

# Seen in Action

as Don Bosco saw them

April 29, 2014

An anthology of young lives written by Don Bosco

# Introduction

Don Bosco began exploring the biographical genre in 1844 when he published the life of his close friend and fellow seminarian Louis Comollo. Forty years later he was still writing in this genre, producing by then the lives of his early Salesian confreres.

Other than the Lives (biographies) of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco and probably only the first two of these for many English language readers, those of Severino, Peter and Valentino will be virtually unknown. Both Severino and Peter came directly under Don Bosco's influence at the Oratory at Valdocco, and probably Valentino too, though nowhere in this 'Life' does Don Bosco actually name Valdocco or the Oratory or even himself for that matter. Peter Braido suggests that Valentino was placed in a school 'run along Salesian lines'. Still and all, this collection would be incomplete without Valentino, I feel, as it would also be incomplete without Louis Comollo.

Comollo will be known by English readers, though many would not realise that Don Bosco reworked this very first biography for very different purposes in what turned out to be three editions, eventually. He first wrote it for the seminarians at Chieri. By the time he had established the Oratory at Valdocco and was also engaged in seeking and forming hundreds (some might argue many more) vocations to the priesthood, he had adapted Louis Comollo's life to suit those boys who might be aspiring to seminary and ultimately priestly life at the Oratory. The version included here is the first, 1844, a much smaller version than the two reworked ones. It has its own special value because it was the first.

Because Louis Comollo and Angelina (we have no other name for her) are quite apart from the other six, they have been placed in a section on their own at the back of this anthology. Comollo was Don Bosco's teenage and early adult friend, but it is still interesting to see how some of the opinions he presents in this 'Life' are also woven into the three 'classic' lives of Savio, Magone and Besucco. Angelina, on the other hand is entirely different again. It falls more into the category of an edifying 'saintly' story. As it is the only story with a female chief character that in any way resembles the others, it seems helpful to include it here. Certain themes found in the other biographies of boys also appear here in this story he wrote in 1869.

The order of presentation in this anthology for the other six (Savio, Magone, Besucco, 'Peter', 'Severino' and 'Valentino') does not follow the date of publication, but rather the order in which the boys in question probably came under Don Bosco's direct influence. Severino speaks of his contact with the Oratory before it finally settled in Valdocco, so he is clearly first. Peter was eleven when he made his First Communion and was already and then subsequently attending some catechism lessons at the Oratory in 1845, so he comes next. We already know that Dominic, Michael and Francis arrived at Valdocco in

that order, from 1854 onwards until 1864, the year Francis died.

While common themes, indeed entire phrases, reappear across the full gamut of these biographies, every one of them is different, because each boy concerned was different, and in Angelina's case - well, she is different in every sense. We only know her as an adult who lived till she was seventy, and the Salesian connection is nil, except for Don Bosco's interest in her story. But to have missed out on one of them is to have missed out on the full picture that Don Bosco was trying to paint of the 'school of holiness' he was striving to encourage with every fibre of his being. This is not to say that each of his characters was a model of holiness. That is why we need both light and shade in the picture, as well as male and female. I would suggest that only reading Dominic, Michael and Francis really does give one an unbalanced picture.

Amongst other things, these three all died in their youth, still very much in touch with Don Bosco. Severino, Peter and Valentino made it to manhood, and while Severino's death was imminent and Peter was in imminent danger on the battlefield (the story remains inconclusive—we do not know if he survived), their connection with Don Bosco had been interrupted for some years by the circumstances of life. The stories are not just for enjoyment - they are stories of salvation, so death is an important element. The youthful and edifying deaths of the first three, following the pattern from Comollo, maybe, might have left Don Bosco with a minor problem for the last three which, it seems to me, he gets around in the following ways: Severino is on his death bed and the entire story is intended to edify as he details his repentance; Peter's father's death and his earlier conversion ensure that this pattern can be found in the story, and in Valentino's case it turns out to be Mari, his repentant 'bad guide' and seducer, who provides that essential element.

Even with the inclusion of the wayward Severino and Valentino in the spectrum, and even though some of Severino's and Valentino's behaviour was hardly edifying, the overall intention of the stories is to edify and encourage. And surely there would have been boys at the Oratory who would have seen themselves more in Severino, Peter and Valentino than in Dominic Michael and Francis, and drawn encouragement from these accounts. Perhaps it was the adults—parents especially—who had much to learn from Severino, Peter and Valentino.

Scholars have their reasons for choosing which edition is 'definitive', where there were two or more. It does not matter so much for this anthology—the key issue is that they were written by Don Bosco. Some of the critical editions are laden with footnotes by the scholars, and these seemed of less interest for the purposes of this anthology. Footnotes by Don Bosco, though, are always included as part of the text in these English translations.

Yes, the English translations. Here we are on the vigil of the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth and we have a mere handful of items from Don Bosco's *Opere edite*, or published works, in English. Let these six 'Lives' be a small contribution to filling the lacuna.

Enjoy!

Julian Fox sdb

# Contents

<b>I. Severino</b>	<b>12</b>
Chapter 1. Who was Severino...	14
Chapter 2. His father	15
Chapter 3. His mother	17
Chapter 4. Disaster	19
Chapter 5. Turin	21
Chapter 6. His father's death	23
Chapter 7. The Oratory	26
Chapter 8. The Oratory, continued	28
Chapter 9. Severino's schooling	31
Chapter 10. The plunge into Protestantism	33
Chapter 11. Leaving Turin	35
Chapter 12. The Waldensians	37
Chapter 13. The Waldensians, continued	40
Chapter 14. Waldensians and Protestants	42
Chapter 15. Waldensians adapt to Protestantism	44
Chapter 16. Contradictions in Waldensian teaching	46
Chapter 17. The Great St Bernard Pass	50
Chapter 18. The Great St Bernard Pass, continued	53
Chapter 19. Geneva and Calvin	56

## *Contents*

Chapter 20. Catholics in Geneva	60
Chapter 21. Severino in Geneva	62
Chapter 22. Death of a friend	65
Chapter 23. The return to Turin	68
Chapter 24. The priest and the Waldensian minister	71
Chapter 25. An unexpected recovery	74
Chapter 26. His mother's death	76
Conclusion	78
Appendix: Severino's death	81
II. Peter	82
A Word to the Reader	84
Chapter 1. The Match factory	85
Chapter 2. Communion preparations	88
Chapter 3. Confession	91
Chapter 4. Communion day	94
[Chapter five is missing in the original]	97
Chapter 6. The father's conversion	98
Chapter 7. The vicissitudes of youth	102
Chapter 8. Some particular details	105
Chapter 9. His outstanding devotion	108
Chapter 10. He leaves home	111
Chapter 11. Life in the army	113
Chapter 12. His father's death	115
Chapter 13. He leaves for the Crimea	119

*Contents*

Chapter 14. Events in Crimea	121
Chapter 15. Conclusion	124
III. Dominic	128
Pastoral Letter	131
My dear boys...	132
Chapter 1. Early years at home	133
Chapter 2. Signs of virtue	135
Chapter 3. First Communion	137
Chapter 4. School at Castelnuovo d'Asti	139
Chapter 5. What his teacher had to say	141
Chapter 6. School at Mondonio	143
Chapter 7. The first time I got to know him	145
Chapter 8. He comes to the Oratory	147
Chapter 9. Grammar year	149
Chapter 10. Decision to become a saint	152
Chapter 11. Zeal for souls	154
Chapter 12. Dealing with his friends	157
Chapter 13. Spirit of prayer	160
Chapter 14. Frequent Confession and Communion	162
Chapter 15. Penances	165
Chapter 16. The Immaculate Conception Sodality	167
Chapter 17. His special friends	171
Chapter 18. John Massaglia	173
Chapter 19. Special graces	177

## *Contents*

Chapter 20. Thoughts about death	180
Chapter 21. He leaves the Oratory	182
Chapter 22. He says goodbye to his friends	184
Chapter 23. Last confession and Viaticum	186
Chapter 24. Final moments and death	188
Chapter 25. Fr Picco's words to the students	190
Chapter 26. Imitating Savio's virtue	193
IV. Michael	197
Dear young people	200
Chapter 1. An unusual meeting	201
Chapter 2. The Oratory	203
Chapter 3. Difficulties and moral reform	205
Chapter 4. Confession and the Sacraments	207
Chapter 5. A word to young people	209
Chapter 6. Practices of piety	211
Chapter 7. Duties	213
Chapter 8. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin	216
Chapter 9. Purity	218
Chapter 10. Charity	220
Chapter 11. Facts and sayings	223
Chapter 12. Holidays	226
Chapter 13. Preparation for death	229
Chapter 14. His illness	232
Chapter 15. Last moments and death	234



## *Contents*

Chapter 16. Conclusion	237
Appendix	240
V. Francis	242
Chapter 1. Besucco's early upbringing	246
Chapter 2. Death of his godmother	248
Chapter 3. His obedience	250
Chapter 4. Conduct and events at school	251
Chapter 5. Life at home	253
Chapter 6. Besucco and his parish priest	255
Chapter 7. Looking after the sheep on the mountainside	258
Chapter 8. Conversations	261
Chapter 9. The holy Crucifix	263
Chapter 10. He teaches catechism	264
Chapter 11. The Holy Childhood	265
Chapter 12. First Communion	267
Chapter 13. Mortifications	269
Chapter 14. Decision to go to the Oratory	271
Chapter 15. The trip to Turin	274
Chapter 16. Lifestyle at the Oratory	276
Chapter 17. Happiness	278
Chapter 18. Study and diligence	280
Chapter 19. Confession	282
Chapter 20. Holy Communion	284
Chapter 21. Reverence for the Blessed Sacrament	286

*Contents*

Chapter 22. Spirit of prayer	288
Chapter 23. His penances	290
Chapter 24. Particular deeds and sayings	292
Chapter 25. His letters	294
Chapter 26. Last letter to his mother	299
Chapter 27. A badly chosen penance	302
Chapter 28. Resigned to his illness	304
Chapter 29. He receives Viaticum	306
Chapter 30. Receives the Holy Oils	308
Chapter 31. Death	310
Chapter 32. Suffrages and upset	312
Chapter 33. Commotion in Argentera	313
Chapter 34. Conclusion	315
VI. Valentino	316
Chapter 1. His mother	319
Chapter 2. First year of boarding school	321
Chapter 3. Holidays	323
Chapter 4. The new college	325
Chapter 5. His vocation	327
Chapter 6. Difficulties	329
Chapter 7. A fatal guide	331
Chapter 8. Osnero's bitterness	333
Chapter 9. Recent news of Valentino	335
Chapter 10. Mari's death.	338

*Contents*

<b>VII. Comollo</b>	<b>342</b>
Chapter 1. Louis Comollo's childhood	344
Chapter 2. He goes to Chieri to study	347
Chapter 3. After Clothing Day he goes to the Seminary in Chieri	352
Chapter 4. Circumstances preceding his illness	357
Chapter 5. He falls ill and dies	360
Chapter 6. The funeral rites	367
Chapter 7. Consequences of his death	369
<b>VIII Angelina</b>	<b>372</b>
Chapter 1. A fortunate family	374
Chapter 2. Strange encounter	376
Chapter 3. The good maid	378
Chapter 4. The young girl's rare gifts	380
Chapter 5. Assisting a dying person	382
Chapter 6. The priest and the waif	384
Chapter 7. Who this poor girl was; her upbringing and education	386
Chapter 8. Ease and comfort	388
Chapter 9. Distress	390
Chapter 10. Her flight	393
Chapter 11. The girl's final activities	395
Chapter 12. Angelina's death	397

Part I.  
Severino

SEVERINO, OR THE ADVENTURES OF AN ALPINE LAD, AS TOLD BY HIM-  
SELF AND PRESENTED BY FATHER JOHN BOSCO  
TURIN

ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES PRESS  
PUBLISHER'S PROPERTY  
1868

## Chapter I. Who was Severino? What led to these tales?

Severino was born in a village which lay at the foot of the Alps. After a series of strange adventures he returned to his birthplace, stricken by an illness that had brought him to the brink of the grave. Many of his relatives and friends hurried to visit him and took delight in hearing the stories of what he had been involved in or had seen. One day they asked him to give them an orderly account of his life. "We will gladly come and listen," they added, "and we'll bring other friends of ours along as well. They will enjoy listening as much as we do."

Although Severino was prostrate from his illness, he still very much enjoyed visits from good people; he liked listening to pleasant tales and even liked telling them himself. "Since you enjoy listening to me," he answered, "I will gladly tell you about some of the strange things that have happened to me, and I do so willingly because it provides good reason for you to visit me. For my part it gives me a chance to make some reparation for the scandal I have given, but even more so because my misfortunes might be a warning to others to avoid the pitfalls that lead so many naive young people to ruin. Of course I should say that for obvious reasons I will not be naming places and people who might otherwise be subjected to inappropriate questioning. If you see me occasionally overcome by emotion or even weeping over my past misadventures please be a little patient with me. I am but human, and I keenly feel anything that either honours or demeans our poor humanity; but you can be sure that amidst everything I say I will not utter a single syllable not based on fact."

Once word got around that Severino was going to recount his adventures, a considerable number of listeners turned up amongst whom many young men of the district, since they all knew that Severino had studied and read much and had been involved in many interesting things during his extensive travels.

When Severino saw that his room was full of people he motioned for them to be seated and then began telling the story of his life in the following order.

## Chapter 2. Severino speaks of his father's hard work on behalf of the family.

My good friends, since you are here for this purpose I will begin the tale of my adventures in life. As you well know, I was born in a village that lies at some altitude, right where the Alps really begin to be called mountains. My parents were good Catholics and did their best to educate me and bring me up in the Catholic religion. I was the eldest of five children. We did not have many worldly goods but, thanks to our work and industriousness we were able to earn an honest living. My mother attended to things at home, and also saw that the fields and the chestnut trees, the main part of what we owned, were cultivated in good time. My father had started a small clothing business when he was a young man—knitted goods, wool, silk, cotton, yarn ... He would work at this sort of thing during summer and buy items in dribs and drabs, here and there; then in autumn he would head to the larger towns to sell them. This way he encouraged business in our area, and he helped others in autumn to sell their products more easily and so provide themselves with the foodstuffs that these alpine villages lacked. My father had gained a fine reputation and with his modest assets and sufficient capital for his business he was also able to help his neighbours, and thus was much loved and honoured by everyone.

While he attended to these material things he did not overlook the duties of a good Christian. As soon as his children reached the right age he saw that they went off to school. He himself would go over their lessons with them and he often gave up time when he could have been resting to review topics from school with them and get them to repeat their lessons or talk about some of the problems that all young people encounter at that age. Sometimes, while he was eating, he would have them recite or repeat a passage from some book. When I was promoted to fourth grade elementary, I had to study things that were not even taught when he went to school. So he found a good private tutor who would help me in learning and integrity.

Since my mother did not get involved much in the upbringing of the children my father took over that role. I was barely seven when he would take me with him to parish religious functions. I recall that I was so small I could not get my fingers into the holy water font so he would lift me up to do so then guide my hand to make the sign of the cross; then he would get me to kneel down beside him, and would help me in a most loving way.

When it was time for my First Communion, it was he who wanted to prepare me, and for the entire month before that memorable day, morning and evening he would get me

to read a chapter of a book called JESUS IN A YOUNG MAN'S HEART, adding comments that he thought were appropriate for me.

On the morning established for my Communion he spent four hours in church with me. He helped me make my Confession, prepare myself, make my Communion and then my thanksgiving with my companions.

"Severino," he told me on the way home, "in future remember the joy of this day. But remember always to preserve the delights of such a beautiful day in your heart, so that you may never separate yourself from God's holy Grace by offending him." He had the commendable habit of saying daily prayers with the family. We all got up in the morning at a set time, then with my mother, brothers and sisters, our helpers and sometimes relatives and friends, we would kneel down; he would lead the prayers himself saying the words and getting us to say them piously, devoutly and clearly. In the evening he would do the same; but before it was bedtime he always wanted there to be a little bit of reading about the life of the Saint of the day.

What can I say of my good father's charity and almsgiving? He knew how to earn and save but he also knew how to spend at the right moment. He often used to tell us at home how he would hoist a basket of various silks on his shoulders and go from village to village to sell them. Heat, cold, sweat, hunger and thirst were his inseparable companions always. He mostly travelled on foot. Hotels, inns, cafes were not places he frequented nor even visited. "My usual lunch," he would say, "was a slice of bread with a piece of cheese, cold water and sometimes a glass of wine which some generous buyer would offer me."

So my father, putting together the small earnings of the business with some of the animal products and the small farm, was soon able to notably increase his fortune both for himself and to the benefit of others. No beggar ever knocked at the door of our house without getting, if not money, at least some soup and bread. The weary found rest with him; the weak were given strength; those in rags were given clothing, and pilgrims were well received.

What else? Sometimes when some poor sick people took shelter in our home he saw that they were helped and looked after at his own expense. Not to speak of the care he took to help needy families, especially if there were sick people amongst them. "Almsgiving," he used say, "never makes you poor; my business began to thrive when I began to give alms. The Saviour said: 'Give to the poor and God will give to you' and I have experienced the fact that God gives us a hundredfold even in this life when we do so for love of him." So my father was held in high esteem by all the people who lived around us, and all good people loved him. He was amongst the better-off citizens and was twice elected Mayor. But amidst so many blessings Providence had also sown some prickly thorns.



## Chapter 3. Severino speaks about his mother's apathy.

My father's business prospered, and everything he tackled earned him money; but what a tribulation he found in her who should have been his help and comfort. My mother did not match up to my father's concerns. I speak of her with love and respect, but to do justice to my father I must disapprove of not a few of her actions, the more so because they are things you know of, so all I am doing is recalling them.

Emilia, for that was her name, belonged to a family that had fallen on hard times. When she married my father she thought she would be marrying into a better life, and certainly her expectations would have been met if she had been a true mother to the family with the same zeal as my father had. She would dress beyond her means, something my father was most unhappy about. "Emilia," he would tell her sometimes, "remember that it is better to be in rags without debt than to be dressed elegantly but still owing money for it."

She was not happy with just ordinary food. A bottle of wine, a delicious dish, a sugared almond, sweet bread, a flask of liquor would all be things she would hide away. She would go to the market or a fair, but rarely visit the church; the cafe and occasionally an inn were never overlooked. My father knew about it all, often gave her advice, and to restrain her he would keep the money under lock and key. But with all the shrewdness of the greedy, she would wait till her husband was far from home then she would grab a sack of wheat, chickpeas, beans, or some butter, wine, poultry and even got to the point of stealing some of the goods deposited in my father's house by clients. She would then sell these things at exorbitant prices to buy herself clothes or satisfy her greed. She also wanted her children to be well dressed. My father scolded her severely on one occasion and even threatened to send her away from home. She promised to improve, but it did not happen.

One day my Aunt reminded her of my father's warnings and threats and tried to set her right. "What you say sounds good," she answered, "my husband is right, but I think differently. You only live once. God gives us things for our use, not just to adore them; stinginess is a terrible vice that I don't want in my house."

"Sister," my Aunt replied, "you are making a mistake. We do live only once, and therefore we must use this life to do good and not be intemperate. God gives us things to make good use of them for ourselves, the family and our neighbour. You have a duty to look after your things and to save up for your children; you should cooperate with your husband for their good. You do not want to be stingy and that is good. But there is a huge difference between stinginess and squandering. Your husband is not stingy, nor a squanderer; he works and sweats to earn an honest living to support the family and

help his neighbour. You should imitate him.”

She took little notice of these observations and continued to spend wildly. Certain clothes that were quite good enough for her she judged to be no longer suitable: shoes, gloves, earrings, hats or similar women’s garb - she wanted them to be right up with the fashions. So my friends, rarely would you have seen a peasant woman with wrinkled brow and suntanned cheeks all decked out like a lady. People who saw her would start laughing and my poor father grew angry; he had been sweating blood to improve our family’s lot.

One day my father left to attend to business matters but because he had forgotten some paperwork he returned home unexpectedly. He caught my mother just as she was leaving to go to one of the local fairs. Seeing her in her strange garb he said, “Emilia, you look like the ugliest person in the world; you look more like someone at a fancy-dress ball. What are you going to take and sell?”

“Nothing,” she replied, “I am just going to buy some essential clothing for the family.” But then, because her hands were shaking, some of the flour she had hidden in a pocket began to spill out on the ground, thus revealing her lie and her theft. On another occasion, similarly surprised, and while still denying things as usual, she dropped a flask of oil that she intended taking to the market to sell anyway she could.

Although my father was of a very mild character and preferred that to happen rather than create disharmony in the family, nevertheless after having threatened her several times in vain one day he got carried away by anger and struck her—not lightly. Matters might have gone further had not I and my sister begun to cry and kneel at his feet. We calmed him down and thus prevented sad consequences.

Despite these events and the squandering, it was through my father’s vigilance, activity, effort, or better put, the blessings of heaven that he was able to create a flourishing fortune. He was able to enjoy the consolations of someone who sees his children grow up healthily, honourably and correctly. All this meant that he could foresee a happy future for himself and his family, but a sad event threw us into the most squalid destitution.

## Chapter 4. Severino tells of a terrible disaster in the family.

My father had a heart for doing as much good as he could. Putting in a good word for someone, letters, hospitality, little services, helping the poor and the sick were things he did every day with the greatest of pleasure. The only thing he didn't like doing was putting his name down as guarantor. "I would prefer," he used say, "to give away everything I can than to provide security for others' contracts."

Nevertheless, one day one of his clients came to ask him to prevent his business from going to ruin. "If I don't pay," his friend said, "or I don't have a guarantor, all my goods will be put up for auction, the business closed down and my family reduced to begging. In a word, Gervasio, (my father's name) you could save my honour and save my family from misfortune. I have a promissory note of equal amount that will certainly be paid within three months. You know well that these bills are like cash; I'm just asking for two lines of guarantee." My father hesitated for some days; finally he gave in. "I have never wanted to go guarantor," he said, "this is the first time; I am giving in to do something good. Let God's will be done." He signed and went guarantor for his friend's debts.

That was fatal! The man's good will was not enough: he had bad debts and my father had to pay them. My good father knew he had made a mistake, but it was too late. We can add to the above that the debt was much larger than he had said it was; and everything had to be paid up almost immediately. My father had to quickly sell off some goods, call in some people who owed him, undo some of his own capital ventures: but all of this was not enough.

He was forced to mortgage a substantial part of the house and farm that he had worked so hard to build up. In the end various creditors, seeing his business go bad, pressed claims for him to meet debts before the stipulated time. Since they could not do that legally they threatened bankruptcy and repossession of all the debtor's stable assets.

Absolutely down on his luck, Gervasio did not lose courage; he tried to liquidate what he still possessed in order to start up his business again on a smaller scale but he did not succeed. Nobody wanted to give him credit, and changed times made it very hard for him to sell his goods for cash. That good Christian man raised his eyes to heaven and said: God gave me my fortune and God has taken it away; his will be done, so be it; may his holy name be praised always and in everything.

One evening while saying the usual prayers with the family, he said: "Tomorrow we will all go to Confession and Communion; let us ask God to enlighten us and find a way for us to earn our bread."

We all agreed and even my mother, who had been quite insensitive to things up to that point, seemed moved and eagerly promised she would join everyone and go to church to

call on the Lord's mercy.

Once these religious duties were over my father gathered the family around him and steeling himself so he would not break down, he began to speak in these terms: "My beloved family, the Lord's hand has weighed heavily upon us. We started out with little but with Heaven's help we acquired what we needed to live in an upright way. Now it is all gone. The house is no longer ours, our farm belongs to others, and it is impossible for me to continue my usual business. But God our Father will not abandon us. As a young man I was an occasional bricklayer, and I will go back to that trade. You, Severino, will carry the bricks and mortar, I will take up the trowel. We won't earn much, but one who has learned how to earn a lot also knows how to live with little. You, Emilia, will look after the other children. I need to say that you have also played your part in this misfortune. Your ambition, laziness... But let's pull the curtain on all these sorrowful and useless reminiscences. You stay here and with tight management and with whatever we can send you each month you will have your daily bread. Why are you crying, Emilia?"

"I am crying," she answered, "about your future; it is not possible for you and Severino to put up with such hard labour, so it will be impossible for you to send me help."

"If we trust only in our own strength," added good Gervasio, "we will achieve nothing and die of hunger. But if God looks after the birds of the air, the fish in the sea, the lilies in the field, will he not also look after us? Let us place our trust in him and do what we can to sweeten the bitterness of a sorry future. So courage! Economy, work, prayer is our programme. If we have to put up with privation, it doesn't matter. We Christians know from our faith that sufferings in life are effective for leading us to eternal happiness in Heaven."

## Chapter 5. Severino speaks of his father's hard work.

A few days later my father left for Turin taking with him poor Severino who now had to swap books and pen for hod and pail. I was healthy, strong, and in short I was soon able to get used to the heavy labours of the master bricklayer. My father, due to his age, found it not a little difficult at first but luckily he met a valiant bricklayer who took him on as a helper to build a large building. And between his good will, what he put up with and his friend's help he was soon able to earn a modest livelihood each day.

One evening when he was very tired he took my hands in his, and seeing them all calloused and bruised from these unusual labours, then seeing my face all burnt and blackened from the sun, he sighed, saying: "Poor Severino, you had a better lot in store for you than this."

"Dear father," I immediately replied, "I would be happy to do even more work so long as it brings you some comfort."

One Sunday evening I saw him more down than usual; he gave me the usual supper, but he didn't enjoy any of the food. I saw the intensity of his sorrow etched on his brow, but I didn't dare ask him why.

"Severino," he said in an agitated voice, "go off to bed and sleep peacefully, because tomorrow you will have much to do." I promptly obeyed, but my beloved father's consternation kept me awake and I was there in bed secretly looking at him.

Convinced that I was asleep he began to walk around the room sighing and weeping. "If I was just on my own," he was saying, "I would feel this misfortune much less, but my wife...my children will die of hunger." Then breaking down completely he knelt before the crucifix: "My God," he cried, "If you don't help me I am lost. Have mercy on me." Hearing this outpouring of grief and my father's desperation, I could no longer contain myself. I leaped out of bed and knelt before him, saying: "Father, dear father. What is wrong? Tell me, and I will try to console you, and if I can do nothing else I will share your tears and sorrow with you.

"Dear Severino, I have had new misfortunes, so go to bed and sleep peacefully."

"It's impossible for me to sleep if I don't know the reasons for your grief."

"Severino, we have been working for two months and we have been depriving ourselves of almost everything we need to survive so we can send some money to your mother, but today I received a letter with a note concerning that fatal guarantor business, threatening me with imprisonment if I don't pay a hundred francs within three days. This would use up all the money of two month's hard work, everything we have earned."

"Patience, dear father, our future will not always be so bad. I know how to work and earn, and I hope that within a few weeks we can scrape some more money together.

Meanwhile be at peace, come, let's go and sleep; God will help us."

He seemed somewhat consoled by these words, and drying his eyes he gave me a loving kiss and we both went off to bed. In fact Divine Providence did come to our aid. Our good health was in our favour, I was helping my father in the best way possible, and by carrying out our work, at our own risk and to our benefit we were able to put aside a fair amount of money which could provide for the most urgent needs of the family. Indeed my father regained some of his old energy and was assigned other works of greater importance and therefore with greater earnings. It is true that he was not very practical in his new labours and the new skills needed, but I had already learned a lot, and of an evening I would note things and sometimes correct things as the case might be. One pleasant memory that always comes back to me is that in the midst of all these efforts my father never omitted his religious duties. Some evenings we would arrive home utterly exhausted; we would be eating but already falling asleep; just the same, as soon as we got up from the table he would kneel down with me to say our prayers and do a few minutes of reading from a book he always had with him called: *DAILY PASTURES FOR THE DEVOUT SOUL*.

On Sundays he would take me to sing the Divine Office in a religious community; we always went to the church of St Francis of Assisi for the sermon. At least once a month he would take me with him to receive the Sacraments.

"Never forget, dear Severino," he would tell me, "you can lose everything you have in the world through misfortune but virtue, the merits of your good work, your religion can never be taken away through misfortune." Another time he added: "We have become poor, but remember that we will always be rich if we keep our holy fear of God." This treasure can never be taken from man without his consent!

## Chapter 6. Severino tells us about his father's death.

A year of hard work had finished and my father returned to the family with his savings. With them he could provide rye, cornmeal, chestnuts, and other things of greater need and it seemed to give him a new lease of life. But in January there were new debts he had to cover, and not knowing where to find the money from he again fell into deep melancholy. A friend advised him to declare himself bankrupt so he would no longer have to try to pay the debts he had earlier incurred. But he answered firmly: "Bankruptcy for unpaid debts is a kind of theft, and something that should never be suggested to an upright man. I will live in poverty, I might die from hardship, but I have said that I will pay and I will pay my creditors until my last cent. I would prefer to die as an honourable poor man but with a pure conscience, than live by causing harm to others."

Although my father made huge efforts to show that he was resigned and trusted in a better future, nevertheless his face had lost that jovial look that always used cheer up his relatives and friends. Sometimes he engaged in pleasant conversation that made him happy but often his smile was followed by tears and sighs. Even at night, instead of sleeping he was often heard groaning and lamenting. Sometimes I saw him interrupt lunch so he could go out and let off steam about his worries. All of this reduced his strength, something that he tried in vain to hide.

One day he wanted to carry a heavy basket of foodstuffs on his shoulders from a village that was reasonably far away. The length of the journey, his weakness, and the weight meant that he arrived exhausted and covered in perspiration. He did not recover from this exhaustion. Then he got constipation, fever and a cough, and this had him end up in bed.

The doctor tried to encourage him assuring him that his illness was of no consequence. "A few days of rest," he told him, "a simple remedy that will restore you to your earlier health": but my father kept saying his illness was severe, and he was exhausted, so he had little hope of recovery. To forestall the consequences of a sudden death he sent me to call the parish priest who gladly came to visit him. He stayed some time to help him settle affairs they had in common, because during those difficult times my father had had recourse to him for small sums, but when put together they made up a sizable debt.

"Father," my father told him "My death is not far off, and I do not know how I and my family can repay the debts we have with you. This is sacred money you lent me and it is right that it should be repaid. But..."

"Don't speak about this," the worthy priest replied, "I have already seen to everything: here are the accounts that you wanted to pay. In your presence and the presence of your entire family I will settle these and nobody is to question this any further. Furthermore

with regard to the creditor who has been so insistent with you, yesterday I gave him fifty lire, and so you no longer need to worry about this either.”

“Father,” my father interrupted him, “you have given me the greatest consolation I could have in this world! Thank you a thousand times over and may God reward you a hundredfold for the good you have done for my family and me. Now there is nothing left for me to do than to prepare my soul.”

His illness got worse. He received the comforts of our Holy Catholic Religion with the most edifying dispositions; then he called the whole family around his bed and said: “My beloved family, I can see that my illness is getting worse and I am convinced that I have but a few days of life left in me. I am resigned to Heaven’s decree, and I fully trust that my life’s labours will find some fruit in eternity. God has given me many consolations and many tribulations, but may it all be for God’s glory and the good of my soul. Meanwhile, Emilia, think earnestly of the family’s good. I can no longer help you but God will help you if you love him and practise his holy law. Our parish priest has done something wonderful for us, nor will he cease to help you in the future, therefore never depart from his prudent advice. And you, Severino, as the eldest child, never cease to give good example through your practice of virtue. Always remember that your father preferred to be reduced to poverty than betray the duties of an upright man and a good Christian. Beware of one thing that makes me fear very much for your future. This is your great eagerness to read anything, without checking whether it is good or bad. Do your best to avoid bad books and newspapers, as well as friends who try to lead you away from a virtuous life.”

“Father,” I interrupted him, crying, “you may be sure that your advice will never be forgotten.”

A few hours later he called me again, and with great effort said:

“Severino, if you can, do good to everyone, but never become a guarantor for others’ debts.”

He wanted to continue this discussion but could no longer manage it. The parish priest came to visit him several times during the day, and one evening, the last of his life, seeing that he was in immediate danger of death, he wanted to stay and watch over him all night. We were all gathered around the sick man’s bed. The parish priest was praying with us and he would occasionally suggest some brief aspiration. At midnight we saw that our father wanted to tell us something. With huge effort he pronounced these final words of his: “Pray for me at this terrible moment; tomorrow is the day of Mary’s Purification and I trust that this Mother of Mercy will help me at the judgement seat of Jesus Christ. We will not see each other again in this life, but I hope we will see each other in blessed eternity.”

While he was speaking he was holding my hands: “Courage,” he told me in a barely audible voice, “Courage, Severino, keep firm in your father’s religion until death.”

Right then he let my hands go then looked at us almost as if he were saying, “Goodbye.” He looked at the parish priest as if to thank him; he let go of the crucifix he was holding in front of him, and while we were saying the prayers for the dying, his dear soul slipped away into the bosom of the Creator.

This happened on the 2nd of February when he was 47 years old. “O my ever beloved



father, why have you abandoned me just at the time I had greatest need of you! But God has called you to enjoy what is truly good. And you haven't abandoned me because you will pray for me from Heaven so that I may exit from this abyss that I have unfortunately been cast into.

## Chapter 7. Severino speaks of games at the Oratory.

My family was really in a very sad situation but we needed to resolve something at least to provide the most necessary things for life. Some relatives took care of my younger siblings; my mother seemed to resent so many blows of adverse fortune, but began working as a seamstress which was something she had learned while growing up. And following my father's advice, I put my tools across my shoulders and set off for Turin again. Up till then I was always guided by my father's prudence, but right then I was like a young foal set loose to run and jump around heedlessly, in danger of going to ruin. The risks of the big city are serious enough for everyone, but they are a thousand times greater for naive youngsters.

The year before, my father had got me to meet a certain Felix Turivano, a charitable man who was exemplary in religion. I soon went to him to get some direction and counsel. He found an employer for me who gave me bread and work during the weekdays. But what to do about weekends? Sometimes he took me with him to Mass, Divine Office, to a sermon then left me to do what I wanted. Some of my friends invited me to gamble and play, go to cheap joints or cafes where moral ruination was pretty much inevitable for a young boy who was barely eleven years of age. One Sunday good Mr Turivano asked me, "Severino, have you never heard tell of an Oratory, or recreation park, where lots of kids go to play at weekends?"

"You said something about it last year. Indeed you promised to take me there but never did so."

"This Oratory once used to be at our church of St Francis of Assisi, but now it has gone to another part of the city."

"What do they do at this Oratory?"

"Everyone fulfils his religious duties there, and then they have pleasant recreation."

"What kind of recreation?"

"Jumping, running, *bocce* (bowls), marbles, *piastrelle* (shovel-board), stilts, singing, playing instruments, laughing, joking and a thousand other kinds of fun."

"Why have you never taken me there?," I interrupted him, full of anxiety. "How do you get there?"

"I will take you there myself next Sunday, and I will speak to the Director all those amusements and ask him to look after you especially."

The rest of the week felt like years; working, eating, even sleeping I seemed to be hearing music, seeing people jumping and playing all kinds of games.

Sunday finally came and at 8 in the morning I arrived at the long-awaited Oratory. I believe, good friends, that you would like to hear something about the things I saw there.

It was a field where today you find a pig-iron foundry; a box-thorn hedge surrounded it. There were some three hundred boys split into three groups; some were playing games; some were kneeling around the Director who was seated on a slight rise in one corner of the field hearing confessions; many, having been to confession, paused some distance away to pray.

Having got to this much-awaited place that Sunday, I was astounded. I didn't want to question anybody because I was ecstatic, like someone who had just discovered a world full of amazing new things which he wanted but had never known existed. One of the boys, seeing I was new amongst them, came up to me in a friendly sort of way: "Friend," he told me, "do you want to play shovel-board with me?"

This was my favourite game, so I very happily accepted the offer. We had just finished the game when a trumpet sounded and everyone fell silent. Everyone left his games and gathered around the Director. "My dear young friends," this man said in a loud voice, "It's time for Mass, and this morning we will hear Mass at Monte dei Cappuccini, then after Mass we will have something to eat. Those who did not have time to go to Confession today can go next Sunday: don't forget you have the chance to go to Confession every Sunday."

Having said this, he gave another blast on the trumpet and everyone set out walking in orderly fashion. One of the older boys began the Rosary and all the others joined in. It was almost three kilometres, and although I did not dare join with the others, just the same, encouraged by all this novelty I walked along some distance behind, but joining in with the prayers they said together. When we were about to start up the hill leading to the monastery they started on the Litany to Our Lady. I just loved it, because the plants, the pathways, the wood that covered the mountainside, seemed to echo our singing and made our walk truly romantic.

Mass was celebrated and some of the boys went to Communion. After a brief sermon, and after we had made sufficient thanksgiving we went into the courtyard at the monastery for some breakfast. Thinking I had no right to eat with the other boys, I drew aside waiting to walk back with them, when the Director came up to me and said:

"What is your name?"

"Severino."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't go to Confession or Communion."

"You don't need Confession or Communion to have breakfast."

"Then what do I need?"

"Nothing else but a good appetite and the desire to come and get it." And having said that he shook my hand then led me to a basket filled with bread and cherries. After midday we returned and I had lots of fun playing until evening. I wasn't able to go back to the Oratory for a month and when I went back there I saw a noticeable change. The oratory had shifted to Valdocco, right where later the church and house known as St Francis de Sales was built. This place was better suited and they could introduce the regular practices of piety, recreation, games, evening and Sunday classes.

## Chapter 8. Severino talks about a few pleasant episodes.

This is not the place to talk about the history, regulations, and the events that went with the beginnings and progress of this institution; I only intend to tell you about some of the episodes that befell me or which I was witness to.

I attended the Oratory for several months taking part in recreations, games and religious functions such as Mass, catechism classes, vespers, sermons; and when they sang psalms, hymns I took part with much gusto and sang to my heart's content. I had not yet gone to Confession.

There was no reason not to go, but having let it go for some time I no longer knew how to make the decision to go back to it. Occasionally the Director had warmly invited me and I had immediately said yes; then with one pretext or another I did my best to avoid his fatherly invitations. One day however, he found a very clever way to corner me. So listen how: one Sunday evening I was fully involved in a game which we used call *barra rotta*. I was fully intent on it and because it was hot I was in shirt sleeves. Caught up with all the fun and tension of the game, and because it was hot and the game went on I was all fired up. In the heat of the game, while I didn't know if I was in heaven or on earth, the Director called me saying:

"Severino, could you help me do something fairly urgent?"

"With great pleasure. What is it?" I said to him.

"It might cost some effort."

"That doesn't matter; I can do anything, I'm very strong."

"Put a jacket over your shirt and come with me."

The Director went ahead, and I followed him as far as the sacristy thinking there was something there I needed to carry somewhere else.

"Come with me behind the altar," the Director went on.

"I'm ready, Father."

"Kneel down here."

"Here I am, but now what?"

"You can make your Confession."

"Oh that, yes, but when?"

"Now."

"But I'm not ready now."

"I know you're not ready but I will give you all the time you need: I will say a good part of my breviary, and then after you can make your Confession."

"Since that's what you'd like I will willingly prepare myself, then I will have no more worries about finding a confessor."

I made my Confession much more easily than I thought I would have, because this kindly and expert confessor helped me wonderfully with his wise questions.

From that day, far from finding it repugnant to go to Confession I even found it a great pleasure to approach the Sacrament, and began to go much more frequently.

At that time the church, I have to say, was not a church, but one part of a very poor building. It was a low-slung storage area, very long, and our magnificent 'basilica' was accommodated beneath this roof. The floor had to be lowered by two steps worth so that you would not bump your head on the ceiling when entering. But this was where our dearest and most majestic functions took place. In one corner there was a raised area where not everyone could go up to preach. It was best suited for the well-known Fr John Borelli. He was so short that he suited it admirably and each weekend evening he would preach with much zeal and much to the satisfaction of the many boys who came to listen to him.

That year Archbishop Franzoni of Turin came to administer Confirmation in the little church. The function had just begun when the bishop went up to the altar, and according to the rite should have put on his mitre, but the roof of the church prevented him from doing so. From this Oratory we used to take really pleasant walks to Madonna di Campagna, Stupinigi, Monte dei Cappuccini, Sassi, Superga and elsewhere.

These walks happened in the following way:

If it was morning the boys all got into a group and walked along the road praying or singing songs and hymns. When they arrived at the place they did their practices of piety, then had breakfast and everyone went off to do his own thing.

Afternoon walks were more fun: for example the one we often did to the Superga. We used take two or even three boxes full of things to eat. Then there was the band which consisted of a violin, guitar, trumpet and tambourine. The boys were not lined up but bunched around the director, who amused them with some story or other. When he got tired of talking, the music started up again - the band or singing. With all the singing and clapping and shouting we made such a racket that it seemed the world was about to end. Once we had arrived at the Superga we visited the huge basilica and after a brief prayer gathered in the courtyard where the director told us the marvellous history of the Sanctuary. Then we had this stupendous snack where, given the late hour, and because of the long walk, the boys could swallow a whole roll in the blink of an eyelid. After some rest we went into the church where we took part in vespers, the sermon and Benediction. Having fulfilled our religious duties this way, we then visited various parts of this magnificent building: the gallery of Popes, the library, the tombs of Savoy's Royal family, the high cupola and suchlike. As evening approached there was a blast from the trumpet and everyone gathered around the Director. Then began the usual singing, noise and general hubbub all the way from the Superga to Turin.

