felt betrayed. Seeing himself bereft of the military protection of Napoleon III, Pius IX hardened his anti-liberal stance. With a document called *The Syllabus of Errors*, he proclaimed a wholesale condemnation of all 'modern doctrines'. In the last lines of the document the pope denied that "the church could and should come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern culture."

Together with many Catholic groups, the pope was frightened by the grave religious crisis which seemed to be changing the face of the world.

Traniello writes: "The new ranks of managers and business leaders were more interested in reading stock exchange lists than the Bible. The new proletarian masses, uprooted from their surroundings and exploited, were more inclined to class struggles than to the practice of the beatitudes. They had left the countryside for the city, many had been compelled to change trade or occupation, new conditions of life had emerged, the old social fabric had dissolved. All these provoked profound changes in ways of thinking and drew people away from the influence of parish priests and pastors. All this looked like a rejection of Catholic principles, an abandonment or watering down of Christian practice, and above all a rebellion against ecclesiastical authorities which had remained tied to a bygone era."

This critical situation, which would worsen and reach its peak with the conquest of

the city of Rome by Italian troops in 1870, led Catholics to a siege mentality. They organized themselves into 'a state within the state.' To save their own values and form the new generations in a Christian climate, Catholics created, alongside the anticlerical state institutions, their own 'Catholic' mutual aid societies, 'Catholic' people's banks, 'Catholic' insurance companies, and 'Catholic' schools, boarding schools and colleges for the education of their own children.

Don Bosco was fully immersed in this period of Italian history. He dedicated a good part of his energies to the opening of Catholic schools and **hospices**, up to the point of introducing his congregation into a new phase: that of the boarding schools. We shall deal with this a little later.

The Non-Official History of the Workers

Side by side with the official history of Italy, other events took place, often ignored by texts dealing with the 'great' history.

These were years of great suffering for the poor. The workers of Piedmont laboured 12 hours a day in factories, on starvation wages, without security or insurance of any sort. The farmers, who formed the overwhelming majority as we have already pointed out, still used to bring their 10 or 12 year old sons to the market places in March to hire them out to landowners. This was already happening at the time of Johnny Bosco, and would go on for many years more (in some villages of Puglia it was still happening in 1979). The girls took great care of their hair. They would have it cut and sold on reaching their eighteenth birthday. It would bring the biggest part of the money set aside for the *trousseau*.

From Piedmont too, where workers had absolutely no legal protection, many migrated: temporarily to France and Switzerland, permanently to America.

In 1864, the First International was born in London. At first it was a blend of three currents: English Syndicalism, which aimed at gradually improving the conditions of the workers and training them to participate in political life; the followers of the French Socialist Proudhon, who were opposed to the class struggle and Marxist communism, and tried to organize 'workers' cooperatives' to gradually undermine capitalism; and the Mazzinians, who had already opened 450 'workers' societies' in Italy, with 120,000 members.

Gradually, this International would be dominated by Marx, who would purge it of all his opponents and impose communism.

In the same year, Bishop Ketteler of Mainz published *The Workers' Question and Christian Thought*. It was the program of the robust social Catholicism of Germany. The bishop advocated the intervention of the state with a clear legislation on work and social security. The law had to guarantee minimum wages, limit the hours of work, provide a weekly holiday, forbid work to women and children, provide social security, and give importance once again to the intermediary social institutions between the individual and the state such as the family, municipalities, local bodies and free associations.

Prodded by such movements and by the insistent struggles of the workers, some progress was made during these years. The French government of Napoleon III granted the workers the right to strike in 1864. In 1866, the German government under Bismarck extended the right to vote to all individuals. For the first time, workers could send their representatives to parliament. In 1866 the Belgian government, ceding to the strong pressure

of Catholic associations, granted the formation of the first workers' unions. The same happened in Austria, 1870, England, 1876, and France, 1884.

On 1 May 1866 began also the 'international campaign' to reduce the workday to 8 hours. During that year 5000 strikes took place and innumerable manifestations. Everywhere they were severely repressed by the police and army. In Chicago there were many deaths, and the organizers of the workers' manifestations were hanged.

Towards the end of the century almost all the European states reduced the workday to 10 hours. The employment of boys under 13 as fulltime workers was forbidden, norms were laid for accidents during work, hygiene and the weekly rest. Between 1883 and 1889, under pressure by the Catholics of the 'Centre' and the socialists of Lasalle, the German government introduced compulsory insurance covering accidents, illness and old age. Germany was quickly followed by Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium and Italy.

A 'Tax on Hunger'

In 1868 the Italian peasantry, already desperately poor, were hit by an iniquitous new tax, the so-called 'tax on flour'. The grinding of all grain and cereals was heavily taxed, putting an unbearable burden on the poorest, those living on bread and *polenta*. There followed a wave of serious uprisings throughout the country. "Against all who revolted, some of them at the cry of 'Long live the pope' and 'Long live Austria'," writes Francesco Traniello, "the army was called out once again, causing hundreds of casualties. The government refused to budge on the 'tax on hunger'."

For the Oratory and the other houses of Don Bosco, where the boys were demolishing mountains of loaves, the tax on flour meant a great increase in expenditure. "What we spend on bread," wrote Don Bosco in those months, "drives us to desolation."

Birth of the 'Salesian Boarding School'

Beginning from 1863 when he opened the minor seminary at Mirabello, Don Bosco began getting requests from various parts of Italy to open, not oratories but boarding-schools. He accepted, but made sure that with every boarding school there was also an oratory.

In this way, the Salesian Congregation found itself involved, in the space of a few years, in running numerous schools imparting elementary, secondary and technical education.

We ask: how is it that the Salesians of Don Bosco, born in an oratory, became almost overnight 'specialists in running boarding schools for the sons of the people?'

We have already hinted at the motives in the foregoing pages. Here we attempt a more complete explanation following Peter Stella:

The flowering of Catholic boarding schools and their multiplication is proper to the second half of the nineteenth century, when politics and legislation in Piedmont and Italy came to be based on liberal foundations. There was a deep split between 'legal Italy' made up of the ruling liberal political class, and 'real Italy' made up of large layers of the Catholic opposition and other forces which were still in development, such as socialism. One result was the aconfessional and indeed

anticlerical orientation of the Italian **public** schools, and the fierce opposition to the teaching of religion in them. Catholics, who were forbidden to participate in public politics but not administration, reacted by organizing their own associations of all sorts: religious associations, mutual aid societies, people's banks, insurance companies, and *private boarding schools for the education of their children*. Their support lay mainly in the peasants, the working class, and the lower middle class; thus they were almost a society of their own within the larger civil society.

This explains how, from that year 1863, we witness a multiplication of boarding schools, hospices, trade schools, agricultural schools, and seminaries, either opened by or administered by Salesians, and their preference for the boarding schools... The Salesian boarding school provided a massive contribution of young recruits to the Catholic forces in Italy and in the world.⁵⁰

“Educate Poor Youth”

The houses for young artisans were called hospices, to stress the point that they were meant only and exclusively for orphaned and abandoned boys. The houses for students were called boarding schools; these too were to be clearly for the poor. This was always the explicit desire of Don Bosco.

In the evening of 7 March 1869, Don Bosco, just back from Rome, shared with his Salesians some recommendations of Pius IX: “Aim always at helping the poor sons of the common people. Educate poor youth and avoid boarding **schools** for the rich and noble. Keep your fees modest and try not to raise them. Do not undertake to administer rich establishments. If you educate the poor, and if you are poor, you will be left in peace to do your good work.”⁵¹

Salesian houses developed, in fact, along these lines, not only during the first years but later too. In 1875, Don Bosco could write: “At Alassio, Varazze, Sampierdarena, we have closed the year with no savings at all.” In 1898, ten years after the death of Don Bosco, the Salesian institute of Bologna, directed by his ex-secretary, had 181 boarders. 49 were total orphans and paid nothing. Only 33 boys paid the full monthly fee of 25 *lire*. All the rest, 99 of them, paid, with difficulty, about half the regular fee. The house had an income of 23,000 *lire* and an expenditure of 46,000: a healthy deficit of 100%.

The First Five Boarding Schools

In 1864 the boarding **school** of Lanzo was opened. Don Bosco appointed Fr Ruffino as rector. Fr Ruffino was 24 years of age, and he was given 7 seminarians to help him. Poverty and squalor were the main companions of the first months. The seminarian Sala, who would one day become economer of the congregation, wrote: “The walls were bare, and had collapsed in some places. There were neither chairs nor tables. Givone, our cook, prepared our food and we ate it on a door resting on two trestles. The windows were without panes. We boarded them up somehow with old blankets and towels and slept on straw....”

During the first year the boarders were only 37, together with an unruly horde of day-scholars. In March, the seminarian Provera fell dangerously ill and had to be given

⁵⁰ P. Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work* 126-127.

⁵¹ MB 9:566 = BM 9:263.

complete rest; the cause was exhaustion. In July, the young rector died of tuberculosis. The house went on, run by the remaining six seminarians. “And how we worked,” remarked Fr Sala. “We didn’t want it to be said that the boarding school was a failure because it was run only by us seminarians.”

The following year, Fr Lemoyne went there as rector and things began to improve.

In 1870, the boarding school at Alassio was opened. The rector was Fr Cerruti, 26 years old.

In 1871 a hospice was opened at Marassi; a year later it was shifted to Sampierdarena (Genoa). The rector was Fr Albera; he too was 26. The house began with three workshops for ‘poor and abandoned boys.’ But alongside the professional schools, Don Bosco wanted a section for boys who were thinking of becoming priests.

In 1871 again, twenty Salesians enter the *Collegio Civico* of Varazze, led by Fr Francesia, one of the very first pupils of Don Bosco. These Salesians had been running a boarding school at Cherasco for three years, but had eventually to give up.

Don Bosco came to visit Varazze and spoke to a huge crowd who applauded him. “To feed my boys,” he told them smiling, “I do not need people who clap hands in the air, but people who put their hands in their pockets. If at lunch time I can only clap my hands, what will happen to my poor boys?”

In 1872, Don Bosco accepted the boarding school of Valsalice for boys of the aristocracy.

It was a difficult moment for the congregation. A group of seven priests belonging to the archdiocese of Turin had opened a boarding school for the sons of the nobility on the hill of Valsalice, but the finances had gone awry. The new archbishop of Turin, Msgr Gastaldi, whose relations with the Salesians were already rather tense, called Don Bosco and obliged him to accept the boarding school. Don Bosco did not want to hear of it. Some years before he had said: “This, never! Never, as long as I am alive! It would be our ruin!” But the archbishop was adamant and was ready to command under obedience.

Don Bosco submitted the proposal to the young chapter of the society. All were against it. He went to Lanzo to ask Fr Lemoyne’s advice and the answer was: “Refuse! Didn’t you tell us repeatedly that to accept schools for the nobility would be our ruin, and that we must always and everywhere work only for the poor?”

At the end, in order to avoid an open clash with the ecclesiastical authority, Don Bosco accepted. For five years that boarding school was a heavy burden on the congregation. The pupils were few and the expenses enormous. The Oratory of Valdocco had to step in with heavy contributions. Don Bosco was bitter: “Now it is the poor who feed the rich!”

Finally, in 1887, having bought the place at a huge sum of 130,000 *lire*, Don Bosco replaced the rich youngsters with his Salesian seminarians. A new board at the entrance announced the change: *Seminary for the Foreign Missions*. The problem of conscience was solved after a period of 15 years.

A Turning Point Which Indicates a Fundamental Principle

We stop here in our listing of new foundations. At the death of Don Bosco the houses of the congregation numbered 64, spread over six nations. The Salesians numbered 768.

Let us conclude what we have said so far about boarding schools.

From 1864 onwards, alongside the oratories and hospices we have the Salesian boarding schools.

The festive oratory (and daily where possible) continued being 'the main work of the congregation.' This is confirmed by the constitutions of the society as well as by the practice of the Salesians. In the great foundations opening up in Italy, and that would soon open in so many working class neighbourhoods in Argentina, Spain and Brazil, the splendid bedlam of the oratory went on. The successors of Don Bosco would continue to insist: every Salesian institution must have an oratory.

But, beginning from 1864, Don Bosco became aware of a new need of the sons of the people: a need for serious schools of quality which would impart a solid Christian education. It was a turning point for the congregation: from the noisy bedlam of the Oratory, a growing number of Salesians made the shift to the orderly lines of the boarding schools.

Seeing that he did not hesitate to take this turn, it seems to us that Don Bosco had implicitly laid down a fundamental principle for his congregation:

The basic, unchangeable element of the Salesian mission is poor youth, the sons of the people. To them his Salesians will have to suit their activities with a quick and courageous reading of the signs and needs of the times. It is not poor youth who should adapt themselves to the Salesians and their works, but rather the Salesians and their works that must adapt themselves to the needs of the sons of the people.

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WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

On 24 June 1866 the Oratory celebrated the name feast of Don Bosco. The rectors of the first two Salesian houses, Mirabello and Lanzo, had also come. Fr Lemoyne, the rector of Lanzo writes:

The sun had gone down and there was a splendid moon in the sky. I went up to the room of Don Bosco and spent a couple of hours with him. From the playground there arose the festive noise of the boys. On the windows and balconies there were hundreds and hundreds of little lamps in coloured glasses. The band began its concert in the middle of the playground. Don Bosco and I drew near the window. The sight was enchanting. Don Bosco smiled. I broke the silence:

“Don Bosco, do you remember the first dreams? Here are the boys, the priests and the clerics promised by the Madonna. Twenty years have skipped by and we have never lacked for bread.”

“The Lord is good indeed,” Don Bosco answered. We fell back into a silence full of a thousand emotions. Then I spoke a second time:

“Don’t you think, Don Bosco, that there is one thing is missing in your work?”

“And what would that be?”

“Don’t you really want to do anything for girls? Don’t you feel that if we had an institute of sisters, founded by you, that would be a beautiful crowning of your work? The sisters could do so much for our boys. And they could do for girls what we are doing for boys.”

Don Bosco thought for a while and then said:

“This too will be done. We shall have the sisters, but not now. Later.”

Peter Stella is of the opinion that, for some time, Don Bosco nourished the hopes of associating to the Salesian Congregation the works of Marie Louise Angelica Clarac, a Sister of Charity who was working not far from the Oratory of St Aloysius.

If Don Bosco ever had this project in his mind, it was short-lived.

The meetings with two other people were, instead, decisive for Don Bosco: Fr Pestarino and Mary Domenica Mazzarello.

Typhoid, Witches and the Evil Eye

In the heat of the summer of 1860, typhoid broke out on the hills of Mornese. During the previous year, the second war of independence had already taken away some heads of families. And now typhoid, probably hatched in one of those wells where the water stagnates and becomes putrid, broke out to sow terror in that part of the province of Alessandria.

With the contagion, the old tales of witches and the evil eye were resurrected. Microbes, hygiene, disinfection were still unknown words.

Families with sick members were shunned by all. Those who were well closed their doors to all comers.

The Mazzarello family was one of the first to be affected. First the father got sick, then the mother, and then all the children. Within days the father and the eldest boy lay dying.

Fr Pestarino, known to all in Mornese as *previn* (the ‘little priest’—not only because he was small and but also because all liked him), visited them and realized that they were badly in need of someone to care for them. He went straight to the house of some relatives of theirs, also Mazzarello by name, and asked for Mary. She was a solid young girl of 23, who worked like a man and prayed like an angel.

“Two people are on their deathbed at your uncle’s place. Would you mind going there to give them a hand?”

There was a long silent pause. Mary was afraid, like anyone else. The ‘little priest’ waited calmly for her answer. At last Mary murmured:

“If my dad agrees, I will go.”

Her father was a no-nonsense Christian, how could he not agree? Mary entered the stricken home. Swiftly she set about restoring cleanliness and order. Medicines and hot food were ready at the prescribed times.

As the sick began to leave their beds, however, Mary caught the fever. The doctor looked at her once lovely oval face, now pallid and drawn, and shook his head. Death was near. He ordered more medicines. Mary, exhausted, said to him:

“Thanks, doctor, but please do not tell me to swallow any more pills. I have no more need of anything. Let God come and take me.”

But her hour had not yet come. She had still much work to do before God would come to take her.

Sharing a Secret with Petronilla

And so, without any medicines, one morning Mary found that the fever had left her. Colour returned to her wan face. But inside, she knew she was no more the same. The high fever had permanently damaged her robust fibre.

And now, what was she going to do? There was more than one suitor at the door. She had everything that made for a beautiful bride and a good mother. But Mary did not even want to talk of marriage. She kept asking herself: What shall I do with my life?

Mary Mazzarello had earlier become a member of the *Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate*. The idea of forming this group had come from the young teacher of the village, Angela Maccagno. At Fr Pestarino’s suggestion, she had written some regulations, which were subsequently sent to a well-known priest in Genoa, Fr Frassinetti. Using this draft, Fr Frassinetti had in 1855 composed the ‘Regulations of the Pious Union of

the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.’ The pious union had an unexpected success and in a short time spread throughout Italy.

Fr Pestarino was responsible for the foundation of the first pious union at Mornese on 9 December 1855. There were five members. Mary Mazzarello, 18, was the youngest.

Mary had a friend with whom she shared all her secrets. Her name was Petronilla. She was not only a Daughter of the Immaculate like her, but also had the same surname, Mazzarello. One day in 1861 Mary said to her:

“I have decided to learn cutting and stitching. After learning well, I shall open a small tailoring shop, and will teach the trade to poor girls. Would you like to join me? We shall live together, like one family.”

A year went by. Mary and Petronilla had opened a small tailoring shop on the outskirts of the village. About ten little girls used to go there to learn tailoring. Then the unexpected happened.

Four Frightened Eyes

It was a cold winter evening in 1863. The little girls had just gone home, plodding through the snow with their clogs, when Petronilla and Mary heard a knock. At the door there was a man with two little children. He was a pedlar, a widower with two girls. He begged Mary to keep his daughters. With his job he couldn’t look after them, especially at night. Four frightened eyes looked up. The bigger girl was 8 years old, the smaller one was 6. Petronilla took the first by the hand, while Mary lifted up the smaller one. They lit a big blaze in the fireplace, filling the house with warmth and light.

And so, without any precise plan, the little tailoring school became a home for poor girls. Mary and Petronilla begged the neighbours for a loan of two cots and some flour to make *polenta*.

The news soon spread in Mornese that the Mazzarellos were taking in orphan girls. Some came with firewood, others with blankets, and yet others with half a bag of flour. But they also brought other little girls in need of a home. In a very short time there were seven of them.

Before beginning their work, the girls would recite a Hail Mary. When the belfry clock struck, Mary would say, “One hour less in this world, one hour closer to heaven.” She wanted her little seamstresses to work for God: “Every stitch an act of love for God”.

Even on Sundays, Mary wanted “to do good to all the girls of the village.” The two friends would gather the girls, take them to church, help them pray and sing, and later keep them happy with games and outings. And so an oratory was born.

Fr Pestarino

Fr Dominic Pestarino was from Mornese. He had been ordained priest at the age of 22 in the seminary of Genoa. For some years he had worked in the seminary itself, but at the age of 30 he had gone back to his native place to help his aging parish priest. He introduced himself to his countrymen from the pulpit: “I am here looking for work. Not in your vineyards, but here in the church, in the vineyard of the Lord. I have received many offers of work, but I will stay here with you if you give me the work I am looking for.”

He first met Don Bosco in Genoa, at the house of Fr Frassinetti, and later on a train

from Aqui to Alessandria. Don Bosco invited him to pay him a visit at Valdocco.

The sight of so many boys running about happily, learning not only a trade but also the faith, delighted the little priest. He immediately told Don Bosco: "I want to stay here with you!" Don Bosco accepted him as a Salesian (Fr Pestarino made his vows the following year), but insisted that he go back to Mornese, where he was needed more urgently. Fr Pestarino thus became a Salesian and began to collaborate with Don Bosco. He also began attending the meetings of the Salesian rectors.

At Mornese, meanwhile, things were happening: two more Daughters of Mary Immaculate asked to join Mary and Petronilla. When asked for his opinion, Fr Pestarino agreed at once: "Why not?" he said. "You two are so busy, you can surely use some help." The four Daughters, as they were known in the village, taught tailoring to their pupils, and looked after their seven little boarders with motherly care.

In 1864, as we have seen in chapter 37, Don Bosco paid a visit to Mornese with his brass band and his boys. He stayed there five days. Mary Mazzarello listened to his conference to the Daughters of the Immaculate. She also managed to listen every evening to the 'good night' talk he gave his boys. Some chided her for this. Undeterred she answered: "Don Bosco is a saint. I feel it."

The next year, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate split into two groups. Those who decided to live with Mary and Petronilla were given better quarters near the church by Fr Pestarino, and kept the name of Daughters of Mary Immaculate. Others who, like Angelina Maccagno, preferred to live with their own families, adopted the name New Ursulines.

A Lost Notebook

The people of Mornese were working hard to build a boarding in that part of their village called Borgo Alto. Don Bosco has promised to send them Salesians to run it as soon as the building was ready. The whole village joined in, with money or with work.

In 1867 the chapel was ready and Don Bosco came to celebrate the first Mass. He invoked God's blessings on the new boarding **school** and on the people. He spent four days in the village and gave a special conference to the little group of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.

By 1869, Don Bosco felt that the time had come to start his 'second family.' He had set his eyes on the little group of Mornese. Quietly he sent Mary and Petronilla a little notebook "written in his own hand, containing a timetable and a small set of rules to help them live a more regular life."⁵²

The notebook has since been lost, but Sr Petronilla remembered its contents: "That they should live always in the presence of God; make use of frequent short prayers; cultivate a sweet, patient, amiable disposition; watch carefully over the girls and help them develop a simple, sincere spontaneous life of piety."⁵³

In 1870 Don Bosco went once again to Mornese for a little rest of three days, but also to check on the Daughters and to see the effect of his little notebook. He was pleased with what he saw.

On 30 January 1871, at the meeting of the Salesian rectors at Valdocco, Fr Pestarino gave a report of what was happening at Mornese.

⁵² MB 10:591 = BM 10:259.

⁵³ MB 10:592 = BM 10:259.

On 24 April 1871, Don Bosco called a meeting of the chapter of the congregation, consisting of Frs Rua, Cagliero, Savio, Ghivarello, Durando and Albera. He informed them that the meeting was “about something of great importance.” Here are his words, taken from the minutes:

Many have been asking me time and again to do for girls what we, by the grace of God, have been doing for boys. Personally speaking, I would rather not undertake this kind of apostolate. But I would not like to come in the way of divine providence. I invite you, therefore, to reflect before the Lord, that we might take that decision which will be for the greater glory of God and for the good of souls. During this month let our prayers be intended to obtain from the Lord the enlightenment necessary for this important undertaking.

No Polenta

Felicina Mazzarello, Mary’s sister, recalled those early days. “Very often the little community did not have the necessary food. We did not have even the flour for *polenta*, and if by chance we had flour, we had no wood to cook it. Mary would then go out with one of the Daughters looking for dry wood, and when they had collected enough they would bring it back and start cooking. When the *polenta* was ready she would bring it out into the courtyard and invite everyone to the sumptuous lunch. We had neither plates nor cutlery, but plenty of appetite and good cheer.”

Towards the end of May 1871, Don Bosco once again gathered the chapter and asked each one for his opinion. Everyone thought that the initiative in favour of girls was very opportune. Don Bosco concluded:

“We can now safely hold that it is God’s will that we take up this work for the girls. I suggest that the house being put up at Mornese by Fr Pestarino be dedicated to this work.”

In mid-June, Don Bosco called Fr Pestarino to Turin. The report that the ‘little priest’ drew up of this meeting is very calm, almost bureaucratic. The dialogue must have been, however, quite different, if we are to believe Sr Petronilla who remarked that, while on other occasions Fr Pestarino “would always return from Don Bosco as if he had seen a bit of heaven, on this occasion he looked very pensive, disturbed and sad.”