As we got to the city people fell silent and got into line, then gradually as we got near where someone lived he would drop out of the line and go off home. This way, when the Director got back to the Oratory there were just a few boys left keeping him company. I have to say that one of the glories of these walks was that with so many boys quite unused to discipline of any kind, there wasn't the least disorder. No brawling, no complaining, no one stealing fruit no matter how many there were, and there could sometimes be six

or seven hundred.

At the time I thought these walks were just for sheer enjoyment, but later I learned their purpose and their advantage.

While the boys were enjoying themselves in such a good way, they were free of the risks that young working boys especially usually run on weekends, and at the same time they were fulfilling their Christian duties. It would shore up their good behaviour for the rest of the week.

The walks were such great fun for the boys, that there were few places big enough for the numbers, so instead of going out looking for more boys he had to limit the number who wanted to take part.

## Chapter 9. Severino speaks about his studies.

I had finished my primary schooling when I was twelve, but my thirst for knowledge and my craving for reading had led me to read very many books. I had not just read but devoured all the Bible histories I could find. I had studied Royamont, Soave, Secco, Farini, Calmet, Giuseppe Flavio and the Bible itself, translated by Martini. There was no better time for me than the time I could spend reading any kind of history book. Sometimes I would spend an entire night reading. But after having read the Bible histories, I went on to secular ones and newspapers too; even if they weren't exactly godless, nonetheless they were not appropriate for my age.

The Director at the Oratory kept an eye on my passionate nature and tried to correct it, giving me useful and pleasant books to read. Then when he saw the risks I was running with my craving for reading, he thought of getting me interested in drawing, arithmetic and the metric system. But I was not so interested in those kinds of studies, so he tried to direct me towards more serious studies like Latin and Italian. He would tell me that these were the languages of the learned, and if I were to succeed it would be of some advantage to me. These new studies did not satisfy my insatiable imagination; I felt myself drawn to science, but in a superficial and not a serious way. I abhorred mental effort and all the kind of learning that demanded serious and lengthy application.

That was when something fatal happened! Some of my false friends satisfied my craving by giving me books and newspapers of all kinds, after which I began to find good reading boring, then my prayers dropped off as well as my going to the Sacraments.

The Director of the Oratory had noticed this so he gave me various projects and invitations to my advantage and encouraged me to be more frequent in going to Confession. But my heart was already heading for disaster, and it no longer knew how to decide on doing the good that it loved and avoiding the evil it so much detested. What is said of Medea was also true of me: I see what is best but I choose what is worst. I could no longer put up with reproaches from the Director, so I took the worst decision of all - to leave the Oratory.

Leaving the Oratory and finding myself without money went hand in hand. When autumn came I decided to return home, where they were expecting me, because bricklayers usually spend winter back home bringing with them the results of their labours during summer. But finding myself without money I did not dare present myself to my mother whom I knew was in dire straits. Meanwhile winter was well advanced and here I was without money, food and clothing. In those moments when I was very much at risk a kindly person took me into his home.

He gave me clothes, somewhere to stay, fed me, sent me off to school until spring; and

had I followed his suggestions I would have been a happy and upright young man. But when spring came, led on by the invitation of my former friends, I shamefully abandoned my benefactor's home. Thus began a series of ills that led me to the depths of godlessness.

I spent the year working, reading and gambling, and as a result autumn came and I had nothing but debts. My creditors were pushing me, in fact threatening me; I no longer dared present myself to my usual benefactor whom I had let down so badly. So what was I to do?

Heavens above! If I had had a friend right then to give me good advice I would have been saved from disgrace and crime. There was such a friend, I well knew, but the only one who could have remedied my ills was the only one that I did not want to approach. One friend suggested gambling my way out, but that only led to increasing my misfortune. Is it possible, I was asking myself, that the Severino who was so diligent, hard-working, honourable and even well-off once upon a time, now had to die of hunger or take the dishonourable path? Was I no longer able to pull back from the abyss that I saw before me? One wretched friend, who knew the desperate state I had been reduced to, said to me:

"Severino, I have a suggestion to free you from the anguished state you find yourself in."

"What is that?"

"What I have myself done."

"What is that?"

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"To the church ... the Protestant church."

"And become a Protestant, maybe? I would rather die of hunger, no longer be your friend; I have always fought against Protestant beliefs. I am fully convinced that they are outside the way of true religion; and you want me to become a Protestant? I will go begging, die of hunger, but I will never go to that extent."

"Such fervour will pass," he said, "but just think about your miserable state, your commitments; and then you might think about it."

"Not even that. It would be a heinous thing to do, and I would be doing it consciously."

"Just you think about it: with a bit of self-deceit you can have money, honour, work, otherwise consider the future that awaits you."



## Chapter 10. Severino speaks of his plunge into Protestantism.

So, my good friends, you who are listening to this, pity the disgrace with which I stained my father's and my own honour. I resisted for a long time and felt I was ready for anything rather than giving myself over to the Protestants; but the gambling, my friends, my abject poverty had brought me to that extent.

"If you don't want to become a Protestant," my astute companion told me one day, "at least go to one of their Ministers. I will put in a good word for you and who knows but he might give you whatever you need to extricate yourself from your terrible situation?"

After a lot of reflection, and a serious struggle with conflicting emotions, I went to the Protestant Minister not for religious reasons, but to ask him for some help. I was welcomed with great courtesy, and it went as follows:

Minister. "What brings you here? Tell me, and you will find in me a true brother in Jesus Christ."

"I find myself in calamitous circumstances; some misfortunes have led me to incur debts that I cannot pay; I wanted to study literature, but I have no money. Could you help me and open the way for me to preserve my own honour and that of my family?"

"Both can be easily done, but first of all it would be essential for you to come to our church and become...."

"But I have no intention of becoming a Protestant."

"Just find out about us."

"And then?"

"And then? If you learn that the Reform professes the true faith, would you then refuse to embrace it?"

"If it is just a question of attending instructions, then I will go. Meanwhile could you help relieve me of worrying about one debt?"

"How much?"

"Eighty francs."

"Take this amount, then tomorrow go to Evangelist N. and he will give you the rest. Take courage, providence is great, trust her."

The following day I went to the person indicated and he gave me the promised sum.

I took it, paid my debt, and in the evening went back to the Minister to thank him. He was very pleased with my frankness; he had told my friend that he wanted to enlighten me so long as I attended lessons, and would stop at nothing so I could make progress in my studies. "If he studies the proper sources," he concluded, "he will certainly be a good propagandist for the Gospel."

"My heartfelt thanks, Minister," I told him, "Thank you for your kindness to me."

“Charitable works do not require thanks; we have to do things in such a way that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. Now, do you still intend to continue your studies?”

“I am very keen to.”

“If you want to apply yourself seriously to studies I will give you a letter to take with you to the Luserna Valley, and there you will be able to complete your studies easily. Note of course that I am not obliging you to become a Protestant, or a Waldensian; I just want you to study your beliefs and ours well, because I am sure that you will be convinced that only our Church professes the religion of Jesus Christ.”

“I accept your offer and am ready to leave whenever.”

“Come by in three days time and I will give you a letter to take with you. Someone else will go ahead of you to announce your arrival to the right person. But I would advise you not to discuss your plans with any priests because they will immediately start to argue with you, fill your mind with scruples, and then the Lord’s enlightenment will no longer be able to vanquish the darkness that usually clouds the minds of Catholics.”

I promised to do what he had suggested and without him talking about my going to church any more, three days later I headed off in the direction of Pinerolo. I was walking mechanically; I no longer knew if what had happened to me was a dream or real. I had given my word, and in line with my character, I would have considered it an unforgivable fault to have gone back on it. So I was heading for Luserna Valley under the appearances of doing studies, and at the same time finding out about the Catholic and the Waldensian religions.

This was disgraceful, my dear friends, because outwardly it showed that I wanted to become a Protestant: and then, going amongst Protestants, reading their books, following their teachings, putting myself in proximate danger of perversion were all mortal sins, and I believe that precisely as a punishment for these sins of mine God had allowed me to fall further and further into the abyss to the point where I began to doubt the true religion in which I had had the precious good fortune of being baptised and raised. So forgive me for the scandal given. Books, papers, gambling, greed and my friends all conspired together to lead me to ruin.

## Chapter 11. Severino speaks of leaving Turin and the death of Bl. Pavonio

Along with the letter I also had an Evangelist accompany me. Evangelists are not Ministers, but they have done some study, and after spending a good part of their life spreading Protestant books, almost as a reward for their zeal they are made Evangelists, meaning they have the task of explaining the Gospel according to their private inspiration.

For a good part of the journey we spoke only of casual things, and in fact he tried to avoid religious discussions. But when we got to Bricherasio he became much more serious. "Look here," he said. "It was in this square that our fathers showed signs of their evangelical zeal and courage."

"What was it? What happened? Tell me; it will relieve the boredom of our journey."

"There was a time," the Evangelist began, "when brute strength tried to impose its religious beliefs; this was the Pope, who amongst others sent in the Dominican, Pavonio. Our people had often advised him to keep quiet and get out while he was safe and sound but he refused to give in and they had to confront him. He boldly stated that he would never cease to preach the Catholic religion until his dying day. Because of his obstinacy he was followed and attacked in this square and torn to pieces by the infuriated mob. Many other obstinate Catholics faced the same fate."

"The Dominican priest was fighting with guns?"

"He had no guns, but he was obstinately preaching against the Waldensians."

"It would seem to me that the Waldensians should have been fighting words with words, convincing him of his errors, confusing him with argument and not killing him."

"But why did he not keep quiet after being told so many times? His obstinacy got what it deserved."

"Since we are travelling and we have time to discuss religion, I will add something. You have told me that Catholics wanted to impose their religion, but from your own words it seems that Catholics wanted to impose it through preaching, and the Waldensians instead wanted to impose theirs through violence. I also recall reading that Fr Anthony Pavonio was not killed by an enraged mob but by some foreign Waldensians sent in from elsewhere, and therefore the infamy of this event should not be laid at the feet of the people of Bricherasio but on the assassins who had taken on this wretched task, and those who invited them."

"You are still very young; little by little as you study the bandage will fall from your eyes and you will see the truth more clearly."

Let me assure you, friends, that my friend's boasting made me very sad and since later I found sure and plentiful information about the fact I can tell you literally now how it

was referred to by reliable writers.<sup>1</sup>

Bl. Anthony Pavonio was born in Savigliano, and entered the Order of Preachers at a young age. With Peter Valdo's heresy spreading around the provinces of Pinerolo, the Bishop of Turin sent Bl. Pavonio to Bricherasio to preach against these dominant errors. The heretics soon wanted to argue with him, but they were left in disarray and decided on more nefarious means to get rid of him, meaning they wanted him murdered.

It was Easter 1374 when the heretics, seeing the crowds of people abandoning their errors to follow Blessed Pavonio, resolved to carry out their dastardly deed. It would seem that he had some inkling of this, because when Easter week was over, while he was having a shave, he told the barber:

"Do the job well, because I have been invited to the wedding feast." The barber replied: "I have not heard of any kind of wedding feast in these parts."

"Have no doubt," the priest concluded, "I am telling you the truth. I am invited to the wedding feast." The feast he was talking about became obvious a few days later.

On 9 April, the Sunday after Easter, at 9 in the morning Fr Antonio celebrated Mass in the parish church at Bricherasio after giving a fervent sermon. As he came out of the church into the public square he was attacked by seven hired assassins who savagely killed him, raining blows on him without him offering the least resistance. So he went to the wedding feast of the Lamb carrying the palm of martyrdom.<sup>2</sup>

The veneration of the faithful at the Martyr's tomb continued until 1854 when his cult was solemnly approved by the Church and Bl. Anthony was listed amongst the Martyrs and Confessors for the Faith. This fact increased my doubts on Protestant claims but my position was such that I could not separate myself from them without at least having done some of the study on the reasons for the credibility of their religion.

---

<sup>1</sup>Concerning the life and martyrdom of Bl. Pavonio, we have authentic information from the following documents: the Acts of his Canonisation published in Rome in 1856. Canon Giacinto Gallizia three volumes published in 1759. Fr Enschenio, *acta Sanctorum* Vol 1 page 857 and following. Also see the Bollandists and constant tradition.

<sup>2</sup>Fortunately the emissaries of that terrible deed were not from Bricherasio; history has recorded the names so that those responsible may be publicly cursed. Their names were Giovanni Gabrelli, Giacomo Marmitta, Francesco, Giacomo, Antonio all of the Tarditi family, Giovanni and Pietro had Buriasco as their surname. The badly mutilated body of the Saint was piously collected and taken to his monastery at Savigliano. People visited his grave in large numbers and because of the many miracles worked, he was relocated to a more worthy resting place. When religious orders were suppressed at the beginning of this century, the Dominican Prior entrusted the relics of the Blessed Pavonio to the Counts of Viacino who kept them until 1854, when they were relocated in the church of the Annunciation in Racconigi.

## Chapter 12. Severino speaks of his studies on the origins of the Waldensians.

When I arrived in the Luserna Valley I was made welcome with so much kindness. “Severino,” one of the Waldensian pastors said to me, “thank God that He has enlightened you, for you will find true friends here amongst us. Your mind will certainly have absorbed many Roman prejudices but you will see that these will vanish over time.”

“That’s true,” I replied, “my thinking has absorbed prejudices; amongst other things the origins of the Waldensians, which we say amongst ourselves is quite obscure. Until today we say that the foundation of the Waldensian Church is totally due to Peter Valdo and I have been assured a thousand times that nobody spoke of Waldensians before him.”

“This is one of the Catholic calumnies; take this book and read it carefully. Compare it with the Bible and you will find that our belief is a Gospel one, starting from the Apostles and coming down to us.”

The Waldensian Pastor gave me a huge book entitled *THE WALDENSIANS, OR THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH*, by Amedeo Bert, Waldensian Minister. In fact the author attempts to tell the origins of the Waldensians and makes them direct disciples of St Paul’s. I knew I was reading a bad book, and that because of my lack of studies I would not be able to discern true from false in its contents; but despite feelings of remorse I took it and read it from beginning to end several times.

The book really caused me consternation because it was based on reliable Catholic authors. By good fortune Providence came to my aid in the following way.

My Pastor took me one day to visit Catholic schools in a nearby town and since he was caught up in other matters, it gave me time to talk with the parish priest in that place.

“Father,” I asked him straight away, “what do Catholics say about the book by Amedeo Bert, *THE WALDENSIANS* etc. ?”

“My dear young man,” he replied, “check the sources it draws its information from and then you will see for yourself what judgement to pass on its author; you will have no further need of others for rebuttal” .

“But where can I find the works by the authors quoted in it?”

“Come to my place and I will willingly let you see them.”

I thanked him and since I had some hours completely free that day, I was able to check what I had read in the book given me by the Waldensian Pastor and offered as a second Gospel.

And of course I can assure you that I was amazed at the inaccuracies and falsifications I discovered. Amedeo Bert quotes a certain Policdorfius to back up his story, a famous professor of theology, and has him say: *Three hundred years after Constantine the Great*

*there came a man from Valdis who preached poverty and propagated the Waldensian sect.*

Now listen to the actual text by the author he quoted: *Eight hundred years after St Silvester, at the time of Pope Innocent II, a certain Peter Valdo was reading or listening to someone else reading the Holy Scriptures, and thought about renewing apostolic life.*

As anyone can see, names, years and facts are being attributed to an author who had never imagined such.

He then quotes another author called Marcus Aurelius Rorengo, the Prior at Luserna, who he says calls the Waldensians 'Apostolic', then introduces him thus: *The precise era in which the Waldensians began cannot be firmly established; in the ninth and tenth centuries it was not a new sect; it always existed in the Valley of Angrogna.*

I wanted to consult the text by this writer, who far from calling the Waldensians Apostolic, or descendants of or existing since the time of the Apostles, assures us that they began to appear on the scene in 1160.

So it is completely false to have Prior Rorengo saying that we still did not know the origins of the Waldensian sect with any certainty when he clearly says: *The Waldensians, to show they were ancient, declared themselves descendents of Valdo who began to form his new teachings in 1160.*

Amedeo Bert also has the Prior say that in the ninth and tenth centuries the Waldensians were not a new sect; but he takes no notice of the fact that the writer here is speaking of the Iconoclasts or other heretics, with no mention of Waldensians.

Amedeo Bert puts words into the quoted author's mouth: *They always existed in the Valley of Angrogna.*

I also wanted to check this passage in its original, and I noted that after having hinted at the appearance of Peter Valdo in 1160 he continues thus: *Some presume that some Waldensians, or the Poor of Lyon who had been expelled from the city, had since this time (1160) been spread out along the Valley of Angrogna, but I believe that this is only the view held in the Dauphiné region'. Bert then makes use of Claudio Seyssel as an authority.<sup>3</sup>*

In a book called DISPUTATION, focused on Waldensian errors, Bert has him say: *According to the view of most they draw their origins from a certain Leo, a very religious person in the time of Constantine the Great.*

I assure you, dear friends, that this prelate says something quite the opposite. He begins the history of the Waldensians with Peter Valdo, and then continues thus: *Nevertheless some who wanted to defend this heresy, to win over the view of the ordinary people who know nothing of history, say (fabulantur) that the sect came from a certain Leo who was alive in Constantine's time.* What could be more false than this?

---

<sup>3</sup>Claudio di Seyssel is from a famous Savoyan family. He was a most learned jurist, as demonstrated by the many books on jurisprudence and ancient history he published. He was legal secretary and advisor to Louis XII of France he was sent by the King as a Legate to the Lateran Council; earlier he had been Bishop of Marseilles and then Archbishop of Turin. Before being elected Bishop he had studied Law *summa cum laude*; he is buried in the sacristy of the metropolitan church, honoured by a statue with the following epitaph on his marble tomb: To Claudio Seyssel Legal Secretary of King Louis XII of France, eloquent orator, ambassador in nearly all principates, and Bishop of Marseilles, Archbishop of Turin, excellent Legal Counsel: the college of canons has erected this monument to him as their beloved father. Died on the Calends (first) of June 1520.

As you can see, my friends, this passage by the Archbishop of Turin has been totally falsified by putting words in the writer's mouth and saying what he said was a mere fable was something certain. Although I was overcome by impatience at this point, I still wanted to take a calm look at some other authors quoted by Bert, but I found the same bad faith everywhere I looked. What most convinced me of the meanness of Waldensian history was that in general most writers had followed the very same fables produced by minister Bert to prove their antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

After having read all this I reasoned this way. Either these ministers are really very ignorant, or they are writing in bad faith. In either case they should not be given credence, especially in things of great importance like matters regarding eternal salvation. If these who are considered the most learned amongst the Waldensians are spreading such fables, then what about the ordinary lower and poorer populace?

Having told you the errors about the origins of the Waldensians, I hope you now know the true story of this sect as handed down to us by recent or fairly recent authors.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Leger, Peyran, Muston, and other well-known Waldensian Protestant writers have more or less the same falsifications.

<sup>5</sup>On this topic you can consult the commendable work by Archbishop Charvaz of Genoa, entitled: HISTORICAL RESEARCH INTO THE TRUE ORIGINS OF THE WALDENSANS, AND THEIR EARLY TEACHINGS.

## Chapter 13. Severino speaks of the Luserna Valley and the true origins of the Waldensians.

Let me begin then to give you a brief account of the Luserna Valley so you can better understand the true story of the Waldensians who set themselves up here.

By *Lucerna* or *Luserna* we mean an ancient and very famous town at the foot of the Alps, six miles from Pinerolo and twenty four from Turin.

If you like, Luserna comes from the German word *Lučke* which means an exit, or opening, and Luserna is found right at the opening into a valley from which it takes its name, which runs from the Piedmont plains to the Dauphiné region in France. In ancient times Luserna was a forum, a Roman meeting point, and because of the transport or deposits of Italian merchandise to France and French merchandise to Italy, it was of great military importance. The Luserna Valley has well-cultivated hills and plains; it has lots of small towns like Angrogna, Perosa, S. Martino, Torre Pellice and many other more or less well-known names. This valley and the towns bordering it are mostly inhabited by Waldensians who hark back to Peter Valdo, a rich French merchant from Lyon. They had been Catholics from primitive times. One of his friends who had been angry, began blaspheming, and adding perjury to his blasphemy, suddenly dropped dead. At such a terrible fact, evidently Heaven taking revenge, Valdo was terrified, and resolved to leave all his possessions behind to live a life of poverty, penance and put into practice what the Divine Saviour had said to the young man: *If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you possess, give it to the poor and follow me.* This happened in the twelfth century, towards 1160.

Up to this point there would be no reason to reproach Valdo. But the error occurred when he had the audacity to declare himself a preacher and said he was an apostle sent by God to preach poverty and condemn possession of wealth as a mortal sin, even when it was acquired legitimately.

Valdo had not done much study and so it became very difficult for him to get his new teaching accepted. Understanding nothing of Latin he thought about translating and explaining the Gospel in the vernacular using some sentences from the Fathers. This is where the crazy idea comes from of the Waldensians having the Bible and the liturgy in the vernacular. Valdo learned some of these writings off by heart then began preaching in the squares, cities and villages.

Ignorant men and women became preachers, but error and scandal followed wherever they went. When news of these disturbances reached John Bolismano, Archbishop of Lyon, he exhorted Peter and his followers to cease this silly enterprise. But their ignorance



became pride and they answered the Archbishop with insults and insolence. The worthy prelate did not lose courage and did everything that prudence and charity would suggest in such serious moments. He began by advising Valdo in private, then he publicly rejected his teaching, and finally had Valdo, his followers and their teachings formally condemned. Far from any retractions Valdo instead appealed to Pope Lucius III.

He had the teaching carefully studied, and found it so contrary to the Gospel and the Church that he confirmed the condemnation proclaimed by the Archbishop of Lyon and invited Valdo and his followers to abandon this new teaching. It was then that Valdo took off his mask and threw aside the yoke of all authority, refusing to obey the Supreme Pontiff himself. He was then condemned and excommunicated as a rebel and someone who stood in the way of the Church. This happened in 1185.

When these enemies of the faith appeared, many learned men fought against them through their writings. The most ancient writer to speak of the Waldensians was the Abbot of Fontecaldo, a contemporary of Peter Valdo's. He wrote a treatise against the Waldensians where amongst other things he said: *While Lucius III was governing the Church the Waldensians arose, new heretics who were then condemned by the Pope at a Council held at Verona in 1185.*

The words of Stephen Bellavilla, a Dominican and also contemporary of Peter Valdo's will serve as more complete information on the origins of the Waldensians.

Here are his words: 'The Waldensians were called after Pietro Valdo the one who originated their heresy. They are also known as the Poor of Lyon, because that is where they began professing poverty. They called themselves the poor in spirit, because the Lord says: Blessed are the poor in spirit. And indeed they are - they are poor in every spiritual good, all grace of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>It seems that the early Waldensian writers did not agree on fixing a date for the origins because some say 1160, others 1170, others still 1182 or 1185. The reason for these variations is that some writers speak of Waldensians from when Valdo began propounding his teachings and that was in 1160; others begin Valdo's story from the time he began visiting the villages and towns with his band of people in 1170; others then speak of the heretics from when they were condemned in 1180 and 1185.

## Chapter 14. Severino talks about how the Waldensians spread and how they joined the Protestants.

Following their condemnation by the Holy See some Waldensians returned to the Catholic Religion from which they had so recklessly separated. But most remained rebels and against the Church. The civil authorities expelled them from Lyon as heretics and disturbers of the peace.

Some then went to Provence and southern France: others became wandering foreigners looking for shelter, so they crossed the Alps and spread out through the valleys of Pinerolo and especially in Luserna Valley and the nearby mountains. That happened in 1220.

They settled amongst the inhabitants of the mountain regions, most of whom were poorly instructed in religion. The Waldensians hoped they could easily spread their false teachings amongst people of this kind. In fact their Ministers, called *Barbi*, from where we get *Barbetti*<sup>7</sup> as a way of describing all Waldensians, did everything they could to deceive these good people: but after much turmoil occasioned at gunpoint, amongst which the assassination of Bl. Anthony Pavonio, they were reined in forcibly by the governing authorities.

The Princes of the House of Savoy, seeing that the heretics seemed to be living in peace and were no longer mixing in political affairs, let them be on condition that they did not leave the areas assigned to them; so the Waldensians were left alone, almost unobserved, for three centuries. Over this time, since they had no church they seemed to be more Catholic than anything else, and did not even refuse to go to Catholic priests. They practised the teachings and most of the customs. Over that long period of time and with no one to stir up their errors, the Waldensians had lost their ancient fervour, and in general had fallen into crass ignorance of their own religion; perhaps they would have been totally reconverted to Catholicism if they had not associated with other enemies of the Faith. These were the Protestants, or the followers of Luther and Calvin which we will soon have occasion to speak of.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>It is thought they were known as the *Barbetti* from the beard their early ministers always wore; other believe they were called this from the Provençal word *Barbs*, *Barba* or Uncle, since their teachers were called uncles or fathers.

<sup>8</sup>We usually give the name *Protestant* to those who rebel against the Catholic Religion and create a schism; they protest against the infallible teachings of the Holy Roman and Apostolic See. The name is commonly and especially given to the heretics Luther and Calvin. Emperor Charles V, seeing how Germany was affected by the growing Lutheran heresy set up a Diet or assembly in Worms in February 1529, under the supervision of King Ferdinand, in order to bring together elements of religious discord that were increasing by the hour. Amongst other things the Diet proposed that the

Around 1536 the Calvinists, who had taken their stance in Geneva, sought to increase the number of followers and seeing the advantage they would gain from joining with a more ancient sect than themselves they went to the Luserna Valley to persuade the Waldensians to embrace Calvin's teaching. Believing they could regain the glory of their name and find protectors for their beliefs, the Waldensians welcomed the Calvinists as friends.

So having forgotten Valdo's teachings they began to profess those of Calvin, and from then on the Waldensians became one with the Calvinists and decided to send the young men destined to become ministers or *Barbi* to Geneva so they could imbibe the principles of the Protestant heresy.

It is worth noting here that the *Barbetti*, since they became Calvinists, then became even more hostile to Catholicism and insubordinate to civil authority against whom they often rebelled. So to restrain them they were confined to determined towns in these valleys.

---

innovators abstain from preaching in public against the Sacrament of the altar, not abolish the Mass etc. Lutheran Princes declared a protest against this more than moderate proposal and from that point on were called Protestants.

## Chapter 15. Severino speaks of changes to Waldensian teaching.

At the beginning, much of Waldensian teaching was that of the Catholic Church.

Only as time progressed did they add new and more serious errors. Firstly, Peter Valdo, frightened by the sad event that had happened to his friend, condemned oath-taking, even if done under the correct conditions, and taught that every oath is a sin.

Secondly he said that the poverty of the early faithful, who owned nothing of their own and sold their possessions to give money to the poor, was essential for salvation. Because voluntary poverty can be an effective means of obtaining the glories of Heaven, it is something the Gospel teaches; but to say that Jesus Christ commanded it is an error, because Jesus Christ did not condemn riches but only prohibited acquiring them illicitly and using them badly; he advises voluntary poverty but does not demand it.

Thirdly he condemned offerings, suffrages for the dead.

Fourthly he said that the civil powers have no right to punish evil-doers by death. He had something to gain from this teaching because he had much to fear from civilian authorities due to his own wretched behaviour.

Valdo did not stop at these errors, and when the Church commanded him to cease from his silly preaching he added further errors by teaching that there was no need to obey ecclesiastical authorities. But while Valdo was refusing to submit to ecclesiastical authority, he attributed priestly powers to himself and his followers, administering the Sacraments, celebrating Mass, hearing his followers' confessions and giving them absolution and similar.

This was Waldensian teaching for around three hundred years. But they later modified it and indeed changed it almost entirely when they joined the Calvinists.

So they began believing that ministers of religion could possess goods without damning themselves, they admitted that oath-taking was no longer sinful, and that evil-doers could be punished by death. Calvinists allowed them to continue not praying for the dead, and no longer fasting for prescribed periods, but they forced them to abolish the Sacrifice of the Mass and all the Sacraments except Baptism. Instead of the divine Eucharist they imposed a sterile commemoration of Jesus Christ's last Supper, reduced to showing and then eating a piece of bread and a few drops of wine. And the Calvinists obliged the Waldensians to believe that to be saved, faith without works was sufficient, and to profess the horrible blasphemy that man is no longer free but that it is God himself who constrains him to do good or evil. They also adopted the general Protestant principle that any man enlightened by the Holy Spirit can understand the Holy Scriptures of his own accord and no longer needs other spiritual authority in order to know what are his duties and how he should behave. This way the Waldensians abandoned their less

perverse teachings to embrace much worse ones. They took on errors which before they had neither professed nor known. with these constant variations, additions, denials of the most important points of religion, the Waldensians became even more separated from the true Church which remains always the same and always has the same Teacher, as St Paul says: *Christus heri et hodie*.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Anyone who wants to find more on this subject should read the learned work of the erudite Archbishop Andrea Charvaz with the title: GUIDA DEL CATECUMENO VALDESE, three books.

There are about twenty five thousand Waldensians and they practise their Calvinist cult in the villages of Angrogna, S. Martino, Perosa, S. Giovanni, Torre Pellice, and other places. They have fifteen churches, each with a Pastor or Minister on a stipend paid by the inhabitants. All these churches come under a Synod made up of practising Pastors, Pastors who have resigned their post in the valleys, lay representatives. Also part of this Synod was the so-called *Tavola* or Table, a judiciary made up of three ecclesiastics and two elected lay people. One of these is called the Moderator of the valley which holds the presidency, under which is added another moderator and a secretary.

The Table functions in the interval between one Synod and the next. These Synods are held ordinarily every five years, and rotate between Luserna Valley and S. Martino della Perosa. Before the Synods finish the new Table is elected, and over the five years it keeps an eye on discipline in the churches, sees to needs, keeps up correspondence within and beyond the valleys, decides in matters of controversy, and distributes alms in the churches. The Moderator and his aid call the Table together as needed through a circular letter, and the Table, when it has the chance, also proposes an extraordinary Synod of churches, and if they agree to join it then turns to the government for authorisation to hold it. The Moderator visits the churches every five years or more often according to need. He removes pastors if there are just complaints against them, and then they can appeal to the Synod if they feel there is cause. The Moderator can retire Pastors with a pension paid by the town and other Pastors. When a new Synod opens the Table is dissolved. Each church also has a pastoral consistory made up of elders, a deacon or bursar and procurator. The pastor presides over it. The consistory keeps an eye on spiritual and temporal administration of the church, and the smooth running of the schools. It should take care of the poor in the district and present a yearly account of everything to the administrators. If some problem arises, its task is to make a report to the Table about it.

## Chapter 16. Severino speaks of some curious episodes in Waldensian teaching.

What made me recognise Waldensianism as a phantom religion were the contradictions I noticed in their current beliefs. I will explain some of the ones I witnessed.

They separated from the Catholic Church, refusing to obey the head established by Jesus Christ, someone always venerated and obeyed by all Catholics beginning with St Peter down to the reigning Pius IX, and meanwhile they set up evangelists, pastors, ministers, tables and synods, moderators, all things the Bible never mentions, nor does the early history of the Reform.

The Waldensians accuse Catholic priests of being paid for their ministry; meanwhile their ministers or pastors have stipends which are eight or ten times greater than those for Catholic priests, and nor do they move a finger, we could say, without being paid for it. 'Your priests' they tell Catholics 'do not give alms'; but I observed that if the ministers, pastors, evangelists give alms it is always money belonging to others; they give away what they collect from simple folk, and then try to persuade them that since it is such a good religion, they are giving money sent to them from England. Of that money there is always some of it that sticks to the fingers of those who are distributing it!

And for my part I would say that it is a lie to say that Catholic priests give nothing. I have known hundreds who have goods and their life for their neighbour's benefit. And if I did not remain a victim of misfortune I owe it to a Catholic priest who took me in and gave me what I needed to live, be clothed, fed and educated for many years. and hasn't the parish priest of our village always been the support of our family? What I say of my parish priest must be true of a thousand others. These priests give away what is theirs, they give money they could spend on themselves without needing to give account to anyone else.

Besides, the most serious work of the Protestant pastor and minister consists in the sermon he gives on Sundays; the rest of the week is really just passing time for them. That's not the case for Catholic priests; they hear confessions at weekends, preach, teach catechism, sing vespers, and during the week they are similarly occupied. I know priests who sometimes spend eight, twelve or even fifteen hours a day in the confessional; on certain days they preach four or five times, and all this is done for free and without the least obligation in terms of their duties, but out of the charity that burns in their hearts and urges them to such sacrifices. Let Protestants give careful consideration to these facts and then say whether the Catholic religion or the so-called Reform ought be called the golden religion.

Protestants cry out against confession and meanwhile condemn those who sin, they name them in public meetings, as well as the evil they have committed and the penance

that is imposed. They want only the Bible as their rule of faith, and they rail against Catholics who want it explained through texts or notes from the Fathers, while meanwhile they pretend to explain it arbitrarily and woe to anyone who does not accept their explanations! They cry out against Catholics saying that their Councils, Synods, Bishops and Popes are like a scourge forcing everyone to bend to their beliefs. Meanwhile the Protestants have their synods, ministers, pastors, moderators, evangelists who, contrary to their own teachings, discuss and decide on controversies as they see fit, condemning whoever does not give in; they relieve those in office, vary, add, take away whatever is said in their catechisms.

So tell me in good grace all you Protestants - who made you the teachers of religion? You should only be giving the Bible to your disciples without preaching or speaking or explaining since you say that the Bible alone is the rule of faith and behaviour. You go around extolling the use and reading of the Bible, and then contradict this by your deeds because in the liturgy and prayer books, and in the catechisms you have there are a thousand sentences and ideas and prayers none of which in fact can be found in the Holy Bible.

One day I was surprised while I was reading a devotional book that I had always had with me since I was a child. They forcibly took it off me, saying that the book was full of nonsense against the Bible. I was upset and I told them: "You have taken a book from me that you say contains prayers not drawn from the Bible, so meanwhile why are you trying to teach a catechism that cannot be found in the Bible? Are all those prayers in your catechism taken from the Bible? So you either allow Catholic books or if you want to reject them, then you also have to reject your own."<sup>10</sup>

"Our prayers" they answered, "are all thoughts from the Bible; but that is not the case with Catholic books."

"That's what you say," I added, "but Catholics say that their books are also thoughts taken from the Bible which are in agreement with what has been revealed there. But you contradict your words by your deeds, because in your books I find prayers that must be said before and after communion, but are they to be found in the Bible?"

The contradictions were even more obvious when I went to hear one or other of the Pastors' Sunday sermons. Here I witnessed a real Babylon.

Every pastor explains things as he likes and in his own way; one often speaks against the other; it happened to me more than once on the same morning that I heard one pastor teaching that in the Holy Eucharist there was the Body of Jesus Christ and then I'd hear another saying that it was a simple commemoration of the passion and death of the Saviour, or one saying it contained the body of the Saviour while another was saying that Jesus Christ was only there in the Eucharist in transitory fashion, meaning at the moment of consecration.

One day two pastors were preaching from the same pulpit; one was saying that good works were necessary to be saved, drawing his words from the Bible : *Fides sine operibus mortua est*, faith without good works is dead; the other was emphatically asserting that faith alone was sufficient, but this one was living a godless and wicked life. So I was

---

<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Catéchisme de l'église évangélique Validoise, publié par Ordre du Synode 1859.*

convinced that every Pastor, every Minister has his own religion, every Father follows his own beliefs and every member of the same family follows the religion that pleases him best.

In this confusion of opinions and ideas I thought of going to one of the pastors to get certain difficulties sorted out. If we were ever allowed to laugh about serious matters I can assure you that here we have something to really laugh about. Listen. One day I asked to speak to a pastor who told me he was occupied with something that he could not easily leave aside, but I could explain my question to his wife who could then pass it on to him at a better time. On another occasion I succeeded in speaking with the pastor, but in the presence of the maid and the wife surrounded by kids yelling, laughing and crying. They made as much noise as a Carnival. Imagine If I'd dared to hold confidential discussions in the midst of such a respectable audience!

The best case of all is what happened to me one Sunday evening. As evening came I went to the pastor to ask him for some clarifications on his sermon. I knocked once or twice on the door, and a handsome young lad of about twelve years of age opened it. "Come in," he told me excitedly, "come quickly before my mother kills my father." Having entered the home I saw this woman of almost herculean strength raging against the pastor, her husband, who having spent a lot of money in revelry had returned home that evening more drunk than usual. She had grabbed him by the tie around his neck and was hitting and punching him repeatedly, then yelling at him she threw him to the floor, then began kicking him and hitting him all over with a stick.

While the poor pastor was begging for mercy from the infuriated woman, all his children were sobbing and asking their mother not to kill their poor father.

Given my unexpected arrival and hearing my keen reproaches she calmed down, and I was able to pick up the poor distraught man from the floor. Just the right moment to begin a moral or religious discussion!

Amidst so many contradiction on the origins and beliefs of the Reformers, I was able to find just one point on which they all agreed: fighting the Catholic Church. It didn't matter if you were a Jew, a Turk, a Lutheran, Calvinist or other: just so long as you were not a Catholic you could be regarded as a gentleman. But if by chance there was even a hint that you might become a Catholic, then you are an idiot, crazy, and the only way of recovering from your stupidity is to renounce all ideas of becoming a Catholic.

No one could imagine the nonsense they invent about Catholics to ridicule and discredit them. Ignorance, bad faith, greed and similar vices, according to them, are qualities of every Catholic.

For example they preach that Catholics are idolaters, falsely accusing them of adoring images and relics of the Saints and other holy things. One day I was with some pastors and one of the began saying: "I believe, Severino, that you must be very happy now that you are finally far away from the idolatry of the Roman Church."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that with us you are no longer obliged to adore images and relics." And here he had some most disparaging things to say about some of the most venerated things of religion.

"Pastor," I said, quite upset, "I was with Catholics for many years, and very much



involved in their religion, but I never heard anyone preach, not even hint at something against God, the creator of heaven and earth.”

“If you’ve never heard something then good for you, but Catholic books are full of these abominable idolatries.”

“Excuse me but in any of the Catholic books I have read I have never read what you are saying.”

“Also their catechisms...”

“I have read and studied their catechisms for fifteen years; I have never found the sorts of things you are saying.”

“If these things were not taught would you believe we would be saying them, printing them and preaching about them everywhere?”

“That is no argument in my view; show me one Catholic book that says you have to adore the saints, images, relics, and then...”

While we were discussing this, one of them ran to get the Bellarmine catechism, one by Cardinal Costa, another by Borglioni and other theologians.

They looked through them and checked as much as they wanted to, but they were left in confusion when they could not find a single point that expressed what they were saying. To the contrary those authors were in perfect agreement in the use of words like *devotion, veneration, respect* with which Catholics usually express the cult of the saints, images and relics, since they all know the Church’s teaching is that the saints deserve honour as benefactors of humanity and models of Christian life, as friends of God and our kindly protectors with him in Heaven.

The pastors who had been laughing at me were considerably mortified by this event. “You are young,” they told me, “so you can be pitied; the bandage has not yet fully come off your eyes. As you make progress in your studies, you will be consoled by true beliefs.”

And with such flattering conviction they resolved finally to send me for higher studies in Geneva.

## Chapter 17. Severino tells of his departure for Geneva and his arrival on the Gran S. Bernardo.

In the years I stayed in Luserna Valley, and while I was learning their religion, I had not forgotten my other studies and was able to pass the exam to teach high school. I was a teacher there for three years. My position was very delicate since I was not trusted by the Waldensians and in order to live in peace with them I always had to keep my real intentions hidden. At school I never taught things that went in favour of the Waldensians, nor did I utter a syllable against my former religion. I let the students study the prescribed books, but in religious matters I did not speak for or against the Waldensians. It is true that in any argument I was always against them, but they still showed that they were happy with my frankness and openness. Over time, and with study, they said, Severino will become a good believer. So my superiors, to reward me for my concerns, or as they said, to improve me in learning and religion, judged that it would be good to send me to Geneva where those who wanted to become Evangelists, Pastors or Ministers would usually go. But of course I had other plans in mind. At my departure they gave me a companion who also had to go to that city, and to make our trip more interesting we thought of taking the Aosta road and going over the Gran S. Bernardo. When we got to Aosta we stopped there for a day to visit the most interesting things in the town; and while we were satisfying our curiosity, it was around eleven in the morning, there was this marvellous and unexpected tolling of bells.

“What is that?” we asked our guide.

“That,” he answered, “is the midday bell.”

“But it’s only eleven in the morning.”

“Here midday is rung at eleven o’clock.”

“Why this strange specialty?”

“It is to remind us of a most glorious event. Once upon a time there was this arch heretic called Calvin, who wanted us to accept his errors. Our forefathers, who not only were and wanted to remain Catholics, but also wanted to hand on their religion since it was the only true one, bravely and energetically opposed the godless rebel. Except that this preacher of Satan, standing boldly against them, got some idlers to use violence and force our ancestors to adopt his errors. At these threats the people stirred and rang the bells to call people to help repel the common enemy. With God’s help they succeeded; so they chased out Calvin and his mercenaries, and most of them foreigners. It was eleven in the morning when that happened, so in commemoration of this happy event we have always since then rung the midday bells at eleven o’clock.”