Fr Pestarino writes: “Don Bosco spoke of his desire to see to the Christian education of the daughters of the working classes, and said that Mornese was the best place he could think of. Those among the Daughters of the Immaculate who showed signs of a religious vocation, could form the *Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* for the good of girls of the working classes. Fr Pestarino answered: if Don Bosco accepted both the direction and protection of the work, he would place himself in his hands.”

At this stage, with Mary and Petronilla there were Teresa Pampuro, Catherine Mazzarello, Felicita Mazzarello, Joanna Ferretino and the girls Rosina Mazzarello Baroni, Mary Grosso and Corinna Arrigotti.

What made Fr Pestarino “pensive and disturbed” were two things. Firstly, those girls were good Christians, but none of them had ever thought of becoming a sister. Secondly, Don Bosco wanted to use the Borgo Alto boarding school for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; but the whole village had worked with the idea of having a boarding school for boys. The change would mean serious trouble.

The Pope's Opinion and the People's Resentment

That same June of 1871, Don Bosco went to Rome to present his new project to Pius IX. The pope asked for some time to think it over and then told Don Bosco: "I think your plan is according to God's will. I think that these sisters should have as their aim the instruction and education of girls, much as the Salesians are doing for boys. Let them depend on you and your successors. See to their constitutions and begin the experiment. The rest will come later."

On 29 January 1872, at Don Bosco's instructions, Fr Pestarino gathered the 27 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and asked them to elect a superior. Mary Mazzarello got 21 votes. Frightened, she begged her companions to change their minds. The others insisted, and so Fr Pestarino decided to refer the matter to Don Bosco. Mary was relieved, thinking that Don Bosco, knowing her limitations, would certainly dispense her. But Don Bosco, who had come to appreciate her capacities, confirmed the election. Mary was desolate.

There was urgent need now of a proper residence, but the problem was how to do it without upsetting the village. Something unexpected happened. The parish house was in danger of collapsing. The municipal council decided to demolish it and rebuild it. They asked Fr Pestarino to let the parish priest have the house next to the church, where the girls were running their needlework school.

"And the Daughters, who teach tailoring and look after poor girls, where shall I send them?" complained the 'little priest.'

The municipality decided to send them to the new building in Borgo Alto. The ground floor was ready and unoccupied.

Fr Pestarino heaved a huge sigh of relief: he was being ordered to do what he would never have dared to ask for. The Daughters moved quickly, taking with them also the silk worms which were one of the sources of their meagre income.

At the moment, no one paid much attention to all this. But soon the news spread that the Daughters would occupy the building permanently, that their numbers were increasing, and that they were going to form a new religious congregation. Ill feelings and opposition began.⁵⁴

Wirth does not mince words: "The villagers of Mornese called it a betrayal. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians took their first steps in a climate of misunderstanding, not to say hostility. All this on top of the poverty and privations, which were bad enough."

Felicina, one of the sisters, wrote of those days: "The rumour in the village was that the Daughters would not hold out for long. And humanly speaking, seeing how they lacked so many things, it should have been that way. But Mary Domenica was not daunted. She continued her life of toil and sacrifice. Since the construction work was still going on, she would busy herself all day collecting stones. On laundry day, she would take some bread or a few slices of *polenta*, and lead a few of the others to the stream outside the village. They would come back tired and wet, and she would make sure that the others changed and had some hot food. She was a loving mother."

The Smell of Boiling Chestnuts

⁵⁴ MB 10:613 = BM 10:272-73.

On 5 August 1872, the first 15 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians received the religious habit. Eleven of them made triennial vows, Mary Mazzarello among them.

Bishop Sciandra of Aquì gave the crucifix to the fifteen sisters. "Receive, my dear daughters, the image of your beloved Jesus. He will be your comfort in the difficulties you will meet."

Don Bosco assisted at the ceremony and then addressed them with affection:

You are troubled, and I can see it with my own eyes, because you are laughed at and persecuted, and even your relatives give you the cold shoulder. Do not be surprised. In the office of Our Lady you have just read: "My spikenard has given off its perfume." But do you know when the nard gives off its best perfume? When it is crushed! Do not worry, my dear daughters, if you have to suffer now in the world. Pluck up courage and be consoled, because it is only thus that you will fulfill your mission. If you live up to your condition, you will do great good to your own souls and to those of others.

The sisters continued to live in dire poverty bordering on misery. Their staple food was always the same, *polenta* and boiled chestnuts. "The smell of those chestnuts," wrote one of the sisters of those early days, "would pervade the house a couple of hours before meals and make us feel faint."

All the pillows in the house were given to the girls. Most of the sisters used a piece of wood wrapped in rags as a pillow. Mary Mazzarello did not want the younger sisters to make this mortification, but could not be very convincing because it was she herself who had started the practice.

Death Comes Knocking

29 January 1874 will remain in the annals of the sisters as the day that death first knocked at the door of their house. Sr Mary Poggio had belonged to the very first group. She had been cheerful, generous, always ready to help, serve, watch over the sick. She had suffered much hunger and cold that winter. She died quietly, without disturbing anyone.

The whole village turned up at the funeral. "Many were in tears," recalls Fr Pestarino. They saw the pale drawn faces of the young sisters saying the rosary. It was the moment of reconciliation. From that day onwards, the pantry never ran short of the yellow flour for *polenta* and the white flour for bread.

But death came knocking again in May. Fr Pestarino was reading to the sisters a page on the brevity of life. "Death could well surprise me within a year, or a month, or a week, or a day. It could come perhaps as soon as I finish reading this page..." The 'little priest' broke down and started weeping, leaving the sisters very upset.

At 11.00 a.m., as he was doing some work, he collapsed. Within a few hours he was dead. He was 57 years old.

Partings in the Snow

Under a cloud of swirling snow, three sisters left for Vallecrosia in Liguria, to open

an oratory there and a school for girls. It was 9 February 1876.

Seven more left for Turin on 29 March. About fifty metres from the Oratory of Valdocco, they started their own oratory and a school for girls. This house would become, for more than forty years, the headquarters of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

During the same year, 26 other sisters left Mornese for Biella, Alassio, Lu Monferrato, Lanzo Torinese. Seven went to Sestri Levante to found the first camp for a hundred little boys and girls suffering from scrofula, a form of tuberculosis. Labouring with joy among the disfigured faces of the children was Sr Enrichetta Sorbone, who had come to Mornese as an orphan with four younger sisters.

By 1878, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had become a large family, spread out all over the world. Don Bosco had ordered that the headquarters be shifted from Mornese to Nizza Monferrato. For Mary Mazzarello it was a heart-wrenching change. She bid goodbye to her parents, now well on in years, to the graveyard where Fr Pestarino and some of the first sisters were buried, to the little house where she had begun teaching tailoring to the first little girls.

Despite being superior general, Mary Mazzarello never lost her balance. She continued to look after the smallest ones with motherly affection. A little girl whose feet had been glued to her socks and shoes by chilblains tried to slip into bed, shoes and all. But Mother had seen everything. Without a word she went down to the kitchen and came back with a basin of warm water, cotton wool and gauze. Going up to the little girl's bed, she whispered gently: "Come, child, show me your feet. Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you!"

Mary's Farewell

By January 1881, the sisters began to notice that Mother Mazzarello's health was declining. Someone whispered that she ought to take better care of her health, but she replied, smiling:

"It is better for all that I go, so that you may have, at last, a capable superior."

She collapsed as she was accompanying a group of sisters leaving for the missions of America. An unforeseen hitch forced her to spend a whole night huddled up in a corner of the house, shivering with fever. In the morning she was unable to get up. With a tremendous effort she managed to see her daughters off at the port. A couple of hours later she could no longer stand on her feet.

The doctor diagnosed acute pleurisy. She spent forty days with high fever, far away from home, tortured by vesicants that were the only remedy known at the time, and that left her back scorched.

The fever left her at last, but the doctor was brutally clear: she would live only a few months more.

On her way back to Nizza she met Don Bosco.

"The doctor has been quite clear, but I am asking you, Don Bosco: may I still hope for a cure?"

Don Bosco did not answer directly but told her a little parable. "One day, Death knocked at the door of a monastery. To all the sisters he met, he would say: 'Come with me!' But all gave excuses: they all had so many things to do! At last he went to the superior: 'You must give good example. Come!' The superior had to bow her head and obey."

Mother Mazzarello understood, bowed her head, and tried to smile.

Pale and exhausted she arrived at Nizza. She received a triumphant welcome and was moved. She thanked the sisters briefly:

“In this world, whatever happens, we should neither rejoice too much nor get too upset. We are in the hands of God our Father, and we should be ready to do his will always.”

The end came in spring. Green leaves and flowers could be seen through the window. She liked to hear the carefree noise of the girls at their games. She wanted to speak one last time to her sisters.

“Love one another. Keep united. You have left the world. Do not build up another one inside here. Keep in mind why you have entered the congregation.”

She was feeling bad, but did not want to trouble anyone till the end. She even managed to keep singing. God called her to himself at the dawn of 14 May. She managed to whisper: “Goodbye till we meet in heaven!” She was 44 years old.

Sr Catherine Daghero, 25, was elected as Mother Mazzarello’s successor. She had become a sister at the age of 18, and Mother Mazzarello had helped her overcome the difficulties of the early years. In 1879 she had become superior at Turin. The presence of Don Bosco had awakened in her an enterprising spirit, revealing great qualities: solidity, equilibrium and goodness.

Under her leadership the FMA spread out in Italy, France and South America. At Don Bosco’s death, they had come a long way: they ran 50 houses, with 390 sisters and about 100 novices.

42

THE CONQUEST OF ROME AND THE SHIVERS OF DEATH

Two events of extraordinary importance took place in 1870: Vatican Council I and the occupation of Rome by Italian troops.

Rome and Naples: Council and Anti-Council

The council was declared officially open on 8 December 1869. Pius IX had declared the two main aims of the council: a clear exposition of Catholic doctrine in the face of modern errors, and the definition of papal infallibility.

Three hundred years had elapsed since the Council of Trent. Pius IX made a warm appeal to the Oriental churches, inviting them to participate. The answers were negative and not very polite.

The Protestants were also invited, mentioning that “this would be a good occasion for all to return to the one flock of Christ.” The invitation grated on their ears.

The rabidly anticlerical Italian freemasonry proclaimed an ‘anti-council’ at Naples. The first two to register themselves were Giuseppe Garibaldi and the French writer Victor Hugo. Demonstrations were organized in several provinces proclaiming a “relentless war against the pope.”

At the opening of the council there were 220 Italian bishops, 70 French, 40 Austro-Hungarian, 36 Spanish, 19 Irish, 18 German, 12 English, 50 Oriental, 40 from the USA, 9 Canadian, and 100 from other nations and mission lands. In addition there were also the superiors of religious orders and congregations, bringing the number of ‘council fathers’ to 700.

Don Bosco left for Rome on 20 January 1870 and arrived there four days later. On 8 February he had two long private audiences with Pius IX, who urged him to publish and diffuse a booklet on church history illustrating the doctrine of papal infallibility. Don Bosco was able to comply towards the end of that year. He sent to all subscribers of the *Catholic Readings* a new edition of his *Storia Ecclesiastica* with a final portion dealing with Vatican I and the infallibility of the pope.

“Heaven’s Voice to the Pastor of Pastors”

In another audience (12 February), Don Bosco handed over to the pope some pages of ‘previsions for the future.’ In the opening lines we read: “On the eve of Epiphany of the year 1870, all the objects from my room suddenly disappeared and I found myself engrossed in supernatural thoughts. The vision lasted barely a few moments, but I saw many things.”

The account (the autograph of which is still available) is drawn up in a style full of prophetic imagery, mixing woes, forecasts and entreaties in a rather mysterious and confused way. The pope was particularly struck by the following:

Now the voice of Heaven is addressed to the Pastor of Pastors. You are in the Great Assembly with your councillors; but the enemy of the good does not rest a moment. He is planning and practicing all his arts against you. He will sow discord among your councillors, and will raise up enemies from among my sons. The powers of the world will spew fire, and will try to choke the voices of the custodians of the law. But that is not to be. They will end up harming themselves. So press on. If you cannot resolve difficulties, cut them short. If you are in trouble, do not stop, but continue till the head of the Hydra of error is cut off. This blow will make earth and hell tremble, but the world will be rendered safe and the good will rejoice. Even if you are left with only two councillors, press on and finish the task entrusted to you.

The days pass quickly, and your years advance to their appointed number. But the Great Queen will always be your help, and as in times past so in future, she will always be *magnum et singulare in Ecclesia praesidium*.⁵⁵

Some twenty lines further on, Don Bosco hints at the future of the pope:

Now he is old, feeble, defenceless and despoiled; and yet with his captive word he makes the whole world tremble.

The occupation of the Pontifical States took place only on 20 September 1870, more than six months after this prediction.

Black Clouds over France

The page that seemed to make the least sense at the time was that referring to France. In those months, Napoleon III was still the most powerful ruler of Europe. No one could anticipate the disastrous war with Prussia (which began on 19 July 1870) and the massacres of the Paris Commune (1871). Don Bosco had written:

The laws of France no longer acknowledge the Creator, but the Creator will assert himself and will visit France three times with the rod of his anger.

He will crush her pride with defeats, plunder and destruction of crops, animals and men. Your enemies will plunge you into anguish, hunger and fright, and will make of you the abomination of nations. But woe to you if you do not recognize the hand that strikes you... You will fall into the hands of foreigners, and your enemies will see your palaces in flames. Your dwellings will become heaps of ruins bathed in the blood of your young men who are no more.

In the days that followed, Don Bosco approached many bishops, using the prestige he enjoyed to promote the speedy definition of papal infallibility. He was especially insistent

⁵⁵ "The great and powerful help of the church."

with Msgr Gastaldi, Bishop of Saluzzo and a good friend at the time.

Fr Lemoyne reports that the pope was so pleased with the work of Don Bosco that one day he said to him:

“Couldn’t you leave Turin and come to live in Rome? Would your society suffer?”

“Holy Father, it would be our ruin!”⁵⁶

Don Bosco left Rome on 22 February 1870.

On 24 April 1870, the council unanimously approved the decree *Dei Filius*, clearly setting out the Catholic doctrine on God, revelation and faith. The decree stressed the idea that science and faith, rightly understood, can never come into conflict because both come from the same God.

The Infallibility of the Pope

The debate on infallibility began on 15 May 1870 and went on till 4 June 1870. Cardinal Bonnechose wrote in his diary: “We are in for some rough sailing aboard a ship that is being buffeted by the waves, and on which everyone is down with sea-sickness.”

There were two currents among the council fathers, and the debate was harsh both inside and outside the council. The majority was for infallibility. The minority—consisting of about sixty German, French, Italian and American bishops—felt that such a declaration would be a great obstacle to the reunion of the Protestant churches. Pius IX himself intervened several times in favour of the definition.

On 18 July 1870 the council approved the text. “It was a day of heavy rains and violent thunderstorms,” recalls an eye-witness. “As Msgr Valenziani was reading the text, the windows were shaken by thunderclaps, and brilliant flashes of lightning were followed by an oppressive darkness.”

With the approval of the pope, the council defined the following truth as a dogma of faith: “The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians, he defines, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, a doctrine *concerning faith or morals* as binding for the whole church, possesses through the divine assistance promised him in the person of Peter, the infallibility which the divine Redeemer wanted for his church. For this reason, these definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not because of the consent of the church.”

A four week break followed, after which the council was to resume work with a discussion on bishops. But grave events were in the offing in Europe.

***Bersaglieri* at Porta Pia**

On 19 July 1870, Napoleon III declared war on Prussia. It was a disaster. The French were defeated in battle after battle until they surrendered at Sedan on 2 September 1870. The emperor himself was taken prisoner.

France did not give in at once. It proclaimed the Republic, shifted the government to Tours, but in the end had to give in. A humiliating peace treaty would be signed at Frankfurt in May 1871, after Paris had attempted to transform itself into a republic of the Jacobin type (the ‘Commune’) and the brutal suppression this revolt by the French troops themselves, leaving 14,000 dead.

⁵⁶ Lemoyne, *Vita di S. G. Bosco* 2:44

With the defeat of Napoleon III at Sedan, the Italian government felt free to act in the Roman question. It had taken the Veneto region with a sad 'third war of independence' (1866). Now 60,000 men under the command of General Raffaele Cadorna were ordered to assemble at the boundary of Lazio for the conquest of Rome. The papal army consisted of 14,600 men under General Kanzler.

Many advised Pius IX to leave Rome. A British ship was ready to take him to Malta. Others suggested that he go to Spain or America. The pope, who now regarded his 1848 flight to Gaeta as a mistake, was bent on staying on. He however sought advice from trustworthy persons. Among those consulted was Don Bosco, who answered: "Let the sentry, the Angel of Israel, stand firm at his post, to guard the fortress of God and the Ark of the Covenant!" The letter had been copied out by Cagliero and sent urgently to Rome.

Civitavecchia was attacked by land and blocked by a fleet at sea. It surrendered to Nino Bixio on 15 September. Meanwhile the troops of Cadorna had entered Lazio and were surrounding Rome.

At 5.30 a.m. on 20 September, a battery of the Angioletti division opened fire against Porta San Giovanni. It was a diversion. The real objective was Porta Pia. The *bersaglieri* opened up the way by entering the park of Villa Patrizi and getting rid of the marksmen blocking the advance of the artillery. From Via Nomentana, the Italian artillery opened fire on Porta Pia. By 9.00 a.m., a 30 metre breach had been made in the walls, through which the 12th and 34th *bersaglieri* entered.

The news of the breaching of the walls reached the pope a few minutes before 10.00 a.m. The pope directed that the white flag be hoisted on Castel Sant'Angelo and ordered General Kanzler to surrender.

Casualties were relatively low, though certainly sad: 56 dead and 141 wounded on the Italian side; 20 dead and 49 wounded on the papal side.

The pope launched a major excommunication against all those responsible for the conquest of Rome, "even if enjoying the greatest sovereign authority."

Don Bosco, writes Fr Lemoyne, received the news at Lanzo. To the great surprise of all, he was unruffled by it, as if it were something he had already known for some time.

To the council fathers who were still in Rome, the pope sent the following message: "In the present lamentable situation, knowing that the council fathers would not enjoy the necessary liberty, security and tranquility to deal with dignity about the affairs of the church, we suspend the celebration of the ecumenical Vatican Council."

Shivers of Death at Varazze

The occupation of Rome and the end of the Pontifical States had a resonance we can hardly understand today. It was the end of an era that had lasted 1500 years. Many thought it was the end of the church.

A year later, the young Salesian Congregation also experienced for a moment the cold shivers of death.

On 6 December 1871, Don Bosco fainted and collapsed at the railway station of Varazze. Those present feared a heart attack. He was carried to the Salesian house, where he had to be put to bed like a child.

The malady turned out to be most serious. Every now and then Don Bosco's body would become covered with small blisters. He experienced shooting pains and very high

fever. Thinking he was at death's door, he was given the viaticum.

Consternation reigned at Turin. If Don Bosco were to die, what would happen to his work? His right hand man, Fr Rua, was only 34. Many Salesians offered their lives in exchange for Don Bosco's. Don Bosco seems to have said later: "My time had come at Varazze. The subsequent years are God's answer to the prayers of some of my sons."

The illness lasted two months. In the beginning the news was so alarming that it was made known only by vague-sounding telegrams, so as not to upset life at the Oratory. But this very circumstance gave origin to one of the most moving testimonials of the love that surrounded Don Bosco.

Peter Enria—the cholera orphan of 1854—had been sent to Varazze to take care of Don Bosco. Joseph Buzzetti remained on at Turin, restless because he did not have proper news about the health of 'his' Don Bosco. Between these two, there sprang up a sort of secret correspondence. The letters of these two 'ex boys' of Don Bosco are poor and full of clichés, but they betray an affection that is tender and absolutely genuine. We report some excerpts.

From the Buzzetti-Enria Correspondence

23 December. Enria to Buzzetti:

With great sorrow I give you news that is not so good about our poor father. Today the fever did not leave him for a moment. He has been bathed in sweat the whole day. He frightened me several times by moaning aloud while dreaming. When I approached him, he would say it was nothing.

Dear Buzzetti, I have no strength to go on writing, I feel so upset. Please ask all to pray, the Child Jesus will have pity on us. It is 2 o'clock after midnight, it looks like he has finally fallen asleep. Happy Christmas to all. I will spend these days with a heavy heart by the bed of my dear father and yours.

Buzzetti answered:

I found it difficult to finish reading your letter of the 23rd. I am full of sorrow and grief, and cannot contain my tears, hearing that our dear Don Bosco is suffering more and more.

I have prayed and have asked all to pray. I have even told the Child Jesus to make me suffer all that Don Bosco is suffering, even death, that he may be well again and live many more years.

Please go on writing, and don't be afraid to say everything for fear of making me sad, instead, you would make me very sad if you were to let even a single day go by without giving me news of our dear father. Kiss his holy hand for me and tell him to bless me.

Enria again:

3 January. Dear Buzzetti, the health of our loving father is improving, but slowly. The blisters keep breaking out still, causing a bit of fever and pain.

Buzzetti answered:

Dear Peter, we are anxious for good news. Yesterday we finished a novena. Today, if Mary Help of Christians finds us worthy of her love, she will cure our dear Don Bosco. If not we shall go on pestering her till she hears us.

The cold is awful here. Every day we find the water jugs cracked by the cold. The one you had in your garret is cracked too.

When Don Bosco began to get really better, Enria sent a telegram to Buzzetti. “Yesterday rejoicing. Father out of bed. Your visit welcome. Today well.” The news spread like wildfire at the Oratory, causing great joy.

Since Don Bosco continued to improve, Enria did not write for a few days. Buzzetti wrote to him: “Dear Peter, are you still alive? If you are, why don’t you keep your promise not to let a day pass without giving me news about our dear Don Bosco? Stop taking me for a ride!”

Enria answered immediately: “Don Bosco’s health improves steadily. Sometimes he exclaims: ‘What a day that will be, when we shall enter our Oratory again!’ Then he is moved, and remains engrossed in the thought...”

Don Bosco came back to the Oratory on 15 February 1871. He entered the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians through the main door. The church was packed with the boys of Valdocco and many friends. As he stepped into the sanctuary, Buzzetti intoned the psalm *Laudate pueri Dominum*.⁵⁷ Kneeling before the tabernacle and Our Lady, Don Bosco prayed for a long time. He then thanked the boys and invited them to thank the Madonna.

“Enria had remained kneeling in the sanctuary,” recalls Fr Amadei, “and Buzzetti, taking him by the arm, led him outside.” They embraced and wept.

⁵⁷ Praise the Lord, you children of the Lord.

43

THE COOPERATORS: SALESIANS IN THE WORLD

The project for the Salesian Cooperators took shape in the 1870's. Like all of Don Bosco's projects, it was not the fruit of an overnight inspiration. It had distant roots.

Don Bosco writes: "Already at the beginning of the work of the Oratories in 1841, some pious and zealous priests and lay people came to help me in the education of poor boys. These 'collaborators' or 'cooperators' were always the support of the works that divine providence placed in our hands."

Goodbye to Fr Borel

Don Bosco first remembers the priests whom we have seen appearing here and there in the story of his adventures, first in the wandering Oratory and later at Valdocco. They did not always agree with Don Bosco's 'mad' ideas and his political stance, but love for the young helped overcome all obstacles. Peter Merla, Louis Nasi, Leonard Murialdo, Ignatius and Joseph Vola, Hyacinth Carpano, and in a special way Fr Cafasso and the 'little priest' Fr Borel, will always be linked to the Salesian work as faithful and dedicated cooperators of Don Bosco.

The 'little priest' passed away quietly on 9 September 1873. Don Bosco wept as he lay dying. "He appeared to be a little priest not counting for much, but ten good priests could hardly have done the good that this great servant of God has done."

Fr Borel left nothing, not even enough for his own funeral. But Don Bosco remembered how often he had emptied his wallet into his hands without counting. The rectors of the Salesian houses, summoned by Don Bosco, carried the coffin to the cemetery. The seminarians, the boys and the Oratory band accompanied him to the cemetery. They were the priests, the seminarians, the boys whom Don Bosco used to describe to Fr Borel in those early difficult years: "They exist, because I see them!"