My friend was most unhappy at hearing these words but I was secretly happy, and was content just to give a smile of complacency. We made one more tour around the town then directed our steps towards the peak of Gran S. Bernardo, where we had planned to reach. The ancients used call this Alpine crest *Mons Iovis*, or the mountain consecrated to Jove.

It was towards sunset when we found ourselves faced with that marvellous and surprisingly tall mountain. After a fair walk we reached a spot called San Remigio, a little village surrounded by thick ancient forest that gradually thinned out as we climbed the mountain. These trees are very helpful in saving the town from the ruinous spring avalanches. From here until the Gran S. Bernardo hospice we had to climb a further seven kilometres up a steep winding path strewn with debris and with overhanging cliffs.

These are the final traces of a grand road that had been opened through there by the ancient Romans. The more we climbed, the more we became aware of the more rigid climate and the trees were becoming rarer and smaller, until finally there was no vegetation at all. Only some grass on some of the mountain flanks indicated that it was summer, that disappears here almost as soon as it begins. Snow had already begun to fall and was sprinkled on the arid rocks hanging from mountain gorges.

We finally reached the famous plain which the ancients called *Summo Pennino*, which they named so because it was here that they made sacrifices to the god Penn.

The plain forms a high and very long valley enclosed by high cliffs glistening in eternal snow. It was then and because of the sheer effort of our climb and our insufficient clothing that we felt a keen chill through all our body; we had to open our bags and put on a second layer of clothing.

Looking across that exceptional plain, we were very surprised to find, almost in the centre, a very deep lake.

This is what gives rise to a small stream that runs down the south of the mountain and joins another called the Bautia or Bauteggio, and from there becomes known as the Dora Baltea, the river that after many torturous windings finally empties its waters into the Po near Crescentino.

On the banks of the lake, at the foot of a high cliff is the famous monastery or Hospice of St Bernard.

The origins of this marvellous building go back to very ancient times. From the books that the monks there lent me I was able to find out that it already existed in the eighth century.

It was very much in decline in the tenth century when Bernard, from the illustrious family of Menthon, came to restore it or rather to rebuild it from its foundations. This extraordinary man who already as a layman had practised all Christian virtues in an exemplary way, was the archdeacon at the cathedral in Aosta. Deeply moved by the ignorance of the people who lived in these high mountains and even more so by the misfortunes that often befell travellers crossing the mountains, he was urged on by charity that only looks to doing good and does not calculate the difficulties or the risks. He decided to dedicate his life and everything he had to educating the people. He fought the pagan superstitions and idolatry still reigning there; he pulled down the statue of Jove, and in its place erected a church to the true God. Then to provide shelter against the

disasters that travellers were exposed to every day, he built the Hospice that still bears his name today.

He put down the foundations in 972, and soon had the marvellous building erected that has kept the heroism of Christian charity alive for nine centuries. The monks there are called Canons, and they are from the Augustinian Order. Their duty is to put up people for free and help those who are travelling through, often putting their own lives at risk to save the lives of others.

## Chapter 18. Severino speaks of some incidents on the Gran S. Bernardo.

I was very anxious to look around and see the all the details of this special high plain that might be the highest spot on earth that has been consistently inhabited by human beings, when one of the monks hurried towards us warning us to come quickly with him to the Hospice. "Perspiration," he told us, "can be fatal because of the sudden change in temperatures." We accepted his courteous invitation and followed him into the building. We passed quickly through the ground floor where there was the church, refectory, kitchens and large rooms where the ordinary people stayed, and we climbed to an upper floor where the religious were and a few rooms for the better-off travellers. Struck by the exquisite cordiality we were led into a warm room where we were given something to eat; we were hungry and the food satisfied us, seeming to us to be very tasty. After this we visited the rest of the locale and amongst other things we were happy to find in such an almost uninhabited place a precious choice of books, Italian and French newspapers, and a stupendous piano. I love music so much so I ran to the instrument to see how good it was and I found it to be in excellent condition. As soon as I began playing, monks and strangers came in and began to sing; it became a harmonious concert and it all made for a very pleasant evening. A bell rang at ten and that indicated the time for silence and rest.

One monk said in a loud voice: "Each one can say his prayers and go to the cell assigned to him - and may you all have a good night." We were very happy to head off to bed. And just as our appetite had improved the quality of our supper, so our tiredness meant we immediately fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning one of the canons took us for a walk a short distance from the monastery. Just around there there were no trees or shrubs not even a blade of grass to cheer the traveller; only amongst the crags could we see a few mountain herbs like lichens and gentian.

"What do you do?" I asked the good monk.

"We practise charity to our neighbour and most of all to strangers, and we go looking for people who have fallen into danger to save them or at least to offer them the comforts of religion."

"Do you often find people in such danger?"

"It happens very often. When the wind is raging furiously and covers the tracks with snow, or huge masses of ice fall free from the mountain, then woe to the traveller who is caught by surprise! He could be buried under snow sometimes to a fearful depth."

"Whatever can you do in such accidents that is useful?"

"When these storms strike, or strong winds cover over or make the track indistinguish-

able, as soon as there is a moment of calm we wrap ourselves up in some skins and with a flask of strong liquor and a pickaxe in our hands we head for the most dangerous passes to see if some unfortunate traveller has been covered up.

Certainly alone we could not do great things, but Divine Providence has seen that these dogs - you can see them - come to help us." "Look at them," and he pointed out two of them to me. "These dogs have been taught how to follow the footsteps of lost travellers, and led by their fine sense of smell they run ahead of us and make a path with their bodies; they can tackle rain, ice, snow. We follow them, not without risks, and run along those tracks, and often we succeed in pulling people out of the jaws of death where they have been carried by avalanches."

I was deeply moved by this story and exclaimed: "Blessed is the religion that carries out such marvellous works of charity!"

"Come here," the hospitaller went on kindly, "So you can feel part of this story I will tell you about an accident that happened here not long ago. Do you see this large carcass? It belonged to one of our most faithful dogs. Barrì is what we called him; he helped us save many a poor unfortunate.

When the wind was raging long and violently, it was impossible for us to leave the house without being buried alive or dragged into a crevice, so we would tie a little basket around Barrì's neck with a flask of liquor inside, another one of wine, and some bread. Barrì would leave with those provisions and facing up to the winds and the storm would run for very long periods. Making a path with his body or digging under the snow, like a mole underground, and guided by his wonderful sense of smell sometimes he succeeded in finding some unlucky dying person. Barrì would then use his paws to uncover the person, then he would get up close and if he could see signs of movement, he would push the little basket off from around his neck and then race home. He would wag his tail, and by his behaviour show us that he had found someone, and we had a sure set of tacks to follow to go and help the unfortunate person who sometimes by that stage we found already on his feet, restored, and already looking for the way out. He saved ten travellers this way. But poor Barrì fell victim to his hard work and skill. One day after a violent storm he went out as usual and ran for hours, until he found a man in one corner of the track who seemed to be dead. Barrì scraped off the snow covering him then he got on top of him to try to give him warmth and bring him back to life. In fact a few minutes later the man regained the use of his senses; but he took fright at the sight of the animal and thinking he was a wild beast running to attack him, he shot him with his pistol. Barrì was killed on the spot. We were able to reach the poor stranger and bring him back to the monastery. Oh, who could express the grief he felt when he learned that he had killed the very one who had saved his life! He was inconsolable, so to give himself some comfort and to pay a kind of tribute to recognise his benefactor he had the body embalmed at his own expense, and saw that it was placed in that magnificent position you can see now."

While we were discussing this, the superior of the monastery, called the Prepost or one in charge, intervened.

"They have really honoured you," I began telling him, "by making you a superior at such a young age."

“Superiors here need to be young,” he replied, “because no one gets to old age here. Because of the terrible climate if they are not sent elsewhere after some time they end up in the grave. So our confreres, once they have turned thirty five, are usually sent to parishes our Order runs in the Vallese. The temperature here is constantly around 28 to 30 degrees centigrade below zero. We are only in the first days of August now, and the ground is already covered in snow. We rarely have a truly calm day. This little lake is frozen over for more than ten months of the year, so fish cannot live there. Now come with me to the garden and see our splendid greenery. Some turnips, a few small cabbages and some lettuces for salad, and that’s about all we have. It is things like this that weaken the health even of men with a strong constitution. Only the two months of summer are pleasant enough for living on this peak. And it is over those two months that the best of Europe’s travellers appear each evening at the hospice, most from England, France and Germany.” While the kind superior was telling us about all the details of this spot, without noticing it we had walked almost a mile. “Here,” he told us, “is the chapel where we bury the mortal remains of the poor people who have perished amidst the ice and snow.” Then walking back to the monastery he told us: “We were also visited by Napoleon I on the 20th May 1800. The Emperor was crossing this rugged mountain and spent some time here talking to the monks and visiting the Hospice. The formidable conqueror was moved when he heard about our life, took our needs into account and made some splendid offers. Each soldier in his large army was given a glass of wine.”

“But do you ask for money for these expenses? To keep yourselves, preserve the locale, and provide whatever you need for so many travellers?”

“Divine Providence looks after everything. In the church there is a box where the better-off travellers can deposit some alms. To which we add the rent from some buildings the hospice has here and there through the Alps. Some help also comes from Switzerland.

We continued these pleasant discussions when we were advised the the time for our departure was close. Having thanked those incomparable benefactors of humanity sincerely for the kindness and hospitality they had shown us, we left an offering in the box and departed for Switzerland. I was moved to tears at that point. Why, I asked myself, are you living apart from a religion that produces such sublime fruits of charity? Why are you following the dictates of a religion so sterile in virtue, with no other encouragement to do good than claiming the principle of philanthropy, but a false one at that?<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>On the Gran S. Bernardo cf: *Vita di Bl. Bernardo di Menthon*. 1866, lett. catt. fasc. XI - *Antonio o l'orfanello di Firenze*. 1858, fasc. VI - Casalis on: Gran s. Bernardo.

## Chapter 19. Severino speaks about Geneva and Calvin.

We reached Geneva towards nightfall, at an hour when the city looks most beautiful. It is in a delightful location, bounded by considerable fortifications, and built on the lake that bears its name. With all its streets lit up, Geneva charmed us. Given that the reason for this journey of mine was study and religion, I turned my thoughts to learning about the religious state of the city. I knew that the Gospel had been preached here from early Christian times and I also knew that heresy had been introduced here some centuries ago. From books I found I learned that in the 16th century Swingli had introduced the beginnings of the so-called Reform.<sup>12</sup>

In 1530 the people from the Bern Canton together with the Genevans took up arms against the Catholics, tore down their crosses, smashed their sacred images, trod on the consecrated hosts and relics of the saints and ordered heretics to preach regularly in Geneva in the famous cathedral of St Peter's where Catholicism had been preached for continuously for centuries. Catholics, who made up at least nine tenths of the population, sought to fight this godlessness, but the handful of people running the government forbade all acts of Catholic worship and established that Protestantism was the sole religion of the State. The Episcopal See was abolished, a Republic proclaimed, and the monks and friars were expelled. Thus Geneva became Protestantism's Rome, as someone called it, trying to compare it with the centre of Catholicism, the city of Rome. This happened after the true religion had flourished for around one thousand five hundred years, producing many saints for the Church and many souls in Heaven.

The most famous promoter of this false reform in Geneva was Calvin of whom I had heard so much said. Listen, my friends, and I will give you a short account of this so-called Reformer, and that should be enough to persuade you of the absurdity of this wicked reformed teaching.

John Calvin was born in Noyon, a city in France; his father was a procurator called Couvin. The bishop of the city, moved by charity, gave him money for his studies in

---

<sup>12</sup>Calvinists and all Protestants in general call themselves Reformers, because under the pretext of reforming supposed abuses in religion they had separated themselves from the unity of the Church. Catholics are wont to call them pretexts for reform and their beliefs a pretended Reform because under the pretext of reforming the Church they fell into a thousand errors.

Whoever wants to read more on what has been said about Calvin and the Reform, can read the works of De la Foresi.

*Metodo d'istruzione per condurre i pretesi riformati alla Chiesa Romana.* - *Vita di Calvino.* Tolosa, stamperia Pradel e Blanc. - Boost. *Storia della Riforma in Alemagna.* - But then there are all the commendable works of Arch. Andrea Charvaz: *Difesa del cattolicesimo*, vol. 5. - Fr Perrone: *Il Protestantismo e la regola di fede.* - Franco: *Risposte* etc.



the hope that he would do well. His father's business affairs went bad and he incurred a number of judicial sentences; his mother was a woman of ill repute. His brothers and their wives ended up in prison or at least in disgrace. To avoid the family's disgrace Calvin decided to change his name and instead of Couvin called himself Calvin; so under this false name he began to journey from town to town. But his poor moral behaviour accompanied him everywhere he went. He was convicted in Paris for a serious crime, and condemned to be branded on the back with a hot iron. This was by special favour of the Bishop and the Magistrates, since being burned at the stake was the established penalty for his crime. None of this improved him; he became worse. But even putting aside his crimes I simply say that this wicked man established a teaching that made licit the most terrible deeds, and then he set about propagating it.

His preaching disturbed the public peace everywhere and the civil authorities sent for him to be taken in. When he heard knocking on the door, having no other escape, he took a sheet from the bed, tore it in pieces and made a rope to climb out the window, and then he ran and hid in the house of a husbandman. To escape from there he disguised himself as a poor farmer and with a hoe and spade on his shoulders managed to deceive the soldiers of justice and save himself.

A serious author called Rouvrai, French minister in Berne, speaks of this arch-heretic as follows: 'The infamous Calvin, a sordid being, branded in France, concubinage in Strasbourg, theft in Metz, sodomite in Basel, tyrant in Geneva, Calvin, I say, proclaimed freedom of religion, railed against Catholic magistrates calling them Diocletians or persecutors because they judged heretics. Meanwhile he cursed and swore and if he could have would have imprisoned and put to death anyone who ran contrary to his opinions. It happened that a Spaniard called Michael Serve passed temporarily through Geneva. He did not believe the same things as Calvin about the Blessed Trinity. Calvin had him imprisoned, then commanded that he believe as he did or he would be burned alive. Serveto did not give in so he was consigned to the fire.

From Geneva Calvin made a few sorties into Italy, but as soon as he was recognised as a disturber of the peace he was chased out wherever he went.

Seeing that his efforts were useless, especially after he had been repelled from Aosta, he tried to open a mission in America. His new missionaries embarked to carry the plague of their teachings to people who were still ignorant of the Gospel. But since the Reformers had neither a Head nor guide for religious questions, endless disputes about the Eucharist arose. One said he was inspired by God to teach that in the Eucharist there is the body of Jesus Christ, and another claimed to be equally inspired by the Holy Spirit to believe and teach that the Eucharist is truly the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus C. In the midst of this tumult the head of the mission, named Durando, came to see the absurdity of the Reformation in 1558 and publicly abjured Calvinism and professed the Catholic faith which he defended in speech and writing until he died. And that was the end of the famous Reformed mission Calvin sent to America.

Since his efforts had failed, Calvin decided to consolidate the Reform in Geneva.

He succeeded in fact in making himself head of civil authority; but when he wanted to change the old religion, Calvin found himself in great embarrassment.

"Let us see some sign," the people said, "so we can be sure you were sent by God to

reform religion. The prophets and apostles confirmed their words through the holiness of their lives and with miracles. Prove your mission with a miracle; that way we will have reason to believe you.” Calvin understood the seriousness of the question, but his immoral life did not allow him to say: observe what I do. So it came back to this: try for a miracle or be regarded as an impostor by everyone. He went for the first one, meaning he tried to do something that might be regarded as miraculous. Listen to the facts. A poor Genevan called Brulleo along with his wife had had recourse to Calvin asking for alms. “Gladly” he told them, “I will help you so long as in all prudence and confidence you give me a hand to carry out a plan I have.” The poor unfortunates, in their abject poverty, were ready to do anything, and following the instructions of the new miracle worker, Brulleo pretended he was ill.

Calvin sent out an order for prayers and supplications for a healing to all the churches, but in vain; then the sick man pretended to succumb to his illness and die. Calvin was advised secretly, but indicating that he knew nothing, under the pretext of going for a walk, he was accompanied by many friends. When they arrived at the house where the scene was already prepared they heard the cries and wailing coming from the hypocritical wife, who appeared to be overwrought and desperate.

The impostor asked what was going on in the house, entered, fell on his knees with all his entourage and in a loud voice to demonstrate his power he called on the man to come back to life: the idea was that his glory should shine before all the people and be witness to the fact that he, Calvin, was truly sent by God to reform the Church.

When the prayer was over, Calvin approached the dead man in majestic fashion, and taking him by the hand said to him: “In the name of Jesus Christ get up and walk.” The dead man didn’t move. He repeated the same command several times and finally the wife ran to him, tried to strike her husband, and then discovered that he was really dead! Imagine the grief, and the curses that desolate woman would have hurled at the impostor. She reproached Calvin and left the house enraged, then spread the news right throughout the city. This was Calvin’s great miracle.

Such an immoral man assisted by people who were equally immoral did nothing other than attract people caught up in all kinds of vice to the point where the reformers, still experiencing the foundation of the so-called reform, were making godless fruits of the Protestant system known. I could quote what Catholics say about the disturbances created by those strange missionaries but I prefer to limit myself to the words of an author who cannot fall under any suspicion, I mean Luther, worthy teacher and colleague of Calvin’s wickedness. Seeing the turmoil these reformers had created he expressed his complaints in these words: “Most of our followers are living like Epicureans; they are only looking for days of revelry. You would not find such buffoons and monsters amongst the Papists. They call themselves reformers but in reality they are devils incarnate .... They are rogues stuffed with pride and avarice of the kind never found under the papacy. Disorder has reached such a point that if one were to contemplate a gathering of buffoons, fraudsters, usurers, the dissolute, rebels, people of bad faith, he would only need to enter one of the cities that calls itself evangelical. I doubt that amongst pagans, Jews, Turks and other infidels one could find such hard-headed and arrogant types where any kind of sentiment, any virtue was extinguished, and amongst who, are all kinds of sinfulness

etc.” Cf *Lutherus in colloquiis*, p. 234.

## Chapter 20. Severino speaks about events affecting Catholicism in Geneva.

In 1536 John Calvin was expelled from France for serious crimes, as we have said, and went to Geneva to Minister Farel who appointed him as professor of theology without him ever having studied theology.

Since Calvin was teaching dogma that went against Swingli, he was first blamed then expelled from the city. The decree which banned him and his companions said they were wicked rebels. But soon after, Calvin found a way to return to Geneva, where he was welcomed and made 'Pope' of Geneva, as his biographer called him.

Then through deception, calumny, persecutions and all kinds of detestable barbarity, he managed to lead a huge number of Catholics into error, such that Geneva became virtually a Protestant city, and the Episcopal See was transferred to Annecy, whose bishop however called himself the Bishop of Geneva.

Soon after Calvin's death St Francis de Sales began to lead the people in the Chablais back to the Catholic religion, and at that time the number of Catholics in Geneva also grew. Francis de Sales was made bishop of that diocese. For two centuries Protestants in Geneva used violence against Catholics who made every effort to keep the religion of their fathers; just the same the number of Catholics decreased to the point where last century Geneva had no more than a few hundred. But Divine Providence raised up a man according to God's heart who reawakened Catholicism and made it flourish amongst Genevans. He was Father Francis Vuarin, native of Savoy and elected parish priest of Geneva in 1808. His knowledge, prudence and piety won him fame throughout Europe, and for thirty six years he 'hammered' reformist heretics.

He began fighting error with charity, patience, preaching, especially to comfort Catholics who had remained constant in their faith up till then. Then he wrote books, offered to debate with the Protestants who never chose to struggle against a rival whom they deemed far superior to them. They rejected the challenges therefore and began to set traps for him. Possibly they would have repeated the defeat of Bl. Pavonio had the priest's great reputation not held them back.

Vuarin responded to two great needs, the sick and children. The former always had to go to Protestant hospitals where Catholic priests were not allowed to give the comforts of religion; and children had to attend Protestant schools. In response to these evils Fr Vuarin called on charity of the Catholics, and protection by external powers. He opened a hospital only for Catholics, set up schools for boy which he entrusted to the De La Salle Brothers, and schools for girls, which he entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. Fr Vuarin was consistently helped and guided in his great enterprise by the Supreme Pontiffs Pius VII, Leo XII, Gregory XVI, who not only supported him in his zeal but gave him

considerable sums of money to achieve and maintain so many works of charity.

Well-deserving Vuarin died on the 6th September 1843 and his death was lamented by all well-meaning people. His funeral was a real triumph. Thirty thousand Catholics from the city and nearby towns accompanied his remains in an orderly fashion amongst a crowd of what is reckoned to be around fifty thousand Protestants. Minister Cheneviere who was at the Catholic spectacle, one that Geneva had not seen for more than two centuries, said of the emotional ceremony: "Fr Vuarin made us fearful when he was alive, but crushed us when he died."

When Vuarin took possession of his parish, Geneva had around eight hundred Catholics, but there were ten thousand when he died, meaning he had taken in a third of the population.

This tendency of Genevans to return to the religion of their forefathers did not cease with the death of the zealous pastor; it continued uninterruptedly especially through the zeal of the famous Abbot Mermillot. This venerable prelate through his preaching, writing, and with the help of zealous collaborators won many other Genevans over to the faith. The reigning Pius IX has also turned his fatherly interests towards the Genevans, and rejoicing at the great progress of the faith in the city considered re-establishing the episcopal residence. So in 1864 Abbot Mermillot was consecrated bishop and given the task of residing in Geneva and exercising his episcopal functions there. Amongst jubilant crowds he calmly took possession of the Diocese that Divine Providence had entrusted him with. He was the first bishop to be able to have his residence in Geneva for more than three hundred years.

Currently there are more than twenty thousand Catholics in Geneva and they have three churches open to freely practise their religion. Catholic schools are increasing in numbers daily, as well as in regularity and in freedom to teach. It all bodes well that in a short time the desires and prayers of good people will be crowned by a complete return of Genevans to Catholicism under the leadership of the Successor of St Peter, the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 21. Severino speaks of his stay in Geneva.

I was in Geneva to study the Bible, Latin and Greek, but to tell the truth these studies that I had dreamed of for so long were too demanding for my lively nature and for the fact that I was now 27 years of age. I liked science more and preferred history to everything, as well as reasoning and religious subjects, which beyond instruction also served to calm my agitated conscience. The Protestants supported me and held me in high regard.

But their teaching of theology, as they called it, far from reassuring me of their religious principles, made me even more aware of the uncertainty of the so-called reform of theirs. From their own teaching I drew the following conclusion: reformed religion did not exist before Calvin and Luther, so before this prevarication they were Catholics. Who sent them to form a new religion? Did they work miracles? Did it bring them a life commendable for virtue and morality? None of this, therefore from their actions I concluded that their private life was reproachable and that they gave no sign of having been sent by God to reform the Church of Jesus C. Therefore I discerned that their teaching was insufficient a belief to give peace to a man with doubts. It is true that their religion gives a man greater freedom, but this greater freedom leads to unbridled passions.

So a Catholic never becomes a Protestant in order to be a better person but to become a worse one.

I then noted how they condemned tradition, but then went back to tradition to find arguments to give credibility to the Bible, the Apostles Creed, keeping Sundays holy and all the other religious practices they observe and that cannot be found in the Bible.

Furthermore Protestants admit that a good Catholic can be saved; so why should a Catholic abandon his own religion, where he can be saved, to embrace another that leaves him in fearful doubt of his salvation? My teachers noticed that the more I went ahead with my studies, the more I was convinced of the need to make a loyal return to Catholicism, so they tried to be with me wherever I was to stop me being alone with Catholics.

One day while I was with some of my teachers and colleagues we were walking through the city and met a priest who was taking Viaticum to a sick person and was accompanied by some of the faithful. At that sight, and hearing the prayers I called to mind the sad moment when a similarly moving ceremony was carried out for my father, and what came vividly to mind were my father's dying words: "Live as a good Catholic." I was almost beside myself: "Father," I said, "my beloved father, if you are in Heaven, pray for me." And having said that I drew aside under a porch, made the sign of the cross, knelt down and begged God to open up the way to his mercy for me. They others saw me and that evening they did everything they could to mock me for my reaction to the Blessed

Eucharist. I got all emotional then and out of spite said to them: "I have been studying your religion for nine years but my doubts have only increased. I am of a view that Viaticum is of great comfort for someone *in extremis*. You are all really in contradiction. You do not believe in the Eucharist but you celebrate the paschal supper with great solemnity. If you believe the Body of the Lord is in your supper, then you should believe along with Catholics that you can take it to the sick; if you don't believe that of what value is your supper? Furthermore, from the Bible and from what you yourselves have taught me it is certain that Jesus commanded us to eat his body and drink his blood; he gave his body and blood to the Apostles under the species of bread and wine and commanded them and their successors to repeat this sacrifice for the remission of sins. That does not mean that the Eucharist is just a figure or commemoration of the sacrifice of Calvary. Jesus Christ solved every doubt when he said: This bread is my body, this drink is my blood, this food is my body sacrificed for you." *Corpus quod pro vobis tradetur.*"

No one at that moment thought of making any observation, perhaps not to exacerbate my emotions, and all they said was that study and prayer would better enlighten me in the faith; it would get rid of my sadness and would be happier.

Up to this point the Waldensians in Luserna and the Protestants at Geneva had treated me well, and I did what I could to respond to their kindness by getting energetically involved in work whether study or practical, that they asked of me. No one ever insulted my honesty. But there was one wicked individual amongst them who pushed me to do something bad that I will abhor until the end of my life. I will tell you but only so you can be horrified. Please offer me kind forbearance for my disgusting behaviour.

In Geneva it is the custom to write down the place, day and time of conferences or sermons, as they say, then disseminate these amongst the Protestants and Catholics, inviting them to attend. A friend who I think they gave to me so I could keep an eye his moral behaviour, invited me to go with him to a special conference for which, he said, they had not printed the usual posters, but he knew about it and he could take me with him as well. Indeed he reassured me that his teachers had given him the task of inviting me. "If you come" he added, "you will become an excellent evangelist."

I went, but that villain led me to being a victim of seduction.

It was the first time that immorality of that kind had stained my conscience. I was twenty seven years of age and my life had always been honourable and upright. I felt such remorse for that terrible action that I had no peace, day or night. But you can imagine my anguish when I became aware that as well as offending the Creator I had contracted a physical disease that could only suggest sad consequences for the future. My superiors took me to a good doctor who offered me all kinds of cures; but after many attempts he finished up telling me that it was a long-term illness and not an easy one to heal. With those humiliating words I was rabid. I cursed Geneva, my villainous companion, Protestants, Waldensians, and I detested the very moment I put myself into their hands. All useless words.

My teachers decided to remove me from a place where all I did was run them down and speak badly of them and also to try a remedy that could give me back my lost health, they agreed with the doctor's advice and decided to send me to Genoa where the climate

and some well-known medical experts could help me a lot.



## Chapter 22. Severino speaks of his friend's death and going to the Capuchin church.

The change and the mild climate, Genoa's wonderful position at first produced a noticeable improvement in my health. But it did not last long and after a few days I had fallen back to where I was.

I was in the Protestant hospital and it lacked nothing of what could possibly help me.

It lacked just that one thing that would have calmed my conscience. One day while I was thinking about this and walking around the hospital I heard a nurse call me by name.

"Who is it?" I answered.

"A friend of yours, Paul Bordis, don't you remember me any more?"

"Bordis ... you're here ... and you look so sick ...!"

"The miserable thing about it, dear Severino, the miserable thing that led me to this sad state is that I became a Protestant. And now I feel such terrible remorse. Oh woe is me! Here I am stuck in this bed and I don't know where to turn, nor how to provide for my needs."

"Mr Charbonier, what does he say?"

"Mr Charbonier our Pastor comes almost every day to see me but all he can say is courage, have faith, have faith; But those words don't give me any comfort. It is my conscience that is pricking me; if I die in this state I am lost and meanwhile here I cannot go to Confession, Communion. Severino, Severino! You still have time; leave this place, do not let death surprise you in this accursed place."

"Have you explained your doubts to the pastor?"

"Sometimes I have and one day I insisted that he hear my Confession. He answered that I could confess to the Lord and that he alone forgave sins. I told him I knew that very well, that only God forgives sins; but the priests help me to make my confession; In God's name absolve me from my sins."

"What did he say?"

"He smiled then added: 'Have faith as this alone will save you'. These are nice words but meanwhile I am suffering terribly in body and in soul. What a terrible disaster I have fallen into!"

"Paul, I share your suffering, because my conscience just like yours is horribly troubled. We were always friends, we were brought up together, went to school together, were at work together, and I will not abandon you. I will try to find what will relieve us both of our worries."

I thought my friend's illness would continue for some time, but the following day I saw that his life was in grave danger.

"Dear Severino," he said, "I do not know if I will still be alive tomorrow: remember to tell my brother that I have asked forgiveness for the scandal I gave; also tell our old spiritual director that I was ungrateful; ask him to give me absolution if he can; tell him I am the unfortunate Paul Bordis who he had told so many times not to wait until the moment of death to make a good Confession. I didn't listen; now I want to go to Confession and I can't. Poor me, I can almost hear the devils coming to drag me down to hell: I will die and I will die and be damned."

"Paul, have courage, tomorrow I will go and get advice on who can help us and we will both go."

"I will not survive, I will suffocate from coughing, tonight is the last night of my life; oh Severino....."

"Dear Paul, be at peace, while there is breath there is life; but if you unfortunately find that you are at the point of death, ask God to forgive you your sins with all the fervour possible, and promise you will go to Confession the very first moment that you can. If you do that you will certainly find mercy in God's sight."

His sad prediction came true.

Next morning I went early to see my friend, but he was already a cadaver. Someone who was with him in his final agony assured me that his anguish and remorse were with him till he breathed his last.

Confused and desolate then I left the hospital without knowing where to go or what to do. I mechanically entered a church run by the Capuchins just as one of them was about to celebrate the holy Mass. I attended gladly; it was the first I had been at for many years. I then looked towards a confessional where lots of people were: at the sight a thousand thoughts ran through my mind. I recalled the peace I enjoyed when I regularly went to Confession. this confessional, I said, sighing to myself, could give me the peace I have sought in vain elsewhere. This confessional could have saved my beloved Bordis' soul. Poor Bordis— where is his soul now?

Right then I took some steps towards the confessional but shame kept me back. I went and sat in a pew, and amidst all my worries and sighs I said: Confession doesn't cost me anything; it gives my heart peace and does me no harm. And we know that the Saviour gave the Apostles all kinds of faculties amongst which he said: those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; those whose sins you retain they are retained.<sup>13</sup> So, I concluded, God gave us a way to obtain forgiveness for our sins, and this means, this Sacrament must be administered by his ministers; they are to remit or retain sins, give or not give absolution according to the penitent's dispositions. And so that the inner dispositions of the penitent can be known, they have to be made manifest or confessed.

And then ... I went to Confession for many years and I was always happy.

Remorse and these pricks of conscience in my heart began when I left off going to Confession. So, I want to go to Confession and let God do with me what he wills. But one particular and not slight difficulty was getting in the way of my good will. When I

---

<sup>13</sup>St John Ch. 20

have been to Confession where will I go? What can I do in my ruined state of health?

This was the way I was reasoning or better, struggling with myself, as I approached the confessional. I was welcomed with true paternal kindness; I opened my heart and the good confessor listened to everything; then he gave me some saintly advice and at the end said: "Dear friend, Divine Providence has brought you here, God does not want to see you lost. I cannot give you absolution yet because before receiving this Sacrament you must leave the place and the people you are staying with."

"Where shall I go and what can I do?" I asked.

"Have faith in the Lord's goodness: I will take care of you; come here tomorrow at this same time and I hope to be able to give you good news."

A ray of hope, a comforting thought arose in my heart; except that when I got back to the hospital I was so exhausted that I immediately went to bed. The emotions, the heart-wrenching death of my friend, my uncertain future made my illness much, much worse. My coughing returned again that day with even stronger and more feverish symptoms.

The doctor came to see me frequently; but seeing my illness worsen each day, he said that the fresh salty air seemed to be bad for my weak state and he advised a quick change of climate. Then Mr Charbonier decided to follow the doctor's advice. Telling me he would never abandon me he asked: "Have you got some place you would prefer to spend some time? I will see that you get there."

"I would gladly go to Turin," I answered, "my mother has been living there now for some time and although she is in difficult straits, she loves me very much and earnestly wants me to be with her."

"You will have this comfort; I will write to someone in Turin and I hope you will also get some help at home with your mother. But I do recommend that you remain firm in the faith and honour the society you belong to."

## Chapter 23. Severino speaks of his trip to Turin and his new life in the family.

The doctor's care did help me recover somewhat from my illness, and a week later I found myself ready enough to set out for Turin. On doctor's advice my departure was hastened, and more so because the pastor had guessed that I wanted to abandon the sect that I had pretended to put my name to. This was confirmed by someone who had observed what had happened at the Capuchin church and had informed the Evangelical pastor. Besides, after the fatal deception at Geneva, and Bordis' sad death, I could no longer refrain from blaming the people and the actions that had prevented my friend from having the comforts of religion. One thing I regretted and that was not being able to go back to see the Capuchin priest to whom I had promised to return. I thought I could at least fulfil part of my duty by writing the following note:

Dear and reverend father,

The worsening of my illness has prevented me from returning to you. Now I must leave for Turin without being able to see you again; but be consoled that your words were not without good results; I am a Catholic again. Where I am going there is a priest in whom I have full confidence.

I hope he will help me to complete the task you have begun. My illness is getting worse by the day, and I am hurrying towards the grave; the doctors give me little hope of recovery any more, nor of a long life. Pray to God for me that I may soon find myself in such a state that I will no longer fear the hour of my death.

We may not see each other again in this world; May God let us see each other again in blessed eternity. Goodbye.

I had only just been able to entrust delivery of this note to a servant when news that it was time for me to leave arrived. I was taken to the station, not without some effort, placed in a compartment on the train with two salesmen for evangelical books who were also travelling to the same city. God helped me and kept me going on this rough, six hour journey. I got off at Porta Nuova station where I was packed into a buggy which had me at my mother's place in the blink of an eyelid. The good woman barely recognised the old Severino, given the many years since we had seen each other and the change in me due to both age and illness. We both experienced mixed emotions: tears, sighs and joy.

“Dear Severino,” she began, “I very much regret that I cannot do everything I should for you, but I will do what I can to see that you lack nothing.”

“God will not abandon us, dear mother. Let us put our hopes in him.”

“They had told me that you had become a Protestant and that you had a job where you were earning a lot of money. Is that true?”

“Mother, let’s not talk about this now. I just need to ...”

And right then the bell rang and in came the Minister, the Waldensian Pastor.

“Is this the house where Mr Severino is staying? He just came from Genoa,” he asked.

“That’s correct,” my mother replied. “He was extremely tired when he got here. Now he has gone off to bed to get some rest.”

“I know that things are tough for you; so take this money; we will send along our doctor and we will also see that you are not left wanting for anything. But see that you don’t allow any priest to come and visit him because they will immediately start talking about Confession, Our Lady and what not, and this will disturb the poor sick fellow; could even bring about his death. I will come and see you frequently. I am leaving a nurse here who will be able to help, day and night.”

In fact I had fallen asleep and the Minister did not want to disturb me, but when I awoke and my mother told me what had happened I knew that I was getting help but at the same time had become slave to the Protestants.

“How kind that man was to me,” my mother said. “He gave me money and promised to bring some more next time.”

“I look on this money as poison to poison you with, a knife to stab you with.”

“Why on earth do you say that? Money is always a good thing, wherever it comes from.”

“But that money has been brought by a Protestant minister, and he has given it to you so I will continue being a Protestant.”

“And what does that matter? Look here. On Sunday morning I can go to our parish and ask the parish priest for help; in the evening I can go to the Protestant church to get whatever they give to those who attend their services.”

“That is bad. That would be done in bad faith. A man should have only one face; if he believes in one set of beliefs he should practise them and not another. Material interests should never induce you to practise a religion that you don’t consider to be good; no two religions can be equally good. Saying that you would go to the Catholic and Protestant churches is like serving both God and the devil.”

“I have done that in the past because I did not consider it such a bad thing; I won’t do it again in the future. But how will we survive?”

“By being good Christians, trusting in God. He will help us. Meanwhile mother, I would like to speak with our priest because I do not feel at all well; I want to die in the religion that you and my father brought me up in.”

“Calm down. Tomorrow I will call him and he will come for sure.”

That was almost the only discussion I was able to freely have with my mother.

After that I was no longer my own master: the nurse, or the evangelist, or the pastor, or a minister were always beside my bed, or in the next room. I learned later that my mother did in fact invite the priest to come and see me; he came and other priests came

several times but they were never allowed to get to see me. They were always told I did not want to see them; that my illness was not serious, and that anyway the doctor had forbidden it.

These were lies and deceit because I earnestly wanted to see, if not the parish priest, some priest at least who could help prepare me for death. My fear was that what had happened to poor Bordis was also going to happen to me; and an even greater abhorrence grew of a religion that pretended to support you with money and deceit.

## Chapter 24. Severino tells the story of a lively discussion between a priest and a Waldensian minister.

Four weeks had quickly passed of my stay with my mother, and although my life was not threatened by my illness, it nevertheless kept me in bed. I was always promised that a priest would come, and finally one did get to me but in a very chancy way. Let me tell you the story:

A priest whom I knew, in agreement with the parish priest, after having tried several times to get up to my room, but in vain, went to my old Director at the Oratory and told him the whole story. This man had always regarded me with great affection, so he decided to visit me at any cost. One day, it was two in the afternoon, he came along to our house and rang the bell just as the Waldensian minister was by my bedside. He went down to open the door.

“Who are you looking for, Father?”

“I want to speak with Severino who is ill.”

“You can’t. He cannot see you; the doctor has strictly forbidden it.”

“Then let me just talk to his mother.”

“Good morning,” said this astute priest to my mother. “I have come to hear how Severino is.” Saying that he opened the door to my room, and while the minister was standing there shouting: “You can’t, you can’t,” he was already beside my bed.

“Dear Severino” he said to me.

“Oh! Look who’s here.....!”

“Severino, how are you? Do you still remember me? Do you know me still?”

“I certainly do know you. You are my old soul friend; you gave me so much advice which I then forgot about. I am ashamed to look you in the face.”

“If you know me, if I am your friend, then why be afraid?”

“It is not you I am afraid of, since you are so good, but I am ashamed because I was ungrateful, because I have done many bad things.”

“Father,” the Minister said, “Please go because all this emotion you are stirring up in the sick man could prove fatal. You have taken him by surprise; he didn’t want to see anyone, and besides, he doesn’t need anything from you.”

“Severino,” the priest said, “get a little rest and don’t tire yourself by talking. I will stay a little while and keep you company.”

“And I’m telling you to go,” said the Minister resentfully, “There is nothing you can do, nothing you can say to this young man.”

“There are many things I can do and I have a lot to tell this child of mine.”

“Who are you to speak to me so boldly?”

“And who are you to be making the kind of claims you are making?”

“I am a Waldensian Minister, so who are you?”

“I am the Director of the Oratory...”

“What do you want with this sick man?”

“I want to help him save his soul.”

“He wants nothing more to do with you.”

“Why on earth do you say that?”

“Because he is a member of the Waldensian Church and he has no more religious ties with Catholics.”

“I had enrolled him long before you in the register of my boys, I was, and I want to continue to be, his boss, and that’s why he has nothing more to do with you, nothing he wants to say any more to the Waldensians.”

“I’m afraid Father, that by speaking this way, you are disturbing the man’s conscience, and that could lead to certain consequences that you may have to regret later.”

“When it is a question of saving a soul I fear no consequences...”

“Stop! Stop right there! Leave - now!”

“How about you stop right there! You are the first one who should be leaving.....”

“Do you know who you are talking to?”

“I know very well who I am talking to, and I think you also know who you are talking to.”

“You’ve no idea... I have the authority to....”

“Where religion is concerned I respect everyone but fear no one.” And right at this moment I fear you even less because I know that this poor sick man is sorry he ever put his name to your beliefs. He wants to die a Catholic.

“This is called seduction. It is a lie.”

“That is untrue. Severino, why do you want to persevere in our Church?”

“I want to persevere in the.....”

“Take it easy; careful what you are about to say.”

“Minister,” the priest said; “I suggest you calm down. Just let me ask the sick man some questions. His replies will help both of us.”

The minister fell silent and wide-eyed, sat down. The priest turned to me lovingly and began to speak this way: “Listen, Severino: this man has written a book where he repeatedly says that a good Catholic can be saved in his own religion; therefore no Catholic needs to embrace another religion in order to be saved. All Catholics likewise say that by observing one’s own religion, one can be saved. But they also say that someone who remains a Protestant out of bad faith will certainly be damned ... Now tell me whether you want to leave aside the certainty of salvation and stay with doubt; or, according to Catholics, to the certainty of eternal loss?”

“No, no and no again” I replied. “No. I was born a Catholic, I want to die a Catholic—these were the last words my father left me ... I am sorry for everything I have done.”

Then the minister stood up, put on his hat and turning to the priest, said: “You cannot be reasoned with at the moment: I will return to the better Church. But you



Severino, you have cast yourself into an abyss ... Remember that they want you to go to Confession, and that Confession, instead of giving you life, will hasten your death.” And having said that, filled with indignation he left.

## Chapter 25. Severino tells of how he moved elsewhere, and of his unexpected recovery.

After these discussions, which lasted two hours, I was very tired; and I felt such fatigue that I feared I might die that very night, so I immediately asked if I could go to Confession. Given that I was dealing with a Director whom I had known since my childhood, it was just so easy to tell him the story of my life. And since I had never preached or written anything against the Catholic religion I had no need to make any public retractions. With Sacramental absolution, it seemed to me that the priest has taken a huge boulder off my back. My soul returned to a calm that it had not experienced for ten years.

I shook this sacred Minister's hand, kissed it and kissed it again. I was as happy as anyone could be in this world.

When I had finished my confession, I asked if I could receive holy Viaticum. "Do me a kindness," I told the Director, "and go to our parish priest, and say I am sorry for not greeting him. But tell him why. If he wishes to he can give me some public penance or ask for a retraction; I will gladly do so. If he judges me worthy I would like him to bring me Viaticum. I fear that tonight may be my last night."

I was overwhelmed when the parish priest came to visit me; he assured me he would help me in all my spiritual and temporal needs. Then he brought me the Sacred Host and it filled me with consolation. Following that I had no more desire to live any longer. But a small difficulty surfaced; the fear that the Waldensians would never leave me in peace. In similar cases they used come, come back again, send others, even use civil authorities to safeguard, as they put it, freedom of conscience. To avoid all this and the sad consequences that might result from it I considered it wise to move elsewhere, and I was brought to a house where every corner, or better every stone seemed to be stamped with the blessings of heaven. During this move we feared some disaster, but God was with us and everything went well. My confessor spent the night with me, and as day broke, at the sound of the *Angelus*, we prayed together, and then he said to me:

"Dear Severino, you are ready for death; this is an extraordinary grace from the Lord. But I can feel some hope welling up in my heart. You were always devoted to Mary...."

"Yes, I never abandoned this devotion, and I really believe it was Mary who put me back on the right road."

"Who knows but this Mother might not want to reward you also in this life?"

"How?"

"By obtaining your recovery from her Divine Son; so you can help your own mother especially in religious matters because you have told me she is a little weak in her thinking

and I fear for her if you are not there.”

“I am in God’s hands: tell me what to do and I will do it.”

“A novena to Mary Help of Christians.”

“With what intention?”

“Asking God for your recovery so long as it not be to the detriment of your soul.”

“I really feel I am at the end, but if you advise me to ask for this grace, I will gladly do so: tell me therefore what I have to do in this novena if I survive long enough to make it ...”

- In this novena you should say three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, three Glory bes to the Blessed Sacrament, with three Hail Holy Queens, to Mary Help of Christians.

“And if I recover?”

“If you recover you will help your mother as long as she lives, and you will never stop promoting devotion to the Blessed Virgin everywhere, and with anyone when you have a chance and see that it would be useful.”

“I will do what you say and may the Lord’s holy name be always blessed.”

He then gave me his priestly blessing and I began the novena he had suggested. From that moment my illness seemed to mark time. I prayed every day and every day the Director came to ask me if I was feeling any better, and since he didn’t see any real improvement, he kept saying to me: “Pray with faith; God has some plans for you. Faith and prayer.”

The eighth day came; “So, Severino, how are you?” the Director asked me, anxious for news.

“Always the same, no worse, no better, but still ill and without strength.”

“Faith and prayer; Mary is a *Virgo potens*: so courage; tomorrow... who knows... keep hoping...” and he left.

That night I did not sleep at all, and as day broke I felt I was about to leave for eternity. I wanted to call somebody but I had no strength in my voice. I am dying, I told myself, and so I said the following aspiration to myself with all my heart: Jesus, Mary and Joseph may my soul breathe its last in peace with you.

Then two hours passed where I knew no longer if I was dead or alive. Finally, as if I had been shaken awake from a deep sleep, I awoke all covered in perspiration. I began thinking and I could not sense that I had any illness. I asked for a drink, then some soup, then some more soup. I was well again!

The confessor came and as soon as I saw him I cried: “I have recovered! I have eaten something, had something to drink. The grace has been granted. I have recovered.”

He answered with joy: “May the Lord’s great kindness always be blessed and may the great Mother of the Saviour be glorified throughout the world! How beautiful and true are St Bernard’s words when he said: never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession was left unaided.

## Chapter 26. Severino's final years: his mother's death.

So marvellously recovered as I have explained, I felt strong enough to take up some new work. And I needed to if I was to look after myself and my mother, who completely lacked any luck at all. There was good work available in Turin; but given the friends, companions and places that had earlier been so fatal for me I felt I should go elsewhere. Nor did I think of going back to my home town where sad recollections would have made my stay a bitter pill to swallow.

Amidst all these hesitations the very same Director offered me to a school principal in ..... where no one knew anything about my earlier existence. I went there with my mother. Between my school stipend, a small amount for playing the organ at the parish and teaching a few piano lessons, I was able to scrape enough together for our circumstances of life.

I was enjoying my new status, and never ceased telling my pupils and others of the glories of Mary Help of Christians. My mother, who had learned much from her sad experiences, had determined to live a temperate, sober and sincerely Christian life. And since everything came back to me for our survival, I thus had a certain freedom to encourage her, and even help her correct her faults if that was necessary. The Christian way my father, of beloved memory, used live once again became our family's way of living; my mother gladly came with me to parish functions and to the Sacraments. My days went back to being a source of consolation, proving that only the practice of religion can strengthen harmony in families and give happiness to those who live in this vale of tears. I spent three years of what I can say were years of peace and reparation; I would have liked them to last forever, but that was an illusion. Nothing under the sun remains stable and whoever lives in joy and abundance today, will end up tomorrow in squalid misery and tears. Deadly cholera had chosen our village to stay—and it was indeed deadly. My mother was terrified; I tried every way to give her courage; I left nothing undone that could help her and ensure her good health. But God had decreed that my mother should die. She was struck down so violently by the disease that she succumbed after just a few hours. She barely had time to receive the comforts of religion. I was able to be with her until her dying breath. I was consoled amidst all this sorrow by the Christian ideas she expressed during her brief illness.

These were her final words: "Severino, God wanted to give you life here on earth, but you have given me eternal life; thank you, I hope to be with your father in Heaven to possess those goods that can never be lost."

I wept for days and prayed so much for her.

Now that I had lost both parents I began thinking about what I should decide for my

future. God himself mercifully showed me; my mission was complete; my mother was out of danger: I was to follow her to the grave. Two weeks later I was also struck down by this disease, though not with such threatening symptoms; but a few days later the disease turned into a serious kind of typhoid fever. Thanks to the doctor's care and the loving assistance of the parish priest the intensity of the illness seemed to mitigate, and after a few days I was strong enough to make the journey back to my home town. After fourteen years of absence I was able to see my old friends and family, and they spared no efforts, out of great charity, to provide for whatever poor Severino, Gervasio's son, needed. His memory was still held in honour amongst anyone who had had occasion to know him.

I have no illusions about the state in which I now find myself, my dear friends. Any improvement in my illness is but a brief prolongation of my life. May God, who has brought me back to you, always be praised and may he generously reward you for all you have done for me.

## Conclusion.

Now, kind friends, after having heard the adventures which troubled my poor existence, I would like you to join me in some reflections drawn from twenty years of experience and study.

Because just from the study of Protestantism I am fully convinced that only Catholicism contains the truth; so how much more should one be confirmed in faith who studies good books and draws his thinking from true sources? Let us say then that only religion can make a man happy, either in prosperity or misfortune; but that only the Catholic religion can provide this heavenly comfort. All other beliefs boast religious comforts, but all they offer are externals which satisfy the senses but never calm the anguish of the spirit.

Better educated Protestants agree that they do not have ancient origins. They can go back to Calvin, Luther, Peter Valdo: but further back than that we can find no one who professed their religion. So in no way can they connect their beliefs with the religion and the Church founded by Jesus. Christ.

Not even after Protestants began were they able to agree on the religious system they were offering. In all the books that I have had available to me I have never been able to fully understand what is meant by Protestantism. Even going back to their catechism and governing decrees I have not found confirmation that Protestantism has any religious principle or system. An example is the definition by the Geneva Senate. In 1824 this Senate gathered to define reformed religion and concluded thus:

*Protestantism is an act of independence by human reason in religious matters.* (V. Edilio Sen. Gen. Feb. 1824).

This definition takes everything that is sacred and divine away from religion. Reformed religion is one's own reason. Following this principle we can say that those who deny the holy books, God, the soul, eternity, everything that is superior to human reason, are excellent Protestants.

In England, then, Protestantism is defined as an act by which one believes what he wants and professes what he believes. By saying that, there is no action, not even the worst kind, that Protestantism disapproves of or does not allow. (V. Watson in Milner Contr. Relig. p. 3). In a catechism printed and commonly used in England we read as follows:

*Protestantism is detestation of Papism and Catholicism and exclusion of papists and Catholics from any civil and ecclesiastical role.*

Protestant catechisms in America have almost the same definition.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Perrone *Praelectiones theologicae*, tom. 1.

According to this definition there is no belief in the world that cannot be allied with Protestantism. Turks, Jews, pagans, free thinkers can become excellent Protestants without altering any of their beliefs so long as they detest Catholics and Catholicism.

It is true that in general Protestants do not follow such godless principles; indeed I have known many who are pious, charitable and completely upright. But their good qualities should still be attributed to the Catholic dictates and principles that they have unknowingly preserved and not to Protestantism that has no principles, or if it does have some, are ones we have indicated which lead to an endless series of errors and godlessness.

Another error spread amongst Protestants is the use they make of the Bible. They say they do not believe in the Catholic Church, but meanwhile, from whom did they receive the Bible? If they want to have some certainty with regard to the holy books are they not forced to go back to the Catholic Church and by that fact recognise it as the only repository of the Bible, traditions and all other revealed truths? When Protestants separated from the Catholic Church, did they not receive the Bible from this very Church? So while Protestants say that it is enough for someone to use the Bible, they fall into contradiction. If the Bible is enough, why write catechisms, sermons, keep Sundays holy; why believe in the Apostles Creed? Are all these found, maybe, in the Bible?

Then Protestants say that a good Catholic can be saved so long as he practises his religion; Catholic say the same. With that, we can ask this question: why do you reformed pastors try to lead Catholics into your beliefs while according to you, and us, they can be saved in their own religion? You should cease all kinds of explanations of God's Word, or preach just this: You Catholics should be happy in your religion, just do your best to practise it and you will be saved. Do not become Protestants otherwise you expose yourself to the great risk of being damned. You should then tell your own followers: Waldensians and Protestants, do you want to ensure the salvation of your soul? Become Catholics. Do you want to live in doubt? Be Protestants.

If Protestants say otherwise they betray their mission, contradict themselves and deceive their followers.

This is why we never read that a Catholic has become a Protestant to lead a better life, or that any Catholic has ever become a Protestant at the moment of his death. On the contrary, there are thousands of pious and learned people who have moved from Protestantism to Catholicism to lead a pious Christian life, and many have converted as they were dying fully convinced that they were ensuring their salvation.

But I am aware that my strength is fading, therefore I will stop speaking against the Protestants.

Instead let us be of one heart and one soul and ask God to show us and them his mercy. May he grant Catholics perseverance and may he lead those in error to the right path. And so may everyone take refuge in the loving bosom of the true Church under the leadership of the Supreme Pastor the Saviour established when he said: You are Peter, I give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; all that you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven all that you loose on earth will be loosed also in Heaven. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. I have prayed for you Peter, so that your faith may not weaken; confirm your brethren in faith.

May God see that the day soon comes when there is one sheepfold and one shepherd

on earth, so we can then be gathered around the one eternal Shepherd, Christ Jesus, in the kingdom of glory forever.



## Appendix: Severino's death.

Severino was thirty years old. His predictions of his imminent death unfortunately came true. None of medical science's efforts could restore him to health.

He received all the comforts of the Catholic religion with great devotion. His former parish priest was still alive and although failing due to his age he was with him in his final moments. Someone who was there at his death says that these were his final words: May God be praised in everything; he has given me many consolations and tribulations but these latter contributed more than the others to my soul's good. One of my great comforts is the presence of my parish priest. He was my spiritual director in my childhood; and now he directs, comforts and is with me in these final moments of my life. May God be praised. I separated myself from him but he called me to himself again. I thank him for having made me, and that I was born in the Catholic religion. If it is possible, let my life be made known throughout the world so it may help others by way of example, and also help me make reparation for the scandal I gave. My Jesus, have mercy on me, holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, poor sinner that I am, as I face death. Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. *In manus tuas, Domine, commenda spiritum meum.*

With ecclesiastical approval.

Part II.

Peter

THE SWAY OF A GOOD UPBRINGING  
TURIN

PARAVIA & Co. Press  
1855

## A Word to the Reader

The reader may ask if this episode contains true or credible facts, to which I can honestly answer that the facts recounted here really happened; I myself saw or heard almost all of them. I simply note that this book was modelled on one entitled: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu* or, *A husband like the many: a wife like the few*. I cannot fill out the story completely because Peter, to whom the facts refer, is still alive; this has meant I needed to avoid some names and places so that individuals are not identified. I have also thought it better to remain silent about some things that would be of great interest, for the sole motive that they are presented in a way that contains the supernatural and this could give rise to inappropriate criticism.

Here we will see the sway that a good upbringing has on a child's future; we will see a model mother, an exemplary child. A mother who amidst a thousand difficulties succeeds in giving her child the best upbringing, and leads a wayward husband back to the straight and narrow. A child who responds to the maternal concerns of his affectionate mother; a child whom we can say was the instrument of Divine Providence in leading his father back to religion and at the same time becomes the support of his family, a model for his peers, a model of courage and resignation for every faithful Christian.

## Chapter I. The Match factory.

*John.* “Really, wife, I am beginning to get annoyed at seeing Peter slouching on the streets, and me supporting him while he is doing nothing. We have four children, this one is the oldest at eight years of age and we need to put him to work. If he is unable to do anything else, let’s put him in the Match factory run by Mrs Boccardi. He won’t earn much that’s for sure because he is so young, but even if he brings just a handful of coins home a week that will be nice.”

*Wife.* “That’s true, John, with four boys ... I understand that it begins to be a burden, since you have to provide for everyone with your own work. But, my husband, I think it would be better to send him off to school for a time with the Brothers who would teach him to read, write and pray, since he is still very young and unable to do work that might be of any great use. That would certainly be better than putting him in a match factory where there’s a crowd of unruly kids who will give him bad example and bad advice.”

*John.* “Quiet! You’re always going on about bad example. What on earth can boys get up to or say that is bad at that age? So it’s clear then; I want to put him to work with Mrs Boccardi.”

*Wife.* “But let’s at least try another factory where there are none, or at least fewer, of these types like the ones that work in the factory you are speaking of.

Because we want to preserve this lad of ours from all kinds of bad encounters so he can keep the good principles I have tried to give him until now.

*John.* “That’s enough! Leave me in peace about your principles; if he doesn’t go to Mrs Boccardi he will only earn about twelve soldi a week, and there he can earn at least eighteen, and with that ...”

*Wife.* “If I can just say one thing, not to contradict you, but it seems reasonable to get him to learn now. I really want him to learn to read, write and do at least some arithmetic. When he is able to take up an honourable profession he will need to know these things. At the same time he could learn his catechism and prepare for his First Communion and ....”

*John.* “The problem is solved. He will do what I did; I didn’t go to school and I grew up big and strong like the others. “Maybe it’s true that I know nothing, and I am mortified when everyone else races off to read a placard and I have to ask them to explain it to me; if someone asks me what was pasted up there I can’t even say a thing. Be that as it may, I have to work Sundays to ensure I can have an extra little something on Mondays, and if my boy can earn eighteen soldi, you can make your polenta and I can have my little extra. So go to it, Peter, get your clogs on, get on the road and go to work.”

*Wife.* “Since that’s what you want, at least let me take him there and I will have a word with his employer.”

The poor mother, sighing deeply, washed the lad's face and taking his arm, she sat him down.

"Poor boy," she told him, "you need to be obedient to your father and your mother. At your tender age we have to ask you to earn your share of your nourishment. Poor boy! But be patient: we are in wretched circumstances and that's why, as small as you are, you need to go off and work. I will find some work mates of your own age at the Oratory for you but always keep in mind the good advice I have given you. I am sure you know, Peter dear, that you need to love God and obey him and never offend him. If your friends put bad ideas to you, you don't need to reply. If they give you bad advice like slacking off work, taking someone else's things, disobeying your parents, don't stop and listen to them.

Make sure, Peter, to tell me each evening what your friends said to you during the day. That way I can give you good advice about what you should do and what you must avoid. Do everything your employers ask you, and be courteous to your friends; if someone hits you, don't hit back, because you know that God does not want that.

Work diligently, offer up your little sufferings to the good Jesus; think of him and the Virgin Mary from time to time; pray often to this good Mother of ours to obtain the graces you need. And pray too for your poor father. I am really sorry that he told you in your presence why he wants to send you to work so young, that he is counting on your work so he can have a better time at the tavern - that is really such a sad thought!"

After this discussion, and with anguished heart, the good mother took the boy by the hand and led him off to the Match factory. She climbed up to the third floor on a steep and partly obscured staircase. She opened the second door on the right, went in and said: "Good morning, Mrs Boccardi, here is an eight year old boy; could you place him with some of your working lads of the same age?"

*Mrs. Boccardi.* "So here you are, my lad. What would you like to do? To be honest your dad told me you were not very big, but you are big enough for the job I want to give you. So relax, mother, he will do the same as the others."

*Mother.* "I recommend to you, Mrs Boccardi, if he ever does something wrong, do not fail to let me know, please; and please see that he does not get caught up in indecent conversations with the other boys."

*Mrs Boccardi.* "Away with you—stop being difficult! Don't worry about it. Your boy will be no worse than the others."

That kind of talk would give you a rather bad impression of the factory where the mother had placed her son. But she kept all her sad thoughts to herself and put all her trust in God, her only hope. How lucky she was that she found a balm in religion that could ease the pain she felt in her heart!

Now let's spend a moment inside the Match factory.

*A boy.* "Look, look at that boy over there! Look how clean he is! Luxury, eh? So well washed, and just look at the handkerchief in his suit pocket! His collar covers half his face!"

*Another boy.* "Hey! Have you got the tools our father Adam used use? Give them to me; I'd like to have some fun. Hey, let me see your handkerchief! You're crying! Why?"

*Yet another boy.* "They are just having fun, don't take any notice of what they say."

Come here. If someone asks you, tell them that I will be showing you what work you have to do.”

The latter who spoke to him this way was the oldest in the group. Reassured a little, Peter went and sat near his protector, and Mrs Boccardi brought him the things he had to work on. He hurriedly set to work so he could earn the eighteen soldi his father was expecting.

Peter was a happy kind of character and he soon established an easy friendship with the other boys, so that conversations got very lively each day and they spoke about many things.

*A friend.* “What does your father do, Peter?”

*Peter.* “My father is a carpenter, and yours?”

*Friend.* “Mine is a labourer. Do you have good fun on Sundays?”

*Peter.* “Yes, I have fun. I go to Mass with my mother, then vespers, then afterwards I go for a walk with my brothers.”

*Friend.* “You go to Mass and vespers, you ... well you ought to see how much more fun I have. My mother says: ‘Off to Mass’ and I say ‘Yes mum I’m going’. Then when I get to the church door I go inside then run out the other door, then I go and play tops with my friends. On Sunday you can come with us, Peter, right?”

*Peter.* “No that won’t be possible because my mother comes with me and then even when she doesn’t come I know that one should go to Mass every Sunday.”

*Friend.* “Well, come at least while they are singing vespers. You’ll see how much fun we have.”

*Peter.* “Even that’s impossible; my mother doesn’t always come with me but she tells me to be there and I obey her because she tells me that disobeying our parents is displeasing to God himself.”

*Friend.* “Then you are a hypocrite if you don’t want to come; go to....”

And despite the frequent insistence of his young work mates, Peter remained unbending, and for two years kept on the straight and narrow path that his mother had always pointed out to him. That is much to his credit, but he had always had such great confidence in his mother; every day he told her what his work mates had said to him. His mother gave him good advice, they prayed together asking for God’s grace and God blessed the boy. He was able to be steadfast in the face of his work mates’ threats and inducements.

## Chapter 2. Preparations.

Things went on like this for two years. Peter earned twenty four soldi instead of eighteen. Mrs Boccardi was happy with him, his father benefited from receiving twenty four soldi a week and knew how to spend the lot in an hour! But when it came time for his First Communion, his good mother found herself with more problems. His father had promised to leave this year free so his wife could attend to Peter's upbringing. But what did he do?

His taste for the tavern had become more overpowering than ever, the other children were getting older, expenses were on the increase and none of the other children was earning a cent.

*Wife.* "John said, "You'll need to be patient, because Peter has to keep working."

*Wife.* "And what about his First Communion?"

*John.* "Do what you can for his First Communion."

*Wife.* "But how can he possibly learn his catechism and go to church to hear explanations?"

*John.* "Do what you like about it but I have decided that he continues working. So off you go Peter, quickly. Get to work."

The poor mother just gave a deep sigh; the child obeyed.

The poor mother was taking a walk through the city when she stopped, filled with sadness, in front of a church. She entered and knelt tearfully before the tabernacle where God, the consoler of the afflicted, dwelt. There, like a child she abandoned herself into her Father's arms, placed before him all the crosses in her heart, begged him to inspire her with some good idea as to how to guide her boy during such an important year as this one of his First Communion. She felt her heart filled with consolation, and leaving the church she went looking for just the right moment to speak with Peter alone and give him appropriate advice. The moment came.

"My dear boy," she began saying to him, "Here we are in the year when you should be making your First Communion and this is the most important thing in your life. You need to prepare yourself with fervent prayer, ready obedience, and by detailed attention to all that the Church requires. One thing that pains me is the little time you will have available to learn the catechism and listen to the explanations from your parish priest."

*Peter.* "Do not worry dear mother. Thanks be to God I have a good memory and good will.

On Sundays I have time to go and apply myself with all due attention. Then on working days I have an hour and a half for lunch; I can finish lunch in half an hour then go off straight away to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales where they offer catechism at midday during Lent. If I can't finish eating before I go to catechism I'll finish later with a slice of bread on my return.



And then, mother dear, if you let me, I'll go back there in the evenings, because they gladly instruct boys there for free. So to put it briefly I will make every effort, and I hope I can study and understand the catechism and be able to pass the exam our parish priest will give me. Indeed at the same time I hope to be able to learn how to read and write; oh how much I want to learn!"

*Mother.* "Dear child, let me embrace you; your words are a real comfort for my afflicted heart."

To further encourage Heaven's favour the poor mother redoubled her care and efforts to temper her husband's unruly character. Although he only gave her twenty of the thirty soldi he earned daily, she knew how to have his supper ready for him when he returned from work. The house was kept very clean; not a grain of dust on the table, the floor always swept, the bed or rather straw palette shaken out and the blankets, little more than rags it is true, were always clean and mended.

She always welcomed her husband with a smile despite his inflexibility, lack of religion and frequent visits to the tavern. She always treated him pleasantly and made every effort to do so in the hope that one day she could get him to mend his ways.

In fact how many men we meet each day who are brutalized and ruined by wine, but would be very different if they could live within the bosom of a family where they could find a warm welcome, a kindly and patient wife, and respectful and submissive children!

The poor woman we are speaking about, convinced of this, did everything she could every day to make the family a pleasant place for her husband, but how much she had to do just to see that he had everything he needed! What economy to make ends meet, how many privations, how many long vigils, how much thankless and unrewarding work, and all this to be able to offer her husband some soup tomorrow that could not be done with the mere one franc he offered her each day!

But let's come back to Peter.

Faithful to the plan agreed on between his mother and himself he worked as before in the same Match factory. By doing some fasting he learned his catechism; he did this by taking up an hour of his lunchtime to go to church. Often his lunch consisted of a piece of bread which he put in his pocket and would eat, partly on the way to, partly on the way back from catechism. Then in the evening he went off punctually to the Oratory to hear an explanation of things that he may not have understood properly at midday. I recall having often seen him of an evening when it was dark and snowing, coming to catechism all on his own. One evening I asked him: "Are you not afraid coming here in such bad weather and all on your own?" "I am not alone," he answered. "Are not the good God and my Guardian Angel excellent companions?"

His young work mates mocked him because of his good behaviour; some of them were also supposed to be making their First Communion that year, but for them and their parents it seemed to be something that could be done in a hurry.

One of them used say: "Last year I was sent off to Confession because I wasn't fasting in Lent, but my father told me not to be silly enough to tell the parish priest these kinds of stories this year of my First Communion."

Another said: "The same thing happened to me, but my mother got my father to agree

that this year we would abstain so I can make my Communion, then we'll go back to how we did things before."

And yet another said: "My father has forbidden me from telling my more serious sins to the priest because that might stop me from making my First Communion; for better or for worse I have to do it this year because that way I can earn more money."

Peter was amazed at these revelations but restrained himself and said just a word or two of disapproval. "I really have nothing to say," he said, "But for sure, someone who goes to Confession and doesn't promise with all his heart to change his life is making a bad Confession; anyone who keeps quiet about a sin and doesn't tell the confessor will not receive forgiveness for his sins and adds sacrilege to his conscience. And those who do not abstain are disobeying the Church which commands us to abstain from meat on Fridays and Saturdays and other vigils."

Meanwhile Peter made sure to tell his mother about all these blunders they were making. The good mother was terrified at knowing that her son was living amongst such badly brought up and badly advised boys. The maternal advice she gave him was in conformity with the healthy morality of the Gospel.

"How unfortunate," she told poor Peter, "How unfortunate it is to have families with little religion and especially not to have good mothers who can keep their hearts away from the bad influence and advice of their fathers. Just remember, dear Peter, that First Communion is the most important thing in your life, and you need a long time to prepare for it, changing your bad habits and practising all the virtues compatible with your age like obedience, being docile, love for work, study of the catechism, respect and proper behaviour in church.

As for the sins you should confess, you need to be sorry for them and also make a resolution not to commit them in future. And even if your family or friends should force you to break the fast, remember that you must obey God before you obey man. Also be careful not to stay quiet about any sin in confession; you need to confess all of them, be sorry for all of them and make a resolution to lead a better life with God's grace. It would be a thousand times better to delay First Communion for a year if your confessor judges it would be better, than to hide a sin so you can do it, because someone who goes to Communion like that is like someone who invites a friend to dinner and then gives him dishes full of poison."

*Peter.* "Don't worry, mother, I've been going to Confession for four years and I have never not told my confessor something I should. Sometimes I don't remember something and he questions me and I immediately tell him."

Thus the good mother continued preparing her son for the most serious moment in his life. How many mothers there are who spend so much effort looking after the body but do nothing for their children's souls! And then what do we say of parents who as well as not caring about the spiritual and eternal good of their children, are actually an obstacle to their eternal salvation by giving scandal by their language and actions? Instead of preparing them properly for Communion, unfortunately they set them on the path to perdition. What a terrible account they must give before God's judgement seat!

## Chapter 3. Confession.

Peter went to catechism classes regularly; he was also obedient to the least indication of his father's. His father was very proud of having a son who was so much better than many of his neighbours' children; and he was not unaware that his son's good qualities were due to the religion his wife had so successfully taught their son to practise.

The day for Communion was approaching and Peter redoubled his fervour.

He used to go to Confession often and had gone to the same confessor for four years. He had always opened every secret of his heart to him and never kept silent about anything in Confession so everything went well for him in Confession. But he wanted to be extra certain about past Confessions that he might not have given due care to for lack of knowledge so he decided to make a general confession.

Firstly he invoked the enlightenment and help of the Holy Spirit so he could remember all his sins, then he made a careful examination of conscience then went to the church and quietly waited his turn to present himself to his confessor. He told all his sins or rather those he judged were culpable without hiding anything or lessening their seriousness. When he had finished he prepared himself with all humility to receive absolution asking God many times to give him the strength to be truly sorry for his sins.

Usually, at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales they held a Triduum to prepare boys to make their Easter Communion well. During the three days of preaching, he was a model for all the others. Seeing him so recollected, so pious, so kind and so good with them, they were envious of him. One of his friends was so moved by Peter's modesty and devotion that he decided to tell a sin that he had kept quiet about in an earlier confession just to please his father.

Another day one of his friends said: "Come here Peter, look in the mirror and comb your hair."

"Oh," he replied, "I prefer to adjust my soul and prepare my heart as a proper place for Jesus."

He made every effort to have a keen sense of repentance and practise all the little virtues of his age.

How many boys and especially older lads there are who are all worried about looking after their good looks rather than embellishing their souls by practising virtue. How many families have no other ambition than to see their children well-dressed so they can look better than their companions when they go to Communion! Peter's mother had no vain ideas like this in her head. She was always busy about things to do with her children and husband, and spent what little time she had left over praying and sewing a nice item of clothing for her firstborn child.

But the poor woman had no money to buy some nice material and had the parish priest not come to her aid good Peter would have run the risk of only having a simple

and somewhat tattered jacket. But underneath those humble clothes what a wonderful soul there was! It was of great consolation to his mother to think about this.

The final day of the Triduum came and Peter had made his general confession and received absolution. It is impossible to describe the fervour with which he prepared himself. No distraction; perfect recollection; he went into the church and went to the confessional where he received forgiveness for his sins. How moved he was when he recited the act of contrition. He was crying when he came out of the confessional. Covering his face with his hands he went to the altar, knelt down, renewed his act of sorrow and told God he would always belong to him and would serve him for the rest of his life. His heart was full of joy and he did not know how to thank God for lowering himself to be so good to a poor creature like him. All his thoughts then turned to the following day when he would be receiving him into his heart, even though he was so poor and the least of all people.

Where would one have found a mortal being who was happier than he was? And full of ideas like this he returned home. Seeing such a radiant look on his son's face his father was amazed, and he became a little more tender; something indescribable was going on in his heart; he went up to his son and embraced him; and filled with joy the latter put his arms around his neck: "Ah, father, if you only knew how lucky I am!"

"Yes, I was thinking about it, my son," his father said, "You will soon be finished with all that First Communion humbug."

"Oh father!," Peter said, "you haven't understood me; It's the most lucky 'humbug' ever! The good God is coming into Peter's heart tomorrow, poor miserable creature he is! The one who made heaven and earth wants me to sit at his table, feed me with his flesh: by receiving him I will be one with him. Do you understand that, father? God has left me fully free to approach him and to give me his immense riches. How many riches I can use for my soul, how many graces I wish to ask for you and my mother! And being so good how can God refuse such favours when he is with me, in me. There is so much I want to say to him! Oh father, you will be so fortunate, because he has said: 'Ask and you shall receive'."

His father was so amazed that he began to say to himself: "There has to be some other happiness than the one found in the bottle; I am envious of my son's contentment, happiness. It seems so pure and undivided; on the contrary my own pleasures are always mixed with bitterness. The time I spend drinking, time I could well spend supporting my wife, is not spent without some sadness. She is so good, so kind to me despite my mistakes."

And right then a generous thought came into Peter's father's mind. "I want to share in this happiness my son will experience tomorrow" he said: "Here," he told his wife, "Take my entire week's wage. I will be here tomorrow, Sunday, and will spend the whole day with you. I will go with Peter to watch his First Communion. See that there is something extra on the table tomorrow, because I want us to be happy, all happy together."

Peter ran and hugged his father, embraced him, kissed him several times. His mother, whose eyes were full of tears, embraced all the children, and they all gathered around their lucky father, giving him a thousand caresses. And for his part he felt such a pure joy that he had never experienced in the past; family life and the happiness of a soul at

peace were revealed to him.

Before going to bed that night Peter wanted to make amends and ask forgiveness of his parents for all the things he had done wrong in the past, and he did this in front of everyone else at home. In some places this ceremony happens in church with the children all together, just before they make their Communion; in other places it is done in the family.

“Forgive me,” Peter said, “Forgive me, dear parents, for all the displeasure I have caused you, though I believe you cannot overlook the offences I have committed. I hope that God has already forgiven me and you will complete my happiness if you tell me I can be sure of your forgiveness; you see a poor repentant boy before you who is promising unlimited obedience and respect in the future.”

“Of course you are forgiven!”

Seeing Peter and meeting his gaze, his father was moved to tears, and almost beside himself as he said: “My poor boy here you are asking me for forgiveness and I should be asking it and throwing myself at your feet, begging mercy for a father who has been a tyrant.” He was about to break down sobbing.

Covering his face with his hands he wept, but they were sweet tears because they came from repentance.

After evening prayer, said with more fervour than usual, Peter went off to bed and fell straight asleep. His father came to him and contemplated the face of his son lying on his straw mattress. It was a face of innocence and happiness, peaceful, with a half smile that made him look like an angel. Thoroughly moved, he went off to bed himself, but that night he could not sleep; remorse was getting to him; a good resolution came to him; he thought of his past life, and the happiness he once enjoyed; he thought of Peter’s happiness and tranquility; and meanwhile there was a terrible struggle going on in him between good and evil; the only way he could find peace was to renew his resolve to spend all Sunday with his family.

## Chapter 4. Communion day

As soon as he awoke, Peter's first thought was an act of adoration and love, turning his heart to God whom he would be receiving that very morning. Having made this offer of his heart to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and consecrated his whole day to him, he got up and dressed himself with all due modesty. Let us not think that the sight of his new, decent clothes would have made the slightest impression on him, although it would have been the first time he had seen himself so decently dressed, since his usual clothing was ill-fitting and patched. But what is clothing for the body compared to a soul that adorns itself with virtue, carefully avoids the least little vanity, the slightest defect that could displease the guest who wants to take up his abode there?

Meanwhile the bells were ringing and the children were all lining up for church, one so proud of his nice clothes, the other all boastful because he was seen there with his family or because everyone was looking at him. Peter was humble and took no notice of anyone; he was dressed in clothes that came from the parish priest's charity, and he went off to church with exemplary composure.

What did it matter to him to have all the good things on this earth if he were not going there to soon possess the riches of Heaven, take part in the Heavenly feast, go to the same table as his lucky companions, and attract heavenly favours on himself and his family? Accompanied by his father he entered the church; his composure and simplicity shone through each of his movements; his gaze was fixed on the altar; not a word, not even a smile for his companions. His father looked at him, filled with emotion; he stood still, his eyes fixed on the angelic figure.

When Mass began he had new cause for wonder when he saw his son reading from a book. He recognised his wife's goodness and her diligence in bringing up this dear child. Meanwhile they began reading aloud the prayer of preparation for Communion that the children say alternatively. How much attention Peter gave those prayers! With what a fervent heart he read them! How humble he was before God! How unworthy he saw himself of the great favour he was awaiting! With what emotion he renewed his acts of sorrow for having offended a God who is so good and worthy of being loved! With what firm resolution he promised to avoid anything in the future that could harm his soul!

Finally the great moment that he had so long desired arrived. The dear boy said three times: "Lord, I am not worthy of the honour you do me, I am not worthy for you to come into my heart I receive you only by trusting in your mercy: Jesus, Jesus come and take possession of my heart." Having said these words he put his tongue out over his innocent lips and received the God of Heaven and earth, the sovereign of the heavenly choirs who adore him reverently.

At that moment Peter was no longer the child of a poor labourer but an angel. He possessed in his heart the one who makes us truly happy, the only happiness in life; he

possessed God. He seemed radiant, his heart overflowing with joy, thanksgiving, and he repeated firmly that he would never abandon his duties. He talked with Jesus one to one. After having spoken of his poverty, his needs, the weaknesses of his soul, and after having asked him for some special graces, he began saying in his heart: "My good Jesus, I possess you in my soul, and your goodness to a poor creature encourages me to ask you for one more very big favour. I have a father who has seen my happiness in church, as you have seen: Oh my Jesus! I do not want to accuse him before you, but I can tell you that he is far from the practices of your holy religion. His soul has not been nourished by your adorable blood for a long time; bad friends have led him to certain places he should not be going to. Change his heart, O my good Jesus, have him return to you.

You have said: 'Ask and you shall receive': so I turn to you with so much confidence. I insist, lovable Saviour, that I will never abandon you whole there is a ray of hope in my heart.

My poor mother, my good Jesus, reward her for all the good she has done for me; give her patience, the strength to complete my upbringing and that of my brothers and sisters; make her husband worthy of her virtue; and may the peace and happiness of pure souls begin to reign amongst us. Oh Jesus, we are very poor but I am not asking you to let us have more; I only ask for your love, your grace for me and my parents, and that we may always do your holy will."

During this intimate talk his face radiated the emotions of his soul. His father, his eyes constantly fixed on him, would have liked to have gone to his son and bathed him in his tears but he did not want to interrupt the thanksgiving he had begun. Peter then recited alternatively with the others the prayers that are usually said after Communion, then he went to a corner of the church and spent half an hour reading a devout book. Then, to please his father and mother, filled with contentment at this greatest act in his life, he obeyed his parents and went home with them.

Throughout that memorable day Peter was a constant model for the other boys and anyone who saw him. After a frugal lunch, which his fortunate father and his still more fortunate mother were also present for, he went back to the church to hear a short sermon that evening, meant to encourage all those who had made their Communion that morning to persevere in doing good. His father also wanted to go back with him. Peter, who was filled with thoughts of his God, was saddened to see how the boys who had made their Communion that morning were just frittering away their time that evening. Another praiseworthy custom they have in some places, and it would be good if they did it everywhere, is the renewal of baptismal vows on the same morning that the children are making their Easter Communion. And because this was not usually the case amongst us, Peter wanted it done at home in God's presence and in the presence of his parents and the rest of the family.

So kneeling down, with a small crucifix in his hands, he said in a steady, loud voice; "I renounce forever the devil, all his pomp and works, and I promise to consecrate myself to Jesus for my entire life." His father could no longer handle these tender, sublime words. He felt his heart breaking; "I made this promise too," he said, but did I keep it? For me First Communion was a mere formality to be accomplished. If only I had had a mother like Peter's, I certainly would not have abandoned the Sacraments the very same year

I made my Communion. I would have been happy, my home would have been honestly managed and the family would have been happy. Oh Peter! You have let me know how happy you are; forgive your father. My God, forgive a poor man like me; and since you have been so good as to make my son happy like this, I also hope you will not reject my repentance and my resolve to begin a new life, because I would like to be as lucky as my son, and make my family happy.”

And that evening, it seems that God’s peace came to that family. How sweet it was for all their hearts! How happy were mother and son now that the head of the family was with them. And what unspeakable joy was the father’s, a joy that he hoped to preserve for the rest of his life!

That evening they prayed together, the father playing his part for the first time. Who can imagine the poor wife’s consolation seeing her husband kneeling there with the rest of the family! No one could possibly measure up to her happiness. Just the same she had one fear; “Will these good intentions last?” she asked herself? I will pray with all my heart, and Peter, who is so intimate with the good God, will also ask God to listen to us and fulfil our wish.

Before going to bed Peter opened the window that looked out towards the church, and with one more thought for the One who had given himself to him that morning he said: “Just one final greeting, my good Jesus. May I remain yours now and forever.” Then with his heart filled with these holy thoughts, his mind once more thinking of God, he went to sleep in the embrace of his Guardian Angel.



[Chapter five is missing in the original]

## Chapter 6. The father's conversion.

On Monday it was decided that Peter would return to work at the Match factory until he was twelve, and that in the evenings he would go to school to learn to read and write better. The father worked as usual all that morning then after midday, according to his earlier sad custom, he left the workshop. His wife, who was very anxious, saw all this and was deeply upset when she knew that he was no longer at work.

One of his mates had enticed him back down to the tavern.

"What's up with you," his friend asked him, "Why so sad? Has your wife been beating you?"

This last mocking jibe reminded him of what he had been thinking of the day before.

*John.* "I find myself here," he said, "but it's not where I should be; I am not fulfilling my duties here, am not doing what I should be doing. So goodbye. I'm going."

*Friend.* "Come on, Is it Peter that's affected your mind? Because they told me that yesterday you were an impostor—in church. So away with all this melancholy, be happy: cheers, here's to happiness: church is good for women and children."

*John.* "Yes, but my wife and boy are luckier than me; their conscience is at peace, while I am suffering terribly."

*Friend.* "Relax. Have a drink, two drinks and you will see how good times return."

*John.* "No, that's impossible."

*Friend.* "Look! I've got the solution. Madam (to the innkeeper) bring us your best bottle. Here is the remedy for all ills, drink up; to your wife's health, and mine!"

Just then Peter went past on the way to work: his father saw him and it was like a bolt of lightning striking him. He stood up suddenly and ran to the door shouting,

"Peter, Peter, listen, come here my dear boy."

*Peter.* "Oh father, whatever are you asking me! You know what I promised God yesterday, so let's have a hug but then I'm off to work."

Poor Peter was sad when he went to the Match factory. But he decided to say nothing but rather to redouble his prayers for his poor father. Meanwhile John went back in to the tavern, but he seemed to be dumb; his friend noticed and began talking to him: "I'm telling you my friend, it's your boy that has affected your mind. Mine made his Communion yesterday too. Your boy has been fooled, don't crucify him, he will be what you want him to be. Let him go to church when he wants; I would never stop him but when he becomes an adult he will be just like his father and mother, so ... Ah! ah! To your health, and away with any melancholy!"