Men and Women of Good Will

Along with the priests there were also lay people. Some belonged to the aristocracy: Count Cays (who would later become a Salesian priest), Marquis Fassati di Montemagno, Count Callori di Vignale, Count Scarampi di Pruney. Others were simple workers or traders. Don Bosco always remembered with gratitude Joseph Gagliardi, a seller of knick-knacks, who gave his free time and his savings to the Oratory.

The cooperation given by these people was varied. Don Bosco made use of them especially to teach catechism on Sundays and in the Lenten season. Some also helped in the evening classes and in supervising the boys. Others would go around scouting for jobs,

especially for those who came out of prison.

Besides men there were also women. We have already mentioned the ‘mothers’ who worked at the Oratory: Mamma Margaret, the mother of Fr Rua, the mother of Michael Magone, the sister of Mamma Margaret, the mother of Canon Gastaldi. The latter had taken charge of the boys’ laundry. “That was a crying need,” Don Bosco recounts. “Among those poor boys there were some who did not have a single change of clothes, and were so dirty that no employer would take them into their workshops.” On Sundays, ‘Madame’ Gastaldi would gather the boys and inspect them like a general, checking clothes, personal cleanliness and even their smelly cots.

Many helped with money. There was a priest who would contribute all that he received from his well-to-do parents. There was a banker who used to pay the monthly fee of a boarder. There was a humble worker too, who would regularly come with his savings.

‘Extern Salesians’

Little by little, Don Bosco became convinced that it would be useful to gather all these cooperators into an association.

He made a first attempt in 1850, gathering seven trustworthy Catholic laymen. It was a failure.

In 1864, he made a second attempt. Presenting the Rules of his society to Rome, he added a chapter that made many monsignors turn up their noses. He spoke of ‘extern Salesians.’ Don Bosco was proposing that anybody could be a Salesian, even someone living with his or her own family. Such persons would not have vows, but would work for poor boys along with the Salesians. Article 5 even contained a proviso that any Salesian leaving the congregation for a ‘reasonable motive’ would continue as an ‘extern’ member. The chapter was rejected. Don Bosco, like a good Piedmontese, presented it again, first in a modified form and later as an appendix, only to have it rejected every time. To obtain the approval of the Rules in 1874, he had to remove every trace of the chapter. Today that chapter might have been considered an intuition of genius.

Seeing that the idea of ‘extern Salesians’ had no chance, Don Bosco began working on something similar. In 1874, he drafted the outline of a *Union of St Francis of Sales*. His rectors showed little enthusiasm when they were consulted, thinking it was just another confraternity. Don Bosco shook his head:

“You do not understand me. But you will see that this union will be the support of our society. Think about it.”

Don Bosco assigned three aims for this union:

- to do good to oneself by the exercise of charity towards one’s neighbour, especially towards poor and abandoned youth;
- to share in the works of piety and religion carried out by the Salesians;
- to gather poor boys in their homes, instruct them, and keep them away from danger.

The Salesian Cooperators

In 1876 the union reached its final form. Don Bosco gave it the name *Salesian Cooperators*. He wrote and printed the regulations and sent them to the pope. Pius IX’s

Brief approving the union arrived on 9 May 1876.

The aims were those mentioned two years earlier: to do good to oneself by means of a committed Christian life, to help the Salesians in their work, and to help remove the evils endangering young people.

The means were the ones used by the Salesians themselves: teaching catechism, making spiritual retreats, sustaining vocations to the priesthood, spreading good books, prayer and almsgiving.

This last work was the cause of much misunderstanding. Many Salesians reduced the activities of the cooperators to giving money for the support of their works. Don Bosco intervened energetically against this disfiguring of the image of the cooperators:

“Understand well the aim of the pious union,” he said at Toulon in 1882. “The cooperators are not there only to collect funds for our works, but also to help in every possible way in the salvation of their brethren, especially the young.”

During his journeys within Italy and outside, Don Bosco worked hard to increase the number of his cooperators. Morand Wirth writes: “Genoa and the Liguria furnished large numbers. Nice in France became an important centre thanks to its cosmopolitan character. At Marseilles, the cooperators were so fervent that Don Bosco always felt at home with them.”

In Spain there was Donna Dorothea de Chopitea, who became ‘the mother of the Salesian works’ in that country. Her cause for beatification has been introduced.

The Salesian Bulletin

The first issue of the *Salesian Bulletin* came out in August 1877. It was a monthly magazine which Don Bosco designed as a means to keep the cooperators united among themselves and with the Salesians.

Don Bosco expected so much of this *Bulletin* that he personally prepared the first few issues. When he could not do this any longer, he entrusted it to Fr John Bonetti who, though he continued being a member of the superior chapter, was pulled out from the rectorship of one of the houses. When asked to whom the *Bulletin* should be sent, Don Bosco would reply: “To those who want it and to those who don’t!”

The first letters of the Salesian missionaries were published in the *Bulletin*, and were read avidly by young and old alike. The first *History of the Oratory of Don Bosco* was published in installments, also eagerly awaited by all. In addition, there were regular accounts of the Salesian works all over the world, and of graces received through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians.

This modest publication found its way everywhere, winning innumerable friends for Don Bosco and his works. Pope John XIII recalls: “My early years were gladdened and protected by the dear image of the Help of Christians. It was a very simple picture cut out from the *Salesian Bulletin*. My great-uncle Xavier used to receive it and read it to us. The picture was at the head of the bed. How many prayers and confidences before that humble picture! And Mary Help of Christians has always helped me.”

Speaking to Fr Lemoyne in 1884, Don Bosco disclosed a conviction that been maturing in him for some time: “The direct aim of the cooperators is not so much to help the Salesians as to help the church, the bishops, the parish priests, under the guidance of the Salesians.”

“When Don Bosco died in 1888,” writes Wirth, “One thing was clear: the apostolic force of the modest Salesian Congregation had been multiplied, thanks to the brotherly help of its cooperators. Many of them deserve to be called, in fact if not in law, true *Salesians in the world.*”

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FRANCIS, EUSEBIO, PHILIP, MICHAEL AND MANY OTHERS

In 1870 Don Bosco was 55. His life, which in its first decades could be compared to a mountain torrent, restless and energetic, had now become a majestic river. The last 18 years of his life, recorded minutely in tons of documents and testimonies, were condensed into 9 volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs*, two of which run into more than 1000 pages.

It goes without saying that every biographer of Don Bosco must get used to mercilessly scrapping so many things. The events, the encounters, the talks to the young, the dreams, are all so touching and so human, that it is painful to set aside dozens and dozens of them. Yet, keeping in mind our set limits, we too must cut and prune vigorously.

In this chapter, however, we want to take a little liberty. We shall narrate freely some of the events and encounters of these years which have most impressed us, offering our apologies for not being able to bring them together in a 'logical' way. But on the other hand, life itself is hardly ever logical.

“I Have Stolen Two Loaves”

It was break time some day in August 1872. At the sound of the bell, an immense crowd of youngsters rushed into the courtyard for the afternoon snack.

The two young men from the bakery had set up four enormous baskets full of fresh bread. “One each, no more!” they were shouting. 11 year old Francis Piccollo, recently arrived from Peccetto Torinese, was watching everything and waiting for his turn. He had had his fill of thick soup at lunch time, but that was four hours ago. What was one loaf compared to the hunger he felt? He needed at least two, he thought. But the Oratory was poor, and even bread had to be rationed in 1872.

As he was mulling over these thoughts, he noticed that some of his friends, after having taken a loaf, would queue up again and take a second one, and a third. He narrates the story himself:

I too allowed myself to be dominated by hunger. Soon I had two loaves, and ran to eat them greedily. But then I began to feel remorse.

“I’ve stolen,” I thought. “How can I receive communion tomorrow? I must go to confession.”

But my confessor was Don Bosco. I knew he would have been pained to hear that I had stolen. What was I to do? Not so much out of shame, but because I didn’t want to displease Don Bosco, I ran out of the Oratory to the Shrine of the *Consolata*.

I entered the dark church, selected a confessional and began.

"I've come to confess here, because I was ashamed of confessing to Don Bosco." (There was no need for me to say that, but I was accustomed to saying everything). A voice answered:

"Don't worry, go on. Don Bosco will never know a thing."

It was the voice of Don Bosco! Good heavens! I broke into a cold sweat. But if Don Bosco was at the Oratory, how could he be here? A miracle? No, no miracle at all. Don Bosco had been invited, as usual, to hear confessions at the *Consolata*, and it was my luck that I had bumped into him just when I wanted to avoid him.

"Tell me, my son. Whatever has happened?"

I was shaking like a leaf, but managed to blurt out:

"I've stolen a loaf of bread."

"Are you feeling sick?"

"No."

"Then don't worry. You were hungry?"

"Yes."

"Hunger for bread and thirst for water are healthy feelings. Look, whenever you need something, ask Don Bosco. He will give you all the bread you want. And remember: Don Bosco prefers your trust to your innocence. If you have trust, he will be able to help you. With your feigned innocence, instead, you could slip and fall, and there might be no one to give you a helping hand. Don't forget, Francis, Don Bosco's wealth is the confidence that his boys place in him."

About a year later, at lunch time, I was told that my mother was waiting for me in the parlour. She was crying.

"Mamma, what happened?"

"Nothing, Francis. But you see, we are poor, and if I don't pay your fees, the administrator threatens to send you home."

She was crying. I had to leave her and run for class. In the afternoon I saw her again, this time smiling and happy. She told me what had happened.

"I went to see Don Bosco, and he told me: Good lady, tell your son that if the administrator sends him away, he should come back through the church and come to see me. Don Bosco will never send him away."

My mother kissed me and left. That same evening the administrator sent for me. Frightened, I went instead to Don Bosco and knocked at his door.

"Who's that?"

"It's me, Francis Piccollo."

"Come in, come in. Tell me, Francis, how many months' fees does your mother owe?"

I told him, and Don Bosco wrote out a receipt for the whole year. No one ever came to know of this act of generosity, not even the administrator to whom I gave the receipt. I was more moved by Don Bosco's delicacy than by the work of charity itself.

Three more years went by. I was in the fifth class. Some of us were walking with Don Bosco under the portico. I wanted to speak to him privately, but did not know how to go about it. As usual he noticed it and took me aside.

"I think you want to tell me something," he said.

“You have guessed it. But I wouldn’t want the others to hear.” I whispered into his ear: “I have a gift for you. I think you will like it.”

“And what is it?”

“Myself!”

Don Bosco smiled.

“And what would I do with a bloke like you?”

Then he became serious, and said to me:

“Thank you, Francis. You couldn’t have given me a better gift. I accept you, not for myself, but to give you whole and entire to the Lord and to Mary Help of Christians.”

Francis Piccollo became a Salesian and a priest. He worked for 30 years in Sicily, first as a teacher, and later as rector and provincial of the Salesian works there. He died in 1930.

Eusebio Calvi

That same 1872 another boy, Eusebio Calvi of Palestro, was also worried because his parents could not pay the boarding fees any more. Don Bosco noticed something was amiss.

“What’s wrong, Eusebio?” he asked him.

“Don Bosco... my parents are unable to pay my fees and I have to interrupt my studies.”

“But aren’t you a friend of Don Bosco?”

“Of course!”

“Then we can fix things. Write to your father not to worry about the past. From now on let him pay what he can.”

“But my father wants to know exactly how much, because he wants to do all he can.”

“What was your fee, so far?”

“Twelve *lire* per month.”

“Write to him that we bring it down to five, and that he will pay if he can. Come to my office, I’ll give a chit for the administrator.”

Eusebio Calvi also became a Salesian and a priest. He worked in Calabria and in Sicily, and lived up to 1923. “Thousands of boys,” writes Fr Amadei, “received such signs of affection from Don Bosco!”

Philip Rinaldi

During one of his autumn outings, Don Bosco had stopped at the Rinaldi house at Lu, and had placed his hand on a little fellow of 5 named Philip.

When that boy was 10 years old, his father thought of sending him to the minor seminary Don Bosco had opened at Mirabello, within shooting distance from Lu.

Young Philip gathered his belongings, kissed his mother goodbye, and set off for the boarding school. He was leaving home for the first time, and he felt it like anyone else. But he was a quiet and thoughtful boy, and knew that this sacrifice could open up new horizons

beyond the fields and vineyards of his father.

His first teacher was the seminarian Paul Albera: "Fr Albera was a guardian angel to me," Philip would later write. "I was put under his care, and he did his job so well that I am still amazed every time I think of it." Unfortunately, together with Albera there was another assistant who was rather uncouth and offensive.

Don Bosco came twice from Turin to visit the minor seminary. He had long talks with Philip and they became friends.

In spring, things came to a head. Philip was tired after the long study days of winter. His left eye had begun giving him trouble. One day when he was particularly tense, the ill-mannered assistant hurt him badly. Philip did not react. He went straight to the rector and told him he was going home. It looked like a passing reaction at first. But Philip had decided, and no one could make him change his mind.

When Don Bosco came to Mirabello for a third visit, he was told that Philip had returned home. He was disappointed. He wrote a letter to the young man, inviting him to change his mind.

Many more letters followed in the same vein: "Remember, Philip, that the houses of Don Bosco are always open to you."

Rarely did Don Bosco insist so much with a boy. Did he see something special in the future of this youngster? But the boy, while remaining in good terms with Don Bosco, would not change his mind.

In 1874, Philip was 18. Don Bosco had come to Lu to pay him a visit. While he was in Philip's house, a poor woman came in, asking Don Bosco for a cure. She was on crutches and had a diseased arm. Don Bosco gave her the blessing of Mary Help of Christians and, in front of Philip's eyes, she threw away the crutches and walked away cured. Philip was left shaken, but still refused to follow Don Bosco to Turin. This denial would weigh heavily on his heart for the rest of his life. "May the Lord and Our Lady," he would say later with humility, "see to it that, after having resisted grace so much in the past, I may never abuse it in future."

That 'no' to Don Bosco became for Philip the first of several others. He began saying 'no' to prayer, to his mother's warnings about dangerous friends, to the parish priest who invited him to be more regular at church. It was a real 'religious crisis' which he would overcome thanks to the prayers of his mother.

Don Bosco's Decisive Battle

In 1876 Philip turned 20. The parents of a good girl came to see his father, Christopher, with a proposal of marriage. But Don Bosco also turned up from Turin, determined not to go away without Philip.

They talked for a long time. With the stubbornness of a farmer, Philip put forward his objections. But Don Bosco was also of peasant stock and rebutted them all, one by one. He could see in Philip the stuff of a good Salesian, and would not let him go. "He conquered me bit by bit," Philip wrote later. "My parents left me free, and I chose Don Bosco."

In November 1877 Philip Rinaldi entered the house of Sampierdarena, where Don Bosco had opened a house for 'late vocations.' At the age of 21, the farmer from Lu opened his Italian and Latin books again. The beginning was hard and the first test was a disaster. But, with the same stubbornness with which he had resisted Don Bosco, he now tackled his

books.

The rector of Sampierdarena was the same Paul Albera who had so charmed him at Mirabello. Albera saw him through the difficult moments. “One day I told him that I was afraid I might run away again. He said to me: And I will come and get you back.”

Kneeling before Don Bosco, on 13 August 1880 Philip made the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. At the age of 24, he was finally a Salesian.

In the autumn he received the minor orders, the subdiaconate and the diaconate. Philip went ahead, not because he wanted to, but because Don Bosco commanded him. He had absolute faith in Don Bosco. He recalls: “Don Bosco would say to me: on such and such a day, you will give that exam, or you will receive that order. And I would do it.”

Philip’s case is the only one of its kind in the life of Don Bosco. Don Bosco was wont to exhort and invite, but would always leave the individual free to make his own decision. With Philip, it was different: he would order him. He must have had a very clear vision of the future of that young man.

On Christmas Eve 1882, Philip celebrated his first Mass. Don Bosco was there. Embracing him, he asked, “Are you happy now?” The answer was a bit disconcerting: “If you keep me near you, yes. If not, I wouldn’t know what to do next.”

But a few months later Fr Costamagna came back from South America and Philip, full of enthusiasm for the first time, asked Don Bosco to send him to the missions. Now it was Don Bosco’s turn to say no.

“You will stay here. You will send others to the missions.”

Fr Michael Rua would be the first successor of Don Bosco at the head of the Salesian Congregation. The second would be Paul Albera, and the third Philip Rinaldi. Old Fr Francesia will say of Philip: “But for his voice, he is another Don Bosco.”

The Canon Who Had Retired

In 1872 Don Bosco paid a short visit to Genoa. Fr Amadei narrates the following episode.

Among the many visitors was Canon Ampugnani. He was from Marassi and had helped Don Bosco buy the boarding school at Alassio. Don Bosco asked him:

“And what are you doing now?”

“Me? Nothing! I am retired.”

“Retired? But you are still young and in good health!”

“I have worked many years in America and now I am resting.”

Don Bosco turned very serious:

“Have you forgotten that a priest rests only in paradise? And that we will have to give God a very strict account of time wasted?”

The canon was so shaken by the words of Don Bosco that he could hardly find his way out of the room. The next day he came back to the Salesian house and asked the rector for a job as music master, organist, preacher, anything. “Don Bosco said terrifying things to me,” he explained.

Don Bosco met also the superior general of the Friars Minor of St Francis of Paola. He was a man of great learning who was also in charge of a parish. After greeting him respectfully, Don Bosco said:

“You must be rather busy as general of your order.”

“Well, to be frank, hardly so. We are so few.”

“How many novices do you have?”

“None.”

Don Bosco’s face became serious and grave, and his words forceful

“How come? And you are doing nothing to prevent such a well-deserving order of the church from disappearing? You have not yet exhausted the scope for which you were founded, and there are many glorious prophecies that are yet to come true.”

“I know, but we have no vocations!”

“If you find no vocations in Italy, go to France, to Spain, to America, to the Pacific. You have a tremendous responsibility, a great account to render to God. How much your founder, Francis of Paola had to suffer and toil to found your order! Will you allow so many prayers, toils and hopes sink into nothing?”

The good Father General felt crushed. He promised to do his best to find new vocations.

The Young Bricklayers of the Festive Oratory

Studying the life of Don Bosco in these years, one might have the impression that the festive Oratory of Valdocco had disappeared. This is not true. Of course, 90% of Don Bosco’s energy was absorbed by the huge house with over 800 students and artisans, and by the other works which kept increasing in number. But he never forgot ‘his’ Oratory. The testimonies are not many, but enough to give us a clear picture. Henry Angelo Bena, for example, has this to say:

I arrived in Turin during the Lent of 1871. I came from Magnano Biellese and found work as a bricklayer. On my first Sunday, as our parish priest had insisted, I went to the Oratory with my companions. I liked the place. I frequented the Oratory every year from March to November, until I was drafted into the army.

During those years, the entrance to the Oratory was on the left of the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians. It was a rough door made of wooden boards. There were three or four priests with us and several clerics. Don Bosco would usually be there for Mass in the morning and for catechism in the afternoon.

In my second year in Turin, I received my first communion at the Oratory. Everyone had a clean suit. Those who could not get one from their families would be given one by Don Bosco. He himself celebrated the Mass in the Church of St Francis of Sales and gave us communion. When we came out of the church, we found a table ready for us with bread, cheese and salami. Don Bosco went around pouring a little bit of wine and distributing biscuits.

Whenever a boy was in need, Don Bosco would give him clothes or shoes, not always new but in good condition. We were attracted by the games, the merry-go-round, the gifts we received. And we loved the music played by the band.

During the same year, 1871, another young worker called Francis Alemanno came to Turin with his whole family. He met Don Bosco on his very first visit to the Oratory.

After church, there was a small lottery in which Alemanno won a necktie. Fitting it to his neck, Don Bosco asked him:

“What’s your name?”

“Francis Alemanno.”

“Have you been coming to the Oratory long?”

“It’s my first visit.”

“Do you know Don Bosco?”

The boy was embarrassed at first, and then shyly lifted up his eyes:

“You are Don Bosco.”

“You will know Don Bosco well if you let him take care of your soul.”

“That’s exactly what I am looking for, someone to take care of me.”

“How beautiful! You have just won a necktie and I will tie you with that necktie to the Oratory for ever.”

Francis became a friend of Don Bosco, and from the Oratory he entered the Salesian Congregation.

The young bricklayers, the distribution of clothes to those who needed them, the personal dialogues with the boys: the Oratory of Don Bosco lived on and prospered in the shadow of the shrine.

Don Bosco entrusted its direction to Fr Barberis for a few years, then for many years to Fr Pavia, who was helped by the legendary lay brother John Garbellone. Rather eccentric and strange, Garbellone was living proof of Don Bosco’s extraordinary ability to make good use of the natural talents of even the poorest of temperaments.

Garbellone was the very soul of the festive Oratory for 50 years. In a little notebook he maintained a list of more than 6000 names of boys he had helped prepare for first communion. In 1884 he became bandmaster and continued in that office till his death in 1928.

Don Bosco had won his friendship with an act of great trust: he entrusted him with 30,000 *lire* in cash, to go and settle a debt... something like 50 million *lire* in present currency!⁵⁸ Garbellone was a penniless young man of 28 at the time. That gesture touched him so deeply that from that moment on, he would have thrown himself into the fire for Don Bosco’s sake.

Michael Unia, Farmhand

Michael Unia came to the Oratory on 19 March 1877. He was 27 and was a farmhand. He told Don Bosco that he wanted to become a priest but not a Salesian. He wanted to go back to his native village, Roccaforte di Mondovi, to work there.

“But suppose God wanted you for something greater?”

“Then God should make me understand that that is his will.”

“If God were to reveal to me your soul, and I were to tell it to you here and now, would you take it as a sign that God wants you to become a Salesian priest?”

Unia did not know whether Don Bosco was in earnest or just pulling his leg. He thought for a while and then said:

“Well, tell me: what do you see in my conscience?”

Don Bosco told him everything, his good deeds and his sins, down to the minutest

⁵⁸ About 25,000 Euros today.

detail. Unia thought he was dreaming.

“But how can you know all this?”

“I’ll tell you more. You were 11 years old, and one Sunday afternoon you were in the church choir at Vespers. Your companion was asleep with his head thrown back and mouth wide open. You chose the biggest plum from your pocket and dropped it into the poor fellow’s mouth. The boy choked and began running madly all over the place. The vespers had to be suspended. You were rolling with laughter, till the priest smacked you properly and thoroughly.”

Michael Unia, of course, remained with Don Bosco. He was the first Salesian missionary to reach the lepers of Colombia, in a remote area called Agua de Dios. He spent his life among 730 victims of the dreaded malady, giving himself unsparingly till his death, helping them discover their dignity as human beings and children of God.

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THE FOREIGN MISSIONS

Sometime between 1871 and 1872 Don Bosco had a very dramatic dream. It would seem that he first narrated it to Pius IX, and later to some of his Salesians. Two of them, Barberis and Lemoyne, took careful notes.

I found myself in a wild, utterly unknown region. It was an immense, uncultivated plain, with neither hills nor mountains. Far away, however, I could see rugged mountains. Bands of people were running about the plain. They were almost naked, of extraordinary stature and ferocious aspect. They had long bristly hair, and their skin was bronze or blackish in colour. They wore cloaks made of animal skins hanging from their shoulders. They were armed with slings and long spears.

They were divided into different tribes: some hunted wild animals; others strutted about carrying chunks of bleeding flesh on their spears. Some fought among themselves, others came to blows with soldiers who were apparently European. The ground was strewn with corpses. I shuddered at the spectacle.

Suddenly some people materialized at one end of the plain. By their attire and way of acting, I could make out they were missionaries belonging to different orders. They were trying to preach the religion of our Lord Jesus to those people. I looked intently at them but did not recognize anyone. They reached the savages, who attacked and killed them as soon as they saw them. They hoisted their macabre trophies on their spears.

New Attempts

After witnessing those terrible scenes I thought to myself: "How can such a brutal people ever be converted?"