Far from making him laugh, all this idiotic behaviour just weighed even more on his heart; the thought of his wife and Peter were fixed in his memory.

*John.* "It is impossible for me to laugh my friend. I am not finishing this glass. Good afternoon, I'm going, I'll see you another time." And with that, he left.

*Friend.* "Oh! Listen John, wait, just one more thing." But John had left and never went back.

"So," his friend said, "Just look at that impostor, following the platitudes of his wife and children."

*Another friend.* "True, but he's not completely wrong because he does have a virtuous wife and has such a good and well-deserving son. He loves his father, and he doesn't answer back like mine does! When I think that yesterday morning, after he got back home after Communion he treated me like his dog! What's he going to be like later when he's eighteen or twenty! He will have no faith, will not be able to read, and he will treat his father and his commands just like I used to do once. So we need to admit it, it is religion that has made John's wife so virtuous, his son so obedient and respectful; it is religion that brings good fortune to the family. Certainly if I had had a wife like his, and if my son had been brought up like his, I would not be so unlucky and not forced to relieve my sorrows in life through the bottle."

But where did Peter's father go? He was almost out of his mind, wandering from the square to the streets without knowing where he wanted to go. And without realising it he found himself in front of the church where he had found such consolation the day before. "Go on," he said to himself, "Peter's and my wife's God is here; I'm going in, whatever happens." His steps led him irresistibly to the altar where he had witnessed his son's happiness; mechanically he knelt down. Going back over his thoughts from the day before, he felt such regret and emotion that he dissolved into tears. He was there for a long time caught up in his meditation when he felt the priest tap him on the shoulder. Thinking that the man was distraught with some terrible cross, the good priest took him by the arm and led him to the sacristy. "You seem to be weighed down by some terrible sorrow" he said to him, "so tell me your troubles. I am a minister of the God of consolation; What can I do to help you?"

All he got was a deep sigh.

*Father.* "Speak, my friend, I am just a poor priest who has seen all kinds of misery, and nothing that has happened to a human being will disturb me, so open your heart to me and tell me. You are speaking to a friend."

Encouraged by these kind words, words that he had never heard from his false friends, he spoke of his impressions of the day before, his sighs, his promises, his wife's kindness and loveliness, and his first-born's obedience and tenderness.

*Father.* "Well, my friend, then it is your wish to be worthy of your family and regain the friendship of the God who has been so good to your son!"

*John.* "Yes! This is what I want, and my soul has been in constant torment since yesterday."

*Father.* "It is not torment, my friend, but grace which is lifting you up, and God who is reminding you of your sins and his infinite goodness. It is your wife's and your son's prayers that have been heard in Heaven. So courage my friend. Make a good confession, a firm resolve to change your life, and this will be the remedy for your torment. So good friend, do you want to confide the sorrows of your soul in me?"

*John.* "I want this with all my heart, because you seem to me to be a very good man, but what will my friends say?"

*Father.* "Is it friends like those who will give you the happiness you do not have? Look at what your friends are worth. They are only good to get you drinking, wasting your money, staying away from a wife and a son who love you, and from the others who surely love you. Leave them to say what they want, show them you are a man and that you have a manly will and approach that shows no embarrassment at doing its duty. After they have spoken about you and laughed at you they will fall silent, then will praise you and will finally say to themselves: 'At least he has willingly chosen to do his duty'."

*John.* "You are right; see, my wife thinks I am at the tavern, and I was led there by my old habits; a friend induced me and I could no longer keep away: then I left and began wandering from street to street until I found myself in front of the church and went in ..."

*Father.* "Well, my friend, the Lord God brought you here; he loves you very much as you know. He wants to restore your peace of mind and give your family back its happiness. So my friend, listen to his voice, I feel compassion for you; you are not happy. Take my advice: kneel down and make a good confession and you will soon feel peace in your heart."

The sacrifice of self love was made, and human respect overcome. Amidst tears and sighs he made his first Confession and then set aside a time the following day to continue.

His long-remorseful soul was given a soothing balm; an ineffable joy shone from him. Like someone who had found a great treasure, John hurried off home filled with joy. His wife was astounded when she saw her husband arrive so happy, and even more so arriving home long before he usually would on a Monday.

"Where are you coming from, John?" she asked.

"I'm coming from the tavern, then from the church," John said. "I said good bye to one of them forever, and in the other I met the good priest who saw me all upset, so I told him all my troubles and he encouraged me to apply the only remedy - Confession. I was really moved by his kindness so I did what he asked me, and here I am all happy; I am giving my wife back her husband, my children a father who had abandoned them for such a long time."

It would not be possible to express the poor wife's emotions, and Peter's happiness when he found out that his father had said goodbye to gambling and the tavern and gone to the church to go to Confession. We would need a book to express the family's happiness, reunited around the head of the family who had changed his behaviour and found God's grace through absolution for his sins. He received into his own heart a God whom he had offended for so long.

Despite their poverty, joy took root in that family because they were all practising their religion, the only source of true happiness. Great kindness reigned amongst them, because on Sundays and Mondays the husband was no longer squandering the savings of an entire week in a single day. His good and attentive wife found a way to save something so she could offer her husband a gift of a half litre after Sunday lunch, so he would not be totally deprived of the things that filled him with delight at the tavern.

They all went to the functions in church, and after the sermon and Benediction the father and his children went for a walk, and during winter spent their time at home in the family. Sometimes the father and Peter would come here to us to spend the evening

in pleasant, honest recreation, and took part in the plays, comedies or other things that used happen at the Oratory on winter weekend evenings.

Work continued on Mondays like every other day of the week.

John's friends joked about him for a while because of his new life style; but they soon tired of that and it was replaced by esteem and he inspired them by his good behaviour.

Morning and evening they prayed together; they all went to Confession and Communion; you would often see father, mother and children go to Confession one after the other then all devoutly make their Communion.

Thus a family that had been in desolation for a number of years because the father had abandoned his family, carelessly forgotten his duties as a husband and Christian and ignored his religion returned, after twelve years of tribulation, to days of peace and tranquility, since only religion or God's grace can make a man content and happy.

## Chapter 7. The vicissitudes of youth.

The reader would certainly want to know how this story continued and I am happy to satisfy that wish. But to keep things fairly brief I judge it better to leave out some details concerning Peter's parents and just keep to facts regarding himself.

I will begin by referring to the resolutions from his First Communion and showing how he observed these as he grew up.

One day I happened to find a devotional book and opening it I saw a scrawled and badly spelled note. I read it and saw that it was something Peter had written to recall his First Communion. Despite the language, as you can imagine would be the case for an eleven year old just beginning to learn to read and write, just the same it testifies to the simplicity and importance of its contents which I intend to give you without any corrections, convinced that it can be a model for anyone making his First Communion. So here it is.

“Rule of life set out by me, Peter, on the lucky day that I made my First Communion on 12 April 1845 when I turned eleven.

I will kneel down and in God's presence and promise that tomorrow, as soon as I have received the host I will make the following resolutions so I can save my soul.

1. I promise that God will always be my father, and Mary my mother, and I will love and obey both of them.

2. I will go to Confession every fortnight or once a month and to Communion with permission from my confessor.

3. I will make Sundays holy by always going to Mass, the sermon and Benediction.

4. I will read something from a devotional book every day, and say a Hail Mary each day for my father and mother so they can be saved.

5. I will humbly ask Jesus when he is with me for two special graces: first, that I will be able to avoid all bad companions; secondly that I will be able to preserve the virtue of modesty to the end of my life like St Aloysius did.

6. I will re-read and renew these resolutions once a month kneeling before a crucifix. Amen.

Holy Mary, save my soul and the souls of my father, mother, brothers and sisters. Amen”

These are the resolutions Peter made at his First Communion. As we can all easily recognise, Peter had taken some of the ideas he had heard in sermons at the Triduum he made in preparation for Easter, and adjusted them so they could more easily apply to himself. However that may be, he gave himself the sacred duty of observing them.

Before giving him back the book with its memento, I asked him if he had kept these promises he had written down as a reminder, until now. “Until now, yes,” he said, “And I

hope to keep them until I die. I think it would be a terrible lie if you tell God something and don't keep it."

When he turned thirteen, Peter's parents, seeing him able to tackle a better profession, placed him at a Cotton factory. This new job, although it earned him a little more money in temporal terms, was somewhat of an obstacle to his religious practices because his employer, sometimes pretending work was urgent, and sometimes giving him particular work to do, made him work almost all of Sunday. Poor me, Peter thought, God told us to keep Sundays holy, and I am forced to profane them; how will God bless efforts like these! He spoke to his parents about it, and both were sorry that they had let their son stay with employment. His mother used often say: "You can imagine, Peter, how sorry I am seeing you spend most of the Lord's day doing profane work. But I don't know what to do. I have spoken with the parish priest, and he advised me to be patient because there is nothing else can be done; but meanwhile we should try to find other work and put up with the employer until such time as we find something better."

Providence came to Peter's aid, proving that earnings from Sundays and other Holy Days bring ruin to all the work during the week. Here is how it happened. First there was a fire at the factory; then the employer went broke; two of his children died; his wife fell sick for more than a year; he was forced to sell his factory to others and became a simple worker rather than the owner.

While he was with the employer, how was Peter to practise his religion? Whoever wants to do things well finds time to do so. Every Sunday, getting up very early, before he went off to work he went to Mass, after which there was the sermon. After lunch if he could, he still went to instruction; otherwise he went to Benediction late in the evening in some church. He found some time to go to Confession.

If there was no other possibility, he went to his usual confessor on Saturday evenings, then went to Communion on Sunday morning; sometimes he went to Confession on Sunday evening and Communion on Monday early, before going off to work. He also persevered in reading a little bit each day from some devotional book and since he often had little time, he carried *The Companion of Youth* in his pocket with him, and would read some of it while coming from or going to work. He tried to memorise and 'ruminate' on them as he used say, and sometimes would repeat them to his work mates.

Peter's next employer was more humane and more Christian than the first. Having learned from his predecessor's disasters, and fully aware that God had commanded that Sundays be kept holy, bringing blessings on whatever was accomplished during the week, he looked after his workers and saw that they all had time; on Saturday evening he ordered the business to be closed and it would not open until Monday. This decision brought him good fortune. Everyone liked working for him; they all found time to fulfil their duties, nobody took Mondays off and his business prospered.

Peter also gained much from his employer who, noticing his fidelity, punctuality, hard work, soon increased his daily earnings from ten to fifteen *soldi*. Meanwhile because he regularly attended evening classes, Peter was coming on with his arithmetic and metric system, with Italian grammar, and his employer gave him the job of keeping the register for a number of his work mates, keeping an eye on things to see that there were no arguments, and that no breakdowns occurred with the cotton and thread machines. His

work mates were happy; they could not have had a more patient and kind assistant; the employer was happy because it would have been hard to find a more faithful and diligent person than him to entrust things to. And Peter too was happy with these responsibilities because while checking that people were working he could also stop some of the blaspheming or taking the Lord's name in vain, or bad conversations. What else? When someone loves God, things go well. Seeing Peter's good behaviour, and the benefits that came from it, the employer increased his pay several times. Peter was by now only seventeen but he was earning ten francs a week. This was a real stroke of Providence, because his father had been sick for a few months and could no longer work all day, so keeping the family was almost entirely up to Peter.

How often his good mother blessed the time she had spent in his upbringing! How often his father thanked Divine Providence for having given him a wife who had known how to instill religious principles in her Peter's heart. He was now the consolation and support of the entire family.



## Chapter 8. Some particular details.

Let's not think that Peter did not have some bad moments because youth is a risky time, and such risks can be found anywhere and amongst all kinds of people. Peter had many difficulties but with his courage and the help of God's grace he freed himself from them without being drawn into wrongdoing. Let me tell you about some of these.

One Feast Day, it was the Feast of St Peter, some of his friends invited him to go with them to a party. "Come Peter," they said, "We will pay."

*Peter.* "Thanks friends, I will willingly go but only after the functions at church."

*Friends.* "Ok so we can go after church; there will still be time."

*Peter.* "We go and do what God asks first, then what people want afterwards."

*Friend.* "If we go to church, you will come later, won't you?"

*Peter.* "Yes certainly, on one condition you already know about."

*Friend.* "What's that?"

*Peter.* "No bad talk."

Because they wanted Peter to come with them, he was such pleasant company, but also because their parents wanted them to go, they went to vespers, the sermon and Benediction. But then afterwards when they went off for something to eat, an unexpected and troubling event arose for Peter. St Peter's Feast that year occurred on Friday, and the young men, whether they had done so out of good or bad faith, had prepared a meat dish. Peter immediately saw the problem he was faced with. "I can see you have done well," he told his friends.

*One friend.* "Meaning what, Peter?"

*Peter.* "Did you not realise it is Friday? We Catholics are not allowed to eat meat on Friday."

*Friend.* "That's true, we didn't think about it, but what can we do at this hour? What's done is done."

*Peter.* "It is still Friday despite the hour, and the Church's obligation doesn't stop because of it."

*FRIEND.* "But we forgot about it and we didn't do it intentionally."

*Peter.* "But if we eat meat we will be thinking about it and we will be doing it intentionally."

*Friend.* "Peter, I'm sure that just for once we can overlook it."

*Peter.* "I know that it is forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, Saturdays, and other vigils; nor can I see that you can do so unless there is a serious reason, like maybe a serious illness."

*Another friend.* "Peter, leave it all to my conscience; once, yes, it was forbidden but now everyone eats it."

*Peter.* “You are very kind to put all this on your conscience but if I go to Hell then you won’t be coming down to pull me out! I have never heard it said that you can disobey the precepts of the Church without sinning.”

*Friend.* “But these days everyone’s doing it.”

*Peter.* “Excuse me but that’s not true, that everyone’s doing it: I know many who abstain on days they should abstain; so when someone says that everyone’s doing it, are they saying maybe there’s no room left in Hell for everyone? Maybe these days the Lord is not around any more. Is it God who commands? Times change, people change, but divine law never changes.”

*Friend.* “It is not God who tells us to fast but the Church.”

*Peter.* “But God governs the Church, so what the Church commands, God commands.”

*Friend.* “But Peter, be patient: what’s the problem for the Lord if I have a slice of salami this evening, or a piece of cheese?”

*Peter.* “What was the problem for the Lord if Adam ate the fruit or didn’t eat it?”

And you know what terrible punishment he suffered. Friend, in the things that God commands we should not ask how they matter to God, but what the consequences are for us. I can’t stop you from eating this; I could forbid you maybe, if I could; but I will not be eating it.”

*Friend.* “But don’t you know, Peter, that you can eat this when there is a serious enough reason: when my parents are ill they do not take any notice of Fridays.”

*Peter.* “What you say is ok but I see no serious reason here; we are in the best of health.”

*Friend.* “So what do you want to do with all this stuff?”

*Peter.* “I am your friend and companion, I am not your bursar. This stuff can be kept or used in some other way, but not eaten.”

*Another friend.* “Listen up, Peter. You know well enough that this is a time of political freedom, constitutions; a time when everyone can write, think, speak, do what he likes.”

*Peter.* “The freedom you are speaking of has no place in things commanded or forbidden by legitimate authority, much less by God. There is no constitution in Heaven that can abrogate the divine law, and for God’s precepts there is no freedom to do and think as you like; the holy law is eternal, to be obeyed as much today as it was in the past; no human being can introduce the least change to it. So if you want to insist on freedom, then let’s do it like this: I will leave you in complete freedom to eat whatever you want, because I cannot stop you and you will certainly have the courtesy to allow me the freedom to eat what I want.”

At these words no one made any further comment to Peter and leaving aside any further discussion they sat down at table to eat and Peter with them. All eyes were on Peter. He happily took a slice of bread with cherries and began eating heartily. Seeing this one of them said: “If Peter is eating like this I want to follow him,” and leaving the chicken and salami aside that was already on his plate, he took a slice of cheese.

A second, then a third, then a fourth did the same.

Only three were left eating meat. And although they seemed to regret being interrupted, nevertheless, confused by the others’ example, and feeling the remorse of their conscience, they too began eating fruit and cheese. They all ate happily.

Peter could not contain the joy he felt at seeing that he had succeeded in preventing his friends from offending the Lord. When the meal was over Peter amused his friends with some innocent games and stories because, although somewhat reserved, Peter was always cheerful and good at conversation, and when he was with others he could be the life of the party.

After the fun they were about to say good night. As each one was about to go home, Peter greeted them thus: "You gave me great pleasure today my friends by giving me a chance to honour the Saint whose name I bear. But my consolation was even greater when I saw everyone abstaining. You will all be dear friends of mine in the future, and since you were paying today, let me invite you the day after tomorrow, Sunday evening, to eat some meat and everything at my expense. My parents love me very much and they will join in our good cheer." His friends accepted the invitation and the following Sunday after fulfilling their religious duties they went to Peter's place. His parents wanted to celebrate Peter's name day, and they were very happy with the party especially his mother who saw that nothing was missing that could contribute to a true feast for friends.

Thus Peter had the consolation of seeing his friends going to church and preventing them from violating the Church's precepts. Furthermore they became Peter's best friends and continued going to church with him on Sundays, never omitting what a good Catholic should do to keep these days holy. How much good a courageous and truly Christian friend can do when he does not let human respect win out!

## Chapter 9. His outstanding devotion.

The Lord tells us that the road a young man takes when he is young he will continue along as he gets older, into his manhood, his old age and until he goes to his grave. Happy are those who give themselves to God as a young man! They already have an almost certain reward in eternal salvation. This was Peter's happy lot. He gave himself to God in good time, and as he grew in years he also grew wonderfully in virtue. What is most wonderful is that the more he strove to be known before God, the more hidden he became before man.

Here I shall point to some things regarding Peter's outstanding devotion.

On Sundays at our place after church we usually had some games at the Oratory, so that the boys who came could spend some time in pleasant and honest recreation. Peter used come, talk with, and encourage the others in their games, but he rarely took part himself. What was he doing? When the rest were running around, singing, playing and the like, I would see him quietly pull aside from the games and slip into church. And keeping an eye on him, without him noticing me, I saw that he was slipping away to make a quiet visit to the Blessed Sacrament, say the Rosary, and make the Stations of the Cross.

I asked him to tell me one day in confidence why he chose that time to pray, and what particular purpose he had in mind for his prayers and he told me: "I choose this time because with all the others busy with their games I know I won't be disturbed. And I direct all these prayers in suffrage for the souls in Purgatory. Poor souls," he said emotionally, "Poor souls! We can pray for them so they can be with God in Heaven soon; would it not be an act of cruelty not to do whatever we can to help them?"

But despite his diligence in choosing a time he would not be disturbed, some of his friends noticed his devotion and followed his example. That is where the custom came from, and it is one we still keep today, of saying the Rosary after Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament for anyone who wants to, without any obligation, while most of the boys are having fun in the playground.

His heart was so good and affectionate that it enjoyed spending time with spiritual matters. You only needed to mention Heaven to him, God's love or his goodness, and he became all emotional. One day while I was there with some of his friends around I said to him: "Peter, if you continue as good as this what a great feast we will have one day in Heaven with the Lord! We will be with him always, enjoy him, love him for all eternity!" I said this almost casually but it produced such an effect that I saw him go white and he fainted and would almost certainly have fallen had not his friends caught.

I also remember something that happened at Giaveno when a number of boys had gone there to make a retreat. At the beginning of each of the talks he would sit in some corner to see what topic the preacher was going to speak about. And I saw that sometimes he

would gradually move up closer to the speaker, and at other times he would hurry out of the church. When I saw this happen a few times I wanted to know why so I asked him one day: "Peter, what's all this, and why don't you go straight to the assigned place with the others? Why stop at the back of the church?"

"I do that" he said, " so I don't disturb the others."

"How is it," I asked "that you might disturb them?" And he replied:

"You see, if the preacher is speaking about mortal sin, I can't handle it; I feel my heart breaking and I either need to leave the church or shout out."

And so I now knew why he would suddenly leave the Oratory church, sometimes really in a hurry, or why sometimes he would cry out or get very agitated. This is why, if I noted he was at the talk, I tried to temper my words; but all that was needed was the words 'mortal sin' said with a bit of emotion and he would jump up and go. So that is why he usually stayed near the church door.

These things, according to the spiritual masters, demonstrate two important truths.

Firstly they demonstrate how pure and innocent Peter's soul was, if he had such sentiments whenever he heard or spoke of spiritual matters. Secondly it shows how deeply rooted was his aversion to evil; this was a sure sign he would continue in virtue in the future.

Despite the many things he had to do at his employment and at home, he found time for prayer and other religious practices. In the morning he would get up early, go to Mass, say his ordinary prayers and the Rosary, and would often go to Communion. At noon he had two hours free time, but instead of playing games or lying down somewhere like most others usually did, he would help his parents at home, or go over lessons with some of his younger brothers and sisters, and then a quarter of an hour before he needed to go back to the workshop he would already be there, handing out work to his work mates as they came back.

He occupied every minute of his time, and where he could he joined prayer with his work. Coming or going to work, or when he had things to do in some other place, if he was alone he would be praying. At this point I would not like to overlook one thing that I was witness to.

One evening as night was falling I was walking home along the road that comes from the Po to Porta Palazzo. When I got to a certain point along the road a young lad arrived carrying a long and heavy wooden pole, nailed together with heavy iron nails. He seemed to be groaning under the heavy load, and seemed to be saying something. Poor boy, I said to myself, he must be very tired. As I got closer to him I saw him bowing his head every now and again, like you do at the Glory be to the Father..., Or rather other moments of veneration: so I was aware that in fact he was praying. It was Peter.

"Peter," I said to him "You look very tired!"

*Peter.* "Not so much; I went to do a job for my employer, to bring back this cylinder for a broken machine that can now be fixed."

*I.* "You seemed to be speaking. Who was with you?"

*Peter.* "Ah you see, this morning I could not go to Mass, so I didn't say the Rosary, and since I found myself alone on the road I was saying it while I was walking. I really wanted to say it today because it is Tuesday, the day one of my aunties died, and she was

good to me and did many things for me. So having no other way to show my gratitude, every Tuesday I say the Rosary for her soul.”

What a fine example that could be imitated by those who have received some favour. Prayer is such an easy thing to do, and it is so effective as a way of saying thanks for those who have benefited in some way.

## Chapter 10. He leaves home.

There was something that worried the whole family. It was the military service that Peter had to undergo. The ballot chose him and Peter had to enlist in the army. You just can't describe his parent's desolation.

"Woe is me!", his by now sickly old father was saying, "Here am I approaching old age; my strength and health are gone; I cannot earn a living; Peter was my only support. And now he has gone to the army; oh woe is me and my poor family! Desolation and misery will see me to me grave."

*Peter.* "Do not worry, father, as citizens we have to serve our country. We have to recognise God's will even in things like this. It can happen to anyone, so we need to be patient and resigned. I certainly do not want to make you sad for fear of poverty.

But let's put our trust in God; if we observe his law he will not fail to come to our aid."

*His Father.* "But who will help me?"

*Peter.* "God will be our help; my mother will continue to help you, and two of my brothers have now begun to earn something; and I will not cease doing what I can to help you."

His mother, who was always good and solicitous for her son's spiritual welfare even more than for the temporal welfare of the family, on the evening before Peter left, took him into a room that was somewhat apart and taking her son by the hand said: "Peter, tomorrow you leave home, and your parents; who knows if we will see each other again in this life. How many strange thoughts are weighing down my mind at the moment!"

*Peter.* "Don't cry, mother, you worry me so much speaking like this."

*Mother.* "I am not crying because you are leaving. I am a Christian and I know my duties to God and the country! But my dear Peter, just thinking about the fact that you have spent twenty years under my eyes and have been so good, always loved your religion, always gone to the Sacraments, always kept far away from bad friends, and now I see you leave to become a soldier where there are so many perils, whether in the people you have to mix with or the places you will be sent to. This is what afflicts me, makes me sad and worried about what might happen to your soul."

*Peter.* "I understand mother, your fears are well founded. But I have already seen to this at least in part. This morning I went to Confession and Communion and with God's help I will be able to keep my good resolutions and observe the rule I have already established. I am sure I can avoid offending God."

*Mother.* "Will you be brave enough to avoid anything that might offend God?"

*Peter.* "I hope so; and that is what I have already promised and continue to promise before this picture of Our Lady whom I have always honoured as my loving mother since

my First Communion; I promise, I say, to continue in the Lord's service, take no heed of those who speak evil, and keep up my prayer and the Sacraments as I have done so far."

*Mother.* "These words of yours, Peter, give me great consolation, and since we are here in front of the image of Our Lady, let us make this agreement: you will not let a day go without praying to Our Lady so that she may keep you free from sin; and every evening before going to bed I will come and kneel before this picture wherever you are and beg the graces and blessings of this merciful mother."

At this point both of them were moved to tears. The father had noticed and he joined them in the room and then the other children came and it was the most moving scene you could imagine in the world. They were all weeping, sobbing, sighing. They looked at each other tearfully without saying a word, until Peter, gathering his courage said, "It is time that we raised our eyes to Heaven and resigned ourselves to God our Creator. Let us offer him this sorrowful separation in expiation for our sins. Good night, let us get some sleep."

His sorrowing parents were comforted by their son's tender words and offered up their sorrow to God as a sacrifice and went off to bed, but they couldn't sleep a wink.

The following morning before leaving, Peter gathered all his brothers and sisters together around his father's bed, since he was forced to remain there through illness, and in his usual kind way he recommended that they all keep Sundays holy; he asked his brothers to avoid bad companions and blasphemy. Amongst other things he told them: "If you love God, serve him and are obedient to your mother and father, you will have great spiritual and temporal blessings.

And mother, please continue to take care of my father. He is not well and therefore even more worthy of our compassion and solicitude.

And father. I recommend patience and resignation: we are not wealthy and therefore you will have to put up with things but the Lord will take account of everything. Although I have to go far away from you, I will not cease to think of you, and I will send whatever help I am able to. Meanwhile father, take ..."

"What are you giving me, Peter?" his father asked, astonished.

"Take this," Peter said lovingly. "These are the savings I have made over the past years. You and my mother used give me whatever I needed for my small pleasures, so I can do no less; I am keeping some for myself to pay for when I first go to my regiment but the rest I leave for you and I am leaving you two hundred and fifty francs. Goodbye everyone, and take courage."

Peter wanted to go, his father wanted to speak and could not do so out of emotion, but he held his hand; meanwhile making every effort he could he said: "Come closer Peter, and listen to these words which may be the last you will ever hear from your father: leave consoled, may Heaven bless you, and may this thought be your consolation that through your efforts you brought great consolation and support to your father and saved his soul through your good behaviour."

Peter was happy to see his parents so resigned to God's will, and left to join the regiment he had been assigned to.



## Chapter 11. Life in the army.

It is a fact that army life is full of dangers for good souls, although officers and simple soldiers of good conduct and truly Christian courage are not lacking; nevertheless because of idleness, especially in time of peace, or because of the godless books and papers that are everywhere, the conversations they have, certain places and certain kinds of people they come across out of sheer duty, it is rare to find people return from military service with the holiness of life and upright behaviour they had when they left home. Peter was amongst the few blessed by God and favoured by his grace.

He had decided not to omit any of the religious practices that were compatible with his military status, so on the first day he reached the corps, when it was supper time, before eating he made the usual sign of the cross and a brief prayer that he was unable to finish because interrupted by a long oh! oh! oh!

“He is a friar,” said one;

“He’s pretending” said another: “oh! oh”

Peter, without being discouraged, all relaxed, said, “What’s the problem? Maybe I didn’t make the sign of the cross properly? Let me do it again and I will try to do it better.”

So he made the sign of the cross and said his prayer again and the murmuring continued. He did the same when he had finished eating, but with a little less reaction this time.

During the day he was with one or another person. Some thought he was a young man with lots of good humour, others that he had been well brought up by his parents. And many, who had also recently just joined military service, and were still basically very good sought him out as a friend. Meanwhile there were some that wanted to write to their parents but because they were illiterate, Peter offered to read and write letters for them whenever they wanted to, but always as a good friend without expecting anything for it. And this meant he soon had other friends.

One evening, when it was time for bed, Peter knelt next to his bed to say his prayers. It caused such a rumpus that the captain himself had to come to the dormitory. When he asked why there was such a rumpus, he then began speaking severely: “Is that how you treat religion? You should all be practising it; but since everyone is left free to practise it, at least if someone doesn’t want to, he should respect others. I will note this disorder, and if it happens again the miscreants will be severely punished.”

The following day Peter was just as kind to anyone who asked him for something.

“What kind of young man is this Peter?,” said one,

“He read my letter for me, wrote another one and all for nothing; he even gave me the paper; he really is a dear friend.”

“For me,” another one said, “he read out a note, and helped me out with a debt of three francs, and did it all for nothing.”

The quartermaster corporal was told that Peter wrote neatly and knew arithmetic and the metric decimal system, so he got him to do some urgent work which even the corporal himself could not do.

Whenever it was time to eat or go to bed he regularly made the sign of the cross and said his customary prayers, and the scoffers diminished in number to the point where after a few days even they became his admirers. But the real marvel was this: some of his fellow soldiers who out of human respect did not say their prayers, little by little began to follow his example and three months had not passed with Peter amongst them before the entire barracks where he slept regularly said their prayers. He thanked God for the courage he had given him and was happy to see his fellows fulfilling their religious duties.

Despite this there were other men who invited him to certain parties or to go to certain places that a good and well brought up Christian young man should stay away from. Peter consistently refused. One day some wanted to drag him away almost by force and since he was absolutely not going to go they said: "What a wretched kind of soldier you are!"

"Why do you say that?" Peter asked. And they replied;

"Because you won't do what all honourable soldiers do."

"A soldier's honour," he replied, "lies in preserving his body for his earthly King and his soul for his heavenly King; what you want is to dishonour the true soldier because it is forbidden by the King of Heaven and by the earthly King." Peter put all his efforts into fulfilling his duties, doing favours for whoever asked him without ever getting involved in things that were against God's law.

One of his fellows who had been the recipient of many of Peter's services, said to him one day: "I would like to give you a gift, Peter, something you would like. Tell me: what would you like best?"

*Peter.* "If you would like to do something pleasing to me and at the same time of advantage to you, I would ask you to take the Lord's name in vain any more. This would be a very precious gift for me."

*Friend.* "I give you my word of honour that I will give you this gift and I promise you I will not take the Lord's name in vain again; but I would like you to ask me for something else."

*Peter.* "Since you are so kind, could I ask you this Easter to make your Confession and Communion and at the same time pray for me and my poor family."

*Friend.* "What a wonderful soul you are! You are a saint amongst us; you know that some of your friends are aware that your father is sick and in need. They have collected twelve francs and this is the gift they have asked me to give you.

You have only asked me for things that are good for my soul, which I assure you I will do, but in the name of your friends I ask you to also accept this gift for your father."

Peter accepted the money with gratitude and saw that his father, who was very sick, soon received it.

## Chapter 12. His father's death.

Peter's father really was in need. He had had many setbacks and had been confined to bed for some months for most of the time. The two hundred and fifty francs had kept the family going for about eight months. But with the costs of running the home on the increase, foodstuffs going up in price and with the two boys who had been earning something almost without work, poverty had reached a climax. We find out about the situation of the family from a letter Peter's mother had had written to him. It went like this.

My dear Peter,

God's hand continues to lie heavily upon us; after you left your father's health got steadily worse and he was no longer able to do a day's work. Your brothers' employer had no more work for them so they are at home and unemployed. Almost anything of any value is at *Monte di Pietà*. But amidst all our woes there is one great consolation, that we are resigned to God's will. Your father shows the patience of a Christian.

He sees God's hand in his sickness and often says: "I had fun in my youth, so it is right that I should suffer in old age: if the Lord sends me with illness it is a sign that he wants me to save my soul."

I am writing this to let you know how things are at home. You certainly cannot send us any help, but you can ask God to bless us and help us.

May the holy Virgin keep you good. Greetings from the whole family.

Your loving mother.

When he received this letter Peter could not but be saddened and almost by way of comfort he had confided his worries in some of his closer friends who like him wanted to live honest and upright lives. These are the ones who, having been helped so much by Peter, wanted to give him the gift of the twelve francs mentioned above, so he could help his father in some way. So he was keen to answer his mother, and the letter, a copy of which I have here, contained these precise words:

My dearest mother,

Cagliari, 5 7.bre [September] 1854.

May Divine Providence be praised mother, and let us always trust in God, since he has advised us always to seek his glory first, then promises to add whatever we need in life.

Some of my friends who are aware of our need have given me twelve francs to send you; I am adding another twelve that I have saved over the months. So you have a postal order for 24 francs. This sum is certainly only a small help in your serious need, but let us revive our hope that infinite Providence which helps us today will also help us tomorrow. It pains me to hear that father's illness is getting worse. Nevertheless tell him from me that also with this we ought be consoled; the road strewn with flowers and pleasures does not lead to Heaven; thorns, tribulations, sickness and poverty are special signs of the Lord's kindness. He says blessed are those who suffer and are sad; and he calls them blessed because of the great reward prepared for them in Heaven, for sure. So my consolation at the news you have given me grows, I mean that my father is resigned to the divine will in his pain, a clear sign that God's grace is with him.

Tell my brothers to try to keep busy with something or find some trade or other; and if they find no work tell them to go to school and learn to read and write well; that will always be of some use to them. So I am enclosing a note for my old teacher, and I am asking him to give some schooling to my brothers if they have nothing else to do. He loved me and I hope that to the other good things he did for me he will add this one - to take my brothers into school.

I believe that my youngest brother wants to make his First Communion this year.

I am happy about that because he is good. Make every effort to see that he does it well.

Because the saying goes that when First Communion is well made the road to Heaven is almost prepaid. Instruct him at home as much as you can and get his teacher to get him to study his catechism well. Send him to Confession often and tell him to make his Confession well and not keep anything back from the confessor.

For some months I have been helping one of my superiors to write; he has promised me a small reward; as soon as I receive it I will write to you and send it to you.

My dear mother, I have so much love for my family that I cannot stop writing because I feel like I am there talking with you. But I have reached the end of the page so I will finish this letter asking you to tell my father that there is a beautiful church in this city dedicated to the Blessed Virgin where I go each evening and pray for him that he may have either health or patience; but that whatever happens he can do God's will. tell those at home to always keep Sundays holy and especially to go to the sermon.

May God help you mother dear,  
greet all our relatives,

I remain always  
your most affectionate son PETER.

The letter and the money did not arrive in time to help his father, who had already been dead three days when it came. As soon as his mother received Peter's letter she wrote to him immediately to tell him of the sad loss of his father; the letter went like this:

Beloved Peter,  
Turin 10 Sept. 1854.

Your letter, Peter, did not arrive in time to console your father. He died on the 6th of this month. You may weep and be consoled. You have lost a father but he has gone to Heaven. He had been ill for four years; for three months he has been confined to bed; he suffered a lot but was always resigned. During these final months he often went to Confession, received Viaticum twice; he received the Holy Oils and anointing in time; he was also given the papal blessing; his soul went to his Creator at eleven thirty on the evening of the sixth, with our parish priest beside him, praying until he breathed his last. Some hours before he died he called the whole family around his bed and told us to love one another. We are poor, he said, but very rich if we have the fear of God. Love God and begin to love him while you are young. Pray for me now and after my death. And after saying that he looked around: "Peter," he said, "my Peter! Peter is not here! Tell him to pray for me, he ... he saved my soul; Peter, how much I love you Peter... there were things I wanted to tell you but I just couldn't."

We are still experiencing deep sadness.

I received the twenty four francs you sent me, so please thank your generous friends for me for giving the twelve francs. This will help pay some of the debts incurred in recent days because of your father's illness. Your brothers have found work again with a good employer. Here we pray three times a day for your father's soul, so pray with us too, and pray also for me.

I am,  
your sorrowing mother.

News of his father's death was like an arrow piercing Peter's heart. He could not even finish reading the letter. He drew aside so he could give full vent to his sorrow and emotions. He cried for hours and could take no food for a whole day. Some of his friends wanted to console him and he told them: "If you want to console me let me weep for my poor deceased father." His only comfort was to go to church and place his sorrow at the foot of the crucifix: "My Jesus," he said, "accept this sorrow that I am experiencing as penance for my sins and in suffrage for my father's soul. Yes, father, I loved you so much

in life, and I still love you now that you are dead: may the Lord give you eternal repose; yes my beloved father, I pray to God that he will take you soon to Paradise.

That evening he went to his superior and asked for twenty four hours leave so he could deal with some affairs concerning his father's death. His superior gave him words of comfort and granted the favour he had asked. He spent the time in works of piety in suffrage for his father's soul. He went to Confession and Communion, went to several Masses and after midday went to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and then made the Stations of the Cross; he said the Rosary and many other prayers. At the end of the day, like someone who had fulfilled an important duty Peter was resigned and said to himself; I have done everything I can for my father's soul; he would certainly not be pleased if I continued to feel sad, and nor will he gain any more benefit from it. So I will be cheerful and resigned." He then took a sheet of paper and write the following letter to his mother.

My dearest mother.

18 September, 1854.

Your letter, mother, brought me all the grief that a child can feel for the loss of his tender, beloved father. I have cried, sighed, but since sorrow is no suffrage for the dead, I had recourse to religion. I asked for a day's leave, which I easily obtained, and I spent it in works of piety in suffrage for my father's soul.

So soften your own sorrows and continue to pray for him, for in the future we can say with even more affection: "Our father in Heaven"; because I really believe that right now my father is in Paradise. Let us thank God for giving him the time to receive all the Sacraments. That has to be a great consolation for us. Tomorrow all of you go to church for one more Mass, and let those who can, go to Communion for his soul.

If the Lord sees fit for me to return home I would like to bring you all the consolations a good son can for his mother: love, obedience, respect, diligence in my duties, and something I know you have very much at heart - regular practice of my religion. These are the things I promise.

I will write to you again soon when I feel a little calmer. Tell my brothers and my sisters that work makes them good citizens, and religion makes them good Christians and that work and religion leads to Heaven. May God grant you true happiness. Meanwhile mother,

know that I am always

your beloved son, PETER.

## Chapter 13. He leaves for the Crimea.

After his father's death it would seem that the situation for Peter's family had improved. An uncle took his eight year old sister in and that took a burden from the mother. The two older brothers found employment and between them both earned eight francs a week. A thirteen year old sister became a seamstress and earned two francs a week.

Peter had been made a Corporal so was also able to send something to help the family and set that at ten francs a month. His mother put all of this together and through hard work and economy was able to manage affairs properly.

This is how things were for Peter when an alliance was made between our Government, France and England to send fifteen thousand soldiers from Piedmont to the Crimea to fight the Russians. Amongst the regiments destined for this expedition was Peter's. He knew that his mother would be very sorry to hear this news so even though he had to tell her he adopted a facetious tone as if it was like someone going for a walk to pass the time. Therefore this is how he wrote to his mother.

Dearest mother,

Cagliari, 12 March 1855,

Good news, mother; I am going for a trip that will cost me nothing. Transport, food, clothing, my stay there, return ticket (when we return) all *gratis*. We have been warned to get ready to leave for the Crimea. Some get frightened when they hear the name of this country; not me; That's my duty, so I gladly go. The world is like being in exile. Whether I remain here in Sardinia, or return to Piedmont or go to Turkey I am always in exile in a valley of tears; our homeland is Heaven.

Don't think I am heading off carelessly: my first preparations were for my soul and my conscience is fully at ease. We are in God's hands, and if I am to die in battle I will die with honour and even hope to die as a good Christian. But if I come back I will be able to tell you all about those places. As soon as I arrive at my destination I will write to you. Continue to take care of the family, and if we do not meet again in this world we will meet in Heaven where our father is waiting for us. Goodbye, dear mother, goodbye, keep cheerful:

I am always,

your most affectionate PETER.

Peter, as we have said, wrote this letter in a somewhat facetious tone so he would not cause too much sorrow for his mother. But far from being cheerful she was very sad. I tried to console her by telling her that her son was good at writing and therefore when he was amongst enemies it would be less likely that he would fall into their hands, and that she could be consoled because she had such a courageous and virtuous son. The mother became a little more resigned, and asked me to write him a letter in which I would encourage him warmly to avoid any offence against God and that she would be less sorrowful if she knew he had died in battle than if she were to think he had stained his soul with sin. I willingly carried out my commission, and also added some reflections of my own that I thought would be appropriate. He wrote back immediately and since this reply is full of good and frank thoughts I shall reproduce it here just as it is, asking you to take no account of what he says that concerns me.

My dearest friend,

Cagliari, 4 April 1855.

You can imagine with what great pleasure I received your letter! Every word of it was a precious balm for me. You ask me if I am still a good man, if my heart is still good. Yes, dear Don B. ..., I will tell you frankly that my heart is the same as it was when you knew me at twelve years of age. Only distance has stopped me from going to the Oratory, but tell all my friends that the rules of the St Aloysius sodality have always been my rule of conduct in life. The book you gave me as I was leaving I have looked after jealously, and I read a little from it each day. I have brought with me the resolutions I wrote down at my First Communion, and I read them once a month and even more often, taking care to put them into practice. You tell me that you want my soul to be looked after, with all your heart. I believe that and you have always shown that. For my part I assure you I will do everything I can to be saved. I have already encountered serious perils but the Blessed Virgin has always helped me and I have come out of them without offending the Lord.

Please try to console my mother who I believe is very sad that I am leaving for the Crimea. I also ask you to try to teach the fear of the Lord to my brothers. Take care of their soul as you showed you did and still do for mine.

So see that my relatives, friends, brothers and sisters will all be saved.

We still do not know the day of our departure but it will certainly be soon. Who knows if I will return one day and can come back to the Oratory and enjoy the pleasant company of friends, and attend religious ceremonies like you have there! Never forget the agreement we made. Each day I say an Our father to St Aloysius and you will not forget to remember me at Mass.

I greet you with all my heart, and with all my heart I remain now and forever in J. C.

your affectionate son. Peter.



## Chapter 14. Events in Crimea.

Peter left a few days after he wrote this letter. Of the trip, arrival and where he is in Crimea for now we only know what he wrote in two letters to his mother and that is all we know about this valiant soldier.

The first is as follows.

From East Camp, 26 May 1855.

Dearest mother,

Today I can finally write something to you. I begin by telling you that my health is excellent; I can give you some idea of what I have seen. I left the shores of Sardinia on the first of May on a ship something like the boats you see on the Po, but fifty times larger. The voyage took twelve days. On the high seas you could only see water everywhere. Many of my friends were suffering during the voyage, and three died from sea-sickness.

I was able to go to Confession to a Friar who was with us but not to Communion since there was no Blessed Sacrament. The way the burials took place was very sad. A rock was attached to their feet and another to their legs and they were thrown into the sea; they soon sank who knows how deep. After seven days we came to a narrow straight called the Dardanelles then there was the great city of Constantinople. We stayed there a day and I was able to see the Turks. How ugly they look! Their trousers look like sacks; they have hats on their head that could hold about three bushels of maize each. I wasn't able to hear them speak because we were forbidden to leave the ship. Finally on the 13th we reached the Crimea. Oh! You might ask me, what is the Crimea?

Crimea is a country like others. It is a very large country surrounded mostly by water except for one part called Perecop, where it joins the Russian Empire. I was on shore for six days after we were allowed to disembark. The first to meet us were the English who showed signs of friendship, but I understood nothing, although I picked up some words: *the italien: the ilalien pruk*: words that I think mean 'Good for you Italians, well done'!

We were sent to different places according to orders from our superiors. Some of our regiments had already disembarked, others followed us. You might ask where they could put all these people. Don't be surprised: the world is big; there is a place for everyone. Wide open spaces with sand, river banks, stones and some trees - that's the floor of our home. And the blue sky is our roof.

Could there be better floors and roofs than the ones the Lord made? By day we are busy putting up tents where we had to put the munitions, and also some of the men who had fallen. Then when evening comes I wrap two scarves around my head, a woollen blanket around my body, a sack under my head, and lying on the ground I sleep there till morning.

Sometimes we are disturbed by the noise of shooting or cannon fired by the Russians to frighten us, but they are just distant noises for us. We have not engaged with the Russians up till now but must constantly fight other enemies. By day it is so hot that it seems to be the antechamber of Hell, with very annoying flies and horseflies that have no respect for people and have a bite like a wasp. At night it is cold, with mosquitoes and some kind of bug that runs and flutters around all over the place, and if we are not covered up and protected from them it is impossible to sleep. There is another enemy and it's the lice which everyone tries to keep away. Up till now this enemy has not made great advances on us but we fear for the future when we have less clothing. What gives me the greatest regret is that after leaving Sardinia I have not been able to attend Mass, a sermon, Benediction. They say however that shortly things will be adjusted so that we can at least have Mass on Sundays.

This letter is already too long; I have many things to tell you and therefore I will write again and soon.

Until now the Blessed Virgin has assisted me and nothing unfortunate has happened to me so far. May God help us.

Greetings etc.

your affectionate son, PETER.

Another letter on 2 July 1855.

Dearest mother,

It was not possible for me to write until today. I have always had to be going here or there without a moment's relaxation. I have no more pen or ink so am writing with a pencil, that is with a *lapis*.

Many serious things happened after I wrote to you. There was a terrible attack of cholera and some of our companions died! It is said that the death toll reached two thousand five hundred; it is now going down, but there is terrible fever, a kind of cholera. On the seventh of last month there was a great battle at Sevastopol: the French and the English were victorious. On the eighteenth of the same month there was another; and although the allies were very courageous, they were pushed back by the Russians and many of our men died. In these battles, between dead and wounded there have been 18 thousand of ours and 12 thousand Russians. They were fewer because

they were in a fort and protected. We are now at the vigil of another great event. What causes the greatest sorrow is to think that in a battle almost all who die are angry and instead of calling on God's mercy, as they should, most are blaspheming and cursing. How many souls will go to Hell!

My health is very good; I lack shirts, and since I was used to not eating so well at home it helps me now to adjust to any kind of diet; but those who used to eat and drink well are suffering from one illness or another and not a few end up in the other world.

My job is no longer to write for my superior but I have been promoted to Sergeant; this means I earn more but it also means I am on service more and have to live in the field with the other soldiers. Do not worry about me. For my body I need nothing, and as for my soul my conscience is at peace. If I live I hope to live in God's grace; if I die I hope to enjoy him in Paradise. If some time passes before I write again do not worry, it could be just that I don't have time. Continue to pray for me. I am always you

Your most affectionate son PETER.

This is the last lot of news we have had from Peter. We do not know if he is alive or dead. However we hope that Heaven will preserve him so he can be the consolation of his widowed mother, support the family, and be an example of virtue for his friends.

## Chapter 15. Conclusion.

So, dear reader, here are the powerful effects of a good upbringing and we could also say the effects of a well made First Communion. Peter always remembered the promise he made to God to be faithful, despite bad example and advice from his friends for many of whom there was no improvement in their lives after the first or second Communion. Their behaviour just went from bad to worse.

Peter knew that the God whom he had received for the first time wanted and indeed commanded that he be received at least once a year, at Easter. He did not limit himself to once a year because, as he used say: "How can you do something well if you only do it once a year?" So he went to Confession and Communion with the frequency we have seen.

Many mothers would like to have children similar to Peter in their behaviour, who are the support and consolation of their family; instead they are a cross during their childhood, and their sorrow and desolation when they are older.

Fathers and mothers! If you want to have well brought-up children who are your consolation when they become adults, imitate Peter's mother, instruct them in religion especially at a tender age; look after them and see they go to church rather than go off with bad companions.

But you have to give the example; it would be silly if there were parents who had no scruples about speaking freely of things against customs or religion, especially in the presence of their children, who hold parties on Sundays when they should be attending the sacred functions and then hope their children will be good, recollected, devout.

Fathers and mothers! Don't fool yourselves! You will certainly have to render strict account before the judgement seat of God for the upbringing you gave your children. It is certain that many children are damned because they have not been brought up properly and it is equally certain that many fathers and mothers go to eternal perdition for the bad upbringing they have given their children.

These are three great truths which should be given careful consideration. It is an undeniable fact that if children are raised well this growing generation will love order and work, will make sure to comfort their parents and help the family. In short, we will have better times, children who will be an honour to their country, the support of their families as well as being to the glory and honour of their religion.

### **Litany for the dead.**

(Taken from the English version)

Lord, have mercy on us.

Christ, have mercy on us.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Jesus, hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, grant our petitions.

O God the Father, Creator of the world, Have mercy on the souls of the faithful departed.

O God the Son, Redeemer of mankind, Deliver the souls of the faithful departed.

O God the Holy Spirit, perfecter of the elect, Accomplish the bliss of the faithful departed.

O Holy Trinity, three Persons in one God, give rest to the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Virgin Mary, who, by the special privilege of grace, was triumphantly assumed into the Kingdom of Your Son, Pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Angels, who, ordering aright the first act of your will, were fixed forthwith in unchangeable happiness, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Patriarchs, who were filled with joy when the Desired of Nations put an end to your captivity, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Prophets, who, after patiently awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, were at length consoled by a visit from Him in person, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Saints, who, at the glorious Resurrection of Our Saviour, were translated from Limbo to the visible Presence of God, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Apostles, who at the last day shall sit to judge the twelve tribes of Israel, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Disciples of Our Lord, who followed His steps in the paths of perfection, and went straight to the heavenly Jerusalem, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Martyrs, who passed through the sea of your own blood, entering immediately into the Land of Promise, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Confessors, who despised the vanity of the earth, and placed your affections on the joys of heaven, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Blessed Virgins, who, with your lighted lamps, awaited the coming of the heavenly Spouse, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

O Holy Saints, who, being freed from all irregular attachment to creatures, were perfectly fitted for immediate union with your Creator, pray for the souls of the faithful departed.

Be merciful, O Lord, and pardon their sins.

Be merciful, O Lord, and hear their prayers.

From the shades of death, where the light of Your countenance shines not, deliver them O Lord.

From the evils to which immortification in this world must expose them in the other, deliver them O Lord.

From Your displeasure, provoked by negligence and ingratitude, deliver them O Lord.

From the pains of purgatory, so justly inflicted upon unexpiated sins, deliver them O Lord.

From the pains of purgatory, so justly inflicted upon unexpiated sins, deliver them O Lord.

from that terrible prison from where they will not be freed until they have paid the last penny, deliver them O Lord.

From the torments incomparably greater than the bitterest anguish of this life, deliver them O Lord.

By the multitude of Your mercies, ever compassionate to human frailties, deliver them O Lord.

By the virtue of Your Cross, on which You reconciled the world to Your Father, deliver them O Lord.

By Your victorious descent into hell, to break the chains of death, and free those imprisoned there, deliver them O Lord.

By Your glorious Resurrection from the tomb, to open the Kingdom of Heaven, deliver them O Lord.

By Your triumphant Ascension into heaven, to lead captivity captive, and the promise to prepare a place for your servants, deliver them O Lord.

By Your dread coming to judge the world when each one's works will be tested by fire, deliver them O Lord.

We sinners: Beseech You, hear us.

That it please You to hasten the day when Your faithful shall be delivered from the mansions of sorrow and brought to the city of eternal peace, We beseech you, hear us.

That it please You to shorten the time of their expiation, and to admit them speedily into Your heavenly sanctuary where nothing worldly may enter, We beseech you, hear us.

That it please You, through the prayers and good works performed in Your Church, to receive them into Your eternal tabernacle and crown their hopes with eternal glory, We beseech you, hear us.

That the blessed view of Jesus may comfort them, and His unfading glory shine upon them, We beseech you, hear us.

That Your holy angels may bring them to the land of the living, and the glorious Queen of saints present them to Your throne, We beseech you, hear us.

That the venerable Patriarchs may come to meet them, and the ancient prophets rejoice at seeing them, We beseech you, hear us.

That the sacred college of Apostles may open the gates of the Blessed, and the victorious band of Martyrs lead them to their place, We beseech you, hear us.

That the blessed company of Confessors may place them on seats of eternal glory, and the sacred choir of Virgins may welcome them with celestial hymns, We beseech you, hear us.

That the whole Church Triumphant may soon celebrate their deliverance; and the choirs of angels sing new hymns of Joy, on their never ending happiness, We beseech you, hear us.

That amidst all these triumphs these liberated souls may enjoy the author of their happiness, and dressed in white stoles sing eternal alleluias to their God seated on his throne, and to the Lamb who redeemed them with his blood and has them reign with him forever, We beseech you, hear us.

Son of God, We beseech you, hear us.

Lamb of God, Who shall come with glory to judge the living and the dead, give rest to the souls of the faithful departed.

Lamb of God, at Whose Presence the heavens and the earth shall be moved, give rest to the souls of the faithful departed.

Lamb of God, in Whose book of life the names of Your elect are inscribed, give rest to the souls of the faithful departed. Amen.

With ecclesiastical approval.

Part III.

Dominic



THE LIFE OF YOUNG DOMINIC SAVIO,  
PUPIL AT THE ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES  
by Father JOHN BOSCO  
TURIN

G. B. PARAVIA & Co. Press  
1859

# Contents

## Extract from a Pastoral Letter by Archbishop Gianotti, Giovanni Antonio

To the Rev. Parish Priests of the diocese, regarding the *Letture Cattoliche* (*Catholic Readings*).

Before closing this Letter of ours, we should at least encourage you to propagate a small journal, the reading of which we believe will be of the greatest value for Christian families given the times we live in.

You would know, good Fathers, that some years back in an appropriate Pastoral Letter addressed to the faithful in our Diocese, we pointed to the serious harm done to faith and morals by so many godless and free-thinking books and broadsheets that are flooding our streets. Seeing that this remains a deplorable problem, unfortunately, we suggest you join us in our vigilance in preventing the enemy of souls from secretly sowing tares in the evangelical field, and work lovingly to sow the good seed of God's Word and Catholic teaching everywhere. This can be done not only with the instructions you give in church but also by distributing the aforesaid journal we have earlier recommended, the *Letture Cattoliche*, amongst Catholic families. Its choice of topics, its clear presentation and style, and its modest cost,<sup>15</sup> seem to us to make it most appropriate for the people's understanding and needs. And you have even more cause for recommending it inasmuch as the supreme Pontiff of the Church, Pius IX, has deemed it worthy to encourage collaborators in this good work to continue. Furthermore a Circular from His Eminence the Cardinal Vicar, encouraged all Archbishops and Bishops in the Pontifical State to disseminate the *Letture Cattoliche* as much as they could throughout cities and towns under their spiritual jurisdiction.

Let us beg our merciful God, dear Fathers, to look mercifully upon the afflictions of the Church, so that clear and peaceful skies may shine on our dear country, through our Holy Catholic Religion, and that meanwhile he may give us the patience, courage and zeal that we need as His faithful Ministers to fight his battles, triumph over his enemies, and lead the souls entrusted to our spiritual care to the long-awaited gates of blessed eternity.

Saluzzo, 9 October 1858.

GIOANNI ARCHBISHOP AND BISHOP

G. GARNERI Secretary

---

<sup>15</sup>An approximately 108 page booklet that comes out once a month. Subscription costs Cent. 15 a month, that is L. 1. 80 a year. Subscriptions and monthly distribution of the booklet is looked after by the Archpriest at the Cathedral.

## *My Dear Boys,*

*You yourselves have often asked me to write you something about Dominic Savio, and having done what I could to satisfy your earnest wishes here then is his life, briefly and simply written.*

*There have been two difficulties in particular in writing this life for you. The first one is the comments that come from writing about things many people still living have seen and heard. I think I have got around this by only writing about the things which we ourselves saw. The second one is that, since Dominic lived here for three years, I have had to speak about myself in different ways. I have tried to overcome this by treating things in as historical a way as possible. If, however, in spite of this I seem to refer to myself unduly, consider it to be the result of the the great affection I have for Dominic and for you all; this lets me talk freely to you and keep no secrets from you.*

*You might ask me why it is I have written Dominic's life and not that of some of the other boys who had such a reputation for virtue and whom you were so fond of - Gabriel Fascio, Louis Rua, John Massaglia come quickly to mind, apart from many others. It is quite true that the goodness of these boys would make their lives very well worth writing, but Dominic stood out even above these. But if God gives me the health and grace, I have in mind to collect information about these other virtuous friends of yours and satisfy both yours and my wish to read about them and imitate them in whatever is compatible with your state in life.*

*In the meantime, as you read about Dominic's life say to yourselves what the great St. Augustine said in similar circumstances, Si ille cur non ego? That is, if a boy of my age, just like me in every way, who had to meet the same temptations as I have to or worse, could follow Christ with such courage and wholeheartedness, why should I not do the same? Remember that true religion does not mean simply saying things, but doing them. If you read something that you admire, don't content yourself with saying: "This is great," say rather, "I am going to do the same."*

*May God give you and all those who read this little book the grace to benefit from it. May the Blessed Virgin whom Dominic loved so much, grant that we may, all of us, love God with all our heart and soul. For He alone deserves all our love and service.*

*Fr John Bosco*

# Chapter 1. Home - The boy's character - His early goodness

Dominic's parents, Charles and Brigid Savio, were poor, hard working people and belonged to Castelnuovo d'Asti a little town about ten miles from Turin. In 1841 they went to live in Riva.

When Dominic was two years old his parents decided to return to their native place and they found a home at Murialdo on the outskirts of Castelnuovo d'Asti.

His parents dearly loved their son and had only one idea - to bring him up as a good Christian. Dominic was naturally good and his heart was a fertile field for the things of God. He learned his morning and night prayers readily and could already say them by himself when he was only four years old. He was constantly beside his mother, eager to help her in every way. If he did go off sometimes, it was only to go into some corner and try to say some prayers.

"From his earliest years," said his parents, "when children find it very difficult to keep still, and are always wanting to touch and pull things about, Dominic was not only obedient and ready to do anything we asked but was also always trying to do whatever made us happy."

When his father came home at night from work, Dominic would run to meet him, take his hand, or jump up into his arms, something they noted with interest and with pleasure.

"Dear Dad," he'd say, "how tired you must be. True? You work so hard for me and I'm not always good, in fact I cause trouble. I pray to God to give you health and to make me good."

And with that he would offer him a chair or stool to sit on, would keep him company and do a thousand little things for him.

"This was real comfort for me in my work" the father said, "and I was impatient to get home and kiss my Dominic who had won over my heart completely."

His love did not stop at his parents; his love of God was older than his years. He wanted to say his prayers and never had to be reminded, much less forced to say them at night and before and after meals. The *Angelus* too. Rather, it was he who reminded others, should they happen to forget.

One day, distracted by something unusual, his parents sat down to the meal without saying grace. Dominic immediately said,

"Dad, we have not said our grace yet," and began to make the Sign of the Cross and say the prayer.

On another occasion there was a visitor in the house who was asked to stay for dinner. When the meal was put on the table, the man sat down and began eating without

## *Contents*

making the Sign of the Cross or saying any prayer. Dominic did not presume to correct the visitor, but left the table and stayed away until the visitor had gone. When asked by his parents why he had acted in this very unusual way, he said, "I did not like to be at table with one who eats just like animals do."

## Chapter 2. Good behaviour at Murialdo - Signs of virtue - Attendance at the village school

In this chapter there are facts which some might find difficult to believe. In giving them I quote from a statement given me by Dominic's parish priest:<sup>16</sup>

Soon after I came to Murialdo, I would often see a small boy about five years old coming into the church with his mother. I was very struck with the serenity of his face and his unaffected piety, and was not surprised that others noticed the same. If, when he came to church in the morning it was locked, you would see something very interesting. He would quietly kneel down and say his prayers, instead of beginning to play about in some way or other as boys of his age would do. It did not matter if the ground was muddy or the snow was thick on it, he knelt down just the same. Curious to know who he was, I made inquiries and found out that he was the son of the blacksmith, Charles Savio.

If ever I met him on the road he would wave while still some distance away and his face would light up with a smile. At school he made rapid progress not simply because he was clever, but also because he tried very hard. Some of the boys he had to mix with were rather rowdy and far from good, but I never saw him quarrelling. If they did try to involve him in some disturbance, he would patiently hold on and at the first opportunity quietly slip away. If they wanted him to join with them robbing orchards, damaging property, making fun of old people or suchlike, he not only refused but stated quite convincingly why he thought it was wrong to do so.

This spirit of piety did not drop off as he grew older. He was only five years old when he learned to serve Mass and he always did so with great attention. He tried to be at Mass every day, and if there was someone else serving he would hear Mass from the benches. As he was rather small, he could not reach the missal when it was on the altar. It brought a smile to one's lips to see him anxiously coming up to the altar, standing on tip-toe and reaching as far as he could in the effort to get hold of the missal-stand. If the priest saying Mass wanted to please him, on no account should he change the missal over himself, but pull the stand right to the edge where Dominic could get hold of it and carry it triumphantly to the other side.

---

<sup>16</sup>The chaplain there then was Fr John Zucca from Moriondo then living at Buttigliera d'Asti.

## *Contents*

He used to go regularly and frequently to confession, and since he already knew how to distinguish heavenly bread from the earthly kind, he was allowed to make his First Communion. Communion was something he did with great devotion. Seeing how grace was working in his soul so marvellously, I often thought to myself, “What promise there is here for the future; may God open up the way for him to reach the heights he is capable of attaining.”

That is what the priest at Murialdo wrote.



## Chapter 3. His first communion - Preparation, recollection and memories of the day

Nothing stood in the way of Dominic's being allowed to make his First Communion. He knew the basic catechism by heart, and understood very well what the Holy Eucharist was. He had also a great desire to receive Jesus into his heart. There was only one difficulty, his age. At that time boys and girls did not normally make their First Communion until they were eleven or twelve years old. Dominic was only seven. To look at him, he seemed even younger, and so the parish priest hesitated to put him forward. He sought advice from some of the other priests and they, knowing Dominic's state, said that he need not hesitate. The way was now clear and Dominic was told that he could make his First Holy Communion.

It is not easy to describe the joy which filled him at this news. He ran home trembling with excitement and joy to tell his mother. Much of his time was given to praying and reading; he made visits to the Blessed Sacrament and it seemed as though he was trying to out rival the angels in his devotion.

The evening before he went to his mother and said:

"Mother, tomorrow I am receiving Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time; forgive me for anything I have done to displease you in the past: I promise you I am going to be a much better boy in every way." Having said this, he burst into tears. So did his mother as she put her arms round him, unable to say anything except,

"Pray for me and for your father, pray that God may keep you always his own."

Dominic was up early next morning, dressed himself in his best clothes and hurried off to church. It was not yet open so he knelt down on the steps, as was his custom, and tried to pray until the other children arrived and the church was opened. With Confession, preparation, thanksgiving and sermon, the service lasted five hours. Dominic was the first in church and the last to leave. Time seemed to mean nothing to him and he scarcely seemed to know whether he was on earth or in heaven.

It was a wonderful and never-to-be-forgotten day for him; it was a renewal of his life for God, a life that can be taken as an example by anyone. If one got him to talk about his First Communion several years later, his face lit up with joy and happiness as he said:

"That was the happiest and most wonderful day of my life."

He made some promises on that day which he preserved carefully in a little book, and often re-read them. He let me have this little book to look at and I give them here just as he wrote them.

## *Contents*

Promises made by me, Dominic Savio, when I made my First Communion in 1849 at seven years of age:

I will go often to Confession and I will go to Holy Communion as often as I am allowed.

I will try to give the Sundays and holy days completely to God.

My best friends will be Jesus and Mary.

Death, but not sin.

These promises were the guiding light of his life until he died.

If among those who read this book there are any who have yet to make their First Communion, I would urge them strongly to try to do as Dominic did; to let him inspire them in their preparation and all that they do. With all my heart too I recommend to parents, teachers and all those who are responsible for the young, to give the greatest importance to this great act. Be assured that the First Communion very well made is a solid moral foundation for the rest of the child's life. It will certainly be an extraordinary thing to find anyone who has made this great act with real devotion and care and has afterwards gone astray. On the other hand there are thousands of young people who have gone astray and who are the despair of their parents and those responsible for them; I would not hesitate to say that the trouble began with the little or no real preparation for the First Communion. It is better to delay making it, or not to make it at all, than to make it badly.

## Chapter 4. School at Castelnuovo d'Asti - An edifying occasion - Wise answer to bad advice

It was clearly high time for Dominic to go to another school as he had gone as far as he could in the little village school. Both his parents and himself desired this very much but they had not the money which would make this possible. They could only turn to God, the supreme master of everything, and who would see to all that was needed to make it possible.

"If only I were a bird," Dominic would say sometimes, "I would fly morning and evening to Castelnuovo, and so I would be able to carry on with my lessons."

His keen desire finally overcame all difficulties, and it was decided that he should go to the county school, although this was about three miles away. Dominic cheerfully walked the six miles there and back every day. The varieties of weather, the dust and the very hot sun in summer, mud, rain, storms and fierce winds at other times of the year, never got him down or stopped him from going to school, although he was barely ten years old when he started. He was obedient to his parents, which helped him to look after his health and to put up with any discomforts. A local farmer used sometimes to see Dominic on the road, and one afternoon when the sun was beating down mercilessly he approached the boy and started talking.

"Aren't you afraid to be on your own on this lonely road, especially in the dark winter evening?"

"But I am not alone: my guardian angel is with me."

But don't you get fed up having to go backwards and forwards in heat like this?"

"No, I am doing it for a Master who pays well."

"Oh, and who is that?"

"God the Creator, who rewards even a cup of water given for his sake."

The farmer used often to recount this incident and predicted a great future for Dominic.

Some of his school companions were not very good, and on one occasion he was in grave danger of doing wrong. In the hot weather some of the boys used to go swimming in the streams and other water pools where water was available. Bathing has its physical dangers and, not infrequently, the death by drowning of young people and adults has to be lamented. It can also have its dangers for the soul in certain circumstances, when boys are stripped together and have little care and respect for each other.

Dominic was persuaded by some of his companions to go swimming with them on one occasion. But when he saw what was done and said, he was profoundly grieved and made up his mind never to go again.

## Contents

A short time afterwards two of the same boys came to him again.

“Dominic, are you coming to play?”

“What are you going to play?”

“We’re going swimming.”

“I’m not going. I am afraid of drowning.”

“Come on, be a sport: we’ll have a great time and feel much fresher in this heat.”

“But I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be afraid. We’ll teach you, and soon you will be swimming like a fish, and leaping about like the rest of us.”

“But isn’t it wrong to go to such dangerous place to swim?”

“Not at all. If so many go, how can it be wrong?”

“Still, I feel uneasy about it and don’t know what to say.”

“Come on, take our word for it, we’ll look after you.”

“I think I’ll go to ask my mother if it is all right for me to go.”

“Don’t be stupid - don’t say anything to your Mum. She won’t let you go, and she will also tell our parents and we will be in for a good hiding.”

“Well if my mother won’t let me go, I’m not going. In any case if you want the truth I’ll tell you. I went once before, but never again; not simply because it is easy to get drowned there, but more still because from what I saw last time it is also easy to offend God; so don’t talk to me any more about swimming. In any case if your parents don’t want you to go, you know you should not go. God punishes children who disobey their parents.”

This is how Dominic answered the harmful suggestions of his companions and in doing so avoided a grave danger through which, if he had allowed himself to go, he might well have lost his innocence, the loss of which leads on to so many sad consequences.

## Chapter 5. His behaviour at school at Castelnuovo d'Asti - What his teacher had to say

From his experiences at this school Dominic learned how to get on properly with the other boys. If he saw one who did his best, was obedient, tried hard at his lessons, he made him his friend. Those who were always giving trouble, making no effort to learn, ready with bad talk and such like, he avoided like the plague. Those who were in between he tried to help, if he could, in whatever way was possible; but he never made them his close friends.

Dominic's life at the school at Castelnuovo can be a model and an inspiration for any boy who wants to get on, to follow God and also prepare himself for life. I give here what Father Allora, the priest who was the head of this excellent school, wrote about him:

I am very glad to write what I know about Dominic Savio, who in a very short time won my admiration and esteem. I have an unfailing memory of his exemplary life and happy disposition.

I cannot say very much about his piety and devotion as he was excused from taking part in the school religious services, on account of his living so far away.

He passed the entrance examination with distinction and was admitted to Class 2 on June 21st, the feast of St. Aloysius, Patron of Youth. He was not very strong physically, but he had a very pleasant appearance and was very well mannered. He was always cheerful and good tempered and never imposed himself on anyone. He made a very good impression on his teachers by his diligence and made up for some of the others who never bothered or showed interest, no matter what was done for them. He lived up to his name [*Savio*=wise] not only in his lessons, but in everything he did and said. Right from the first moment he made progress in his studies. He quickly got to the top of his class and remained there getting high marks in all subjects. This was not simply because he was clever but because he worked very hard and came to have a great love for his lessons. It was also because his studies were not simply for himself but for God.

Although he was not very strong physically he never missed a day off school. It should be remembered that he had over two miles to walk four times a day in the mud, snow and cold of the winter and the oftentimes intense heat of the summer. I had great hopes for Dominic and it was with great regret

## *Contents*

that I saw him go away. His parents had to move to another district and so it was necessary for him to leave; I was afraid that for one reason or another he might not be able to continue with his studies; this would have been a tragedy for so wonderful a boy.

It was a great joy for me when I heard later that he had been accepted at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales; I knew that there he would have great opportunities both for his mind and soul.

This was the testimony of Father Allora.

## Chapter 6. School at Mondonio - He puts up with a great injustice

It seems that Divine Providence wanted to help Dominic to realise that this world is a place of exile where we have no resting place, it may be, on the other hand, that it was God's design that he should be known in as many places as possible, so that his goodness and strong virtue might be a source of inspiration to all who saw him.

Towards the end of 1852 his parents left Murialdo and set up house in Mondonio, a village near Castelnuovo. Here Dominic continued the same way of life and I need to repeat what other teachers had said about him earlier. His teacher, Father Cugliero,<sup>17</sup> among other things had this to say about him, though I have been selective in order not to repeat myself too much:

I can truthfully say that in twenty years of teaching boys I have never had one to equal Dominic. He was only a boy in age but he had the sense and judgement of a fully mature man. He was very diligent and applied himself to his lessons, and his good-naturedness and readiness to help won him the affection both of his companions and teachers. I could not help marvelling at the way he could fix his attention in church, and I often said to myself 'This is certainly an innocent boy, whose heart and affections are already in heaven'.

The following is an incident among others recounted by Father Cugliero.

One day, an incident of so serious a nature took place at the school such that expulsion was the obvious punishment for those responsible. The culprits realised this and sought to save themselves by coming to me and laying all the blame on Dominic. I could not imagine that the boy had done anything so stupid, but his accusers were so insistent and emphatic about it that I believed them. I was very annoyed and went to the classroom. I left the boys in no doubt as to what I thought about the whole affair, and then I turned to Dominic and minced no words in telling him off, saying that he deserved to be expelled and that he would have been, had it not been the first time he had done such a thing, and that he should make sure it would be the last time. Dominic did not say a word, but stood there with his head bowed, accepting humbly all that was said to him.

God, however, protects the innocent, and next day it came out who the real culprits were. Somewhat ashamed of all the abuse I had heaped on his head,

---

<sup>17</sup>Fr Joseph Cugliero is currently chaplain at Barbasio, a hamlet belonging to Moncucco

## *Contents*

I took him aside and asked him: “Why did you not tell me you were not responsible?” He replied: “I knew that these boys had already been up to so much mischief that this would certainly earn them expulsion, and I thought I would try to save them, as I probably would not be expelled, seeing that it was my very first time . . . also, I remembered that Jesus had been blamed unjustly and had not said anything, and I thought I should do the same.”

No more was said, but all admired Dominic’s patience, which was able to return good for evil and was even ready to accept serious punishment to save those who had told such lies about him.

This was Father Cugliero’s testimony.



## Chapter 7. The first time I got to know him - Some curious moments when we met

What follows in the succeeding pages can be given with more detail, because I shall be dealing with things which happened before my own eyes and also in the presence of many boys who can bear testimony to their truth. This period begins in 1854 when Father Cugliero, already mentioned, came to see me about one of his pupils.

“You may have in your house,” he said, “boys equally good and clever, but there are none who are better than him. Give him a chance and you will find you have another St. Aloysius.”

It was arranged that Dominic should come to see me when next I visited the Becchi. It was my custom to spend a few days there each year with some of my boys round about the time of the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

It was on the morning of the first Monday of October that I saw a boy coming towards me with his father. His serene expression, and charming but respectful manner captured my gaze.

“Who are you and where do you come from?”

“I am Dominic Savio. Father Cugliero has spoken to you about me and I have come with my father from Mondonio.”

I took him aside and asked him about himself and his studies. We found common ground immediately and a relationship of trust and mutual confidence sprang up spontaneously.

I recognised in him a soul where the Holy Spirit reigned supreme, and I marvelled at the way grace had already worked in his young heart and mind.

We talked together for quite a time and, as I was going to call his father over, Dominic said to me:

“Well, Father, what do you think? Will you take me to Turin to study?”

“Well, I think there is good material in you.”

“Good material for what?”

“To make a beautiful garment for Our Blessed Lord.”

“Wonderful! I am the cloth and you are the tailor. You will work on me to make something beautiful for Jesus.”

I then said that I wondered if he were strong enough for a long course of studies.

“Don’t worry, Father, Our Blessed Lord has helped me so far and I am sure he will continue to do so.”

“And what are you going to do when you finish school?”

## Contents

“I should love to be a priest, if that were God’s will.”

“Very good. And now let’s try a little intelligence test. Take this little book, go over this page (it was a copy of the *Catholic Readings*), learn it by heart and tomorrow come back and both explain it to me and recite it by heart.”

I then left him free to go and play with the other boys while I had a talk with his father. No more than ten minutes had gone by when suddenly Dominic appeared, smiling, by my side.

“If you wish I will repeat my lesson now.”

I took the book and, to my surprise, he not only recited the page by heart but explained simply and clearly the meaning, showing that he understood it very well.

“Splendid,” I said, “you have been quick and so shall I. I will take you to Turin, and from this moment I consider you one of my chosen sons. From now onwards, often ask Jesus to help us both to do God’s holy will in all things.”

Not knowing how better to express his happiness and his gratitude he took my hand and kissed it several times and then said:

“I hope always to act in such a way that you will never have reason to complain of me.”

## Chapter 8. He comes to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales - His approach at the beginning

It is characteristic of youth to change suddenly. Not infrequently does it happen that what is wonderful today is far from being so tomorrow. At one time a boy can show great promise and soon after he can act in a way that would show the exact opposite. And if one is not careful, a career that began with the highest hopes can end with disappointment and sorrow to all concerned. It was not so with Dominic. All the virtues which had begun to grow at different stages of his life now continued their growth in a wonderful way, without any of them impeding the others.

As soon as he arrived at the Oratory, he came immediately to my room in order to put himself, as he used say, completely in my hands. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the wall where a piece of cardboard displayed a saying in large letters, which I often used: *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*. He looked at them attentively and I helped him to translate them as follows: *Give me souls, and take away everything else*. He thought for a moment and then said:

“I understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business.”

For a time his life was quite ordinary. He studied very hard and was very faithful in carrying out the school rules. He always listened to talks and sermons with great joy, as he was already convinced that the word of God was a sure guide along the road to heaven. He was not worried if sometimes they were a bit long. If there was anything he did not understand, he never hesitated to ask for further explanations. This was the root and source of his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed.

In order to make sure that he understood the rules and discipline of the school well, he went to one of the teachers and asked him to help and advise him how best to be faithful to them and to correct him if he neglected any of his duties.

His relations with his companions showed the same wisdom. He refused to have anything to do with those who were rowdy, disobedient and who showed little respect for the things of God. He made friends with those who tried hard, made good use of their time and were a source of good example and good spirit in the school.

December 8th, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, was drawing near. It was the director's custom to say a little word of encouragement and exhortation to the boys so as to prepare them to keep the feast in a way worthy of Mary most holy. He insisted especially that they should ask Mary for the grace they had greatest need of.

## *Contents*

That year, 1854, the whole Catholic world was in a state of excitement because of the approaching definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception at Rome. At the Oratory we did our very best to keep the feast with fitting solemnity and devotion.

Savio was among those who had a great desire to keep the feast very well. He wrote out nine deeds to be done in honour of Our Lady and drew out one by lot each day. He prepared himself well, and made a general confession so that his soul might be as pleasing as possible to Mary Most Holy.

On the eve of the feast he went to Our Lady's altar and, on the advice of his Confessor, renewed the promises he had made at his First Communion, and then he repeated many times: "Mary, I give you my heart, please keep it always as your own. Jesus and Mary, always be my friends. Please, please, rather let me die, than that I should ever offend you seriously."

So he took Mary as the guide for his spiritual life, and with such effective results that I began from that time to note down the different incidents or facts of his life, so that I should not forget them.

I have thought it better in what follows to group together the various facts according to their relationship with each other, and not just to give them in chronological order as they happened. This will make for greater clearness and understanding.

Accordingly I will divide the remainder into as many chapters as there are matters to be treated of, beginning with his classical studies which were the chief reason for his coming to this House in Valdocco.

## Chapter 9. Grammar year - Curious incidents - School - He prevents a fight - He avoids danger

Dominic had begun his grammar year at Mondonio and, with the progress he made by his hard work and more than ordinary intelligence, he was very soon moved from fourth class or, as we say today, second year grammar. Here he came under the care of the devout and kindly Joseph Bonzanino, because as secondary classes had not yet been set up at the Oratory like we have them now, I had to send some of the boys out each day to his school. I have to speak of his behaviour and example even here along the same lines as earlier teachers have done. I will just pick a few things from this year and two in particular which were noted by others who knew him and admired him for them.

Father Bonzanino said on a number of occasions that he could not remember having had a better pupil than Dominic, one who was more attentive, better behaved, more respectful. He was a real model in everything. His clothes were poor, but he was always neat and clean and his manners and bearing were easily equal to those of boys who came from richer and nobler families. These boys eagerly made friends with Dominic and accepted him as an equal, being drawn by his manners and good qualities. Whenever there was a boy who was a bit scatterbrained and talkative the teacher would put him beside Dominic, and his influence and example would lead the boy to better behaviour and application.

It was during the course of this year that an incident took place which shows clearly the heroic stuff of which Dominic was made, something hard to believe in a young man at his age. Two of the boys fell out very badly and they became so angry with each other that they determined not only to have a fight but to have a stone fight. Dominic got to hear of it, but he wondered how he could manage to stop the duel, as the boys were both older and much stronger than he was.

He tried to reason with them and persuade them to give up and become friends again. They refused. He wrote a letter to each of them. He threatened to report them, and thereby get it stopped, but this only increased their anger and determination to have it out at all costs. Dominic was very worried both on account of the serious injury which was likely to happen and also for the serious offence against God.

Dominic had no idea what to do but divine inspiration led him to act thus: he waited for them after school and since he was able to speak with both parties he said:

“Since you are determined to see your wretched argument through to the end, I want you to agree to just one condition.”

“We agree” they said, “as long as you don’t stop our challenge.”

## Contents

“He’s a ratbag” one of them said of the other, while the other one said he could never be at peace with his opponent until he had bashed his head in. Savio was quite scared by this fighting talk but was determined to stop worse things happening, so he controlled himself and said:

“The condition I want to impose will not stop you from facing up to each other.”

“What’s the condition?”

“I’d simply like to indicate the place where you can start throwing stones at each other.”

“You’re trying to trick us or stop us.”

“I will be with you and I won’t try to trick you. Don’t worry.”

“Maybe you’re going to call someone.”

“I should, but I won’t. Let’s go. I’ll be with you. Just give me your word.”

They promised and immediately set off for the Cittadella fields past Porta Susa. Dominic had his work cut out stopping them from coming to blows as they went to the spot.

Once they had got there, Savio did something certainly nobody would have thought of. He let them take up positions opposite one another. They already had stones in their hands, and were counting down when Dominic said:

“Before you start I want you to fulfil your promise,” and having said that he took out the small crucifix hanging around his neck and, holding it high, said:

“I want each of you to look at this crucifix and throw the first stone at me, saying clearly these words: ‘Jesus Christ who was innocent died forgiving his enemies; I, a sinner, am going to offend him by this deliberate act of revenge.’”

Then he ran to the angriest boy and, kneeling before him said:

“Throw the first stone at me.”

The boy, who wasn’t expecting anything like this, began to tremble and said:

“No, no, I have nothing against you, and would be only too willing to defend you against anyone else.”

Then he went to the other boy:

“You throw the first stone at me.”

“No, never: you are my friend; I would never do a thing like that.”

Then Dominic rose to his feet and standing between them with his crucifix and a stern look on his face said:

“There you are, because I am your friend, you would not throw a stone at me who am only a poor creature. But yet you are ready with this terrible act of revenge to offend Jesus who is not only your best friend but God also, and who shed the last drop of his blood for you.”

He stood there motionless between them with his crucifix held high and the boys gave in at the sight of such courage and kindness.

One of the boys said later:

“At that moment I was shaken to the depths and began to shiver all over. I felt thoroughly ashamed that a boy like Dominic had had to go so far to make me see sense. I had no difficulty in forgiving my companion and I asked Dominic to take me to some understanding priest to whom I could make a good confession and do better in the future.

## *Contents*

He agreed and a few days later I went with my opponent and we made our confession. After we had made friends again I was reconciled with the Lord whom I would certainly have seriously offended through hatred and desire for revenge.”

This example is well worth imitating by any Christian lad if he were to see some similar attempt at revenge or be offended or hurt by others.

Dominic never mentioned anything about this incident and nothing would have been known of the part he played in it if the boys concerned had not related all that happened to their companions.

For boys from the country not very used to the excitement and varied activity of the town, going backwards and forwards to school from the Oratory had its dangers and difficulties. Dominic used it as an opportunity to do something for Our Blessed Lord. He carried out implicitly whatever was laid down by his superiors, and made the journey without letting his eyes roam everywhere or his ears listen to things that were far from good. He did not let himself be drawn into mischievous pranks, or waste time in the silly escapades that easily suggest themselves to schoolboys.

“I enjoy myself most in doing what is expected of me and, if you are really my friends, you will help me to do this and not the opposite,” he would say, if some silly prank were suggested.

Nevertheless he was nearly caught out one day when the group he was with decided to play truant and spend the day at the fair which had come to the town. Dominic had agreed and had started off with them, when he suddenly realised what it was he was doing, and refused to go any further.