Then I saw in the distance another group of missionaries approaching the savages, with broad smiles on their faces and accompanied by a large crowd of youngsters. I trembled, thinking they would meet the same fate. As I drew near, I could see seminarians as well as priests. They were our Salesians! I recognized the ones in the first rows, but although I did not know the others I could make out they were all Salesians.

I did not want them to go ahead, I wanted to stop them. Any moment they would meet the same fate as the ones before. But to my great surprise, I saw that their presence brought good cheer to those people. They lowered their weapons, stopped looking ferocious and welcomed our Salesians with great courtesy.

Astonished, I thought: “Let’s see how all this is going to end.” I saw our missionaries advancing towards those people and instructing them. They were eager to learn. They listened to what they were told and tried to act as they were taught.

As I stood watching, I saw the missionaries reciting the rosary and the people answering devoutly. After a while the missionaries went right into the middle of the crowd and knelt down. The people knelt down too, dropping their weapons. Then one of the Salesians intoned *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli*.⁵⁹ The hymn was taken up by the whole crowd with such force that I awoke with a start.

That dream had a remarkable effect on the life of Don Bosco. He himself said: “After that dream I felt the old missionary flame re-awakening in my heart.”

Don Bosco had begun to think of the missions while still a young student at Chieri. Fr Lemoyne tells us that during those years, the *Opera della Propagazione della Fede*⁶⁰ was well known in Piedmont. Writings describing the toils and sufferings of the missionaries were eagerly read. And John Bosco contemplated dedicating himself to the foreign missions.

Vatican Council I (1869-70) contributed greatly to the development of the missions. Bishops from America, Africa and Asia, taking advantage of their trip to Italy where the clergy was very numerous, tried to recruit priests and nuns for their territories.

The requests reached even Valdocco. Msgr Barbero asked Don Bosco to give him sisters for Hyderabad in India. Msgr Alemany, bishop of San Francisco, California, asked him to open a technical school there. Don Bosco did not take up these requests. He had not yet begun thinking ‘seriously’ of the missions.

One year later, Don Bosco dreamt the dream of the “immense plain with the ferocious people,” and the old missionary flame was rekindled. He immediately began trying to identify the region he had seen in his dream, the area that providence had reserved for his Salesians. Requests for foreign foundations continued to land on his table, but now he examined them with a different kind of interest.

Two Rivers and a Desert

Don Bosco recounts:

I first thought that the blackish people of the dream were the Africans of Ethiopia. But after speaking to people who knew that region and perusing some books, I dropped that idea. I thought next of Hong Kong, and then of Australia. I asked Msgr Quinn about the natives of those parts, but his description did not click with what I had seen. I turned my mind to Mangalore on the Malabar coast...

Finally, in 1874, Gazzolo, the Argentine consul at Savona, mentioned the Salesians to the archbishop of Buenos Aires, who expressed his desire to have a group of Salesians. I got hold of geography books on South America and read them carefully. I was astounded: I saw described there the very natives and the region I had seen in my dream. It was Patagonia, that immense region in the south of Argentina.

⁵⁹ Praise Mary, O tongues of the faithful.

⁶⁰ An organization founded by a laywoman in Lyon in the early nineteenth century.

Fr Amadei, one of the most attentive biographers of Don Bosco, tells us that Don Bosco searched the maps stubbornly for a particular detail, in order to discover the place “marked by God.” “In the field of apostolate seen in the dream, Don Bosco had noted *two rivers at the entrance of a vast desert*. However patiently he examined all the maps, he could not find this place. He came to know that the two rivers were the Río Colorado and the Río Negro only much later, when he had his first meeting with Commendatore Gazzolo, Argentine consul at Savona. I remember having myself seen, on one of the old atlases examined by Don Bosco, that part of South America, with the words: ‘Region of the Patagonians, where the inhabitants are giants.’”⁶¹

Peter Stella comments: “Don Bosco’s orientation becomes very clear from all this. He was thinking and dreaming of the missions in the strict sense of the word, *in partibus infidelium*,⁶² and in the most romantic sense of the time, among cruel and savage people... In Argentina there were savages, ‘his’ savages in fact... ‘Savages’ was a magic word that awakened interest and curiosity... A climate of legend surrounded the savages of Patagonia, described by the earliest explorers as giants, depicted by designers of travel books in the 18th century as twice the size of Europeans... Even in 1864, the *Dizionario di cognizioni utili* edited in Turin described them as having ‘broad shoulders, enormous heads, coarse black hair, scanty beards, and expressionless faces.’ They were said to reach a height of six feet, making them perhaps the tallest people in the world. Their ferociousness matched their uncultivated lands which were treeless, inhospitable, and continuously swept by strong winds. They roamed those expanses on swift horses, armed with lassoes, *bolas* and spears which they handled with great dexterity.”

A Circular for Recruiting Volunteers

The official request from the archbishop of Buenos Aires arrived at the end of 1874. “On the evening of 22 December 1874,” writes Don Bosco, “I read out the first letters to the chapter of the congregation.”

The proposal was twofold: to take charge of a parish in Buenos Aires dedicated to the Mother of Mercy, catering to Italian immigrants; and to run a boarding **school** for boys in San Nicolas. San Nicolas was an important centre in the archdiocese of Buenos Aires.

Don Bosco replied outlining his program in three points:

- He would send some priests to Buenos Aires to establish a Salesian base in America. They would take care “especially of poor and abandoned youth, catechism, schools, preaching and festive oratories”.
- Later the Salesians would take charge of San Nicolás.
- From these two bases, the Salesians “could be sent to other places.”

In this third point, Don Bosco was including, without being too obvious, his intention “to reach out as soon as possible to the native peoples.”

We have here, in practical and concrete terms, a particular method of missionary approach: Don Bosco’s Salesians would not go directly to the tribal people far from the civilized world, but would first establish bases in safe territory, working among the Italian immigrants who were both very numerous and in need of spiritual and moral help. From

⁶¹ MB 10:1273 = BM 10:548.

⁶² In pagan lands.

there they would reach out towards apostolic enterprises of the ‘front line.’

On 27 January 1875, the consul notified Don Bosco that his conditions had been accepted.

Without allowing the news to leak out, Don Bosco prepared a surprise. Fr Ceria describes the scene: “In the evening of 29 January, feast of St Francis of Sales, Don Bosco gathered artisans, students and confreres in the study hall, where a stage had been erected. Consul Gazzolo mounted the stage in his dazzling uniform, together with Don Bosco, the members of the superior chapter and the rectors of the Salesian houses.

Don Bosco announced to the enraptured audience that, with the approval of the pope, the first Salesians would soon be leaving for the missions of Southern Argentina. Those words, far from causing anxiety because of the risks of the enterprise, awakened wild enthusiasm among both boys and Salesians.

“A new ferment had been thrown among the students and the young Salesians. Vocations began to increase visibly. Applications to join the society multiplied. Everyone was consumed by missionary fervour.” Fr Ceria, who writes about this in the *Annals* of the congregation, comments: “To understand the impression caused by this event, we have to go back to those days when the congregation was still very much a family gathered around its head. The impetus given on that day suddenly opened up limitless horizons in the fantasies of the hearers, and in an instant led to an enormous enlargement of the figure of Don Bosco and of his work, already so great in their minds. A new era in the history of the Oratory and of the Salesian Society was beginning.”

On 5 February 1875, Don Bosco broke the news of the first missionary expedition to all the Salesians residing outside Valdocco. His circular invited volunteers to apply in writing, latest by October.

The enthusiasm was so infectious that almost all offered themselves for the missions. It is no exaggeration to say that it was the beginning of a new era for the Salesians.

The Leader of the Expedition: The Boy of the Giants

Don Bosco would organize eleven missionary expeditions during his lifetime, but none would surpass the enthusiasm aroused by the first.

Everything was prepared with the greatest care. So that his sons might be received as friends among friends, Don Bosco got in touch with a great number of influential people in Buenos Aires. To provide for the needs of his pioneers, he turned to the cooperators. He himself was surprised at their generosity.

This first group of missionaries had to be the best that the young congregation could offer. Going through the mass of applications, Don Bosco carefully chose six priests and four brothers. Some still ended up badly: not always did Don Bosco get it right, nor was he always guided by lights from on high.

The leader of the expedition was to be John Cagliero, the boy over whose bed Don Bosco had seen two huge dark-skinned Indians bending anxiously. At 37, he had turned out to be a strong, jovial, intelligent and exuberantly active priest. He had all that was needed to begin the Salesian work in South America. It was difficult to think of the Oratory without him. With a degree in theology, he taught the clerics, and was a maestro and composer of renown. He was handling many delicate matters, and was, besides, spiritual director of several religious institutions in Turin. His departure would be a serious loss.

The way in which Don Bosco enlisted him for the expedition is interesting. Fr Ceria tells us:

Don Bosco had been silent and pensive for many days. One day in March he turned to Cagliero who was sitting near him.

“I would like to send one of our earliest priests to accompany the missionaries to America, to stay with them three months or so till they are well settled. To leave them alone without support, without someone to whom they could turn for advice, would be too much...”

Cagliero answered:

“If Don Bosco cannot find anyone else, and thinks that I could do the job, I am ready.”

“Good,” said Don Bosco, and left it at that.

Months passed by without any further reference to this conversation. As the date for the departure drew near, one day Don Bosco asked Cagliero:

“About going to America, are you still willing, or was it just a joke?”

“You know well that with Don Bosco I never joke.”

“Well then, get ready, it is time.”

Fr Cagliero set about making preparations immediately. Within a few days of feverish activity he was ready.

Thus, with his customary good-natured simplicity, the first and greatest Salesian missionary began his mission. The three months envisaged by Don Bosco lengthened into a total of thirty years.

Another precious priest who was leaving was Fr Fagnano, a born pioneer and ex-soldier of Garibaldi. The other four priests were Cassinis, Tomatis, Baccino and Allavena. The four brothers were Scalvini, master joiner and carpenter; Gioia, cook and master shoemaker; Molinari, music master; and Belmonte, administrator.

Twenty Reminders Scrawled in Pencil

The missionaries spent the summer learning Spanish.

In October, Cagliero led them to Rome to receive the blessing of the Holy Father. Hardly had they entered the hall, when Pius IX said: “I am a poor old man. Where are my young missionaries? So you are the sons of Don Bosco, and you are going to preach the gospel in Argentina. You have a vast field of labour. Spread your virtues among those people. It is my desire that you multiply, because the need is great and the harvest among the indigenous peoples abundant.”

The group returned to Turin. Eugene Ceria writes: “A missionary expedition to the remotest part of America, in that now distant 1875, had something epic about it in the eyes of those who lived in the remote corner of Turin known as Valdocco. The departing missionaries were looked upon as generous heroes resolutely facing the unknown. Seeing them moving about the house already sporting their travelling attire, everyone wanted to approach them and have a word with them.”

The official send-off was held by Don Bosco on 11 November in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians. By 4.00 p.m. the church was packed and overflowing. At the end of

vespers, Don Bosco mounted the pulpit and outlined a program of action for the missionaries. They would begin by working for the Italian immigrants in Argentina:

“I request you to give particular attention to the plight of Italian families. You will find among them a great number of youngsters and even adults who are absolutely ignorant of reading, writing and of the fundamental Christian truths. Go, search out these brethren of ours, whom poverty and misfortune has led to foreign lands.”

Later the missionaries would begin the evangelization of Patagonia:

“In this way we will set in motion a great work. It is not a question of converting the whole world in a few days, far from it. But who can say that this departure might not be a tiny seed from which a huge tree will be born? Who knows that it might not be a grain of millet or a mustard seed, which will slowly expand and produce abundant fruit?”

At the end of his talk, Don Bosco embraced each one of the missionaries. All were deeply moved when the ten walked down the aisle, with boys and friends milling about them. Don Bosco was the last to reach the door of the church. A great sight was awaiting him: the square packed with people, a long line of carriages awaiting the travellers, lanterns everywhere lighting up the night. Fr Lemoyne, who was standing close to Don Bosco, said to him:

“Don Bosco, is this not your dream coming true: *Inde exhibit gloria mea?*”⁶³

“You are right,” answered Don Bosco, profoundly moved.

It is easy to lose a sense of proportion at moments like these. But Don Bosco had his feet solidly on the ground. Only a few months before he had said: “What is our Oratory when compared to the whole world? Only a tiny atom. Yet it keeps us all busy, and from this obscure little corner we think of sending out people here and there. Oh, the goodness of God!”

Each one of the missionaries had been given a little sheet of paper with 20 special recommendations. Don Bosco had jotted them down in his notebook during a recent train journey, and had them copied out for all. They are a wonderful summary of what Don Bosco wanted his Salesian missionaries to be. We reproduce here the five most important points:

1. Look for souls, not for money, honours or dignity.
5. Take special care of the sick, the young, the old and the poor, and you will receive the blessing of God and the goodwill of the people.
12. Show yourself to be poor in dress, food and dwellings, and you will be rich in God’s eyes, and will conquer the hearts of people.
13. Love one another. Advise and correct one another, without envy or ill-feeling. Let the good of one be the good of all. Let the pain and suffering of one be the pain and suffering of all, and let each one try to remove or at least mitigate them.
20. In your sufferings and hardships, never forget that we have a great reward prepared for us in heaven. Amen.

Don Bosco accompanied his missionaries as far as Genoa, where on 14 November 1875 they boarded the *Savoie*. A witness records that Don Bosco’s face was flushed with the effort he was making to hide his emotion.

The future was not going to be easy. But Cagliari had a little chit on which Don

⁶³ *From here my glory will go forth.*

Bosco had scrawled: “Do what you can, and God will do the rest. Entrust everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians, and you will see what miracles are.”

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PATAGONIA, THE PROMISED LAND

The missionaries landed at Buenos Aires on 14 December 1875, and found themselves surrounded by friends. They were given a rousing welcome by the archbishop, a few priests, and over two hundred Italian immigrants, including a group of past pupils of the Oratory of Valdocco.

They were soon appalled at finding “so many people with good traditions, respectful of the church and priests and generous towards them, but absolutely ignorant and in extreme need of religious assistance. Going by their first letters, about 30,000 Italians in Buenos Aires and 300,000 in the whole of Argentina were without any priestly assistance. Fr Cagliero and his companions felt like scanty drops of rain falling on parched soil” (P. Stella).

Following the plan drafted at Turin, they divided themselves into two groups: Fr Cagliero with two confreres settled at the Church of the Mother of Mercy to look after the Italian immigrants; Fr Fagnano led the other six to San Nicolás to take charge of the boarding **school** for boys.

A festive oratory was started at Buenos Aires, and was an instant success. The city had nothing that could be of help to boys. “Fr Cagliero and his companions were amazed to find themselves surrounded by youngsters, Italian for most part, who, when asked to make the sign of the cross, would look on nonplussed, not understanding what was asked of them. When asked whether they went to Mass on Sundays, they answered that they did not remember ever going, because they never knew when it was Sunday and when it was not” (P. Stella).

There was a great shortage of schools, and in the course of a few weeks Fr Cagliero was flooded with requests not only from Argentina but also from neighbouring Uruguay. The apostolic delegate of Montevideo, requesting the presence of Salesians, gave him sorry figures: in a country half the size of Italy, there was neither seminary nor seminarian, and not even one Catholic school.

What about the Natives?

The thought of going to work among the ‘savages,’ which had spurred many of the missionaries to cross the ocean, was shelved for the moment. Their ‘mission’ was there, in those cities which urgently needed to be evangelized.

Fr Cagliero identified three works which seemed to be most urgent. First, a technical school, “a house of *artes y oficios*, would make a hit, be a milestone in the history of the nation, attract the benevolence of the whole republic, and do much good” (letter to Don

Bosco, 5 February 1876). Next, a boarding school at Montevideo, which would be the first Christian institution of the type in the capital of Uruguay. Lastly, a work for boys of La Boca, the poorest quarter of Buenos Aires, full of Italians and dominated by the Freemasons.

No priest dared walk the streets of La Boca. Cagliero visited the place immediately, gathered a group of boys, gave out medals of Our Lady, and spoke to some families. News reached the archbishop.

“You have been very imprudent. I have never been there myself, and I do not allow any of my priests to go there either. It’s very dangerous.”

“And yet I am tempted to go back there.”

And he did. The boys came running to meet him shouting in the Genoa dialect: “The priest of the medals!” It was a repetition of the old scenes of Don Bosco on the outskirts of Turin: “This medal is for the best one ... And this one for the worst ... Can you make the sign of the cross? Do you know the Hail Mary?”

Men and women came out of the doors to see the priest who dared mix with their urchins, and who was promising them a playground with games, songs, music and fun.

But Valdocco wanted news about the ‘savages.’ “Patagonia,” writes Fr Ceria, “was a magic name that inflamed the imaginations of the young. Many of them were dreaming of adventures among the Indians running about on that immense plain!” Don Bosco had to work hard to feed those juvenile fantasies and keep the enthusiasm high.

The missionaries filled their letters with whatever news they could glean here and there. The information was confused in the beginning but improved with time. A letter of 10 March 1876 reads:

The material and spiritual conditions of the Indians of the tribes of the Pampas and the Patagones fill our hearts with sadness. The chiefs of these tribes are at war with the government. They complain of vexatious oppression, they elude the troops stationed to control them, they overrun the plain, they steal. Armed with Remington rifles, they kidnap men, women and children, and rob horses and sheep. The soldiers, on their part, are determined to wipe them out. Instead of reconciliation, this only leads to greater hatred and revenge. Instead of soldiers, it might be better to send a band of Capuchin friars or other missionaries: many souls would be saved; prosperity and well-being would take root among those tribes. In the present situation, with both sides up in arms, missionaries can do little or nothing.

Reinforcements from Turin

Don Bosco understood the situation: Buenos Aires, bursting with immigrants, reminded him of his early days at Turin as a young priest, with boys descending upon the city from the surrounding valleys.

He got ready a second expedition. Seconding Cagliero’s assessment of the situation, he sent 23 more Salesians on 7 November 1876. Among them were Fr Bodrato and Fr Louis Lasagna (the boy with the shock of red hair), who would make significant contributions to the Salesian work in America. But this effort told heavily on the young and still fragile congregation. Don Bosco wrote to Cagliero: “This expedition has nearly sunk us, but with God’s help we shall manage.”

Don Bosco, however, did not want to postpone too long the original plan, that of the evangelization of the Indians.

He proposed a plan which, from far, looked perfect: open boarding schools in towns on the borders of the territories of the Indians, receive their children into these schools, reach out through them to the adults, and “in the meantime cultivate vocations among the students. In this way we can hope to prepare missionaries for the Pampas and the Patagones. The natives would thus become evangelizers of the natives themselves.”

The plan did not work out. Frs Costamagna, Fagnano and Lasagna made missionary forays many miles out of the inhabited regions, into colonies lost on the immense plain, but did not meet a single native. The towns on the borders of the territories of the Indians were simply non-existent. To reach the lands of the Indians they had to join bands of adventurers or merchants which travelled south in caravans or on ships covering a thousand kilometres. There they found little groups of houses and many barracks, which would become the towns of the future.

In November 1877, Don Bosco sent a third group of Salesians to Argentina, 18 of them. Someone jokingly called it ‘the children’s crusade,’ because 8 of them were very young seminarians. But the results would justify the risk that Don Bosco had taken.

For the first time, the Salesians were accompanied by a small group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Following in the footsteps of those first FMA (whom Mother Mazzarello had herself accompanied to Genoa), thousands of other sisters would cross the ocean.

The archbishop of Buenos Aires was not slow in understanding that Don Bosco was going beyond the limits of the possible for his archdiocese, and wanted to show his gratitude. He asked his vicar, Msgr Espinosa, to accompany two Salesians to Patagonia, the land of the Indians. Don Bosco would thus finally receive first hand information about ‘his savages.’

On 7 March 1878, the vicar and Frs Costamagna and Rabagliati boarded a southbound steamship at the river Paraná. The plan was to land at Bahía Blanca, after covering a thousand kilometres by sea. From there they would proceed ‘somehow’ another 250 kilometers till Patagones on the Río Negro, which divides the Pampa from Patagonia.

The attempt failed and almost turned into a tragedy. The ship was hit by a gale and was shaken and tossed about for three days and two nights, till, in a terrible condition, it was forced to return to the port of Buenos Aires. Costamagna’s colourful letter describing the tempest was a roaring success with the boys of Valdocco and the readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*.

“The Cross Follows The Sword. Patience!”

The second expedition to the lands of the Indians began on 16 April 1879. Julius Roca, general and minister of war, was about to go south with an expedition of 8,000 men. It was a ‘mopping up campaign’ against the indigenous tribes who were constantly in revolt.

A large number of natives had been massacred in the course of previous expeditions, while others had been brought to Buenos Aires and distributed as slaves to various families. Those who remained harboured a deep hatred against the whites. It was clear they would risk extermination rather than surrender. It could also be foreseen that the soldiers would indulge in the usual massacres.

The minister of war wanted to try using means that were more moral. He asked the archbishop for priests to act as chaplains to the troops and as missionaries to the natives. The archbishop sent his vicar and Frs. Costamagna and Botta.

“Fr Costamagna is not very pleased with the whole affair,” Fr Bodrato wrote to Don Bosco. “He is afraid that priests accompanying the soldiers would alienate the people even more from the gospel. It is more necessary than ever to pray.”

Buenos Aires, Azul, Carhué, Choele-Choel, Patagones: it was a journey of about 1300 kilometres, on horseback or on carts reminiscent of the Far West. It was the first true ‘missionary journey’ of the two Salesians. Fr Costamagna kept up a steady stream of lively letters to Don Bosco during the trip. They were read avidly at Valdocco, and were published in the *Salesian Bulletin* and in other Catholic papers, generating great missionary enthusiasm.

Here are some excerpts from those letters:

With the minister of war and many soldiers we set off from Azul, the last settlement in Argentina, after which begins the great Pampa desert.

The cross follows the sword. Patience! The archbishop has accepted this arrangement, and we have to bow our head. We were given a horse and a cart. We loaded the altar, a harmonium and our luggage.

On the first day we saw now and then some *toldos*, huts made with animal hides. They belong to the Pampa Indians, almost civilized now. They are dark brown in colour, with broad flat faces. As we were passing by, we tried to greet them with some words in their own language, and pressed on towards the desert.

Carhué is a station in the heart of the Pampa desert, a frontier post between Argentina and the lands of the Indians. It consists of a mud fortress, about forty houses and *toldos* of the members of two tribes, the *Eripaylá* and the *Manuel Grande*. I asked for a horse and rode into their midst.

As I drew near the settlement, my heart was beating fast. I was wondering what to do. Then I saw the son of the *cacique Eripaylá* coming towards me. Luckily for me, he could speak Spanish. He received me cordially and took me to his father, acting as interpreter. The *cacique* too received me with great kindness and told me that it was his wish that all his people should be instructed in the Catholic religion and receive baptism. Without delay I gathered the children and began teaching them catechism. With a little effort, I taught them the sign of the cross...

At Carhué we baptized about fifty young Indians and twenty children of Christians. Would to God we could have stayed there at least a month! But the minister wanted us to follow him. We left unwillingly, hoping to be able to return soon.

We crossed the desert with the army but also with some Indians who had been ordered by the minister to create new settlements at Choele-Choel. For a whole month we saw only desert and more desert.

On 11 May, after crossing many valleys and mountains, swamps and torrents, we reached the Río Colorado, which is somewhat the size of our Po at Turin. On the bank of that river, we celebrated Mass.

I asked permission to go ahead with the vanguard to the Río Negro. I rode for three days through thickets and thorns, trying my best to prevent my cassock

from being torn to shreds. On the morning of 24 May I woke up at dawn, shook off the frost that had fallen on my so-called bed, and warmed myself before a good fire. Then, mounting my horse, I set off for Choele-Choel. At 16.34, just when the sun was setting behind the Cordilleras, I reached the Río Negro, the river which divides Patagonia from the Pampas. From the bottom of my heart, I raised a hymn of thanks to our dear Mother, Mary Help of Christians, on her feast day...

Manhunt

On the following morning at Choele-Choel, I looked for the Indian prisoners of war, wanting to instruct them. I found them in the most abject misery. Some were half naked. They had no shelter and had to sleep in the open. As soon as they saw me, they surrounded me, men, women, boys, girls...

The missionaries reached Patagones, a town on the Río Negro of some 4000 inhabitants, and from there they returned to Buenos Aires towards the end of July.

But the military campaign on the Río Negro went on for almost two years, till April 1881. In fear and desperation, the Indians fled over the Cordilleras into Chile. Some surrendered. The fierce *cacique* Manuel Namuncurà, with small bands of his fighters, settled in a remote valley in the Cordilleras.

From that moment the Indians ceased to be military units. The survivors, frightened and poor, would in the following years become the object of a silent and ruthless manhunt. They would be taken as slaves for the farms, or simply eliminated.

On 5 August 1879, the archbishop of Buenos Aires offered Don Bosco the mission of Patagones. Don Bosco asked Fr Costamagna to negotiate with the archbishop for “the opening of a centre for Salesians and sisters. I will look for the personnel, and together we will look for the material means.”

On 1 January 1880, Don Bosco announced to the cooperators the beginning of the Patagones mission. “I have accepted it with full faith in God and in your charity.”

Two settlements had developed at the mouth of the Río Negro: Patagones and Viedma. On 15 December 1879, two little groups of Salesians set out from Buenos Aires. They had been entrusted with the missions of Patagones and Viedma. Fr Fagnano, parish priest of Patagones, together with two priests, two brothers and four sisters, was entrusted with all the colonies and tribes between the Río Negro and the Río Colorado. This was known as La Pampa, and was as big as northern Italy. Fr Milanesio, parish priest of Viedma, would look after all the inhabitants south of the Río Negro, the zone called Patagonia, which was a territory as big as the whole Italian peninsula.

Fr Fagnano’s policy was to attract people to the mission. In ten months he put up two schools, one for boys and one for girls, the first of which had 88 boarders, some of them sons of natives.

Fr Milanesio’s tactic was almost the opposite: he went looking for people where they lived. He mounted his horse and went off looking for natives. He learnt their language, befriended many tribes, saved isolated families from the abuses of the whites. With his flowing beard, he became the typical pioneer missionary. The Indians revered and trusted him, to the point of using his name as a magic word when maltreated by the ‘civilized’ whites.

The two strategies were perfectly complementary. Viedma and Patagones became seats of learning preparing a new generation of citizens who would be honest, Christian, and respectful of the natives. They also became strategic centres from which missionaries set off, following the rivers and crossing valleys, hills and mountains to visit the *toldos* of the natives and the *fazendas* of the white colonizers.

Manuel Namuncurà, the last great Araucano *cacique*, asked Fr Milaneseo to be his intermediary when he decided to come to terms with the Argentine government. Under Fr Milaneseo's protection, the *cacique* laid down arms at Fort Roca on 15 May 1883. In exchange he was given the title, uniform and salary of a colonel of the Argentinian army.

“I Could See the Bowels of the Mountains”

During that same year 1883, thousands of kilometres away, Don Bosco saw in a new dream the future of South America and of his missionaries:

... I looked out of the window of the train and saw beautiful lands passing by: forests, mountains, plains, long and majestic rivers. For more than a thousand miles, we ran along the border of a virgin and unexplored forest...

I could see into the bowels of the mountains and into the depths of the plains. I saw the immense riches of these places that will one day be discovered. I saw many mines of precious metals, inexhaustible seams of coal, oil-fields richer than anything we have found so far...

The train resumed its run through the Pampa and Patagonia. We reached the Straits of Magellan. We left the coach. Punta Arenas was before us. The plain was cluttered for miles around with heaps of coal, all sorts of timber, uncut logs, and immense heaps of metal and of ore. My friend pointed out to all this and said: “What is only a vision now, will one day be a reality.”

I concluded: “I’ve seen enough. Take me to my Salesians in Patagonia.”

We came back to the station and boarded the train. After a long journey, the train stopped at a sizeable settlement. I got off, and was immediately surrounded by my Salesians... They were many, but I did not know them, there was not a single one of my early sons among them. They were staring at me with wonder. I said to them:

“You do not know me? You do not know Don Bosco?”

“Oh, Don Bosco, of course we know you, but we have seen you only in pictures. We have never met you in person.”

“And Fr Fagnano, Fr Costamagna, Fr Lasagna, Fr Milaneseo, where are they?”

“We have never known them. They came here a long time ago, the first Salesians who came from Europe. But they died many years ago.”

Hearing this I was thinking: Is this a dream or a reality?

We boarded the train again. The engine hooted and we headed north... The train ran many hours along the banks of a long river, at times on the right bank and at times on the left. Every now and then we could see tribes of savages. And my companion kept saying:

“This is the field of work of your Salesians!”

During this long and fantastic dream, Don Bosco's mysterious companion predicted the time of the complete 'redemption' of the natives of South America:

"It will be completed before the end of the second generation. Each generation is 60 years."

He indicated also the manner in which the Salesians would achieve this goal:

"Through sweat and blood!"

The Last Missionary Dream

Don Bosco had his last missionary dream the night between 9 and 10 April 1886. He narrated it, his tired voice broken by emotion, to Fr Rua and to his secretary Fr Viglietti. It is a grandiose and serene vision of the future.

We draw from the notes taken by them:

... Don Bosco scanned the horizon from a mountain peak. He saw a great multitude of youngsters running up to him:

"We've waited for you, we've waited so long, but at last you've come. You are with us and you won't leave us! ..."

A shepherd girl leading a huge flock of lambs said to him:

"Look farther. Look, all of you. What do you see?"

"I see mountains, then the sea, then hills, and then mountains and sea again."

"I read Valparaiso," said one boy.

"And I read Santiago," said another.

"Good," she went on. "Start from this point and you will see how much the Salesians have to do in future. Draw a line and look."

The boys took a closer look and exclaimed together:

"We read Beijing!"

"Now," the shepherdess said, "draw a single line from one extremity to the other, from Beijing to Santiago through the centre of Africa, and you will have an idea of how much the Salesians must do."

"But how can we do all this?" said Don Bosco. "The distances are enormous, the places difficult, and the Salesians so few."

"Do not worry. It will be done by your sons and the sons of your sons, and by their sons in their turn... Draw a line from Santiago to the centre of Africa. What do you see?"

"Ten mission centres."

"These will be houses of studies and novitiates, and will turn out a multitude of missionaries for these lands. And now turn this side. Here you see ten more centres, from the centre of Africa to Beijing. These too will provide Salesians for all these nations. See Hong Kong there, and Calcutta, and Madagascar further down. These and many other places will have houses for studies and novitiates."

At Don Bosco's death, there were 150 Salesians and 50 FMA in Latin America. They were well established in five nations: Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Equador. An immense amount of work had been carried out in 13 short years.

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DON BOSCO AND ARCHBISHOP GASTALDI

In 1882, speaking to Canon Colomiatti about the archbishop of Turin, Lawrence Gastaldi, Don Bosco said:

“The only thing left for him is to stick a knife into my heart!”

Such an affirmation is capable of blocking any cause of beatification. Yet the experts of the Holy See, after examining this statement carefully for a long time, declared that Don Bosco had practiced the virtues to a heroic degree: *all* the virtues, including patience. They did not judge those words an insult to his archbishop, much less an outburst of anger or of impatience. They saw only a poor priest letting off steam at the limits of forbearance.

In this chapter, we shall deal with events that were either glossed over or skipped entirely by the biographers of Don Bosco, because they were deemed too thorny or difficult.

I believe that the Christians of today have come of age. I believe that, far from causing scandal, it is heartening and instructive to know that even the greatest ‘men of God’ had their failings, to realize that they could not only suffer but also make others suffer in God’s name. As long as we are on this earth, we are all poor human beings, whatever be our uniform or the stripes we wear.

The Coldness of Archbishop Riccardi

Don Bosco suffered the long, humiliating, painful clash with his archbishop during the years of his greatest triumphs.

Archbishop Fransoni died in exile at Lyon in 1862. He had ordained Don Bosco priest, seen his work grow, and had always supported him. He used to call the Oratory ‘the parish for boys who had no parish.’

Because of political bickering, Turin received a new archbishop only in 1867, in the person of Msgr Riccardi of the Counts of Netro. He was seven years senior to Don Bosco and was a great friend of his. When he received the nomination as archbishop of Turin, he was bishop of Savona. When Don Bosco went to visit him, the bishop embraced him cordially. He told him that he knew of his great gift of being able to work with the young, and how much good his priests were doing in the minor seminary at Mirabello. He said he was coming to Turin with a clear plan: he wanted to entrust Don Bosco with the revival of the minor seminaries of Giaveno and Bra, and the reorganization of the seminary of Chieri.

Something went wrong, however, at the very first meeting at Turin. Don Bosco told Msgr Riccardi that he had founded a religious congregation way back in 1859, and that the Holy See had given the first approval with the *decretum laudis* in 1864. It was news to Archbishop Riccardi. A little flustered, he said:

“I thought you had founded a diocesan institute, depending only on me. I thought you would be working entirely within my diocese...”

The surprise and disappointment of Riccardi are understandable. At a moment when, after so many difficulties, the archbishop was trying to consolidate all forces in the diocese, it appeared that Don Bosco was trying to escape. But Don Bosco was looking at a much wider mission, and was already thinking more in terms of the church than of the diocese of Turin.

The coolness of Msgr Riccardi towards Don Bosco and his work increased during the three years that followed.

When the metropolitan seminary had been closed down, some seminarians had taken refuge at Valdocco, and others at the Cottolengo. This had attracted the sympathies of many. They saw in the Oratory a providential citadel, a refuge for the young hopes of the clergy of Turin.

But now the situation changed radically. On 11 September 1867, the archbishop wrote to Don Bosco:

“As regards my diocesan seminarians, I no longer allow them to teach or give tuitions, or to work as dormitory assistants or prefects. I would like them to attend better to their studies. I have also decided to give holy orders only to those who reside in the seminary.”

A period of darkness began for Don Bosco. Seminarians who did not intend to join Don Bosco left the Oratory and went back to the seminary. Those who were attached to him with vows began to be apprehensive about their future ordinations.

Don Bosco went to speak to the archbishop and expressed himself rather sharply:

“According to your orders, the young priests must go to the Convitto and the seminarians to the seminary. And is Don Bosco to remain alone with his crowd of boys?”

The archbishop refused to budge. Fortunately, the tension did not last. The Holy See, on Don Bosco’s keen insistence, officially approved the Salesian Congregation with a decree dated 1 March 1869. Another decree gave Don Bosco the faculty, for ten years, to give ‘dimissorial letters’ to seminarians entering the Oratory before the age of 14. This meant that those who had grown up in the Oratory could be ordained on Don Bosco’s recommendation even if they had never frequented the seminary.

Archbishop Riccardi died in October 1870.

“You Want Him and I Give Him to You”

Pius IX, who held Don Bosco in high esteem, consulted him on the choice of a new archbishop for Turin. Don Bosco suggested the name of Bishop Lawrence Gastaldi of Saluzzo. He was a good friend of his, and his congregation had received much support from him. Pius IX, who knew the impulsive character of Gastaldi, was not very happy about the choice. But Don Bosco insisted, and the pope (if we are to believe the testimony of Fr Amadei) relented:

“You want him? I give him to you. I leave you the task of letting him know that now I make him archbishop of Turin, and later perhaps something more” (clearly a hint at a cardinal’s hat).

Don Bosco immediately sent a telegram to Msgr Gastaldi:

“Your Excellency, I have the honour of being the first to inform you that you will be

nominated archbishop of Turin.”

As soon as Don Bosco returned to Turin, Msgr Gastaldi rushed to meet him. “He met Fr Lemoyne and embraced him. He could hardly stand still. On seeing Don Bosco, the bishop took him by the hand into his room and remained closeted with him for a long time.”⁶⁴ Towards the end of the conversation, Don Bosco rather imprudently let Gastaldi know that he had had a hand in his nomination. He also told him the precise words of the pope: “Archbishop now, and within a couple of years, something more.” The bishop cut him short: “Let us leave that to providence.” It was an act of humility, but there was already a shade of touchiness in it.

The friendship between Don Bosco and Gastaldi could have been defined as bomb-proof. The bishop’s mother had worked for years at the Oratory, and she considered Don Bosco as a son. Don Bosco and Msgr Gastaldi were in fact of the same age.

When Don Bosco needed letters of recommendation to Rome for the approval of his congregation, Gastaldi had written a very beautiful one:

“I testify that Archbishop Fransoni, while in exile at Lyon, affirmed that this congregation was a special blessing from Heaven, because many young men could prepare themselves for priesthood in it when the diocesan seminaries were closed” (11 July 1867).

Ten months later he had written:

“Here the merciful God pours out his blessings in superabundant measure, here we see a special mission on behalf of young people... The undersigned has seen a colossal Church [Mary Help of Christians] rising almost miraculously in its midst. It is the wonder of all who look at it. The expense of more than half a million *lire* is borne by poor priests who have nothing, and this may be taken as a proof that God is blessing this society.”

In his book, *Memorie Storiche*, Msgr Gastaldi had this to say about the neighbourhood of Valdocco: “That this place is specially blessed by God is shown by the numerous Institutes of charity and piety that have arisen here. It is enough to mention the Little House of Divine Providence and the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales.”

Don Bosco had always turned to him as a brother and friend. He had even sent him the drawings of the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians and had accepted some changes suggested by him.

A Great Archbishop

Msgr Gastaldi was truly one of the great archbishops of Turin.

We have a profile of him drawn by Bishop Duc of Aosta:

“He was born for the episcopate. The ascendancy of his character, the vigour of his conceptions and will, the range of his knowledge, the facility of his speech, the fervour of his piety, his attachment to the teaching of Rome, and his passionate love for souls and for the church: all this made one foresee him as the spiritual leader of a people.”

For a more comprehensive idea we should add the words of Msgr Re, bishop of Alba, who testified under oath: “The archbishop, together with many good qualities, had a somewhat exaggerated idea of his own authority and knowledge. His quick character sometimes led him to rash decisions, which he then found difficult to reconsider because of the fear of diminishing the prestige of his authority.”

The time of chaotic enthusiasm was over. Vatican Council I had steered the church

⁶⁴ MB 10:446-47 = MB 10:203

firmly towards greater centralization. Every diocese was reorganizing itself decisively around its bishop, who in turn depended directly on the pope.

Archbishop Gastaldi was a great reorganizer of the archdiocese of Turin. He revived the seminary. He took control of all the ecclesial forces of the city. He wrote pastoral letters outlining the problems of the church and calling all to a more robust life of faith. We quote only two examples:

From a pastoral letter of 1873: “During last year 40 priests passed away, and only 14 were ordained. What do you say to that, my dear people? What will remain of the clergy within a few years if you do not come to our help and support the archdiocese? What a number of good priests we need if we are to look after the half million faithful that live here!”

From a pastoral letter of 1877 on the education of girls: “Education may be limited to cultivating the religious sensibility of girls and emphasizing what is *sentimental* in the practice of the faith. It may be satisfied with sweet pictures of the Virgin Mary, plenty of lights and decorations on the altar, splendid religious functions, music, incense and sermons that touch the heart. But if it never leads to acts of sacrifice, self-denial, humility and forgiveness for the love of Jesus, it can never deserve the name Christian, and it will never form truly Christian girls, girls who are truly imitators of Jesus Christ.”

He had a strong and manly devotion to Our Lady. On the eve of his death he insisted on going to the Shrine of the *Consolata*: “Let us go to visit our dear Mother, let us place ourselves under her mantle. It is so consoling to live and die under the mantle of Mary!”

Msgr Gastaldi died on 25 March 1883. When the news of his death reached the Vatican, Cardinal Nina, official protector of the Salesian Congregation, was overtaken by sadness. “I was thinking that his last pastoral decisions, directed to hurt my poor Salesians, would be an obstacle to his canonization.” That the cardinal should think of canonization at all gives us some indication of the stature of Gastaldi.

Don Bosco’s Basic Mistake

Why then did such a bitter storm arise between Don Bosco and Gastaldi? How is it that the tension became so grave as to necessitate a Vatican inquiry, in which the pope himself had to intervene?

Don Bosco committed a basic error and paid very dearly for it. In a very long letter sent to the archbishop from Borgo San Martino on 14 May 1873, Don Bosco tried touching every chord in an attempt to restore their old friendship. But among other things he wrote these unfortunate lines: “I want you to know that certain confidential information has been leaked out by someone within the government, and is now making its way around Turin. These papers allege that *Canon Gastaldi became Bishop of Saluzzo because of Don Bosco, and archbishop of Turin once again because of Don Bosco.*”

Don Bosco’s fundamental mistake was to think that words such as these might arouse the archbishop’s gratitude. Instead, they only succeed in wounding Msgr Gastaldi’s feelings very deeply.

At the time the letter was written, the interventions of the archbishop had already attained painful extremes. But Don Bosco was equally wrong in writing those words: they irritated Gastaldi all the more. He should have understood this already after his earlier mistakes. Soon after Gastaldi’s appointment as archbishop, Don Bosco had suggested,

without being asked, that Fr Bertagna be made provicar. Don Bosco was with the archbishop when he made his entry into Turin, on 26 November 1871, and had assured him a solemn reception from the anticlerical authorities of the city (it never took place). Someone who was not touchy might have considered these as friendly overtures; but someone as touchy as Gastaldi (see the testimony of Msgr Re) could easily consider them patronizing.

No sooner had he reached the cathedral and climbed the pulpit, Msgr Gastaldi affirmed forcefully that “his election had been an unexpected stroke of divine providence, *and in no way due to any human favour*. It was the Holy Spirit, and he alone, who had placed him at the head of the archdiocese of Turin.” He repeated this again and again, with unusual vigour. It was a sign that he wanted to shake off any trace of ‘protection.’ It was also a sign that he did not like at all the rumour making the rounds of the city that it was Don Bosco who had obtained his nomination. Canon Sorasio, who was present at the speech, was heard murmuring:

“Things look bad for Don Bosco, bad indeed!”⁶⁵

Fr Amadei writes that this was “the first flash of lightning of the terrible and unexpected storm.”

But the letter of 14 May 1873 really unleashed the storm. Msgr Gastaldi was never able to swallow those five lines. Even to a friend it is difficult to say, “It was *I* who got for you that award.” To an archbishop like Gastaldi, “who had an exaggerated idea about his own authority,” these words must have been like gall. Even four years after the event, talking to Fr Tresso, a past-pupil of Don Bosco who was trying to bring about a reconciliation, the archbishop remarked bitterly:

“He boasts of having made me bishop, he even wrote a letter throwing it in my face. But I have sent the letter to Rome. Let them see the saint in whom they put so much trust.”

The Role of the Press

The anticlerical papers immediately sensed the opportunity to set the archbishop against Don Bosco, and made use of every occasion to do so. The *Fanfulla* of 16 October 1871 wrote: “Don Bosco of Turin is being consulted for the nomination of bishops to the dioceses of Italy. He has been called to Rome expressly for that purpose.” At Milan, some papers called Don Bosco “the little pope of Piedmont” (the innuendo being that archbishops depend on the pope). The *Gazzetta di Torino* wrote on 8 January 1874: “The famous Don Bosco is in Rome. He has easy access to the Vatican, and the pope sees him quite frequently. He has ready access even to the government.” The *Lanterna del Ficcanaso*, in its issue of 6-7 May 1876, went so far as to say that the archbishop had suspended Don Bosco from celebrating Mass because “he was too close to Rome,” was trying to evade his authority, and was extorting inheritances from the dying. The article concluded: “It remains to be seen who is more powerful, Don Bosco or Msgr Gastaldi.”

All these allegations of the press (and many more like these) poured vinegar on the wounds. But they are not enough to explain the dissension between Don Bosco and Gastaldi. A factor that cannot be underestimated is the immense popularity of Don Bosco in contrast to the excessive sensitivity of Gastaldi, who, as he remarked to Fr Belasio in 1876, “did not want to play vicar to Don Bosco at Turin.” But there were also other issues which

⁶⁵ MB 10:230 = BM 10:125.

played an equally important role during these twelve painful years. We shall try to unravel this skein with the greatest brevity.

Use and Abuse of Power

Msgr Gastaldi did very much indeed to reorganize his archdiocese. But the human price of this reorganization was high, with its suspensions, questionable decisions, and harsh methods.

With the passing of years, the archbishop's strong character became even stronger. Canon Sorasio, secretary to the Curia, who had to back some very difficult decisions, wrote to the cardinal prefect of the Congregation of Rites in 1917: "May God forgive me: those were the times of power and the abuse of power, to say the least."

The archbishop would easily suspend his priests from celebrating Mass and hearing confessions, both very serious ecclesiastical penalties. Many had recourse to Rome against him. In February 1878, there were about 30 cases pending at the Holy See between Gastaldi and priests of the archdiocese of Turin.

In the early days, when things were not as yet very bad, Don Bosco had interceded for a canon of Chieri, a good man though a bit stubborn. The archbishop suspended him all the same from celebrating Mass and hearing confessions. It was such a scandal at Chieri that the poor man had to leave town.

The most sensational case was perhaps that of Fr Bertagna (the same one whom Don Bosco had suggested as provicar). After 22 years of teaching moral theology at the Convitto Ecclesiastico, he was suddenly dismissed in September 1876. He bore the blow in silence and withdrew to his native Castelnuovo, while the Convitto was shut down. Partly because of this humiliation, he fell seriously ill. Three years later Msgr Savio, bishop of Asti appointed him his vicar general. Fr Bertagna was considered one of the most authoritative moral theologians of his time. In 1884, Cardinal Alimonda, successor of Gastaldi, consecrated him auxiliary bishop and made him rector of the archdiocesan seminary.

Fr Louis Testa, an influential Jesuit in Rome, wrote: "I have had to patch up many differences between Gastaldi and the powers that be... Here in Rome, we are tired and fed up with the whole business."

It would be simplistic, however, to consider Gastaldi as a fire-eater. As a person he was humble, generous and loving. He had, as they say, a heart of gold. But whenever he became conscious of his authority as archbishop, he would become authoritarian and inflexible—as has happened in the case of many others in the history of the church. Such people can become "ruthless in the name of God." They begin to manifest more the face of the Omnipotent God than of the carpenter Son of God, who became servant of servants, washed feet, and allowed himself to be nailed to a cross.

Indiscipline

Gastaldi used this kind of inflexibility in his dealings with the young Salesian Congregation. Things were not helped by his fear of appearing as 'a creature of Don Bosco.' The first item he took up was the 'indiscipline' at the Oratory. The archbishop, writes Peter Stella, "was disgusted with the volcanic fervour that marked the Oratory and the Salesian Society. Don Bosco had everything well in hand, but to outsiders the Oratory appeared to be

a chaotic and noisy mess of disorganized forces, which in a not so distant future would call for drastic interventions from legitimate authority.”

There were also others in Turin who had a negative impression of that climate of serene familiarity which was, in fact, Don Bosco’s pride and joy. Msgr Gaetano Tortone, *chargé d’affaires* of the Holy See with the government of Turin, had drafted a long report in 1868: “During the hour of recreation, I was pained to see those seminarians mixing about with boys who were learning to be tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, etc. They were running, playing and jumping about with little decorum... The good Don Bosco is content if his seminarians pray with devotion in church, and cares little about infusing in them a sense of dignity worthy of the state they want to embrace.” According to Msgr Tortone, Don Bosco should have taught the seminarians to “keep their distance” from vulgar tailors and cobblers. Nothing could have been further from Don Bosco’s mind.

Another Motive for Tension

It seems that Msgr Gastaldi had personally resolved to tackle the issue of ‘indiscipline.’ We refer here to two rather mysterious episodes which are difficult to understand, and which reveal perhaps another motive for the tension.

Immediately after the entry of the new archbishop in Turin, Don Bosco fell seriously ill at Varazze, as we have seen elsewhere. Msgr Gastaldi inquired about his health, and on hearing of the seriousness of the sickness, asked Fr Cagliero:

“How many of you are firm and decided in your vocation?”