“I am going to school. If we stay away we are displeasing God and also our superiors. I am sorry I agreed to do wrong, and I hope this is the last time you will try to persuade me to follow you in doing wrong. If it is not, we will not be friends any more.” Dominic won the other boys over and they all went to school, and there was no more trouble in the future.

At the end of the year his hard work won him promotion to a higher class, but, when the new school year began, it was decided to let him study privately at the Oratory, as he seemed to be failing in health. In this way it was felt he could be better looked after.

This plan succeeded and when he came to pass into the next class his health was very much improved. He was sent to attend the classes of Father Matteo Picco. These were considered to be among the best in Turin, and Dominic was admitted free, because of the good things this good priest already heard said of him.

There are many edifying things said or done by Savio during this next year at school and the one to follow, and we will continue to tell you about them bit by bit as we outline the deeds connected with them.

## Chapter 10. His decision to become a saint

Now that we have given an indication of his studies we will speak of his great decision to become a saint.

When he had been about six months at the Oratory, Savio heard a talk about an easy way to become a saint. The preacher made three points which made a huge impact on Dominic.

1. That it is God's will that each one should become a saint.
2. That it is easy to become a saint.
3. That there is a great reward waiting in heaven for those who try to become saints.

This talk was like a spark that set off into a consuming blaze the love of God in his heart. For some days he said nothing, going about very quietly without his usual joyful spirit. His companions noticed this, and I did also. My first thought was that he was not feeling well, and I asked him was there something wrong.

"No," he said, "it is something good."

"What do you mean?"

"I feel that I must become a saint. I never saw before that it was both possible and easy. Now that I see it, I can have no peace inside until I really begin to do so. Please will you help me?"

I praised Dominic's good desires but urged him not to let himself get too worked up, because in that state it is not easy to know what God wants. I said to him that for the moment he should regain his customary cheerfulness, persevere in his regular life of study and piety, and especially not neglect being with his companions in games and recreation.

I said to him one day I would like to make him a present of something that would please him, and that I would leave the choice completely to him.

His prompt and immediate reply was: "I want you to help me to become a saint. I want to give up everything to Jesus and for always. If I am not trying to be a saint, I am doing nothing at all. I will not have any peace if I don't keep on trying."

On another occasion the Rector wanted to show his affection for the boys and make them a little present, so he said that they could ask for whatever they wished and, if it were possible, he would give it to them. The requests were to be written down, and it can be imagined that there were some strange and bizarre requests made by some of the boys. Dominic took a piece of paper and wrote these words: "I ask one thing only, that you help me to save my soul and make me a saint."

Another day explanations were being given about the meaning of words.



## *Contents*

“What does Dominic mean?” he asked.

The reply was: “Belonging to God.”

“There you are,” he said, “you see how right I am in asking you to make me a saint. Even my name says that I belong to God, so I must at all costs become one. I can’t be happy if I do not.”

This ‘bee in his bonnet’ that Dominic had about becoming a saint, did not spring from the fact that he was not living a saintly life but from the fact that he wanted to go the whole way, including severe penances and long hours in prayer, and his Rector would not allow these on any account.

## Chapter 11. His zeal for the good of souls

The first advice Dominic was given to help him become a saint was to set out to win souls for God, because there is no holier work in this life than to work for the good of souls for whom Jesus Christ shed the last drop of his blood. Dominic grasped this completely and often was heard to say:

“How happy I would be if only I could win all my companions for God.”

He never let any occasion slip for giving a friendly word of advice or of quietly recalling anyone to duty who said or did anything contrary to God’s law.

What really shook him, affecting him even physically, was hearing any form of blasphemy or God’s name being taken in vain. If, going through the streets, he happened to hear anything of the kind, he bowed his head in sorrow and reparation, saying fervently to himself: “Praised be Jesus Christ.”

One day when they were walking through the town a companion noticed him taking off his cap and murmuring something to himself.

“What are you doing? What did you say?”

“Did you not hear that carter, cursing and swearing? If I thought it would have done any good I would have spoken to the man, but as he is in a temper I am afraid it would only make things worse. So I was trying to make a little act of reparation by taking my cap off and saying: ‘Praised be Jesus Christ’.”

His companion was very moved at hearing this, and to this day never tires of inspiring others by telling them about it.

One day on his way back from school he heard an elderly man utter a horrible blasphemy. He trembled when he heard it and said his short prayer. Then, on a sudden, he went to the man and with great respect and politeness asked him if he could tell him the way to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. The man was completely taken by the boy’s charm and politeness, and said very affably:

“I am very sorry, I am afraid I have no idea.”

“Oh,” said Dominic, “I wonder, since you can’t do that, could you do me another favour?”

“Certainly, certainly. What is it?”

Dominic then went very close to the man, and speaking softly into his ear he said.

“Do you think that, when you are in a temper, you could say something else instead of blasphemies about God?”

The man was both astonished and full of admiration for the boy, and said: “Well said, you are quite right. I see that I have a very bad habit and I promise you I will try to overcome it.”

## Contents

Another day, near the gates of the school, he came across two boys of about nine years old, quarrelling. While doing so, one of them used the Holy Name of Jesus in a curse against the other. Dominic felt justly indignant but, restraining himself, he separated the two boys and got them to make peace. Then he said to the one who had sworn:

“Come with me. I’ve something special for you.”

The boy agreed and Dominic took him by the hand and led him into church. He led him to the high altar and then, kneeling down beside him he said: “Tell Jesus you are sorry for having taken his Holy Name in vain.” As the boy did not know the act of contrition, he said it with him. Then he said: “In reparation say after me: ‘Praised be Jesus Christ. May his holy and adorable name be always praised’.”

Among the lives of the saints his preference was for those who stood out for their work for souls. He spoke readily of those on the missions who endure so much to save souls. He had no money to send them, but he prayed for them every day and never failed to offer his Holy Communion once a week. Several times I heard him say:

“How many souls there are in England waiting for our help. If only I were strong enough and good enough, I would go there immediately and by preaching and example try to win them all for our Blessed Lord.”

He also often remarked with grief how little help children received to know and love God.

“As soon as I am a seminarian, I will go to Mondonio and get the children together so that I can teach them their catechism, tell them stories and encourage them to become saints. How many young people may perhaps lose their souls, for want of instruction and encouragement.”

These were not only words. He used to teach catechism at the Sunday school and on other occasions. And he would coach individual boys privately at any time they wanted, gladly giving up his recreation for this purpose. He was always happy if he could speak to them of God and lead them to an understanding of the wonder and value of their immortal soul. One day a light-headed companion made fun of him for telling a good story to a group of boys.

“Why do you bother telling stories like those?” he asked.

“Why do I bother?” replied Dominic. “I bother because we are all brothers and we should all help each other in the most important thing of all, the saving of our souls, which cost the blood of Jesus. I bother because God himself has urged us to do this and because I know also that, if I can succeed in saving one soul, I will make sure of saving my own.”

This concern for others was not simply a term-time one. During the holidays when he was at home he kept up his good work. Any little gifts he got, or prizes that he won during the term time, were set aside carefully so that he could use them during the holiday to gain the good will of the boys and to encourage them to do better. He would also make the rounds of his superiors before he went home, to ask them if they had any little things to spare, which he might take home with him, “to make my companions happy.”

Very soon after he got home he would be in touch with many boys, big and small. He would give out his presents and discreetly find out how things were going. With the

## *Contents*

ascendancy he gained over them he could get boys to go with him to Mass, to Sunday school and so on.

I am assured that he devoted not a little time to instructing one of his friends.

“If you succeed in making the Sign of the Cross really well,” he used say, “I will give you a medal and I will recommend you to a priest who will give you a good book. But I want it done properly, saying the words you right hand starting at the forehead, then to your chest, then to the left and right shoulders and finishing up with your hands joined, saying 'Amen'.”

He had a great desire to see the sign of the cross well made, and was never shy to make it well in front of others, so as to encourage them to do likewise.

He took two little boys living nearby under his special care, teaching them to read and write and to learn their catechism. He would say morning and night prayers with them and take them to church, show them how to bless themselves properly with holy water, and how to behave well while there. Time that he might have legitimately spent in walks and various pastimes was spent in helping others, by word or by any other means possible. He made a point of making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day, and it was a great joy for him when he managed to get someone to come with him. It may be safely said that he never let slip any occasion of helping anyone or of speaking a word which could do good to a soul.

## Chapter 12. Various episodes and his way of dealing with his friends

The thought of winning souls to God never left him. He was the life of the games at recreation. He did not monopolise the conversation or keep butting ins but if silence came he was always ready with something interesting, a difficulty which had cropped up in class or an interesting story. The others were always glad to be with him. If someone started grumbling or criticising, he would raise a laugh over something else and so distract them and dispel any word of criticism.

His cheerful smile and spirit of zest made him popular also with those who were not too fond of religious things. They were always glad to be in his company and whenever he gently chided them it was taken in good part.

On one occasion a companion wanted Dominic to go with him and dress up. Dominic would not go, and said to the boy:

“Would you really like to be what you are going to dress up as - two horns, a big nose and a clown’s costume?”

“Of course not,” replied the other.

“Well, why make yourself look like something you would not want to be and in addition deface the nice face that God has given you?”

Another time a stranger came into the playground. He soon had a group around him, which quickly became a crowd as the laughter of the boys at his stories attracted more and more. As soon as he had a crowd he changed his tune and was soon trying to poison the minds of the boys with all sorts of horrors, including making fun of holy things and persons. Some of the boys moved off when they heard this but more still stayed on, hanging on his words as though hypnotised. At this moment Dominic came along and as soon as he grasped what was going on, cried out:

“Come on, let’s get away from this unfortunate man who wants to ruin us.”

The spell was broken and all the boys, obedient to a friend whom they loved and respected, scattered, leaving the man talking to the wind. He was never seen again.

On another occasion some wanted to go off swimming. This, without due care, can be dangerous anywhere, in more senses than one, and it is especially so round Turin where there is deep and fast-moving water, claiming many young victims each year. Dominic heard about it and tried to make them forget it by occupying their time with him in an interesting way. But when he saw that their minds were made up he spoke out boldly.

“Don’t go, it’s better not to.”

“But we are not doing any harm.”

“You are being disobedient, you are putting yourselves in danger and running the risk of getting drowned and you say you are not doing any harm!”

## Contents

“Yes, but this heat is terrible.”

“Maybe, but it is not as hot as another place I know, and what will you do if you end up there?”

Moved by Dominic’s attitude they changed their minds and also did not dodge the evening service in church as they had intended to.

Some of the boys had formed a little group pledged to try to lead the not so good to better things. Dominic was one of its most earnest members and used to use various things given him - an apple, orange, crucifix, little book - to help him in this work. He would appear in the playground holding up whatever he had, and crying out: “Who wants it, who wants it?”

There were many cries of “I do” and there would be a concerted rush. “Just a moment,” he would say, “I will give it to the one who answers this catechism question best.” He would confine himself to the least good boys, and as long as they made a shot at it the prize was theirs.

He also had other methods, such as talking and walking with them, playing a game with them that they liked, and so he might be seen one day carrying a large stick on his shoulders like Hercules with his club, on his way to play the game which was most in vogue at the time. During the game he might suddenly stop and say to a boy.

“What about coming with me to Confession on Saturday?”

The other boy, because Saturday seemed a long way off, and because he was anxious to get on with the game, or just to please Dominic, would say: “Oh, all right.” Dominic did not say any more, but in the succeeding days he kept his quarry in view, and when Saturday came would go with him to church, make his own Confession first of all, and if necessary ask the priest to go out of his way to help the boy coming in after him. He would then stay in church with the boy and they would make their thanksgiving together.

These incidents were by no means uncommon and were a great source of joy and consolation to Dominic. They were of great benefit to his companions and boys who were insensible to sermons and exhortations in church would often yield to his gentle but persistent persuasion.

It also happened sometimes that a boy did not keep his promise and at Confession time on Saturday, Dominic would look for him in vain. When next he ran into him, he said, good-humouredly:

“Hey, you rascal, you led me up the garden path properly!”

“Well, I wasn’t ready.. I didn’t feel like it.”

“My poor friend,” Dominic would reply, “it was the devil who was tempting you and you fell for it completely. I can see that you are not in the mood for it now, but I promise you, if you take the plunge and go to Confession, you will be much happier than you have been for a long time.” In most cases, after the boy had taken Dominic’s advice, he would come to him smiling and full of happiness: “What you said was quite true. I am very happy and I have made up my mind to go to Confession regularly in the future.”

In any school of any size there are always some boys who are left on their own by their companions. This can be because they are rough in their ways, labouring under some disability, difficult to get on with. What they need is to experience real friendship, and as this is what they normally do not find, they suffer accordingly.

## *Contents*

Dominic made it his business to be their friend. He would play with them during recreation, willingly talk to them, so that when they were ready to do something wrong and he suggested otherwise, they would listen, because they realised it was a friend who spoke to them, who wanted only what was best for them.

So it was when boys were sick, Dominic was always asked for: those who were discouraged and in trouble would go to him and pour their troubles into his ear. Thus the way was opened to him to do good to those around him at all times and to increase in merit before God.

## Chapter 13. His spirit of prayer - Devotion to the Mother of God - Mary's month

Among the gifts with which God had enriched Dominic was fervour in prayer. As a result of his efforts he got so accustomed to talk with God, that no matter where he was, or what noise was going on round about him, he could briefly recollect himself, sending his heart soaring to God.

When he was praying with others, he seemed to be quite angelic. There was no fidgeting and continually changing position; he knelt there motionless, his face radiant, head slightly bowed, eyes lowered. Just to see him this way was an inspiration.

In 1854 Count Cays became President of Honour of the St. Aloysius Sodality which was established in the school. On the occasion of his first visit to take part in the church services, he noticed a boy obviously praying with great devotion and attention and he was so struck that he afterwards asked who he was; he was told that it was Dominic Savio.

He used to try to spend a part of his free time in reading a good book, or in making a visit to the church. He would normally have some other boys with him and they would pray together and also visit Our Lady's altar.

There was no limit to his devotion to the Mother of God. Every day he made some little act of mortification in her honour. He never let himself gaze or stare at a girl, and when walking through the streets, did not let his eyes roam about.

Things happening on the way that his companions were all eagerness to see, he never bothered about and often even never saw. When on one occasion he was asked what he thought about something which he had not even noticed, one of his companions burst out impatiently:

"What is the use of having eyes, if you don't use them to look at what is going on around you?"

Dominic replied:

"Instead of using my eyes on useless things, I should like to keep them to gaze on the beauty of Mary Most Holy, when, by God's mercy, I shall be in heaven."

He had a very special devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Every time he went to church he would pay a visit to her altar, and kneeling there before her, beg her to keep his heart free from all impurity with the following little prayer of his own:

"O Mary, I want to be your son always. Please let me die rather than that I should ever sin against holy Purity."

Every Friday he would get some of his friends together and take them to church with



## *Contents*

him where they would say together the Rosary of the Seven Sorrows of Mary or the Litany.

He was never happier than when he could succeed in bringing someone else to Mary's feet to honour her and ask her help. He did not always succeed easily. One winter Saturday he asked one of his companions to make a visit to Our Lady and they would say the Vespers of Our Lady's Office together. The boy objected that his hands were cold; so Dominic took off his own gloves and gave them to him. Another time in similar circumstances he gave the other boy his coat and made him put it on so he would come with him to the church and pray. Who could not be filled with admiration at such acts of generosity?

But it was in the month of May that his devotion to Mary reached its peak. He arranged with a group of his friends to do some special deed in her honour every day. He got together a collection of interesting stories and facts about Our Lady and willingly told them to others in order to inspire them with devotion to her. He urged his companions during recreation to frequent Confession and Communion every day, showing great recollection and devotion.

The boys in his dormitory had decided to put up in their dormitory a little altar for Our Lady. They had a meeting to decide what each one should give, and Dominic, who was enthusiastic about the project, found that he had no money to pay his share. He was at a loss wondering what to do and then an idea struck him. He hurried off and got a very nice book that had been given him as a prize, and brought it back to his companions telling them to raffle it and so get money that way.

Others were inspired by his generosity and produced little treasures of their own; a very successful raffle was held and with the proceeds all the required materials were brought. The boys worked hard to get the altar ready but in order to finish it in time it was necessary that some of them stay up late the night before the feast.

Dominic wanted to be one of these, but because he had recently been ill, he was not allowed. He was very disappointed, but accepted the decision as an act of obedience.

"At any rate," he said to one of his companions, "come and wake me up as soon as you have finished; I want to be one of the first to see our altar in honour of Mary Most Holy."

## Chapter 14. He goes frequently to Confession and Communion

Experience has amply shown that the greatest helps and aids to development in time of youth are the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Any boy or girl who receives these sacraments regularly and well, will develop in time of youth, reach great maturity and go on to old age, if God spares them, exemplifying a way of life which is an inspiration to all who know them.

Would that all our young people could grasp this and try to carry it out; and that all those concerned with their upbringing and education could grasp it likewise, in order to help in its fulfillment in the young.

Before coming to live at the Oratory Dominic used to go to Confession and Communion once a month as was usual. After he came here he started going more frequently. One day he heard a talk in church which recommended three things. Go often to Confession: go often to Communion: choose a priest as confessor that you can easily talk to and open your heart to and don't change to another priest unless there is real need for it. Dominic grasped these counsels immediately and completely.

He chose a priest as confessor and went regularly to him all the time he was here. So that the priest might know him completely and thereby be better able to help him, he made a General Confession to him. He began by going to Confession and Communion every fortnight and then every week. His confessor seeing what great progress he had made spiritually, suggested receiving the Holy Eucharist three times a week and at the end of the year suggested to him to go every day.

For a time he was troubled with scruples and wanted to go to Confession every three or four days and even more often, but his spiritual director would not allow this, and kept him at weekly Confession.

Dominic had the most complete confidence in his spiritual guide and would speak to him with the greatest simplicity about his soul and matters of conscience also outside the confessional. Someone advised him to go to another priest sometimes, but he would not hear of it. He replied:

“The confessor is the doctor of the soul. People do not go about chasing one doctor after another unless they have lost confidence in their own doctor or their case is pretty desperate. I have full confidence in my confessor who is so kind and helpful to me and I don't think I have any trouble that he cannot cure.”

Nevertheless his confessor did suggest that occasionally, e.g. at the time of retreat, he should go to another priest and Dominic did so without any hesitation.

Dominic was very pleased with this state of affairs. He said: “If I have any problem I take it to my confessor and he solves it for me according to what God wants. Jesus has

## Contents

said that the voice of the priest is the voice of God. If I have some particular need I go to Holy Communion in which I receive the body, blood, soul and divinity *quod pro nobis traditum est*. What more do I need to make me happy? Nothing in the wide world. Only one thing remains - one day to see him whom we can only see with the eye of faith here below revealed in heaven.”

Filled with this spirit, Dominic’s days were full of happiness. This was the source of that wonderful cheerful spirit which was the soul of all his actions. It should not be imagined that he went about in a dream half the time or that he did not realise what sort of life it was necessary to live, if one went to daily Communion. He was fully alive to everything and his conduct was irreproachable. I have asked his companions to tell me of anything wrong they found in him or any good quality which he did not show evidence of, during the three years he lived amongst us and all have agreed that there never was anything that they needed to correct in him, or anything they could suggest for him to do that he was not already doing.

His preparation for Holy Communion was most thorough. Before going to bed the previous evening, he said a special prayer to prepare himself, which always ended as follows: “Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine sacrament.” In the morning he carried on his preparation, but his thanksgiving was liable to have no end to it. If he were not reminded he would forget about breakfast, recreation and even morning school, so caught up was he in prayer or rather, in contemplation of the divine goodness who wonderfully and mysteriously passes on to mankind the treasures of his infinite mercy.

It was really a joy for him to be able to pass some time before the Blessed Sacrament, something he did invariably at least once a day and as often as he could he would get others to come with him. There was a little group of prayers in reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the many sins of mankind - heretics, unbelievers and bad Christians - which he was very fond of saying when making such visits.

In order to make his Holy Communion as fruitful as possible and to encourage himself to renewed fervour every day, he made a plan for his Communions as follows:

SUNDAY: In honour of the Most Blessed Trinity

MONDAY: For all those who have been kind to me and done me good

TUESDAY: In honour of my guardian angel and St. Dominic

WEDNESDAY: To Our Lady of Sorrows for the conversion of sinners

THURSDAY: For the Holy Souls

FRIDAY: In honour of the Passion of Jesus

SATURDAY: In honour of Mary Most Holy, and to obtain her protection in life and in death

He took part with great joy in any ceremonies connected with the Blessed Sacrament. If when out in the town he met the Viaticum being taken to the sick, he knelt down no matter where he was and if he were free he would reverently accompany the little procession to its destination.

One day when such a little procession with the Viaticum was passing by, it was raining and the ground was very muddy. Dominic knelt down without any hesitation. His

## Contents

companion said that in such circumstances it was not necessary, God did not expect you to dirty your clothes like that. Dominic replied quite simply:

“Everything belongs to God including our clothes and so everything must do him honour. I would not only kneel down in the mud when He passes by, but I would throw myself into a furnace if by so doing I would gain a spark of that love which moved him to give us this wonderful sacrament.”

On a similar occasion a soldier was standing near him but made no effort to kneel down. Not daring to ask him to do so, he took out his handkerchief and spread it on the muddy ground in front of him. The soldier looked a bit startled but took the hint and went down on his knees there on the road, not on the handkerchief.

On the Feast of *Corpus Christi* he was sent with some of his companions to take part in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament being held in the parish. Dressed in cassock and surplice, Dominic was overjoyed. No other present could have given him more joy.

On a similar occasion a soldier was standing near him but made no effort to kneel down. Not daring to ask him to do so, he took out his handkerchief and spread it on the muddy ground in front of him. The soldier looked a bit startled but took the hint and went down on his knees there on the road, not on the handkerchief.

## Chapter 15. Penances

Dominic's youth, his far from robust health and his innocent life would certainly have dispensed him from any sort of penance; but he knew and understood that only with the greatest difficulty can a boy keep himself intact without some penance, and so the path of mortification seemed to him to be strewn with roses. By penance and mortification I do not mean patience in meeting the unpleasant things of daily life, nor do I mean the self-control and sacrifice necessary to be able to pray at all times and in all places; such things were part and parcel of his ordinary way of living. I am referring only to penances which affected him physically.

He decided in honour of Our Blessed Lady to fast every Saturday on bread and water; his confessor forbade him to do this. He started off fasting for Lent, but after a week his Rector heard about it and stopped it. He wanted at least to go without breakfast, but this was not allowed him either. The reason of course was that his superiors did not want his health to be ruined. What was he to do then?

Dominic was not daunted; he took to afflicting his body in other ways. He put pebbles or bits of wood under his sheet so that he would be uncomfortable in bed. He got hold of a very rough shirt, very irritating to the skin and wore it. These penances were also forbidden him. He tried again. When summer passed into autumn and winter he did not add any blankets to the very thin covering which was sufficient in the hot summer. In the bitter cold of January this was all he had. His director came to see him once when he was sick in bed. When he got to the bed he saw Dominic lying there shivering violently and he realised that there was only thin summer covering over him.

"What on earth are you up to?" he asked him. "Do you want to die of cold?"

"No," he replied, "I will hardly die of cold, but Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem was much worse off than this."

He was then forbidden absolutely to undertake any kind of penance whatsoever without the express permission of his Rector. Dominic accepted this obedience, but one day I came across him looking somewhat sad, and I asked him what was the matter. He replied:

"You've got me in a real bind. Our Blessed Lord says that if I don't do penance I will not get to heaven. I am forbidden to do any penance; what chance then have I of heaven?"

I explained to him that the penance Jesus wanted from him was complete obedience; obey and that's enough.

"Can't I do some other penance?"

"Yes, you can allow yourself the penance of being patient with others and the unpleasant things of life; to accept equally the heat and the cold and the rain; to be cheerful when tired and not feeling so well and so on."

"But," said Dominic, "these things come to you whether you like it or not."

## *Contents*

“Precisely,” I replied, “offer them willingly to God; there is nothing that will please him more, and you. will be doing real penance.” Thus reassured, Dominic was very happy and completely at peace.

## Chapter 16. The Immaculate Conception Sodality

The whole of Dominic's life can be said to be an act of love for Mary most holy. He never let slip any occasion of pleasing and honouring her. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly defined in 1854. Dominic had a very great desire to leave behind him at the school some lasting reminder of this great event. He said: "I would like very much to do something in honour of my Mother Mary; but I will have to do it quickly, as I do not think I have much time left."

Spurred on by his present desire to help his companions, he asked some of those whom he knew well and relied upon to join him in forming the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. The aim was to obtain the special protection of the Mother of God in life, and especially at the hour of death. Dominic proposed two means to this end: to honour, and to bring others to honour, Mary by different means, and to encourage frequent Communion. In agreement with his friends and after much careful thought, he drew up a set of rules. On June 8th, nine months before he died, he went with his friends before the altar of Our Lady and they read it over together. I give these rules here so that they may be an inspiration and guide to others.

We, Dominic Savio, etc. (the names of the others follow), after receiving the sacraments of Confession and Communion, this day, June 8th, give ourselves completely to Mary Immaculate and promise to work unceasingly for her and with her: to help ourselves to do this and to maintain our love for her we, here before her altar, solemnly promise, in agreement with our spiritual director, to follow in Louis Comollo's footsteps to the best of our ability.<sup>18</sup> Here we bind ourselves as follows:

To carry out with the greatest exactness the rules of the school.

To help and encourage our companions: helping them by pointing out in a friendly way whatever needs correcting; encouraging them by being first in doing the right thing and supporting their own efforts.

To be always busy with something useful.

To make it possible to be faithful to these obligations and to help us to persevere in them, we submit the following rules to our Rector.

---

<sup>18</sup>LOUIS COMOLLO was born in Cinzano in 1818 and died a holy death in 1839 at the Seminary in Chieri at 22 years of age. The life of this model of virtue was reprinted a second time in Year IV of the *Letture Cattoliche*.

## *Contents*

We will be very exact in carrying out what we are expected to do and have great confidence in those over us.

The carrying out of our own duties will be our first and special concern.

A true spirit of charity will unite the members of the group in genuine friendship among themselves and also with their companions. We will not hesitate to correct anyone when so doing in a friendly way would help.

We will meet each week for half an hour and after a prayer to the Holy Spirit and a short spiritual reading we will consider how the Sodality is getting on in its work for Jesus and Mary.

We will help each other to get rid of any faults or wrong habits which we have. This we will do privately.

We will try hard to be even-tempered and good-humoured, being patient with each other, and with those who are awkward and troublesome.

There are no special prayers to be said; whatever time is left over after having carried out our own duties should be devoted to whatever will be most useful for our souls.

However, we do take upon ourselves these few practices:

We will go as often as possible to the sacraments.

We will receive Holy Communion every Sunday, holy days of obligation, the novenas and feast-days of Our Lady and our patrons.

We will also receive Holy Communion on Thursday, unless we are prevented by some necessary obligation.

Every day, especially in the Holy Rosary, we will ask Our Lady to bless our Sodality, and give us the grace to persevere.

Saturdays will be kept in honour of Our Lady and on that day we will offer her some special act done in honour of the Immaculate Conception.

When praying and at the services in church, during lessons and at study time, we will try to make our exterior behaviour and manner such as to edify others.

We will treasure the word of God and we will go over again together the talks we have heard.

We will carefully avoid any wasting time, to safeguard ourselves from the temptations which come so easily and so strongly at times of idleness.

Therefore whatever time remains after the discharge of our own duties will be spent in useful and good reading or in prayer.

Recreation times are best or at least allowed after meals and after lesson time and study time.

We will make known to our superiors whatever will help our spiritual progress.



## *Contents*

We will not abuse the goodness of those over us by constantly asking for those permissions which in their goodness they are willing to give. The exact observance of the school rules to which we have pledged ourselves should help us to avoid this abuse of too many exceptions.

We will not grumble about food and we will try to prevent others from doing so.

Those who want to join our society must first of all make a good Confession and receive Holy Communion, spend a week on trial, read these rules carefully, and promise Jesus and Mary Immaculate to be faithful to them.

On the occasion of anyone being received into the Sodality, the others will assist at Mass and receive Holy Communion, praying that God will give their new companion and the grace of perseverance, obedience and real love of God.

Our Sodality is placed under the care of Mary Immaculate whose name we bear and whose medal we always carry with us. A sincere, filial and limitless confidence in Mary, a constant devotion and loving affection for her, will make us overcome all obstacles, clinging tenaciously to our resolutions, be firm with ourselves, gentle and kindly towards others, exact in everything. The members are urged to write the holy names of Jesus and Mary first of all in their hearts and minds and then on their books and similar objects, so that they can be easily reminded of them. Our director is asked to go over these rules and if necessary change them according as he thinks best. We accept completely whatever he decides in the matter.

Mary, bless our efforts, since the idea of the Sodality is all yours. Smile on our hopes, accept our promises, and thus under your mantle and made strong by your loving care, we will come safely through the storm-tossed sea of this world and be victorious over the temptations of the devil. So too will we be able to help our companions by what we do, give joy to those over us, and in all things be your loving sons. And if God gives us the grace of becoming priests, we promise you to give all our energies and powers to this work, distrusting ourselves, trusting completely in God; and so after our exile on this earth we trust that, consoled by Mary at our side, we shall safely receive the eternal reward that God reserves for those who serve him in spirit and truth.

The director of the Oratory read the rules very carefully and gave it his approval under the following conditions:

That the promises have not the force of vows.

None of them bind in any way under pain of sin.

Some external act of service or help should be undertaken by each one at the weekly meeting.

## *Contents*

The week will be arranged so as to have some members go to Communion every day.

No special religious practice may be added without the express permission of the director.

The principal aim of the Sodality will be to further devotion to Mary Immaculate and Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Everyone before being accepted must read the life of Louis Comollo.

## Chapter 17. His special friends - Relationship with young Camillo Gavio

Everybody was friendly with Dominic. Those who could not understand him completely, at least respected him for his good qualities. He could get on well with everyone. He was so confirmed in the things of God that he was asked on occasion to associate with boys who were far from good, so that he might try to win them over to God. To do this he made use of free time, different kinds of games, conversation, using them all in different ways for the spiritual advantage of those concerned.

His best friends, however, were the other boys in the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. With these he had regular meetings, and they would gather together also for acts of devotion. These meetings had the permission of the director, but they were presided over and carried through by the boys themselves. In the meetings they decided how best to help an active participation in the novenas and solemn feasts, how to maintain and increase love for the Blessed Sacrament and frequent Communion; how to help boys who easily got into trouble and were going astray. Each of them would adopt one such boy and make it his business to help him and encourage him in every way possible.

Dominic was the soul of the meeting, its guide and mentor. There is much I could say about many of the boys who took part in those meetings, but as most of them are still alive, it is better I should not. I will mention two only who are already dead: Camillo Gavio of Tortona, and John Massaglia of Marmorito. Camillo Gavio was only two months with us but it was long enough to leave a wonderful memory of himself.

His outstanding character and the great promise he showed in painting and sculpture encouraged his town council to send him to Turin, so that he might have a real chance of developing his talents. He had been very ill not long before and was not yet fully recovered; also it was his first time away from home, and among so many boys whom he did not know, it was little wonder that he was somewhat downcast and stood sadly watching the others playing their game with great zest. Dominic saw him and immediately went over to talk to him and make friends. The following dialogue took place. Dominic began:

“Hello, don’t you know anyone yet?”

“No, but I am enjoying watching the others playing.”

“What is your name?”

“Camillo Gavio, and I come from Tortona.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“You are looking sad; have you not been well?”

“Yes, I have been very ill with some sort of heart trouble and I am not yet fully better.”

“You would like to be completely better soon, wouldn’t you?”

## Contents

“No, not absolutely. I only want to do God’s will.”

These last words made Dominic realise that Gavio was a boy of more than ordinary piety, and his heart warmed to him. With renewed interest he went on:

“Anyone who only wants God’s will has a real desire to become a saint, do you want to become a saint?”

“Oh yes; I want that more than anything else.”

“That’s great; you can be one of our special group, if you like, and share completely what we do together to help us to live for Jesus and Mary.”

“Yes, I would like to do that; but what have I got to do?”

“I will tell you in a few words. For us here it means making holiness consist in being happy. We hate and detest sin as something that robs us of God’s grace and makes us very unhappy inside; we try to be very faithful to all our duties and to be foremost in taking an active part in all exercises of piety. Try taking for your own special motto: *Servite Domino in laetitia* - Serve the Lord in gladness.”

These few words were like a ray of sunshine in the gloom, and greatly comforted the boy. From that day he became a close friend of Dominic and followed him faithfully in the path which he trod. However, his illness flared up again after two months and despite every care he grew steadily worse and in a few days he died. He received the last sacraments with great reverence and joy and gave up his soul to God on December 30th, 1856.

Dominic visited him regularly while he was ill and as the end drew near wanted to spend the night at his bedside. This he was not allowed to do. As soon as he heard that death had come, he went to his bedside and with tears in his eyes said:

“Goodbye Camillo; I am sure you have gone straight to heaven - get a place ready for me there also. I will always be your friend as long as I live. I will pray for the repose of your soul.”

Afterwards he got the boys of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate together and they all went to pray beside the body. They also said many other prayers for him and received Holy Communion in reparation for his soul. Dominic himself did this a number of times.

He said to his friends several times: “Do not let us forget the soul of our friend. Please God he is already in heaven, but we must carry on praying for him. All that we do for him God will get done for us in due course, when our own time comes.”

## Chapter 18. His relationship with young John Massaglia

Dominic's relationship with John Massaglia was more intimate and maintained over a longer period of time. They both came to the Oratory at the same time, they were from neighbouring villages, both wanted to become priests, and they had a common desire to become saints.

Dominic said to his friend one day,

"Don't let us stop at saying we want to be priests, but let us get busy trying to grow in the virtues that are needed by a priest."

"Quite true," the other replied, "but if we do all we can, God in his goodness will give us the great grace of becoming Ministers of Jesus Christ."

At Easter time there was the annual retreat; this they made with great fervour. When it was over, Dominic said to John: "Let us be friends in the best way possible, anxious for the welfare of each other's soul. We could be that if we were to correct each other in whatever way might be needed. So will you tell me whenever you notice me doing anything I should not, or if you see there is some good I can do and I am not doing, please point it out."

"Very gladly, although you don't really need anything like that. It's me that needs it, as I am older and exposed to greater temptations. So will you do that for me?"

Dominic replied with a smile: "Let's cut out the compliments and be really serious about helping each other."

From that moment Dominic and John became true friends. Their friendship was lasting because it was founded on their life for God, striving earnestly together to help each other to resist evil and do good.

After the examinations at the end of the school year, the boys used to go home for the holidays. Some boys for a variety of reasons used to ask to remain at the school during the holiday period. Dominic and John were among these. I knew that their parents were very anxious to have them at home and I also thought it would do them a lot of good to go home for a while since neither of them was very strong, so I suggested this to them.

Instead of replying they both began to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?"

Dominic replied: "We know that our parents would be very glad to have us at home, but we know also that while the bird in the cage loses its liberty, still it is safe from the claws of the vulture; outside the cage he may fly where he likes but also at any moment he can fall a victim to the evil bird of prey."

In spite of this, I judged it advisable for them both to go home for some time and they went without hesitation in a spirit of obedience, remaining just the time that I suggested.

## Contents

If I were to write about the good example and virtues of John Massaglia I should be largely repeating what I have already written about Dominic, whose faithful follower he was, as long as he lived. He enjoyed good health and showed great promise in his studies. When he had finished his humanities, he passed with distinction the exam prior to receiving the clerical habit. But he was not able to wear the cassock for long that he had looked forward so eagerly to having.

After a few months he became unwell, but not thinking much of it, he did not want to interrupt his studies. His parents were worried, however, and took him home, so that he might have a good rest away from his books. But, he did not improve and after some weeks Dominic received the following letter:

Dear Dominic,

I thought I should only be a few days at home, so I did not bring any books or notes home with me. However, my sickness is going on and on, and I am wondering how it will all end up. The doctor says I am getting better; my own private opinion is that I am getting worse. We shall see who is right!

I am lonely, dear Dominic, so far away from you and the others; there are not the same opportunities here for all the spiritual things we had at school. I comfort myself with the memory of the days we helped each other to prepare well for Holy Communion. I am sure we are still united in spirit.

Would you go to my desk in the study and get the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis which you will find there and some notes which are lying beside it? Please parcel them up and send them to me. I am tired of doing nothing, but the doctor won't let me study. I sometimes walk up and down my room thinking, 'Shall I ever get better? Shall I ever rejoin my companions at school? Is this my last illness?' God alone knows the answers. I think I am quite ready to do his holy will, whatever it may be.

Send me any advice you think will help me. Let me know how you are getting on and remember me in your prayers, especially when you receive Holy Communion. Let our friendship be sealed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and if we are not destined to be united long in this life, please God we shall be together for ever in heaven.

Tell all the boys I was asking for them and remember me especially to those of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate. God be with you.

Your affectionate friend,

John Massaglia.

Dominic sent John what he had asked him to get from his desk and together with it he sent the following letter:

## Contents

Dear John,

You don't know how pleased I was to get your letter - at least it let me know that you were still alive. As no news had come since you left, we did not know quite, whether to say the 'Glory be to the Father' or the 'Out of the depths' for you. I am sending what you asked me to. I should like to say that Thomas à Kempis is a good friend, but he is dead. He needs to be made to come alive by your own efforts to understand what he says. Think it over, and see how it can be carried out in your own life.

You sigh for the wonderful chances we have here of spiritual things; so did I when I was at Mondonio. I tried to make up for them by a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and when going I tried to get as many others to come with me as possible.

Besides the IMITATION I read THE TREASURE HIDDEN IN THE HOLY MASS by St. Leonard of Port Maurice. If you feel like it, read that also.

You say you don't know if you will ever come back to the Oratory. To tell you the truth I have a feeling that I am coming quickly to the end of my own life. At any rate we can pray for each other so that both of us may die happily in God's grace. The one who goes to heaven first can prepare a place for the other and when he arrives stretch out a helping hand to pull him in!

May God keep us always in his holy grace and help us to become saints, but quickly because there is little time left. All your friends look forward to your coming back and send their very best wishes. With theirs I send you my own best wishes and prayers.

Always,

Your loving friend,

Dominic Savio.

John Massaglia's illness at first seemed of little consequence. Several times he seemed completely recovered only to relapse again, and then suddenly he was at death's door, and passed peacefully away. His parish priest, who was also his spiritual father during holiday time, wrote:

"There was time to give him the Last Sacraments and he received them with the greatest devotion. He died the death of the just individual who leaves this world to go straight to heaven."

Dominic grieved deeply at the loss of his friend and although he accepted it completely as God's will, he was in tears for several days. It was the first time that I had seen that wonderful face of his sad and tear-stained. His only comfort was to pray for his friend and get others to do likewise. He could be heard to say sometimes,

"Dear John, you are dead, and I hope you are already with Camillo in heaven; when shall I be with you in that happy place?."

## *Contents*

He never forgot John Massaglia in his prayers right up to the time of his own death. He never assisted at Holy Mass or at any exercise in church without remembering him before God. Dominic's sensitive heart suffered greatly from this loss and even his health was affected.



## Chapter 19. Special graces and particular deeds

There is nothing extraordinary in what I have written about so far, although we might call Dominic's exemplary and innocent life, his spirit of penance extraordinary. The liveliness of his faith, his constant hope, his tireless zeal in doing good and helping others might also be called extraordinary. This went on until his last breath.

Now I would like to present some incidents and special graces which were out of the ordinary. I am conscious that these may give rise to some doubt in those who read about them. I should like to state categorically that anything recounted here which seems paralleled by incidents in the Scriptures or the lives of the saints, was seen with my own eyes and that the accounts written of them are written with a scrupulous concern for the truth. I leave each one free to form his own opinions.

On a number of occasions when I have been in church when Dominic was making his thanksgiving after Holy Communion, or visiting the Blessed Sacrament exposed, I have seen him obviously quite oblivious to what was going on around him; he would continue in this state without noticing the time unless he was reminded it was time for something else.

One day he was missing from breakfast, morning lessons, the midday meal and no one knew where he was, he was not in the study room, not even in bed! The matter was referred to the Rector, who suspected what might be the case, that he would be in the church. He went to the Church and there in the little chapel behind the high altar he saw Dominic standing motionless like a statue. One foot was on top of the other, one hand resting on the reading lectern; his other hand was on his breast and his gaze was fixed immovably on the tabernacle.

He called him but there was no response. He shook him, and he looked around at him saying:

"Oh, is Mass already over?"

"Look," said his director, showing him his watch, "it is two o'clock."

He asked pardon very contritely for having been absent without permission, and the director sent him to get some dinner, saying to him:

"If anyone asks you where you have been, say you were doing something for me." He said this so that he might be spared the curious questions of his companions.

Another time, as I was going out of the sacristy after finishing my thanksgiving, I heard a voice which seemed to be engaged in argument. It came from the little chapel behind the high altar and when I went there I saw Dominic. He was speaking and then stopping as though waiting for someone else's reply. Among other things I heard quite clearly these words:

## Contents

“Yes, my God, I have already said it and I say it again: I love you and I wish to go on loving you till my last breath. If you see that I am going to offend you, let me die: I much prefer to die than to offend you by sin.”