“More than one hundred and fifty.”

“And if your father Don Bosco were to die?”

“We shall look for an uncle to succeed him.”

“Good, good. But let’s hope that God will keep him.”

“Cagliero had the impression,” writes Amadei, “that, in the event of the death of Don Bosco, the archbishop expected the Salesians to turn to him for direction.” This was also the impression of Canon Marengo upon hearing from Cagliero about his meeting. “Thank God you did not say more. Any further suggestion would have been dangerous for the congregation,” he said.

When Don Bosco returned from Varazze, the archbishop paid him a visit. Canon Anfossi, who happened to be in Valdocco at the time, recounts that, while the boys were trying to improvise a hurried reception for the archbishop, he saw him come so rapidly down the stairs that Don Bosco could hardly keep up with him. “Paying no attention to the cheers of the boys, he entered his carriage without wishing anybody and drove away. I said to Don Bosco: ‘Things don’t seem to have ended well. Is anything the matter?’ And Don Bosco replied: ‘What can I say! The archbishop would like to head our congregation. But that is too much. Anyway, we shall see...’”⁶⁶

What had Msgr Gastaldi been proposing? Most probably that Don Bosco should retrace his steps and turn the Salesians into a diocesan congregation under episcopal direction. But it is not impossible that the archbishop cherished the dream of becoming himself the head of the Salesian Congregation. In 1874 he wrote to Cardinal Bizzarri: “Don Bosco has a special talent for forming good laymen, but I don’t think he has the same talent for forming young ecclesiastics.” He felt that he, the archbishop, had this talent. He could

⁶⁶ MB 10:311 = BM 10:155.

take over the reins of the congregation and put everything in order. Don Bosco, quite worn out by now, could continue to be the papà of the Oratory.

Thwarted in his plans, he went about imposing an iron discipline on the Salesians which soon became a real persecution. Any slip, any delay was promptly branded as ‘disobedience,’ ‘rebellion,’ ‘lack of discipline.’

It would be in bad taste to go into details. Quarrels are always quarrels.

Final Approval of the Rule

On 30 December 1873, Don Bosco left for Rome. After exhausting delays and hesitations, the final approval of the Salesian Rule was being debated at the Holy See.

The pope had appointed a commission of four cardinals.

The long discussions and corrections of the text dragged on till April. Msgr Gastaldi intervened against the approval with the letter to Cardinal Bizzarri quoted above: Don Bosco was capable of educating youngsters, but not seminarians or priests.

The commission cast its final vote at the beginning of April: three in favour and one against. Pius IX, when informed that one vote was missing, said that he would cast his own vote in favour.

It was 3 April 1873. Ten days later, the decree of final approval of the Salesian Rules was published. The congregation was now solidly under the authority of the pope, who granted to Don Bosco, for ten years, the faculty of presenting any Salesian for holy orders.

But in Turin things did not change.

The List of ‘Disciplinary Actions’

On 16 December 1876, Don Bosco had to inform Cardinal Ferrieri about the main points of friction with the archbishop:

- September 1875: suspension of Don Bosco’s faculty for hearing confessions. (The vicar, Canon Zappata, exclaimed: “But these measures are taken against drunkards!”). Since the boys were used to confess to him, Don Bosco had to leave Turin. No reasons were ever given for such a harsh measure.
- Prohibition of retreats to outside teachers in Salesian houses.
- Withdrawal of the permission to preach from several Salesian priests.
- Refusal to attend solemn celebrations at the Oratory, and prohibition to invite other prelates. (Even the first missionary expedition was celebrated without a bishop).
- Refusal to administer confirmation to the boys of the Oratory, and prohibition to other bishops to do so.

“These measures presuppose very grave reasons,” Don Bosco writes in his letter, “but we are completely unaware of these. The scandal in the city is great.”

On 25 March 1878, he informed Cardinal Oreglia of a new list of punitive measures:

- Don Bosco is being threatened with immediate suspension from hearing confessions if he dares write anything against the archbishop, except in letters to the pope, to the

Cardinal Secretary of State, and to the cardinal in charge of religious orders.

- Several Salesian priests have been under suspension for more than eight months.
- Holy orders have been refused to Salesian clerics presented to him, with serious consequences for the Salesian houses and missions.

But Msgr Gastaldi was also sending his 'lists' to Rome. "The frequency of these allegations," writes Ceria, "was spreading discredit and doubts about Don Bosco and the congregation among Cardinals who did not have access to all the facts."

Cardinal Ferrieri, for example, remained opposed to the Salesians till his dying day, convinced that they were "a temporary and artificial conglomeration of people".

But what wounded Don Bosco most was that even Pope IX, his great friend and protector, had cooled considerably towards him. "The continuous depiction of Don Bosco as a stubborn and self-willed man," says Fr Ceria, "influenced even the pope in the long run".

Pius IX died on 7 February 1878. Don Bosco was in Rome and had tried every possible way to obtain an audience. He never managed to see the pope again.

The New Pope Tests Don Bosco

Leo XIII was elected on 20 February 1878. Don Bosco obtained his first audience on 16 March. The report he wrote immediately after was triumphant: the pope had accepted to be registered as a cooperator, he acknowledged the finger of God in the Salesian works, he sent warm blessings to the missionaries. But on one point the report is brief: "regarding the differences with the archbishop of Turin, the pope said that he was waiting for an official report from the Congregation for Religious".

In private talks with his Salesians, Don Bosco was less triumphant: "I told the pope clearly how much I had suffered: audiences denied, letters intercepted, secret and open opposition from several quarters, harsh and humiliating words".

The pope was evidently well informed about the grave accusations against the priest from Turin, and if he had treated Don Bosco officially with kindness, he was nonetheless proceeding cautiously.

The enemies of Don Bosco were many and belligerent.

One of Don Bosco's best friends at the moment was Cardinal Alimonda. This cardinal found a way of proving to Leo XIII the sanctity of Don Bosco. It was a difficult test, but one that would reveal the true worth of that poor priest.

A shrine in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was being built in Rome. Despite the personal interest of the pope, appeals to all the bishops, and collections made all over the world, work had stopped at plinth level.

Pope Leo was dejected. It was at this stage that Cardinal Alimonda intervened.

"Your Holiness, I would like to propose a way which will surely succeed."

"What is it?"

"Entrust the work to Don Bosco."

"But will Don Bosco accept?"

"Your Holiness, I know Don Bosco and his boundless devotion to the pope. If you ask him, I am sure he will accept."

Don Bosco was, at that moment, up to his neck in debts. He was building two churches, St John the Evangelist at Turin, and Mary Help of Christians at Vallecrosia, and at

the same time setting up houses at Marseilles, Nizza and La Spezia. He was 65 years old.

On 5 April 1880, Pope Leo sent for Don Bosco and made his request. If Don Bosco were to accept, he said, he would be doing something holy and most pleasing to the pope. Don Bosco replied:

“The wish of the pope is a command for me. I accept this task that your Holiness graciously entrusts to me.”

“But I will not be able to give you any money.”

“And I will not ask Your Holiness for it. All I ask is your blessing, and if you so think fit, your permission to set up a festive oratory next to the church, with a big boarding school, where many poor youth of that forsaken neighbourhood might find a chance to study or to learn a trade.”

“Very good. I bless you and all those who will help you in this holy enterprise.”

Trial at the Vatican

The wrangle with the archbishop took a turn for the worse. To safeguard his congregation, Don Bosco had to have recourse to the Vatican, where a process was initiated.

One of the witnesses during Don Bosco’s process of the beatification was Lorenzina Mazé de la Roche, niece of the archbishop. She deposed under oath:

Beginning from the year 1873, there were painful controversies between Don Bosco and Msgr Gastaldi, my venerated uncle... I came to know of these both from outside and from what Don Bosco himself confided to me and my mother. He requested us to find a way of bringing to the knowledge of the archbishop the gossip circulating among the clergy and in the press, causing great harm to both sides. These quarrels were a painful thorn in my mother’s heart and in mine...

Whenever Don Bosco spoke with us, we could see how much he was suffering... But at all times he spoke with such respect and charity of the archbishop as to leave us edified.

In my diary of those years I find these words: “Why did the archbishop my uncle change so much? Whoever was responsible for sowing such discord will have a great deal to answer for.”

It seems to me that one of the chief instigators was the secretary of my uncle, Fr Thomas Chiuso, now dead several years. I was a frequent guest at my uncle’s table, and I have so often heard the jibes and sarcasms that his secretary directed towards “those of Valdocco”...

I have noted in my diary these words of Don Bosco: “With all the goodwill to be strong and courageous in adversities, there comes a moment when it becomes so disgusting that the poor stomach cannot take it.” I had never seen Don Bosco perturbed before, but on that occasion, as he was speaking, his face kept changing colour...

On the other hand I must also add that my revered uncle, in conversation with me, showed his sorrow, more by his expression than by his words, that his relationship with Don Bosco was no longer what it used to be in the early days of the Oratory.

The case between Don Bosco and the archbishop was discussed in the Vatican on 17 December 1881. Eight cardinals took part. Two voted for the archbishop and four for Don Bosco. When the pope heard of this, he blocked the debate. “We must safeguard authority,” he said to Cardinal Nina, protector of the Salesians. “Don Bosco is a man of great virtue. He will know how to adjust.” It was the second card played by the pope to test the sanctity of Don Bosco.

A Bitter Chalice for Don Bosco

The pope himself laid down the conditions for the *Concordia* in carefully measured language worthy of the finest diplomacy. But there was no mistaking the substance of the agreement: Don Bosco had to write a letter asking pardon of the archbishop, and the archbishop had to answer that he was happy to let bygones be bygones.

It was a bitter pill for Don Bosco. He summoned the chapter of the congregation and read out the text of the *Concordia*. The council was appalled. Some asked for time to think it over. It was Cagliero who went to the heart of the matter with his usual straightforwardness:

“The pope has spoken and we have to obey. The pope has taken this decision because he knows Don Bosco and knows he can trust him. There is nothing to wait for. We must obey, and that’s it.”

Don Bosco wrote the letter and received the reply: “You have asked for pardon, and I give it from the heart.”

Soon after, however, Don Bosco wrote to Cardinal Nina. His letter gives us an idea of the bitterness of the pill he had to swallow and of the consequences that were at work:

“The curia gloats over the humiliations imposed upon Don Bosco. These rumours, badly interpreted and badly enlarged, dishearten my poor Salesians. Already two of my rectors have asked to leave. They do not want to be in a congregation that is the laughing stock of the authorities. Other priests and seminarians are also asking to leave. In spite of this, as I have already written to your Eminence, I want to maintain the most rigorous silence.”

Serene But Shattered

Leo XIII, one of the greatest popes in the history of the church, treated Don Bosco with the most exquisite gentleness from this moment on. It was he who named Cagliero the first Salesian bishop, and who granted in perpetuity the privileges which rendered the congregation ‘exempt’ from the authority of the bishops in the delicate issue of ordinations.

At his election he had found in the Vatican a climate of hostility towards Don Bosco. With two steps he had measured Don Bosco’s sanctity.

Rocks thought to be containing gold are tested by fire. If gold comes out, the stones are valuable. If not, they are only dross. Don Bosco was tested by fire, and revealed that he was made of the finest gold. But his human frame was burnt, reduced to ashes. “From 1884 onwards,” writes Morand Wirth, “Don Bosco was only a shadow of himself.”

Asking pardon of the archbishop who had been his scourge for ten years cost him more than we can imagine. Don Bosco, as we have said again and again, was not born to turn the other cheek. He did do so, but at the cost of great violence to himself. And the construction of the Church of the Sacred Heart, which would swallow one and a half million

lire, compelled him, in the years of his physical decline, to undertake inhuman toils.

Don Bosco obeyed out of faith in the vicar of Christ, and for love of his congregation.

He emerged from the two tests serene but destroyed. His congregation flourished, because it was born of a crucified priest.

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TO FRANCE AND SPAIN

Another cross now began for Don Bosco: the ‘cross of the Sacred Heart.’

He began by sending Fr Dalmazzo and Fr Angelo Savio to Rome, to assess the situation and check the expenses. Papal contracts were soft targets: it was easy for everyone to make a cut. Don Bosco kept insisting with Fr Dalmazzo: “Is there someone to check the materials that are delivered?” “Keep a check on prices.” “Who supervises materials to be sent elsewhere?” “Too little work, and too much thieving. Wastage of material, especially planks.” He also suggested employing a professional site supervisor.

On his part, he at once set in motion his long-tested fund-raising method: circulars in several languages, lotteries, subscriptions and personal letters. But it was not a magic wand. It entailed hard work, humiliations, constant checking, and more work for many confreres. But the largest share of the work fell ultimately on Don Bosco’s shoulders.

“I Have the Church of the Sacred Heart on my Shoulders!”

In his depositions for the beatification of Don Bosco, Fr Rua testified: “It was painful to see him climb up and down stairs begging for alms and enduring great humiliations. He suffered so much that he would say within the circle of his intimates: ‘I have the Church of the Sacred Heart on my shoulders.’ At other times he would jokingly say: ‘They say that the church is being persecuted. I instead can say that the church is persecuting me!’ Well on in years and in poor health, it can safely be said that this undertaking took a tragic toll on his remaining forces.”

The greatest effort was his long journey through France: he went begging from town to town for four months, from 31 January to 31 May 1883.

I might be allowed a passing remark at this stage. Don Bosco was 68 years old, and had only 5 years of life left to him. At a time when the world was going through a period of profound restructuring of ideas and institutions, his congregation had experienced a huge expansion. Don Bosco needed time to produce a synthesis of his thoughts and intuitions that would remain as a point of reference for his works. He should have spent the time left to him rethinking his methods in a rapidly changing social context in order to ensure a solid organization to his congregation.

Instead, he was forced to go begging during the last years of his life, and not for the sake of his poor boys, but for a church in Rome.

But it was precisely this disconcerting situation that obliged Don Bosco to undertake two great journeys, one to France and the other to Spain, where he was acclaimed as a ‘man of God.’ It gave him an opportunity to rekindle in the masses ‘the sense of God.’

Marx had defined religion as the ‘opium of the people’; the anarchist Bakunin exacted from his followers an open confession of atheism; the Paris Commune had recently shown clear signs of militant atheism. “The Christian churches were no longer confronted with pockets of unbelief limited to the ruling aristocracy, but with a frightening alienation of entire strata of society from the practice of religion and obedience to ecclesiastical authority” (Francis Traniello).

Society as a whole was rapidly losing the sense of God and respect for human life. In the days of the Commune, the ruthlessness of the atheistic *communards* had been matched by that of the bourgeoisie who had suppressed the uprising with guns, killing 14,000 workers, not only men but also women and children.

Don Bosco’s last effort, then, was not merely at the service of a church, nor even of poor youth, but of an entire generation that ran the risk of losing the sense of God and of the great values of life. This generation, in both France and Spain, rediscovered in Don Bosco the ‘sense of God’ and the value of ‘spending oneself for others.’

Paris on Fire

For a description of the journey in France, we shall follow the account drawn up by Henri Bosco on the basis of Salesian documents and of the French newspapers of the time.

When Don Bosco set out, he was almost blind. He was suffering from varicose veins, and his legs could hardly carry him. His body was worn out. He entered France through Nice and went up to Paris via Toulon, Marseilles, Avignon, Lyons and Moulins, taking two months and 19 days.

No one, Don Bosco least of all, could have foreseen the extraordinary emotions, the enthusiasm, the crowds and the burning faith that this ‘poor country priest’ aroused.

Prudent persons had advised him not to go to France. “At Paris they are building ‘their’ church to the Sacred Heart at Montmartre. It has already cost a million francs and is not yet finished. Who would give you a cent?”

Don Bosco gave the lie to such people once again. At Avignon the crowds began at the very railway station itself. In the city there were people running after his coach. Others, armed with scissors, cut pieces off his cassock. He had to look for a new one in a hurry.

At Lyons the churches were packed. People surrounded him, slowed him down, blocked the carriage of his hosts. “It would be easier to take the devil himself rather than this priest,” an irritated coachman was heard saying.

Everyone feared a fiasco in Paris. Italy had just shifted her allegiance from France to Germany and Austria. And besides Don Bosco’s being Italian, the French government was strictly anticlerical.

But snobbish Paris received the apostle of the poor with flaming enthusiasm. He arrived there on 19 April and stayed on for five weeks, with a short visit to Amiens and Lille. He put up with friends at 34 Cours Messine, but would receive people every afternoon at the house of the Oblates of the Sacred Heart on rue Ville-l’Évêque, to spare his hosts the pressure of the crowds.

“He is a saint!” everyone was saying. This is a dangerous thing to say, because it immediately sets off a whole series of attempts to disprove it, and any little thing can invite ridicule. Don Bosco allowed himself to be photographed, alone and with groups. Many said it was vanity, but he responded: “It is a good way of making my work known.” For the same

reason he supplied information to biographers such as Dr D'Espiney, who was the first to publish a life of Don Bosco in French. Despite its many inaccuracies, the book sold 50,000 copies in a few months.

A Photograph in France

We have a photographic portrait of Don Bosco taken in France. He looks unbelievably old, worn-out, wasted. His face looks like a mask of papier mâché. Deep furrows cross the ravaged forehead. The mouth sags on both sides, a kind of mouth but marked by an incurable tiredness. The eyes too, sunk below thick eyebrows, betray only a faint glimmer of light, and are almost blind. The man behind that face has known suffering, his own and that of others whom he has made his own, whom he has saved that they might have a better life in this world and a glimpse of heaven at the hour of death. That face was meant to inspire pity rather than enthusiasm.

But in that portrait we also see the hands of Don Bosco. They are hands of a worker, an honest worker, a powerful worker. Those hands blessed the sick, caressed children, restored health like the waters of Lourdes. Looking at those hands in action, the Parisians, instead of feeling pity for Don Bosco, begged him to have pity on them. They saw in him a messenger of hope, a man of God, a providential instrument of cures and graces.

The scenes in the provinces were repeated in the capital. The only difference was that the crowds were greater and Don Bosco suffered assaults that were rougher and more exhausting.

Le Figaro commented: "In front of the house at rue Ville-l'Évêque where Don Bosco has come, long lines of coaches have been parked since a week. Noble ladies beg him to work miracles for themselves and for their relatives. It is said that he performs them with great facility."

And *Le Pèlerin*: "People describe miracles, even invent them... High society ladies run after the saint who cares little for the applause of the world, who does not prepare the sermons he delivers at the *Madeleine* any more than he prepares what to say to a beggar, who gives to a worker as much of his time as to a prince."

The Daily Schedule of a Poor Priest

He rises at 5.00 a.m. and retires at midnight, exhausted. The visits begin at 6.00 a.m. Then he goes to celebrate Mass in some parish or another. He is waylaid at the exit, besieged by questions, hounded by requests, surrounded by supplications and demands. They want to speak to him, touch him, or at least see him. They stop him everywhere, on the steps, in a lobby, at the door of the sacristy, along the way. With regrets, he is late at all appointments. His French is bad, his accent foreign, and his eloquence modest.

He is preparing to celebrate Mass at the Archconfraternity for the Conversion of Sinners. The crowd is enormous. Somebody tries to enter, but cannot, and is wondering what is happening. A woman tells him: "We have come to hear Mass, a mass for sinners, said by a saint."

When they ask for one of 'his' miracles, he answers: "I am a sinner, pray for me. But we will pray together to Mary Help of Christians. She is the one who cures, listens, understands, has compassion. She answers from heaven. All I can do is pray to her." But

when this ‘poor sinner’ calls on her, she always responds. She seems to be there, at his side, at his beck and call.

The religious authorities have received him cordially. Cardinal Lavigerie waited for him in the Church of St Peter and spoke to the people, recommending him warmly to their generosity. He called him ‘the Saint Vincent de Paul of Italy.’

The appeals for generosity were answered not only by the rich but also by the poor. Don Bosco received banknotes, coins, gold pieces and even jewels. There came a moment when he did not know where to put all the stuff.

He took a week off to visit Amiens and Lille. He was received with the same enthusiasm. Seeing the terrible scissoring at his cassock he exclaimed: “Not all the mad people are in the madhouse!”

On the train back to Turin, his companions Fr Rua and Fr De Barruel were silent. The memories of the days gone by were like a dream they could never forget.

Don Bosco broke the silence. “Do you remember, Rua, the path that leads from Buttigliera to Murialdo? On the right, there is a hill, and on that hill a little house. That little house was my house, my mother’s house. In those fields I used to herd two cows as a boy. If those society people knew that they had made so much of a poor farmer boy from Becchi...”

A Cardinal Who Brings Peace

On 18 November of that year 1883, the new archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Cajetan Alimonda, quietly entered the city. During an audience with Pope Leo in 1884, Don Bosco would hear these comforting words: “In sending him, I thought of you. Cardinal Alimonda loves you, he loves you very much.”

“The goodness of the cardinal,” writes Fr Ceria, “was for Don Bosco a providential balm during the last four years of his life.”

Shortly after his arrival Don Bosco asked the cardinal for an audience. The cardinal immediately mounted his coach and came to Valdocco.

“To spare time, I came myself!”

It was 10.30 a.m., notes the biographer. The meeting lasted more than an hour. In the meantime information was sent to the boys in the classrooms and workshops, the band boys went hurriedly to get their instruments, someone managed to put out flags and bunting on the balconies. When the cardinal stepped out of Don Bosco’s room, he was greeted by the band and the applause of the boys. He laughed and exclaimed: “I wanted to give you a surprise, but you have given one to me!” He waved to the boys and said: “My dear children, I thank you, I bless you, and ask for your prayers.”

Then he paid a visit to the workshops and spent a long time in prayer before the picture of the Help of Christians.

“If I Don’t Come Back...”

The money collected in France had been abundant, but the Church of the Sacred Heart was a bottomless pit. The year 1884 began with heavy debts and the coffers were empty. On 28 February, despite his disastrous health, Don Bosco told his sons:

“I am going back to France!”

Fr Rua and Fr Cagliariro tried to dissuade him. They called in Dr Albertotti to examine him. The doctor did not mince words: "If you reach Nice alive, it would be a miracle."

"If I die, patience," muttered Don Bosco. "Before leaving I will settle the most important things. But I *have* to go."

Coming out of the room, Albertotti told Fr Rua: "Be very careful. I would not be surprised if he were to die suddenly, without any warning."

Don Bosco called his lawyer and witnesses and dictated his last will and testament. He then called in Rua and Cagliariro, and pointing to the papers on his table he said:

"Here is my testament. I have made the two of you my universal heirs. If I fail to come back, you know what to do."

Rua left the room, unable to take it. Cagliariro stayed on, but he too was close to tears: "You are determined to leave in this state?"

"How could we do otherwise? Don't you see we have nothing left to go on? If I do not go, where are we to find the money to pay our debts? Shall we leave the boys without bread? Only in France can I hope to collect funds."

Fr Cagliariro was by now in tears. With an effort he said:

"We have always gone on by dint of miracles. The Madonna will work out this one too. Go, we shall pray for you."

"Yes, I go. My will is in this box. Keep it as my last souvenir."

It was not a long journey. He visited only the southern part of France, but the collection was abundant. Count Colle of Toulon alone, for example, gave him 150,000 *lire*.

At Marseilles, worried about his health, Fr Albera called the famous Dr Combal to examine him. The doctor expressed his opinion with a vivid image:

"You are like a threadbare suit that has been used day in and day out. If you still want to preserve it, you will have to put it in the wardrobe. You understand what I mean: you need absolute rest.

"Thank you, Doctor, but that is the only remedy I cannot take."

Strained circumstances drove him to yet another begging trip. In 1886, barely two years before his death, he went to Spain. At Barcelona the reception was like the one at Paris. The streets were packed, there were people on the roofs, people hanging from street lamps. He was swamped with gifts. He was even given a whole hill, the *Tibi dabo* with its magnificent view of the city.

He returned slowly back to Italy through the south of France: Montpellier, Tarasconne, Valence, Grenoble. It was to be his last long journey. He would say to those who were with him:

"It is all the work of the Madonna. It all comes from a Hail Mary recited with a boy forty-five years ago, in the Church of St Francis of Assisi."

As Don Bosco's body was becoming more and more bent, his soul shone ever more brightly through it. On one occasion, Fr Belmonte, the rector of Sampierdarena complained to him:

"I am tired to death. I can't go on like this."

Don Bosco bent forward a little and lifted the hem of his cassock. His legs were so swollen that the flesh was hanging over the shoes.

"My dear Belmonte, don't get discouraged. We shall rest in heaven."

On the evening of 25 June, the past pupils celebrated his name feast. Don Bosco

thanked them. Moved and tired, he could only add:

“I am only a cicada that cries out and dies.”

Someone would notice him walking alone, all bent, and would offer to help, asking, “Where are we going, Don Bosco?” And Don Bosco would give a gentle smile and say: “We are going to heaven!”

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JOHN CAGLIERO, BISHOP

Don Bosco had planned that John Cagliero should stay three months in South America, see to the first openings and then come back. He stayed on instead for two years.

In 1877, Don Bosco had sent two new batches of Salesian missionaries. They were headed by two men who could take charge of things: Fr Louis Lasagna and Fr John Costamagna.

Cagliero could therefore return. The first general chapter of the congregation was to take place at Lanzo in 1877, and his presence was important, not only as spiritual director of the congregation but also as its expert on missionary problems.

In the years that followed, Don Bosco entrusted him with two delicate tasks: the founding of the Salesian work in Spain, and the direction of the infant congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

“Who Could Take My Place?”

Though Don Bosco was only 64 in 1879, he was already feeling exhausted and his health was declining. He wanted to choose a vicar from among his first followers, one who would gradually take over the affairs of the congregation and eventually substitute him. The obvious choices were Rua and Cagliero. Both were trustworthy and capable. Don Bosco loved them both, and the affection was fully returned. But how to choose one without hurting the other?

Don Bosco proceeded with tact and delicacy. One autumn morning in 1879, he had to go to Foglizzo. He asked Cagliero to accompany him. During the journey he suddenly asked him:

“If I were to die, who do you think could take my place?”

Cagliero did not touch wood, but he did roll his eyes.

“Dear Don Bosco, don’t you think it’s rather too early to speak of such things?” he said.

“Maybe. But just supposing: what names would you suggest?”

“I would suggest one only name. There’s only one who could take your place.”

“I instead would think of two, or even three.”

“Later, maybe two or three, but not just now. But who are your three?”

“You tell me your candidate first.”

“Fr Rua. There’s no one else.”

“You are right. He has been my right arm all along.”

“Arm, head and heart, dear Don Bosco. He is the only one who can take your place

when God decides to take you to paradise.”

Don Bosco had acted with extreme delicacy, and Cagliero, with equal delicacy, had stepped aside. No shadow would now be cast on choice of ‘a second Don Bosco.’

He never said it out aloud, but Don Bosco remained deeply grateful to Cagliero for those words said with frankness and humility on the rickety coach to Foglizzo.

An Embrace by the Bishop

On 16 and 20 December 1883 the Holy See issued two important documents. Northern and central Patagonia (Río Negro, Chubut and Santa Cruz) were erected into a vicariate apostolic and entrusted to Fr John Cagliero who was made provicar apostolic. The Tierra del Fuego (the extreme South of Patagonia) was declared a prefecture apostolic, with Fr Fagnano as prefect apostolic.

Cagliero was to leave for America as provicar, not yet as bishop. But Don Bosco would not hear of it. He spoke to Cardinal Alimonda, wrote to Cardinal Nina, protector of the Salesians, and beseeched the pope. Cardinal Ferrieri as usual was in the way, but this time Leo XIII accepted the request of Don Bosco. On 9 October 1884 the Vatican sent a letter to Valdocco: “At last Sunday’s audience the Holy Father granted Don Bosco’s request, consenting to raise to the dignity of bishop, Fr Cagliero, the new provicar apostolic of Patagonia.”

It was a happy day for Don Bosco. The old dream of the dove with the olive branch was coming true. Those words to a dying boy, “You will give the breviary to so many others... and you will go far, very far,” had not been a passing illusion. They were becoming a reality now.

The consecration took place in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians on 7 December 1884. It was a memorable event for the Oratory. One of the first boys of Don Bosco, who had entered the Oratory as a fatherless 13 year old, was now, at the age of 46, being made bishop of an immense mission territory.

Two touching details. At the end of the imposing ceremony, the young bishop detached himself from the procession and went to his mother. Assisted by a son and a grandson, the old lady, now 80, came towards him. Msgr Cagliero hugged her and then helped her back to her seat, moving many in the congregation to tears. And near the sacristy, lost in the crowd, Don Bosco was waiting for him, biretta in hand. The bishop ran towards him and gave him a tremendous hug. He had kept his hand with the episcopal ring hidden in the folds of his cape. The first kiss was ‘his’ Don Bosco’s right.

Fr Rua Vicar of Don Bosco

It was only after the nomination of Cagliero as bishop of Patagonia that Don Bosco announced the choice of a vicar. Speaking to the superior chapter of the congregation on 24 October 1894, Don Bosco said: “I need someone to whom I can entrust the congregation... The pope would like Don Bosco to retire completely. My poor head cannot bear the weight any more...”

He wrote to the pope proposing the name of Michael Rua. The approval arrived at the beginning of December.

Don Bosco Took Him by the Hand

Msgr Cagliero was to leave Turin for South America on 1 February 1885 together with a group of 18 Salesians and 6 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. But by evening he felt so tired that, after seeing his companions off at the station, he came back to the Oratory for the night. He went up to Don Bosco's room. They sat in silence for some time. After a long pause Don Bosco asked:

"Have your companions left?"

"Yes."

"And what about you? When do you leave?"

"I must be at Sampierdarena tomorrow."

"Leave late, if possible. You need a good rest."

"Okay, I'll try. And now give me your blessing."

"Why now? Come tomorrow morning, we still have things to speak about."

"No, Don Bosco, tomorrow I must leave early."

"But you are tired... anyway do as you think best."

"Now bless me and bless my companions."

The bishop knelt down. Don Bosco took him by the hand.

"Have a pleasant journey. If we don't meet again here, we shall meet in paradise."

"Don't say that, we shall meet again."

"As the Lord wants. He is the master. You will have plenty to do in Argentina and Patagonia. You will work much, but the Madonna will help you."

Don Bosco began the blessing. His voice dragged and he sometimes failed to remember the words of the formula. Msgr Cagliero had to prompt him gently, and he would follow, still holding his hands. The bishop stood up.

"Good night, my dear Don Bosco. Have a good rest."

"Greet your companions for me, and all the confreres who work in America, and the cooperators... I still have so many things to tell you... God bless you!"

"A Log Hut for a Bishop's House"

During his last years, Don Bosco followed with tender affection the missionary exploits of his energetic and enthusiastic boy. He would read Cagliero's letters and pass them on immediately to the *Salesian Bulletin* for publication.

In July 1886 Msgr Cagliero could write that the most important part of northern Patagonia had been entirely explored and was being regularly visited and catechized by Salesian missionaries.

That same month the son of the *cacique* Sayuhueque visited the bishop at his Patagones residence. He asked him visit the Chichinal valley and evangelize the senior members of the tribe. "In that vast valley," wrote Msgr Cagliero, "we baptized 1700 natives. Daily they attended three hours of instructions in the morning and three in the afternoon. The house of the bishop was a hut of logs and mud, with a roof made of branches. There was no sign of beds. We slept on hides provided by the natives with great affection. They are good people, full of enthusiasm."

In 1887 Msgr Cagliero, together with Fr Milanese and two other Salesians, undertook a long missionary journey of 1500 kilometres. They were to pass through the

valley of the Río Negro, go over the Andes and descend down to Concepción in Chile.

For the first 1300 kilometers on horseback all went well. The bishop baptized 997 indigenous adults, blessed 101 marriages, distributed more than a thousand communions, and administered 1513 confirmations. Countless hours were spent catechizing the children and evangelizing the grown-ups.

On the morning of 3 March, they had just left Malbarco on the bank of the Neuquem when a serious accident occurred. The bishop himself gives us an account in a letter.

We had climbed the Cordilleras to a height of 2000 metres and had another 1000 metres to go. The path wound along granite cliffs, with a sheer drop on one side. Suddenly my horse reared and began jumping wildly. I invoked Mary Help of Christians and jumped off the saddle. I landed on a sharp rock that pierced my side, fracturing two ribs and puncturing a lung. I felt I was dying. I could hardly breathe and could not speak at all. My companions hurried up to me. Finding I could manage a few words, I tried to make a joke of the whole thing: “Since there are 24 ribs anyway, one or two can easily be sacrificed.” We were forced to retrace our steps. We had to cross two rivers and two ridges before we could find some medical attention. But what medical attention! All we could find was a medical practitioner with a set of primitive remedies. I asked him in jest whether he was also a blacksmith who could repair my ribs. I stayed there a month and, by the grace of God, I got well. Still convalescing, I mounted my horse and set off for the Cordilleras once again. We crossed over at a height of 3000 metres, and in four days we reached the gentle plain of Chile on the shores of the Pacific. There I laid the foundations for the Salesian houses of Concepción, Talca, Santiago and Valparaiso. That was how, that year, on horseback, with my three companions, sleeping in ditches or under the trees, I crossed America from one ocean to the other.

An Interview with Don Bosco

In April 1884, Don Bosco had to go to Rome once more. Some benefactors had promised large sums for the Church of the Sacred Heart, but the promises had not yet materialized. “I will have to go and ring their doorbells,” said Don Bosco wryly.

It was on that occasion that, for the first time in his life, Don Bosco gave an interview (the technique had been invented by the American Horace Greely in 1859). It is interesting to read Don Bosco’s answers to the ‘direct questions’ of the reporter from the *Journal de Rome*. The interview was published in the paper on 25 April 1884.

Q. Through what miracle could you found so many institutions in so many different countries of the world?

A. I have done far more than I hoped for, yes, but how, I find it hard to say. The Blessed Virgin knows our needs, and helps us.

Q. But how does she help you?

R. Once I received a letter saying that 20,000 *lire* were needed within eight days for the church we are building in Rome. I had no money at all. I put the letter near the holy water stoup, said a fervent prayer to Our Lady, and went to bed leaving the problem in her hands. The next morning I received a letter from an unknown person: “I had made a vow to

the Madonna that, if she granted me a certain favour, I would give 20,000 *lire* in charity. I have received the favour and I am sending you the money.” On another occasion I was in France, and I received the bad news that one of my houses had to pay 70,000 *lire* without delay in order to forestall severe legal problems. Not knowing how to solve the problem, I had recourse to prayer. At about 10.00 p.m., as I was about to go to bed, I heard a knock. It was a friend of mine with a thick envelope in his hands. “Dear Don Bosco, I had left you a considerable sum in my will. But today it occurred to me that a good deed is best done immediately. So I have brought you the amount now. Here it is: 70,000 *lire*.”

Q. Unquestionably these are miracles. Allow me an indiscretion: have you worked other miracles besides these?

A. The only thing I have always tried to do was my duty. I have prayed and confided in the Madonna.

Q. Could you briefly explain your system of education?

A. Very simple: give the boys the liberty to do what they like best. The secret lies in being able to discover their good points, and to help them grow. When we know we are good at something, we do it with pleasure. I follow this principle, and my pupils not only work, but work with love. In 46 years I have never punished anyone. I dare say my pupils love me very much.

Q. How did you manage to extend your works up to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego?

A. One step at a time.

Q. What do you think of the conditions of the church in Europe and in Italy, and of its future?

A. I am not a prophet. I leave that to you journalists. We should be asking you what is going to happen. No one knows the future but God alone. Nevertheless, humanly speaking, we have reasons to fear that the future will be difficult. My forecast is not bright at all, but I am not afraid. God will always save his church, and the Madonna, who so visibly protects the contemporary world, will make redeemers arise.

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MANY TEARS

In Don Bosco's last years his spirituality attained new heights. Suffering either drives a man to cynicism or else leads to the blossoming of sanctity. In Don Bosco this blossoming of sanctity was daily becoming more evident. Even his humanity was transfigured.

"In the last ten years of his life," writes Peter Stella, "especially after 1882, Don Bosco appears as one who has fully assimilated the lessons of a long experience. There do not seem to be any more clashes like the ones with his stepbrother Anthony, with his first helpers, with Msgr Gastaldi. More than ever he shuns controversy; he does not approve of battles, and even in the face of hostility and vexations he is not in favour of loud replies and harsh rebuttals in the manner of certain bitterly polemical Catholic papers. He prefers 'to dodge the raindrops without getting wet.' His last years are still filled with great opposition and little official support; he is often harassed financially by political and administrative authorities, but he seems to be imbued more than ever by the ideal of loving kindness and benevolence."

A Thoughtful Young Priest

In 1883 Don Bosco received a visit from a serious, thoughtful young priest from Lombardy by the name of Achille Ratti. Don Bosco talked with him for a good half hour, giving him all the information he wanted, and then concluded:

"Make yourself at home. I am too busy to come around with you, but go round and take a look at anything you want."

The rectors of the Salesian houses were in Valdocco for a meeting. After lunch Don Bosco, leaning against a table, stood listening to those who came to him with their problems. Fr Ratti wanted to leave, but Don Bosco strangely insisted, "No, no, please stay on."

That young priest eventually became Pope Pius XI. 49 years later, speaking of Don Bosco to Roman seminarians, he would remark: "People were coming in from everywhere, with some difficulty or another. And he kept standing there, listening to everything, grasping every problem, and responding to all. A man who was aware of everything happening around him, and yet, at the same time, who was not upset by anything, because his mind was elsewhere. And it was truly so: he was elsewhere, his mind was on God. It was marvellous how he had the right word for everyone. This was the life of sanctity and of constant prayer that Don Bosco led in the midst of innumerable and inexorable occupations."

A Flower for Eternity

In April 1885, Don Bosco was taking a stroll in the garden of a lady who had invited him to lunch together with his young secretary, Fr Viglietti. Walking slowly, he stopped near a flower bed, plucked a violet and offered it to the lady.

“You were kind enough to invite us to lunch. I want to reciprocate with a flower, which is a thought.”

“And what is that thought, Don Bosco?”

“The thought of eternity. It is a thought that should accompany us always. Everything passes in this world: only eternity is forever. Let us work that we might be happy forever.”

Don Bosco was thinking about death, about the encounter with God. The thought sometimes made him serious and pensive. One day in 1885, wishing a gentleman at San Benigno he said:

“Pray for me.”

“Oh, Don Bosco, but you don’t need our prayers.”

Fr Piscetta who was present remembers: “Don Bosco became very serious and tears appeared in his eyes. He answered with great sincerity: “I need prayers very much.”

“The Madonna is Here!”

In August of the same year, Don Bosco went to Nizza Monferrato for the vestitions and professions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He was so exhausted that he could give communion to only a few sisters. Seated on an armchair, he could merely assist from the sidelines at the clothing and profession. But he wanted to say a few words. His voice was very weak, so Fr Bonetti ‘acted as the loudspeaker,’ repeating the phrases that could not be heard properly.

“So, you want me to say something. If only I could speak, there are so many things I would tell you! But I am an old man, as you can see. I want to tell you only one thing: that the Madonna loves you very much. And, you know, she is here among you!”

Bonetti repeated aloud:

“What Don Bosco means is that Mary is your mother, that she looks after you and protects you.”

“No, no,” said Don Bosco. “I want to say that Our Lady is here, in this house, and that she is very pleased with you.”

Once again Bonetti said:

“Don Bosco means that if you are good, the Madonna will be pleased with you.”

Don Bosco gathered all his strength, and extending his arms he said:

“No, no! I want to say that Our Lady is really here, here in your midst. The Madonna walks in this house, and covers it with her mantle.”

Don Bosco and the Rich

During the last 25 years of his life, colossal sums of money, millions of *lire* (millions of the 1800’s) passed through Don Bosco’s hands. Don Bosco himself remained, of course,

very poor; not a cent ever stuck to his hands. But someone might ask: “The rich, those who gave him huge sums of money, did he not pander to them excessively? Did he not end up tranquillizing their consciences about their social responsibility?” A legitimate question.

Examining his life, it is clear that Don Bosco always extended great courtesy to all who did him some good, whether it was a farmer or labourer who gave him ten cents, or Count Colle who gave him 150,000 *lire*.

Some people were extraordinarily generous with him, and Don Bosco responded with extraordinary kindness. He used to call Countess Callori ‘mamma,’ for example, and rightly enough, because she was his last resort in ‘impossible’ situations, someone to whom he could turn without ever being disappointed.

But since the question has been raised about the ‘tranquillizing of consciences,’ let facts speak more than words.

At Sampierdarena in 1882, Don Bosco received a visit from a Capuchin friar, confessor of an old and childless multimillionaire Genoese nobleman. Don Bosco asked him:

“How is it that this gentleman does not do charity in proportion to his riches?”

“You are wrong, Don Bosco. Every year he gives 20,000 *lire* to the poor.”⁶⁷

“Only twenty thousand? If he wants to obey Jesus Christ and give in proportion to his riches, 100,000 would not be enough.”

“I follow you. But I don’t know how to persuade him. What would you do in my place?”

“I would tell him that I would not like to go to hell because of him. If he wants to go there, let him go alone. I would then oblige him to do charity proportionate to his estate. If he refuses, I would tell him that I would not like to continue being responsible for his soul.”

“I’ll do that,” said the priest. And he did so. The old gentleman was not pleased and dismissed him.⁶⁸

The contractor Borgo, also of Sampierdarena, had done many favours to the Salesian house for very poor boys. He had advanced considerable sums without interest, had drawn up building plans without charge, and for two years had supervised the works of the house without a stipend.

It was 20 years since his wife had died, and he kept with him all her jewels and costly dresses. One day, almost by chance, he told Don Bosco that he wanted to do something in the memory of his dear wife, in suffrage for her soul. Don Bosco said rather brusquely:

“If you want to act as a good Christian, why do you keep so many precious things unnecessarily?”

“What would you advise me to do?”

“Bring them here, for these boys who do not have even what they need.”

The man went away rather offended. It was too much of a sacrifice. He walked about for a long time, thinking the matter over. After a few days he came back. Don Bosco was still at Sampierdarena. He personally handed over all the precious souvenirs of his wife.

Many Salesians thought Don Bosco was too harsh with the rich. On 4 June 1887

⁶⁷ More than 20 million *lire* in the 1980’s, which comes to some 10,000 Euros today.

⁶⁸ MB 15:520-21 = BM 15:433-34.

Don Bosco said to them: “Some nights ago I dreamt of the Madonna. She reproached me for my silence on the obligation of giving alms. She complained that priests are afraid to remind the faithful of their duty to give their surplus to the poor. Because of this, the rich keep accumulating riches in their safes.”

On 22 April 1887, Don Bosco went to Sestri Ponente with Frs. Belmonte and Viglietti to pay a visit to Mrs Louisa Cataldi, a great benefactress of his. At the end of the visit, as she was seeing him to the door, the lady asked:

“Don Bosco, what should I do to be saved?”

“To be saved, you must become as poor as Job.”

The lady was baffled, and so was Fr Belmonte who had heard the conversation. But Don Bosco did not add a word. In the carriage on their way back, with the customary frankness of the early Salesians, Fr Belmonte said:

“But Don Bosco, why did you speak so harshly to that poor lady? She does a lot of charity.”

“The problem is that no one dares to tell the truth to the rich,” replied Don Bosco.

During his last trip to France, Don Bosco passed through Hyères. The president of the *Société Marseillaise du Commerce*, Monsieur Abeille, personally took the plate around for the collection. At the end he congratulated Don Bosco because many gentlemen had literally emptied their purses into the tray. Don Bosco said to him:

“I find that quite normal. If they are Christians they must give what is over and above to the poor. You see, Monsieur Abeille, when you have set aside 100 francs every month—and that is quite something—the rest you must give to God.”

Don Bosco could never erase from his mind the painful memory of the death of an 84-year old marchioness, a benefactress of his. She had sent for him, made her confession, and then, looking at him with great perplexity, had said to him:

“Do I really have to die?”

Don Bosco tried to speak to her of God, but she kept looking around with anguish and saying:

“My beautiful palace, my rooms, my boudoir... must I leave all this?” She had made the servants bring her a precious Persian carpet. She kept caressing it and saying: “How beautiful! Must I really leave it?”

To Fr Anthony Sala who was rather reluctant to go in search of alms, Don Bosco said strongly:

“Go, pluck up courage! The rich do much good to us, but we also do them good by giving them a chance to help the poor.”

In 1876, passing through Chieri, Don Bosco saw Joseph Blanchard, the young man who had often emptied the fruit basket at home to feed him. He was an old man now, walking along the road with a plate and a bottle of wine. Don Bosco left the priests with whom he was talking and went straight to him:

“My dear Blanchard! How happy I am to see you. How are you?”

“Good, very good, *signor cavaliere*,” answered the old man, flustered.

Don Bosco’s face became sad:

“Why do you call me *cavaliere*? I am poor Don Bosco, and you used to help me fill my stomach.”

He turned to the priests who had drawn near. “Gentlemen, this is one of the first benefactors of poor Don Bosco.”

Turning to Blanchard he said:

“I want them to know what you did for me. You did all that you could to help me. Every time you come to Turin, you must come and have lunch with me.”

Ten years later, in 1886, Blanchard learnt that Don Bosco was in poor health, and he went to Turin to see him. In the antechamber the secretary told him:

“Don Bosco is not well. He is resting. He can’t receive people.”

“Tell him it’s Blanchard. He will receive me.”

From the other side of the door, Don Bosco recognized the voice. He got up with difficulty and came to meet him. He took him by the hand and led him inside to sit by him on the sofa.

“My good Blanchard, you have remembered poor Don Bosco. How are you? How is everyone at home?”

They had a long chat. It was almost time for lunch.

“You see, I am old and in bad shape. I am not able to come down with you for lunch, my legs cannot handle all those steps. But I want you to go down and eat with my Salesians.” He called for his secretary. “Take this friend of mine to the dining room of the chapter and make him sit in my place. —I will pray for you, dear Blanchard and you too, don’t forget your poor Don Bosco.”

A little embarrassed, the old man from Chieri had lunch that day sitting in Don Bosco’s place at the centre of the superior chapter of the congregation, telling them of his friendship with young John at Chieri and of his chance meeting in 1876.

Ten Days to Reach Rome

The Church of the Sacred Heart was to be consecrated in May 1887. It had meant seven years of hard work, great efforts and ruined health.

Don Bosco would not have been able to withstand the long journey to Rome at one go. His Salesians worked it out in short stages, with many breaks. He left Turin on 20 April. “When he left the house,” wrote Fr Lazzero, “it looked like he would not be able to make it even to Moncalieri.” He was accompanied by Fr Rua and Fr Viglietti. For the first time in his life Don Bosco accepted to travel first class. He made long stops at Salesian houses along the way and in the houses of benefactors.

At Florence he met the elderly Countess Uguccioni. He arrived supported by Viglietti, while she had come on a wheelchair. Don Bosco quipped:

“Happy to see you, Countess. Shall we have a little dance?”

“Oh, Don Bosco, see the state to which I have been reduced!”

“Well, well, don’t be afraid. We shall dance in heaven!”

At the station of Arezzo there was an unexpected encounter. The station master ran up to him and embraced him with tears of joy:

“Don Bosco, do you remember me? I was an urchin at Turin, with neither father nor mother. You took me in, gave me an education, loved me. If I have a good family and this job now, I owe it all to you.”

Don Bosco reached Rome the afternoon of 30 April.

He was taken to the Lombard College and asked to address the seminarians. He managed to say just one sentence:

“Always think of what the Lord thinks of you. Never bother about what people say, whether good or bad.”

The pope received him, made him sit by his side, and covered his knees with a large ermine fur.

“I am old, Holy Father,” murmured Don Bosco, “and this is my last visit to Rome and the end of everything for me. There’s so much to be done, but I have no need to urge my sons to work. On the contrary,” he said, winking at Rua, “I have to insist on moderation. Many actually ruin their health working day and night.”

“Holy Father,” said Fr Rua, “we got the bad example from Don Bosco himself.”

The pope smiled and gave them a wise piece of advice:

“I would urge you and your vicar not to worry so much about the number of Salesians as about their sanctity. It is not numbers that enhance God’s glory, but virtue and sanctity. So be careful and strict in your selection.”

As they were coming down the great staircase, the Swiss guards snapped to attention. Don Bosco smiled. “Take it easy, I am not a king, I am just a poor bent old priest.”

Many Tears

The solemn consecration of the church took place on 14 May.

The following day, 15 May, Don Bosco came down to celebrate Mass at the altar of Mary Help of Christians. He had hardly begun, when Fr Viglietti who was assisting him saw him burst into tears. He could not control his tears, he kept shaking and sobbing all through the Mass. At the end they had to almost carry him to the sacristy. Viglietti was worried:

“Don Bosco, what’s the matter? Are you feeling ill?”

Don Bosco shook his head:

“I saw before my eyes the scene of my first dream, at the age of nine. I could see and hear my mother and my brothers discussing about the meaning of the dream...”

In that distant dream the Madonna had said to him: “In due time you will understand.” Now, looking back, he understood. It had all been worthwhile, the sacrifices, the worries, the work, because of the salvation they had brought and would continue to bring to so many youngsters.

On 18 May Don Bosco bade goodbye to Rome for the last time.

Louis Orione: Three Notebooks of Sins

Not even the long journeys of his last years and the burden of work and debts could keep Don Bosco away from his boys. To see them, to listen to them, to take a stroll with them revived him even at the end of a gruelling day.

Louis Orione, 14, joined the Oratory in October 1886. He was from Pontecurone, and his father was a poor street paver. Louis had served as apprentice, kneeling long hours in the wet sand beside his father, placing cobblestones one after the other, driving them in place with light taps of the mallet. He had tried to become a friar at Voghera but had fallen ill and had been sent back home. The Salesians at Valdocco had accepted him.

Young Louis was fascinated by Don Bosco. Whenever he came down to the playground (“more and more rarely,” Louis recalls), throngs of boys would immediately surround him, trying to get near him, hoping to have a word from him.

Young Louis did the same. Don Bosco looked at him, smiled, and asked him whether the moon at his native village was bigger than at Turin. The boy laughed and Don Bosco said to him jokingly: “You are a simpleton.” Louis Orione had one great desire: to make his confession to Don Bosco. But how to do that?

Don Bosco was a tired man. He now heard the confessions only of some Salesians and of the boys of the final year, those preparing to enter the novitiate. But somehow, Louis managed to get this rare privilege. He took his preparation very seriously. He tells the story himself: “I made an examination of conscience and fill up three notebooks.” Determined not to leave out anything, he had consulted certain manuals with their ready-made lists of sins. He had copied out everything, accusing himself of everything. There was only one question to which he had replied negatively. “Have you killed?” He had written down an emphatic no! Then, with the notebooks in his pocket, downcast eyes and contrite attitude he queued up with the other boys awaiting his turn. He was trembling with expectation.

“What will Don Bosco say when he reads all these sins?” he was thinking. At last his turn came. He knelt down. Don Bosco smiled at him.

“Give me your sins.” The boy pulled out the first booklet. Don Bosco took it, weighed it in his hand a moment, and then tore it up.

“Give me the others.”

These also went the same way. The boy remained staring in surprise.

“And now your confession is over,” Don Bosco said to him. “Don’t give any more thought to what you had written.”

And again he smiled at him. Louis would never forget that smile. He managed to confess many more times to Don Bosco. One day Don Bosco looked at him straight in the eye:

“Remember that you and I will always be friends.”

Louis Orione never forgot that promise. When Don Bosco was dying, he would offer his own life to God in exchange. When he became father of a congregation with oratories and houses for very poor boys he would say, thinking of Don Bosco:

“I would gladly walk on live coals to see him once again and thank him.”

He would call the three years spent at the Oratory “the happiest time of my life.”

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GOODBYE

Towards the end of August 1887, a retreat was being held at Valsalice for youngsters wanting to join the Salesian Congregation. Don Bosco went there and made himself available for confessions.

Since 25 May he had stopped presiding at the meetings of the superior chapter of the congregation, leaving that to his vicar, Fr Rua. He participated in one such meeting on 12 September, at Valsalice.

In the second half of September he took ill. He had bouts of fever and splitting headaches. On some days he could not even celebrate Mass. Fr Viglietti, his secretary, noted in his diary: "In spite of that, he is always cheerful. He works, writes and receives visits. He is the one who needs comforting, but instead it is always he who comforts others."

One evening, towards the end of September, he was trying to have supper in his room. Fr Veronesi, rector of the agricultural farm at Mogliano Veneto, was keeping him company. Don Bosco suddenly said:

"My time is short. The superiors of the congregation do not seem to be convinced. They think that Don Bosco will still live a long time... I do not mind dying. What worries me are the debts of the Church of the Sacred Heart. To think that we had collected so much! Fr Dalmazzo is a good fellow, but not much of an administrator... What will my sons say on finding such heavy burdens on their shoulders? Pray for my soul. I won't be around for next year's retreat."

More and More Lonely

Fr Paul Albera, provincial of the houses of France, was leaving. He went to take leave of Don Bosco. Don Bosco looked affectionately at his 'Paolino' and murmured with tears in his eyes:

"You too are leaving! All of you are abandoning me! I know that Fr Bonetti is leaving this evening. Fr Rua is also going. I'll be left alone."

He began to cry quietly. He was a poor tired old man. He felt the loneliness enveloping him little by little. Fr Albera too was overcome by emotion. Don Bosco plucked up strength:

"I'm not scolding you, you know. You are doing your duty. But I am a poor old man... I'll pray for you. God be with you."

Before going back to Valdocco, Don Bosco spent a few minutes with Fr Barberis, director of Valsalice. He had his eyes fixed on the stairs. He said slowly:

"From now on, I will be here looking after this house..." After a while he added:

“Prepare the plans.”

Fr Barberis thought he was referring to the drawings of the last part of the building which was still in construction.

“I’ll have them ready and show them to you by winter.”

“Not this winter, but by next spring. Show them to Fr Rua.” He continued gazing at the staircase.

Four months later, on the landing of that very staircase, the tomb of Don Bosco would be prepared. Fr Barberis presented the plans of the little monument to Don Rua in the spring of 1888. It was then that he remembered the cryptic words of Don Bosco.

Like a Candle Flickering Out

Don Bosco returned to Valdocco on 2 October to the usual rousing welcome of the boys. They accompanied him with cheers through the playground, to the stairs leading to his room. The bigger boys helped him to climb, step by step. From the balcony he waved out to the boys, and the boys answered with shouts of *Viva Don Bosco*.

He was like a candle that was flickering out.

He celebrated Mass in his private chapel, but always assisted by a priest.

He spoke and breathed with difficulty. To visitors he would say: “I’m looking for two spare bellows. Mine have become useless.”

On 4 December, Fr Cerruti, who was in charge of the Oratory, went up to speak to him. After listening to his report, Don Bosco said to him:

“You are pale. How’s your health? Take care of yourself. Look after yourself as you would look after Don Bosco.”

Fr Cerruti was moved and Don Bosco went on:

“Take heart, dear Fr Cerruti, we will all be happy in paradise.”

His secretaries handed him the letters that were still coming in. He scrawled a word or two on them. He was unable to respond in person. The last letter on which he personally wrote two lines was addressed to Mrs Broquier: “Let us give much if we want to receive much! God bless you and guide you.”

During Mass his breath fell short. He celebrated Mass on 4 and 6 December. On Sunday, 11 December he would try again. He would reach the end with difficulty. It would be his last Mass.

Msgr Cagliari Arrives

On 7 December Msgr Cagliari arrived from America. Fr Rua had sent him a telegram: “Papà’s state alarming.”

The boys gave a rousing welcome to the bishop as he crossed the ground. But his eyes were on those closed windows, behind which Don Bosco lay dying. He entered the room. Don Bosco was seated on a modest sofa. Msgr Cagliari knelt before him, and Don Bosco embraced him, pressing his head to his shoulder. The strength and courage of this beloved pupil gave life to Don Bosco. He touched his side and asked him about the two broken ribs:

“Are you well now?”

“Yes, Don Bosco, very well.” His eyes scanned the features of his beloved father.

How much Don Bosco had aged in three years.

They spent the evening together, sitting side by side on the sofa. The bishop told him so many things about the missions, about the Salesians, about the natives they had baptized in their thousands. And suddenly he asked, as when he was a boy:

“Don Bosco, hear my confession!”

The bishop wrote down all that Don Bosco told him that evening on a page that he would take to America. Among other things Don Bosco had told him:

“I want you to stay here till everything is settled after my death.”

“Tell all the Salesians to work with zeal and enthusiasm: work, work!”

“Love one another like brothers: love, help, support one another.”

On the days that followed, Don Bosco again had long talks with him. On one occasion, as if in distress, he said:

“I’ve reached the end of my days. It is up to all of you now to work, to save the young. But I must share a fear with you. I am afraid that some Salesians might interpret wrongly the love that Don Bosco had for the young, thinking that he was carried away by too much affection. I am afraid they might use this as an excuse to justify their own uncontrolled affections.”

“Be at peace, Don Bosco. None of us has ever interpreted your love for the boys in that way. And as for the fear that some may use it as an excuse, leave that to me. I’ll see that what you have said is made known to all.”

On 16 December the doctor ordered a ride in the carriage for a breath of fresh air. Fr Rua and Fr Viglietti helped him down the stairs. On his way back, coming up Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Fr Viglietti spotted Cardinal Alimonda under the porticos. Don Bosco told him:

“Go and beg him to come a moment. I want to speak to him, but I cannot walk that far.”

The cardinal hastened towards the coach with open arms:

“Oh, Don Bosco, Don Bosco!”

He entered the coach, embraced him and kissed him affectionately. Fr Rua stepped down from the coach. The cardinal and Don Bosco spoke for half an hour as the coach made its way slowly up to via Cernaia.

Thoughts with the Flavour of Eternity

17 December. Don Bosco’s strength was waning. It was a Saturday. Outside the room about thirty boys were waiting for confession. He said to Viglietti:

“I don’t think I can make it...” “

And after a while:

“Yet it is the last time I can hear their confessions. The last time... Tell them to come.”

18 December. Fr Eugene Reffo of the Giuseppini came to see him. He said to him:

“My dear Eugene, I have always loved you and will always love you. I am at the end of my days. Pray for me and I’ll pray for you.”

19 December. Viglietti found him in such good spirits that he asked him to write a few words on some holy pictures to be sent to the cooperators. “Willingly,” said Don Bosco.

Half lying on the sofa, he wrote on the back of two pictures:

“O Mary, obtain for us, from Jesus, health of body if it is for the good of our soul,

but above all eternal salvation.”

“Be quick in doing good works, because you may not have time later.”

At this point he stopped:

“Viglietti, I can’t write any more. I am too tired.”

Viglietti suggested he stop.

“No, I must go on. It’s the last time I write.” He continued slowly, scrawling thoughts on the pictures, thoughts which have the taste of eternity.

“Blessed are those who give themselves to God forever during their youth.”

“Those who delay in giving themselves to God, run the great danger of losing their soul.”

“My dear children, save time, and time will save you forever.”

“If we do good, we shall find good in this life and the next.”

“If we sow good works, we shall gather good fruit.”

“At the end of life, we shall gather the fruits of our good work.”

Fr Viglietti reads this last message and cannot control his tears.

“Don Bosco, can’t you write something more cheerful?”

“But what a boy you are, Carluccio... Don’t cry. I’ve already told you these are the last words I will write. Anyway, I’ll try to listen to you.” He resumed writing:

“God bless us and keep us from all evil.”

“Give much to the poor if you want to become rich.”

“Give, and it shall be given to you.”

“May God bless us and the Holy Virgin guide us through all the dangers of life.”

“Children are the delight of Jesus and Mary.”

“May God bless and reward abundantly all our benefactors.”

“Oh Mary, be my salvation.”

At this point, unconsciously, Don Bosco once again switched to thoughts on eternity:

“He who saves his soul saves everything. He who loses his soul loses everything.”

“Those who stand by the poor will be abundantly rewarded at God’s tribunal.”

“How great our reward will be for all the good we have done during our life.”

“Those who do good in life, will find good at the point of death.”

“In paradise we shall enjoy all that is good, eternally.”

It was the last sentence he ever wrote. The writing had become almost illegible.

Silence in the Playground

That same morning he gave his last audiences. For almost 40 years, he had spent his mornings counselling, blessing, consoling, helping and cheering all who wanted to talk to him. The final visit was that of Countess Mocenigo. It was 12.30 p.m. on 20 December.

In the evening the doctor ordered another ride in the carriage. He needed some fresh air. Despite his protestations, they brought him down the stairs on an armchair. As it made its way slowly along Corso Regina Margherita, someone stopped the coach. It was a gentleman from Pinerolo, a pupil of the Oratory in its early days. Don Bosco recognized him and embraced him:

“How are things?”

“So so. Pray for me. I was told at the porter’s that you would pass this way, and I

wanted to wish you.”

“Good. And what about your soul?”

“I’ve always tried to be a worthy pupil of Don Bosco.”

“*Bravo, bravo*. God will reward you. Pray for me. Try to live like a good Christian always.”

It looked as if the fresh air had helped him. But when Dr Albertotti came, he found him much worse and ordered him to bed immediately. The young seminarian Festa, who was there, asked Don Bosco:

“How are you, Don Bosco?”

“Only one thing is left: to come to a good end.”

Between 20 and 31 December, it seemed that the end might come any time.

Coadjutor Peter Enria who assisted him at night summed up these painful days in two words: “He suffered in silence.”

Don Bosco was running a high temperature, and his breathing was becoming laborious. The doctor insisted on nourishment. Fr Viglietti tried to make him have some soup. Don Bosco wanted to take the bowl, but Viglietti insisted on holding it himself. Don Bosco joked:

“Look at that! You want to eat it yourself?”

Down below, the playground was packed with boys, but there reigned an unusual silence. Even the smallest ones had their eyes fixed on the window above, where their friend lay dying.

“Now I Need that Advice Myself”

23 December. At noon, it seemed the end had come. Don Bosco murmured:

“Get someone to anoint me.”

Fr Bonetti is there by the bed. Don Bosco presses his hand and tells him:

“Always support Fr Rua.”

When Msgr Cagliero comes in, Don Bosco makes an effort:

“Tell the pope that the special aim of the congregation and the Salesians is to uphold the authority of the Holy See wherever they are, whatever their work... Under the protection of the pope, you will enter Africa... you will cross it... You will go to Asia and elsewhere... Have faith!”

Joseph Buzzetti is standing nearby, with his imposing red beard. Don Bosco can hardly speak, but tries to joke all the same, giving him a military salute.

“Dear Buzzetti, you are always my dear Buzzetti.”

Towards evening, the missionary Cassini is sitting with him. Don Bosco whispers in his ear:

“I know that your mother is poor. Speak freely to me, there’s no need to tell anyone else. I will give you whatever you need.”

Peter Enria performs the humblest services. Don Bosco looks at him gratefully.

“Poor Enria, be patient.”

“Oh, Don Bosco, I would give my life for your recovery. And I am not the only one. There are so many who love you.”

“The only thing I’ll really feel while dying, will be to leave all of you.”

Cardinal Alimonda arrives late in the evening. He has been told that this might be

Don Bosco's last night. He enters, embraces Don Bosco, gives him a kiss. Don Bosco tries to say something to him:

"Your Eminence, pray that I might save my soul!"

"Don Bosco, you, of all people, must not be afraid to die. You have reminded so many to stay prepared!"

"Yes... but I need that advice myself now."

On the morning of 24 December they bring him the viaticum. Msgr Cagliari administers the sacrament of anointing. Don Bosco improves slightly.

26 December. Charles Tomatis, who had been at the Oratory with Dominic Savio, pays him a visit. He brings with him his son for a blessing. But he had never expected to find Don Bosco in such a state. He kneels by the bed and can only say: "Oh, Don Bosco! Oh Don Bosco!" When he leaves the room, Don Bosco beckons to Fr Rua:

"See that you pay their railway fare. They are hard up."

The same day he receives the visit of Mother Catherine Daghero. She asks a blessing for all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

"Yes, yes, I bless all the houses of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, I bless the superior general and all the sisters... Let them work to save many souls."

The doctor has prescribed perfect silence and no visits. Don Bosco passes his days dozing, half-asleep and half-awake.

29 December. Don Bosco summons Fr Rua and Msgr Cagliari. He takes them by the hand and says:

"Love each other like brothers. Love, support and help each other like brothers. The help of God and of Our Lady will never be wanting... Promise me that you will love each other like brothers."

During the night he asks Enria for a sip of water.

"We have to learn to live, and also to die."

The Awakening of the 'Monsters'

It looked like the end, but it was not. From 1 to 20 January there was an unexpected improvement. His health seemed to have returned, he seemed to have received a new lease of life. It was a gift from God, but also a hope that quickly faded.

21 January. Msgr Cagliari enters the room smiling:

"Dear Don Bosco, it looks like the danger is past. I am going to Lu for their annual feast. It is a place that has given us many good missionaries and many sisters. From there I will pay a quick visit to our boys at Borgo San Martino."

"Do go, by all means. But come back soon."

The morning of 22 January put an end to all hopes. Don Bosco became rapidly worse.

By the afternoon of 24 January, his condition was alarming. The doctors said he could fail any moment. The constant drowsiness had returned, he was beginning to be delirious.

Peter Enria saw Don Bosco clap his hands, trying to shout:

"Run quickly, run to save those youngsters... Mary Most Holy, help them... Mother, Mother!"

Someone has said that in these delirious phrases Don Bosco manifested a fear with

regard to young boys rather than a sense of trust. The best modern psychology says the contrary: feelings and fears that have been repressed by force of will, now come back to life. They are the ‘phantasms’ and ‘monsters’ that break out of the cages of the unconscious when the will which had chained them is paralyzed and rendered helpless by the sleep of sickness.

From his seminary days Don Bosco carried in his unconscious a system of education condensed in the words *fear and mistrust*. But throughout his life, moved by his love for the young, he had reversed it into another binomial: *friendship and trust*. This was shown so beautifully in the way he had heard the confession of a fearful boy, Louis Orione.

Paradoxically, what seems to be taking the upper hand now in him, is what he had dominated and overcome all his life.

“Tell the Boys”

26 January. Msgr Cagliero has returned. He goes immediately to the bedside of Don Bosco. He understands that the situation is serious, but he tries to find out from Don Bosco himself.

“They are calling me to Rome. May I go?”

“You will go, later.” His beautiful voice is now merely a whisper.

The pain is at times intolerable. Fr Lemoyne suggests:

“Think of Jesus on the cross. He too had to suffer without being able to move.”

“Yes, that is what I am trying to do.”

On the 27th and the morning of the 28th he is delirious practically the whole time.

The afternoon of the 28th, Don Bosco has one of his last moments of lucidity. Bonetti is with him. Don Bosco murmurs:

“Tell my boys that I am waiting for all of them in paradise.”

On the 29th the doctors find him very serious. Dr Fissore says to him:

“Take heart, tomorrow things may improve.”

“Tomorrow? ... Tomorrow ... I am going on a long journey.”

In the early hours of the night he says loudly:

“Paolino, Paolino, where are you? Why don’t you come?” Fr Paolo Albera, provincial of the Salesian houses in France, has not yet arrived.

30 January. In a moment of lucidity he says to Fr Rua:

“Try to make yourself loved.”

Towards afternoon, Buzzetti and Viglietti are by his side. Don Bosco opens his eyes, tries to smile. He raises his left hand and salutes them. Buzzetti bursts into tears.

31 January. Towards 2.00 a.m. Fr Rua sees that the time has come. He dons a stole and begins the prayers for the dying. The superiors of the congregation are sent for. When Msgr Cagliero arrives, Fr Rua gives him the stole and goes to the right of Don Bosco and whispers.

“Don Bosco, we are here, your sons. We beg your forgiveness for all the troubles we have caused you. As a sign of pardon and of your fatherly goodness, give us once more your blessing. I will guide your hand and pronounce the formula of blessing.”

Fr Rua lifts Don Bosco’s right hand and utters a blessing for the Salesians present and those far away.

In the room one can hear only the laboured breathing of the dying man.

At 4.30 a.m. it suddenly stops. The breathing becomes short for a few instants and then ceases. Fr Belmonte shouts:

“Don Bosco is dying!”

Three gasps at brief intervals. Msgr Cagliero says aloud voice the prayer he had learnt from him in his boyhood:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in my last agony.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you.

He takes off his stole and puts it on the shoulders of Don Bosco, who has just entered the blessed realm of heavenly Light.

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[BACK COVER]

DON BOSCO

A new biography

In recent decades the writings about Don Bosco have increasingly been dividing into two types: —books that narrate the stories of Don Bosco ‘for boys and for common people,’ ignoring the recent historical studies regarding Don Bosco’s times or about the figure of Don Bosco himself. These books have enjoyed an enormous diffusion, and have the merit of having given widespread publicity to Don Bosco, but tend to reduce the gigantic figure of Don Bosco to ‘something meant only for boys,’ or to mere material for comic strips; —books that study fundamental aspects of Don Bosco and of his times, but which ‘take for granted’ the happenings, the stories and the facts; and if at all they give any attention to these, it is only to ‘demythicize’ particular episodes resting on dubious testimonies.

Between ‘beautiful stories’ and ‘critical studies,’ Don Bosco runs the risk of at once being not very well known, and of appearing as a figure wrapped in dubious legends.

The present book (translated into more than thirteen languages) attempts a third way.

It narrates the life of Don Bosco, refuses to take anything for granted, and takes into account of all the historical facts and circumstances that makes up the beautiful, adventurous and dramatic story of the saintly priest of Valdocco. It relies especially on the *Memoirs* written by Don Bosco himself, and of the enormous mass of testimonies of his pupils and collaborators, most of which were given under oath during the process of his beatification.

The figure that emerges is that of Don Bosco in the context of his times and of the church of his times, based upon the most recent and rigorous research.

The author

Teresio Bosco, born in 1931, is a Salesian priest and native of Asti, the region from which Don Bosco himself comes. He has published a large number of books on Don Bosco: *Don Bosco: storia di un prete*; *Esercizi spirituali con Don Bosco*; *Don Bosco ti parla*; *Memorie di Don Bosco in lingua corrente*; *Le avventure di Don Bosco*; *Don Bosco visto da vicino*; *I pensieri di Don Bosco*; and *Don Bosco: una biografia nuova: edizione per ragazzi*. He is also the author of several other biographies: *S. Eusebio*; *S. Antonio*; *P. Pio*; *Attilio Giordani*; *Madre Maddalena Morano*; *S. Domenico Savio*. Besides this, he has written *Il cristianesimo in 50 lezioni* and *La legge cristiana in 20 lezioni*. He was for some years editor of the *Bollettino Salesiano*, the official magazine of the Salesian Family, founded by Don Bosco himself. First published in 1979, the present book has been reprinted at least 10 times, with more than 91,000 copies in circulation, and has been translated into several languages including German and Flemish.

The translator

Giuseppe Moja, born in 1920, is a Salesian priest and native of Varese, Italy. Having arrived in India while still a young aspirant of 17, he is a veteran missionary who has spent over 70 years in the country. Fr Moja has worked in the Eastern and North Eastern parts of the country, in colonial and post-colonial Goa, and more recently in and around Mumbai. For several years he served as the editor of *Don Bosco’s Madonna*, the magazine founded by Fr Aurelius Maschio. Fr Moja is a man deeply in love with Don Bosco, and the present translation is his offering to his Salesian confreres in India, with the hope that they rediscover the greatness of Don Bosco and follow him with fresh enthusiasm.