I asked him sometimes what went on at these times and he replied with great simplicity:

“It is silly of me; I get a distraction and lose the thread of my prayers and then I see such wonderful things that the hours pass by like minutes.”

One day he came into my room saying:

“Come quickly! There is some good work to be done.”

“Where do you want to take me?”

“Come quickly! Come quickly!”

I hesitated, but on his renewed insistence, went with him: similar instances had happened before. We left the house and silently he led me through one street after another for quite a distance. Finally we arrived at a block of flats and he led me up to the third floor:

“Here you are. This is where you are wanted,” he said as he rang the bell and immediately went away.

The door was opened:

“Oh come in, come in quickly before it is too late. My husband lapsed from the church and became a Protestant: now he is dying and begging for a priest.”

I entered and there saw the dying man, overcome with anxiety to set his conscience in order. Speedily I set matters right with a good Confession, and as I was just finishing, the local priest from St. Augustine’s parish arrived with the holy oils. As he was in the act of administering the last anointing the man died.

One day I asked Dominic how he could have known that there was a dying man there. He looked at me somewhat sadly and burst into tears. I did not question him any further.

The innocence of his life, his love of God and great desire for the things of God so developed Dominic’s mind that he came to be habitually united with God.

Sometimes he would stop playing a game and withdrawing from his companions walk by himself. When asked why he did this he replied.

“These distractions come to me suddenly, and sometimes I seem to see heaven open above me and I have to go away from my companions so that I do not say things which could only seem ridiculous to them.”

One day during playtime the conversation turned to the great reward God has prepared in heaven for those who preserve their innocence. Among other things it was said that those who have kept their innocence are the nearest in heaven to the person of our Divine Saviour and that they sing a special hymn reserved to them for all eternity. This was enough to send Dominic’s spirit soaring towards God; he stood still completely motionless and then fell as though dead into the arms of his companions.

This being carried out of himself would happen sometimes during study time and even in the street on his way to and from school.

He often spoke of the Holy Father and how much he would like to see him before he died. Several times he said that he had something very important to tell him. I asked him what this very important thing was.

## *Contents*

“If I could speak to the Holy Father, I would say that in spite of his many worries and cares he should not cease to give his special attention to England; God is preparing a great triumph for the faith in that country.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I will tell you, but please don't tell anyone else, as I don't want them to laugh at me. If you go to Rome perhaps you will tell Pius IX about it ... One morning as I was making my thanksgiving after Communion, a very strong distraction took hold of me. I thought I saw a great plain full of people enveloped in thick fog. They were walking about like people who had lost their way and did not know which way to turn. Someone near me said: 'This is England'. I was just going to ask some questions, when I saw Pope Pius IX just like I have seen him in pictures. He was robed magnificently and carried in his hand a torch alive with flames. As he walked slowly towards that immense gathering of people, the leaping flames from the torch dispelled the fog, and the people stood in the splendour of the noonday sun. 'That torch', said the one beside me, 'is the Catholic Faith, which is going to light up England'.”

When I went to Rome in 1858, I told Pius IX about this, and he listened to it with great joy and pleasure and said to me:

“What you say strengthens me in my determination to do everything possible for England, already the object of my care and solicitude. The message you give me, if no more, is at least the advice of a privileged soul.”

There are many other similar incidents, but I do not give them here. I have, however, written them down and leave it to others to publish them when it will be for God's greater glory.

## Chapter 20. His thoughts about death - His preparation for a holy death

Those who have read what I have written so far about Dominic will easily realise that his life was a continual preparation for death. For Dominic the Sodality of Mary Immaculate was a sure means of securing the protection of Our Lady at the hour of his death, which many now felt could not be far off. I cannot say whether he had some revelation from God of the day and circumstances of his death or whether it was just a presentiment. He certainly spoke about his death long before it happened, and so clearly that he could not have described it more accurately after it did happen.

In view of his state of health everything was done to put a brake on his life of study and piety. However, by reason of his constitution, various physical weaknesses and the ardour of his spirit, each day saw his strength decreasing. He was aware of this himself and sometimes he would say:

“I must hurry up or I will be overtaken by night, while I am on the way.”

By this he meant that he had not much longer to live and that he must do as much good as he could before death caught up with him.

It is the custom in this House for the boys to make the exercise for a Happy Death each month. Part of this exercise consists in making a Confession and Communion as though they were to be the last. Pope Pius IX in his goodness has enriched this exercise with many indulgences. Dominic used to make it with great earnestness. It is the custom at the end of the exercise to say one Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father for 'the one amongst us who will be the first to die'. One day he said smiling:

“It should not be for the one amongst us who will be the first to die, but for Dominic Savio who will be the first to die amongst us.” He said this many times.

At the end of April he went to his director to ask him how he might keep Our Lady's month in the best way possible. He was told to fulfill all his duties as well as he could for Our Lady, to tell some story or fact about her every day and act in such a way that he could go to Holy Communion worthily every day.

“I will do that faithfully: what grace shall I ask for?”

“Ask Our Lady to obtain for you from God, health and the grace of living completely for God and the saving of souls.”

“Yes, may she do this and also be with me when I am dying and lead me to heaven.”

Dominic lived so fervently during this month that he seemed already to be living in the next world and all his thoughts, words and actions were for Mary. He always had his story about her ready each day and would tell it sometimes to one group of boys, sometimes to another.

## *Contents*

One of his companions said one day: "But if you do everything this year what will be left for next year?"

"Let me do what I can this year; if I am here next year I'll let you know what my plans are."

In order to do everything possible for his health, I called in several doctors to consult together. All were taken by his brightness, his cheerfulness and his quick and ready replies. One of them, a very eminent physician, Doctor Vallauri by name, now of happy memory, said to me with admiration: "What a wonderful boy!"

I asked this doctor to tell me plainly what was the underlying trouble which was steadily sapping his strength.

"There is no basic disease: but given his delicate constitution, the keenness of his mind and the intensity of the spirit continually at work in him are gradually wearing him away."

"What is the remedy?"

"To my mind the best remedy would be to let him go to heaven: he seems to me to be very ready for it. The only thing which is likely to preserve his life is to take him away from all study and keep him busy with manual work proportionate to his strength."

## Chapter 21. His care for the sick - He leaves the Oratory - His words on that occasion

Dominic's ill health was not such as to confine him to bed. He passed his time between some classes, some study and little jobs about the house. It gave him great joy to help in the school infirmary when there were any of his companions sick there. He said sometimes:

"I don't get any merit for working in the sick room or visiting the sick, because it is something I like doing very much."

While attending to their physical needs he would also with due prudence suggest things for their spiritual benefit.

One of his friends was finding it a bit hard to remain in bed. Dominic said to him:

"Our bodies are not made to last for ever; it is understandable that they gradually wear out until finally death comes. Think how wonderful it will be when our souls, freed from hindrances of the body, fly straight to God to begin an eternity of happiness and joy!"

Another boy refused to take his medicine because of its bitter taste. Dominic said to him:

"Medicines also come from God who has made them so that we can get better and stronger. When we take them we are doing what God wants us to do and if they do not taste very nice we get all the more merit. However unpleasant they are, it is nothing to what Jesus suffered on the cross for us."

These observations of Dominic's were said so unaffectedly and with such sincerity that they always won the boys over.

Dominic's health was steadily deteriorating but he did not want to go home: he wanted at all costs to try to keep up his studies and his life for God at the school. A few months previously I had sent him home, but a few days afterwards he turned up at the Oratory again. I have to confess that the unwillingness was on both sides. I wanted to keep Dominic with me at all costs. My affection and esteem for him were those of a father for his special favourite son. But I felt that the doctor's recommendation should be carried out and this especially so as he had recently developed a bad cough. I wrote to Mr Savio and Dominic's departure was fixed for March 1st 1857.

He accepted this decision and offered it as a sacrifice to God.

"Why are you so unwilling to go home?" I asked him. "You should be glad to be going to your parents."

"I want to end my days here at the Oratory."

## *Contents*

“Alright; when you get better at home then you can come back.”

“That is all very well ... but I know that if I go home, I shall never come back.”

The evening before his departure, he could hardly be persuaded to leave my side - there was always a new question to be answered or another assurance to be given. The following is some of the dialogue which took place between us:

“What is the best thing a sick person can do to gain merit before God?”

“Frequently to renew the offering of his sufferings to God.”

“What else can he do?”

“Offer his life to Jesus.”

“Can I be certain that my sins are forgiven?”

“I assure you in God’s name that all your sins have been forgiven.”

“Can I be certain of being saved?”

“Yes, through the mercy of God which shall never be lacking for you, you can be certain of being saved.”

“If the devil comes to tempt me what shall I say to him?”

“Tell him that you have sold your soul to Jesus and he has paid for it with his Precious Blood. If the devil continues to worry you, ask him what he has ever done for your soul, and remind him that Jesus shed his blood so that you might be free from his power.”

“When I am in heaven, shall I be able to see my companions here at the Oratory and my family at home?”

“Yes, you will see everything from heaven - what is happening here, at home and lots of other things besides.”

“Shall I be able to visit you here?”

“Yes, if it is according to God’s will and for his greater glory.”

From these and many other questions which he put to me it was easy to see that Dominic was already standing on the threshold of eternity, wondering greatly about the joys it had in store for him.

## Chapter 22. He says goodbye to his friends

The morning of his departure Dominic made the Exercise for a Happy Death with his companions. He showed such devotion in his Confession and Holy Communion. It is quite impossible for me to try to describe it.

“I must make this exercise very well,” he said, “because it will be indeed my preparation for death. If I were to die on the journey, I should already have received the Holy Viaticum.”

He spent the rest of the morning putting his things in order: he packed his trunk with the care of one who is doing something for the last time. Then he went round saying goodbye to his companions, saying a little word of encouragement to one or trying to spur another on to greater efforts.

He owed a few pence to one of his companions and he took care to settle this little debt so that, as he said, his accounts would be all right with our Blessed Lord. He had a farewell meeting with the members of the Sodality of Mary and with great earnestness he exhorted them to persevere in keeping the promises they had made to Mary Immaculate, and to put no limit to their confidence in her.

About to depart, he came to me and spoke exactly as follows:

“You will have nothing of this body of mine (this carcase or skeleton) so I have to take it with me to Mondonio. You would only have been troubled with me for a little time longer . . . but God’s holy will be done. If you go to Rome, don’t forget the message for the Holy Father about England. Please pray for me that I may die a holy death: and goodbye till we meet again in heaven.”

He kept a firm hold of my hand and when we got to the door he said to his friends who were waiting to wave goodbye to him:

“Goodbye, everyone, goodbye! You are all my friends, pray for me and we will all meet again once more where we will not be separated ever again.”

He had moved off a few paces when he turned and came back to me: “Would you give me a keepsake to remember you by?”

“Certainly, with all my heart, what would you like, a nice book?”

“No, something better still.”

“What, money for your journey?”

“Yes, that’s it, money for my journey to heaven. You told us that you had got from the Holy Father some plenary indulgences at the hour of death that you could give to people. Will you give one to me?”

“Yes, my son, I will put your name on the list as soon as you have gone.”



## *Contents*

Then he went off; he had been three years with us. It had been a time of great joy for him, and a great edification for his companions and superiors. Now he had gone never to return.

There was general surprise at his solemn farewell. It was known that his health was far from good, but as he generally managed to keep out of bed, his illness was never considered to be very serious. In addition as he was always bright and cheerful, no one guessed that he was suffering so much anguish of body and spirit. And so it was that although everyone was a bit shaken by the finality of his farewell, there was a general expectancy that he would soon be back again.

But it was not to be so: he was ripe for heaven. What he had done for God and the saving of souls in his few short years of life was though he had lived to an advanced age. God wanted to take him to himself in the flower of his youth, also to free him from the perils and dangers in which even the best of souls can be shipwrecked.

## Chapter 23. The progress of his illness - Last confession and Viaticum - Edifying details

It was two o'clock on the afternoon of March 1st when Dominic left Turin. He had a pleasant journey, and the change of air and being with his parents seemed to be doing him good. The first four days at home, he went about as usual, but his lack of appetite and his increasing cough, made his parents send him to the doctor. He was quite alarmed when he examined Dominic and immediately sent him to bed.

The doctor diagnosed inflammation and had recourse to bleeding. Knowing how young people are afraid at the sight of blood, he told Dominic not to be afraid and to turn his head the other way, and he would not see anything. The boy smiled and said:

“What is this compared with the piercing of Jesus’ hands and feet with the nails?”

He then quite calmly watched the doctor at work, and showed no alarm at the sight of his blood streaming out. This was done several times and there seemed to be an improvement. The doctor felt quite certain there was, and Dominic’s parents were quite reassured. Dominic, however, thought differently and being quite convinced that it was better to receive the sacraments too early rather than too late, he said to his father when the doctor had gone:

“Dad, let us give the heavenly doctor a chance: I would like to go to Confession and receive Holy Communion.”

To please him his parents sent for the parish priest, although they felt it was unnecessary, as he was apparently getting better. The parish priest came and heard his Confession, and then to satisfy him brought the Holy Viaticum. It can easily be imagined with what devotion and love Dominic received Jesus in what he felt was his last Holy Communion. His heart overflowed with love and there came spontaneously to his lips the promises he had made at his first Holy Communion:

“Yes, yes; Jesus and Mary, you are my greatest friends, now and for always. A thousand times, death rather than sin.”

When he had finished his thanksgiving he said:

“Now I am happy; I have a long journey to eternity but with Jesus by my side I fear nothing. How I wish I could say it to the whole world, when Jesus is with us there is no fear of anything - not even of death itself.”

He was patience itself in all his sufferings. He made great efforts to do everything by himself so that as little extra work and trouble as possible should be given to his mother. Unpleasant medicines he took without any sign that they were unpleasant, and he submitted to being bled ten times without showing any sign of resentment.

## Contents

After four days of illness the doctor congratulated Dominic on the big improvement and told his parents that the disease had been overcome and it was now only a question of a good convalescence. His parents were overjoyed to hear this, but Dominic smiled and said: "The world has been overcome, it only remains to make a good appearance before God."

He then begged his father to get the parish priest so that this time he might receive the last anointing. His parents agreed to please him though neither they nor the parish priest could not see in Dominic's serene and joyful face any sign of death. In fact from the happiness in his voice one could only judge he was improving. Dominic, though, either moved by devotion or inspired by the divine voice speaking to his heart, was counting the days and the hours almost arithmetically and wanted to devote every moment to preparing himself for death. Before being anointed Dominic said these words aloud:

Dear Jesus, I love you and I wish to love you for all eternity — forgive me my sins. Let this sacrament wipe out all the sins I have ever committed by my eyes, my ears, my lips and my feet: may my soul and body be made holy by the merits of your Sacred Passion. Amen.

He then made all the responses in a strong clear voice, like the voice of one who is in perfect health.

It was March 9th, his fourth day in bed, his last on earth. He was very weak now on account of his sufferings and ten bleedings and other remedies, so he was given the papal blessing. He said the *Confiteor* himself and made the necessary responses. He was filled with consolation when he was told that with this blessing of the Holy Father he received a plenary indulgence.

"*Deo gratias,*" he whispered, "*semper Deo gratias.*"

Then fixing his eyes on the crucifix he murmured this little verse which he knew by heart:

O Jesus, my liberty I give completely to you: My body with all its powers I give completely to you.

Everything I have is yours, O God, And I abandon myself completely To your holy will.

## Chapter 24. His final moments and his wonderful death

It is a truth of faith that at the hour of death we gather the results of what we have done during life. As a man has sown so shall he reap. If during his life he has worked for God at his last moments he will be wonderfully consoled. It does sometimes happen nevertheless that good people are very afraid at the approach of death, in spite of the fact that they have led holy lives. This is part of God's providence which wishes to purify these souls of the results of their weaknesses in life, and so prepare them for a more glorious crown in heaven.

It was not like that with Dominic. I believe that God willed to give him that hundredfold which he reserves for his chosen souls before they enter the glory of heaven. Without any doubt, his such strong faith, his spirit of prayer and penance, his never having offended God grievously, his work for the saving of souls, had all merited for him peace and joy at the hour of death.

And so as death came to him he looked at it serenely and unafraid. Normally the body suffers considerable desolation and distress at the great stress of the soul separating itself from the body; but with Dominic it was not so - He fell asleep in the Lord.

It was the evening of March 9th 1857; he had received all the helps that the Church has for us at the approach of death. Anyone who just heard him talking quietly and saw the peace and serenity on his face could only have thought that he was having a quiet rest in bed. If you add to this his complete mastery over himself and his happy spirit, it is little wonder that nobody imagined that his end was near.

About an hour and a half before he died the parish priest came to visit him and was quite amazed to hear the brief prayers with which he so calmly and constantly recommended his soul to God. All the phrases expressed his great desire to go quickly to heaven.

In the circumstances the priest was somewhat perplexed as to what way he might help; he said some prayers with the boy and then as he was about to go Dominic said to him:

"Father, before going, leave me a parting thought to keep with me."

"Really I don't know what to suggest."

"Something that will strengthen and comfort me."

"All right; try to keep in mind the Passion of Our Saviour."

"*Deo gratias,*" replied Dominic, "May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always in my mind and heart and on my lips. Jesus, Mary and Joseph help me now when I am dying; Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I die at peace with you."

After that he fell asleep for half an hour. When he woke up he looked round him and said:

## Contents

“Dad, are you there?”

“Here I am son, what do you want?”

“Dad, it is time; get my *The Companion of Youth*<sup>19</sup> and read me the prayers for the Exercise of a Happy Death.”

At these words his mother burst into tears and hurried from the room. His father’s eyes filled with tears, but choking back his sobs, he got the book and read the prayers. As he went through them Dominic answered clearly.

“Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me ....”

When his father reached the final part which runs: “When for the first time my soul will see the wonderful majesty of God, do not drive it away, but take it to heaven to sing your praises for all eternity . . .,” he said:

“Yes, Dad - that is what I want so much, to sing the praises of Jesus for all eternity.”

He dropped off to sleep again, but it was like he was reflecting on things of great importance. He awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said:

“Goodbye, Dad, goodbye . . . what was it the parish priest suggested to me ... I don’t seem to remember . . . Oh, what wonderful things I see ....”

And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle.

Return, pure soul, to your Creator; heaven is open to you, the angels and saints are waiting for you. Jesus, whom you loved so much, calls you with sweet words:

“Come, good and faithful servant, you have fought the good fight and gained the victory; enter into the joy of your God”

---

<sup>19</sup>He was indicating a book addressed entirely to young people, with the title: *The Companion of Youth* in fulfilling their duties, for the exercises of Christian piety, for reciting the Office of the Blessed Virgin, Vespers throughout the year, etc.

## Chapter 25. Announcing his death - Fr Picco's words to the students

When Dominic's father heard him say these last words and saw his head bending forward as though in sleep, he really thought he had fallen asleep again. He waited a few moments and then suddenly filled with apprehension he called to the boy and as he looked again he saw that he was dead.

It can easily be realised how great was the sorrow of Dominic's parents at the death of their wonderful son, whose innocent life and appealing ways had spread such happiness in their home.

At the Oratory we were anxiously waiting for news of how he was getting on, when a letter came from his father which began as follows:

"With my heart full of grief I send you this sad news. Dominic, my dear son and your child in God, like a white lily, like Aloysius Gonzaga, gave his soul to God on March 9th after having received with the greatest devotion the Last Sacraments and the Papal Blessing."

His companions were stunned by the news and some wept at the loss of a great friend who never failed them when in need; others were sad at realising that they would no longer be helped by his constant inspiration. Others got together to pray for the repose of his soul; but the majority said: "He was a saint, he is already in heaven." Some began immediately to pray to him and there was great competition to try to get hold of something which had belonged to him.

When Father Picco, head of the school where Dominic went for special classes, heard the news, he was profoundly moved and gave the sad news to his boys in the following terms:

Only a short time ago I was speaking to you of the uncertainty of life and how death does not spare even your years. As an example I pointed to someone two or so years ago who had gone to this same school, sat here amongst you and listened to me, full of life and vigour and who a few days later passed from this life, his parents and his friends.<sup>20</sup> When I said that to you I was very far from imagining that one of those listening to me would very soon testify to the truth of my words. It is with great sorrow that I tell you that your companion Dominic Savio, so exemplary in his life, died a few days ago. You will remember how he was racked with a painful cough during his last days at the school, and it was no surprise to any of us that he had to stay

---

<sup>20</sup>Leon Cocchis student in 2nd Rhetoric year, a boy who gave good reason for hope who died on 25 March 1855 at 15 years of age.

## *Contents*

away from school. He went home on the advice of his doctors to be better looked after but already foretelling his death as he had told some of you. But the illness was advanced and continued, and after just four days he gave up his innocent soul to his Creator.

Yesterday I read the letter describing his death, which his father wrote to Don Bosco. He had no other words to describe him than to call him another St Aloysius Gonzaga both for the holiness of his life and the beautiful resignation of his death. I am very sorry that he was not long at our school and that his state of health prevented me from knowing him better and dealing with him in a large school like this. I will leave it to the superiors to speak to you about his holiness, his fervour, devotion and piety. I will leave it to his friends and companions who were around him daily to speak of his modest behaviour, his conversations. I will leave it to his parents to tell you about his obedience, respect, his docile nature. And what can I say myself that you would not already know?

I shall never forget he used to come to school with such recollection, how eagerly and attentively he used to listen to what I said, do his duty. I would be so happy if each of you decided to follow his holy example.

Before he was old enough or had done sufficient study to come to our school, he was enrolled at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. I often had occasion to speak with the Rector of the Oratory and had heard him talk of one of his students who was amongst the best students and the most virtuous boys in the House. Such was his zeal for study, the rapid progress he made in his early studies that in brief I was anxious to have him enrolled amongst my own students and had great hopes for this. Before he came here I heard some of my own students speak of him as a model as much in study as in virtue. In my frequent visits to the Oratory I noted his good character which you all know of, and he looked so innocent that you couldn't but love and admire him. And as for the fine hopes I had he did not disappoint me in this scholastic year. I appeal to you, my beloved young people, who have witnessed his recollection and application, not only when it was his duty to listen to me but equally at other times when many youngsters have no scruples about getting lost, even those who are diligent and well-behaved. I ask you, who have been his companions not only in school but in other ordinary ways, if you have ever seen him overlook any of his duties.

I still see him coming to school with that special modest style he had, entering the classroom, taking his place not with the light-headedness of so many boys of his age, but following his lessons, taking notes, or doing some useful reading. And then classes would begin with him applying himself - I recall his angelic face as he hung on every word from me! It is no wonder that despite his young age and poor health he profited so much from his studies. The proof is that amongst so many boys, most somewhat ordinary in their efforts, even

## *Contents*

though he had an illness that would take him to the grave and was often absent as a result, he was always amongst the best in the class. One thing struck me most of all and attracted my admiration. This was seeing how close he was to God as a young lad, how affectionate and fervent in his prayer. It is something we see in the better boys, even where there a natural liveliness and distraction common to your age, where there is very little reflection given to prayers they have to say and little heart given to the effort. For most of them there is little in it except lips and voice. If there is such habitual distraction in youth even in prayers said in the silence and peace of the church, or quietly in their room, in daily prayer, so, boys, know how this can happen even more so for the brief prayers we say usually before and after class. It was here that he showed such piety and union of his soul with God. How many times I saw him with his face fixed on heaven, the heaven that would soon be his place of abode, recollecting his thoughts and offering them to the Lord and his Blessed Mother. He did so with the kind of affection that our prayers should really have. These thoughts, my beloved boys, were the thoughts that enlivened his fulfilment of his duties. They made everything he did and said holy. They directed his entire life to the glory of God. Blessed are the boys who take their inspiration from this! They will be happy in this life and the next, they will make their parents who have brought them up just as happy, their teachers who have taught them, and everyone who did something with and for them.

God gives us life to love him and to gain merit for a blessed eternity. That's how it will be if everything we do is to offer ourselves to the supreme Giver like Dominic did. How foolish the boy is who goes on day after day with never a thought for God and intent only on indulging himself in selfish pleasures. What can we say of the boy who does everything possible to distance himself from these sorts of things or smothers or fights against them? Think about the holy life and the holy death of your beloved friend and his happy lot, something we can be sure he now enjoys. Set your life beside Dominic's and whatever difference you find between his and yours, make up your minds to conquer yourselves as he did, and thereby enjoy the same joy and peace that he had and which made him such a wonderful companion to you all. Just listen to me once more as I conclude these words. If I see any of you better in fulfilling your duties or better at your prayers, I will attribute it to the effects and example of our Dominic and will see it as a grace from above coming from his prayers and from his being amongst you as his companions and me as the teacher.

Thus we have the testimony of Fr Picco to the boys, expressing his deep sorrow and sense of loss at the news of the death of his beloved pupil Dominic Savio.



## Chapter 26. Imitating Savio's virtue - Many pray to him to obtain heavenly graces and are heard - A reminder for everyone

It will not come as a surprise to those who have read what I have written about Dominic that God soon showed in extraordinary ways how pleasing his life had been in His sight. While he was still alive many graces were obtained by people who got him to pray for them and their intentions. After his death confidence in his intercession and veneration grew rapidly.

As soon as news came of his death a few of his friends were already calling him a saint. They met to recite the Litany for the Dead but instead of saying "Pray for him," that is, "Holy Mary pray for the repose of his soul," they said Pray for us: Holy Mary, pray for us." "Because," they said, "by now Savio is enjoying the glory of Paradise and no longer needs our prayers."

Others added: "If Dominic has not gone straight to heaven or is not there by this time who on earth is going to manage it?" From then on many of his friends and companions made him a model. They had admired his virtue in life and tried to make him a model for good works. They began to pray to him as a heavenly protector.

No day passed without favours being received for soul and body, not only in the school but also by people outside. I saw a young lad suffering from severe toothache who recovered from it. He prayed to Savio his friend with a short prayer and was immediately recovered.<sup>21</sup> Many prayed to get over a fever and did so immediately. I was witness to

---

<sup>21</sup>Such veneration and confidence in young Savio grew largely from an event told by Dominic's father, who is ready to confirm what he says in any place and in the presence of anyone. He puts it this way:

"The loss of my son," he says, "was a source of deep sorrow for me and was further stirred by the desire to know what had happened to him in the next life. God wanted to give me consolation. About a month after Dominic's death, one night after I had been unable to sleep, I thought I saw the ceiling of the room spring wide open and there, surrounded by a bright light, Dominic appeared, smiling and happy but majestic and striking. I was beside myself at such a sight and cried out to Dominic: 'How are you? Where are you? Are you already in heaven?' 'Yes, yes father', he answered, 'I really am in heaven'. 'Well', I replied, 'if God has been so good as to let you enjoy the happiness of heaven, pray for your brothers and sisters so they may be with you one day'. 'Yes father', he answered, 'I will ask God on their behalf that they may be able to enjoy the immense happiness of heaven with me one day'. 'And pray for me, for your mother too' I said, 'so that we may be saved and be together with you one day in heaven'. 'Yes, yes, I will pray for that'. And having said that he disappeared and the room returned to darkness as before."

His father gives assurance that he is simply witnessing to the truth and says that neither before or after this, either when awake or asleep, did a similar consolation happen again

## *Contents*

one case where someone immediately gained the grace of being freed from fever. I have received many accounts and testimonies from a great variety of people. Although the character and authority of these witnesses are worthy of trust whichever way you look at it, just the same, since they are still alive I think it better to leave them out for now and be content to refer to just one special grace concerning a seminarian who had known Dominic personally. It was 1858 and he became very ill and what with being in the hospital for a long period of treatment and having to rest after it, he was not able to take the examination at the end of the school year. He thought he would at least manage it in the autumn for the Feast of All Saints and so avoid the loss of a school year, but when he returned to Turin and started to study again his illness returned with renewed force. He testifies thus:

It was getting close to the exams, and my health was in a deplorable state. Stomach aches and headaches robbed any chance of sitting for my exam which was of the greatest importance to me. I turned to my beloved friend Dominic and begged him to help me. I made a novena in Dominic's honour. Amongst the prayers I set myself to do was this one: Dear friend, you were my schoolmate, to my consolation and in my good fortune, for more than a year. You worked away at your studies with me in our class so you know how much I need to pass this exam. Ask the Lord for me, I beg you, for sufficient health so I may prepare myself. By the fifth day of the novena my health improved remarkably and I was able to resume studying. With extraordinary ease, I was able to make up for lost time and very successfully pass the necessary examination. The great improvement in my health has continued for more than a year. I acknowledge this grace obtained from God through the intercession of my friend, my companion in life, my help and my comfort. He now enjoys the glory of heaven.

With this fact I bring this life of Dominic Savio to an end, reserving an occasion to print other facts by way of an appendix so they can give greater glory to God and be of greater advantage to souls. For now, good reader, so that you will benefit from what has been written about this virtuous young man I would like to make the conclusion a very practical one for me, for you and for anyone who should read this book. We should be moved to follow young Savio in whatever good ways are compatible with our state in life. In his poor situation he still lived a very happy, virtuous and innocent life, crowned by a holy death. Let's imitate him in his way of life and we will have a chance to be like him also in his wonderful death.

Let us not fail, too, to imitate Savio in his frequenting the Sacrament of Confession. This gave him support in his regular practice of virtue and it was a firm guide which brought him to life's end so gloriously. We should go frequently and with the right attitude to draw from this source of salvation in our life. Whenever we go we should not fail to consider past confessions to assure ourselves that they were well made, and if not we should remedy this. It seems to me that through these sacraments received well

## *Contents*

and often we can live happily in the midst of the sorrows and trials of this life, and like Dominic, when our time comes, see death approach with peace and joy in our hearts. How happy we will be then to meet Jesus Our Saviour who will judge us according to his mercy, and in his goodness lead us to an eternity of happiness. Amen.

## Protestatio auctoris.

Cum SS. D. N. Urbanus VIII. Pontifex die 13 martii 1625 decretum ediderit, illudque die 15 julii 1634 confirmaverit, quo prohibuit imprimi libros hominum, qui sanctitatis vel martyrii fama celebres e vita migraverint, gesta, miracula, revelationes, seu quæumque beneficia, tanquam eorum intercessionibus a Deo accepta continentes, sine recognitione atque approbatione Ordinarii, et quæ hactenus sine ea impressa sunt, nullo modo vult censi approbata; et cum idem SS. D. N. Urbanus Papa VIII die 5 junii anno 1641 illa explicaverit, ut nimirum non admittantur elogia Sancti, vel Beati absolute, et quæ ad viros spectant tantummodo; sed ea, quæ ad mores et opiniones spectant cum protestatione, iis nullam adesse auctoritatem ab Ecclesia Romana; sed fidem tantum esse penes Auctorem: huic decreto, eiusque confirmationi et declarationi observantia et reverentia, qua par est, insistendo, profiteor me haud alio sensu, quicquid in hoc parvo volumine refero, accipere aut accipi ab ullo velle, quam quo ea solent, quæ humana dumtaxat auctoritate, non autem divina catholicæ Romana; Ecclesiæ, aut Sanctæ Sedis Apostolicæ nituntur.

Part IV.

Michael

BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF YOUNG MICHAEL MAGONE, PUPIL AT THE  
ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES  
by Father JOHN BOSCO  
TURIN

G. B. PARAVIA & Co. Press  
1861

# Contents

## Dear young people,

One of you who was anxiously awaiting the life of Dominic Savio to be published was Michael Magone. All the time he was collecting things that were said about this model of Christian life; he was trying his very hardest to imitate him, anxious that everything that was being said be written down, as he wanted to model his life on him. He only had time to read a few pages of this life before the Lord brought his mortal life to an end to enjoy, as we most ardently believe, the peace of the just in the company of the friend he had made up his mind to imitate.

The singular, or better, the exciting life of your companion Michael aroused in you a desire to see it in print. You pestered me to do it. Therefore, motivated by these requests and by the affection that I had for our mutual friend, as well as by the hope that this small work would be both pleasing and helpful to your souls, I made up my mind to write down what I knew about him and have it printed in a booklet.

In the life of Dominic Savio you saw innate virtue cultivated to a point of heroism right throughout his life.

In Magone's life we have a lad who, left to his own devices was in danger of treading the sad road of evil but fortunately the Lord invited him to follow Him. Michael listened to this loving call and constantly corresponding with divine grace and came to be admired by all who knew him, thus demonstrating how marvellous are the effects of God's grace on those who make use of it.

You will find here many things you can admire and imitate. You will also come upon certain acts of virtue, expressions that seem beyond a fourteen-year-old boy. But just because they are uncommon I felt that they merited being written down. Every reader, anyway, is aware of the truth of these incidents. I do nothing more than write down what happened under the gaze of a whole crowd of living individuals who can be questioned about the authenticity of what I have written.

May Divine Providence, which instructs human beings by the lives of old sinners as well as young saints, grant us all the grace to find ourselves prepared at that last moment, the moment upon which depends a happy or unhappy eternity. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be our help in life and at our death and keep us safely on the road that leads to heaven.

Amen.



# Chapter 1. An unusual meeting

One evening in autumn I was returning from Sommariva del Bosco and had reached Carmagnola where I had an hour's wait from my train to Turin. It was already seven o'clock, the weather was cold and the whole place was shrouded in a heavy fog, turning into a misty rain. This made the whole place so dark that a person could not be recognised a few feet away.

The dull glow of the light on the station lit up with a pale glow a very limited area. All the rest was in darkness. Only a gang of boys drew the attention of everyone as they romped around and deafened the spectators with their racket. The words "Wait! Catch him! Run! Grab this! Stop that one!" could be heard. But in the midst of all this shouting one voice stood out and dominated all the rest; it was the voice of a leader whose commands demanded respect and obedience. I felt that I wanted to get to know this lad who obviously was able to gain ascendancy over this unruly mob. I waited until everyone was crowded around him and then with a couple of quick steps I stepped in amongst them. They all fled, as if terrified - only one remained and he stood in front of me, his hands on his hips and, with an imperious air, began to speak:

"Who are you, breaking up our game like this?"

"I'm a friend."

"And what do you want of us?"

"If you are agreeable, I'd like to play with you and your friends."

"But who are you? I don't know you."

"I repeat! I'm a friend. I want to join you and your friends in the game you are playing. But who are you?"

"Me? I'm.." he said in a serious voice, "I'm Michael Magone, the general in charge of this game!"

Whilst he was saying this, the other boys, who had fled in panic, surrounded him once more. After saying a few words to some of them, I once more addressed myself to Magone:

"My dear Magone, how old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Have you made your first confession?"

"Oh, yes," he replied with a smile.

"And your First Communion?"

"Yes."

"And have you learned some sort of a trade?"

"Yes, I have learned the art of doing nothing!"

"Up until now, what have you done?"

"I've gone to school."

## Contents

“How far?”

“I’ve done sixth year primary.”

“And have you still got a father?”

“No, my father’s dead.”

“And your mother?”

“Yes, my mother is still alive and does work for others. She does what she can to earn bread for me and my brothers who do nothing but drive her to desperation.”

“And what do you intend to do with yourself in the future?”

“I want to do something but I don’t know what.”

This frankness of speech, combined with a certain air of wisdom and logic, made me realise in what great danger this lad would be if he continued in this abandoned state. On the other hand, I realised that if his lively nature and evident leadership qualities were to be cultivated he would do great things. I took up the conversation once more:

“My dear Magone, would you like to leave this kind of life and learn a trade or even take up some studies?”

“I would certainly like that,” he replied, “because this sort of life does not appeal to me - some of my friends are already in prison and I fear that I will follow, but what can I do? My father is dead, my mother is poor, so who can help me?”

“This evening say a fervent prayer to our Father in heaven; pray with all your heart, trust in Him and He will look after me, after you, after everyone.”

At that moment the station bell rang and I had to leave. “Take this,” I said, “take this medal and go to the assistant priest, Fr Ariccio, tomorrow. Tell him that the priest who gave it to you wants to know something about you.”

He accepted the medal respectfully. “But what is your name? What town do you come from? Does Fr Ariccio know you?” These and other questions Magone put to me, but I could not give him an answer because the train was already in the station and I had to depart for Turin.

## Chapter 2. He comes to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

Not being able to learn the name of the priest he had been talking to made Magone very curious and he could not wait until the next day but went straight away to Fr Ariccio and told him what had happened. The assistant priest understood everything and the following day he wrote me a letter in which he gave me details of our little “General’s” life. He wrote:

Young Michael Magone is a poor lad who has no father. His mother is so busy providing bread for the family that she cannot look after him and so he spends his time on the street with all the local hooligans. He is of above-average intelligence, but his liveliness and unruly behaviour have caused him to be suspended more than once from his school. All the same he did fairly well in sixth grade.

As far as morality is concerned I feel he has a good and simple heart but he is hard to manage. At school and in the catechism classes he is forever a disturbing element. When he’s away all is peaceful and when he leaves all breathe a sigh of relief!

His age, poverty, nature and intelligence make him very worthy of charity. He was born on the 19th September 1845.

On the basis of this information I decided to enrol him amongst the boys at this house, either as a student or in the trade section. As soon as he had received his letter of acceptance, our friend was impatient to come to Turin. He dreamed of all the delights of this earthly paradise and how great it would be to live in the Capital City.

A few days later I saw him.

“Here I am,” he said, running to meet me. “Here I am - I’m that Michael Magone you met at the Carmagnola railway station.”

“I know. I know. And have you come along willingly?”

“Yes, for sure.”

“If you have good will, make sure you don’t turn this place upside down then!”

“Don’t worry, I have not come to cause you any trouble.”

“Would you like to study or would you prefer to learn a trade?”

“I’m prepared to do whatever you wish but, if the choice is left to me, I would prefer to study.”

“And if I put you to study, what do you intend to do when you are finished?”

“If a ruffian . . .,” he said, bowing his head and laughing.

“Carry on - if a ruffian ...”

“If a ruffian like me could become good enough to be a priest, I would most willingly become one.”

## Contents

“We’ll see then what a ruffian can do. I will put you to study; whether or not you will become a priest will depend on your progress in your studies, your conduct and the signs that will point out whether you have a vocation or not.”

“If good will is all that is needed I can assure you that I will succeed and will never do anything to displease you.”

First of all he was assigned a companion who acted as his ‘Guardian Angel’ to help him, advise him and to correct him if necessary. Without Magone realising it, this lad, in the most practical and charitable way, never let him out of his sight. He was in the same class and study as well as in recreation. He played and joked with him. But whenever the need arose he said: “Don’t speak that way because it’s not right, don’t say that word or call upon the name of the Lord in vain.” And, for his part, even though he showed his impatience from time to time, Michael responded: “Good, you did the right thing to warn me; you are a good friend to have. If in the past I had had such a friend I would not have formed these bad habits which I now find so hard to break.”

In the first few days the only things he really enjoyed were the recreations. To sing, to yell out, to run, jump, play around were the things which most appealed to his lively nature. When, however, a companion said to him: “Magone, the bell has rung to go to class” or to Church, to prayers or the like, he gave a longing glance at the games and then went off to wherever duty was calling him without any further objection.

But it was great to see him when the bell rang to signal the end of some duty and recreation lay ahead! He appeared as if he were shot out of a cannon! He simply flew to all parts of the yard. Whenever a game required bodily agility he was its leading light. The game that we call *Barrarotta* was his favourite. Michael found life very much to his liking.

## Chapter 3. Difficulties and moral reform

Michael had been at the Oratory for a month now and his many occupations helped the time to pass quickly. He was happy provided he was only jumping around and enjoying himself without reflecting that true happiness must have its origin in peace of heart and tranquility of conscience. All of a sudden he began to lose that mad desire to play! He became very pensive and began to take no part in the games unless he was expressly invited. The 'Guardian angel' noticed this and took the occasion one day of saying to him:

"My dear Magone, for some days now I have noticed your face has lost its happy smile; are you sick or something?"

"No, no my health is very good."

"Then why are you looking so sad and downcast?"

"I am sad because I see my friends taking part in all the practices of piety. To see them so happy whilst praying, going to Confession and Communion makes me feel very sad."

"I don't understand how the devotion of others should be the reason for your sadness."

"The reason is easy to understand: my friends, who are already good, practise their religion and become better still whilst I am a 'no-hoper' and can't take part and this is the cause of great remorse and uneasiness."

"What a silly kid you are! If your friends' happiness makes you envious, why don't you follow their example? If you have something on your conscience, why don't you get rid of it?"

"Get rid of it! That's very easy to say! But if you were in my shoes, you'd even say that..." and with that, throwing his cap down in anger and frustration he fled into the sacristy.

His friend followed him, and when he caught up with him he said: "My dear Magone, why are you running away from me? Tell me what's bothering you. Who knows I might even be able to suggest a way to get over it."

"You're right, but I'm in such a mess."

"Whatever mess you're in, you have a way to get out of it."

"But how can I find peace when it seems there's a thousand devils in me?"

"Don't worry.. Go to your confessor, open up your heart to him and he will give you all the advice you need. When we have something on our conscience that's what we do. That's why we are always happy."

"That's O.K. but ...," Michael broke down and started sobbing. Several days went by and he grew more despondent. He no longer enjoyed his games. He no longer laughed and smiled. Many times when his companions were enjoying the recreation he retreated to some corner to think, reflect and to cry. I was keeping a close watch on him so one day I called him and the following conversation took place.

## *Contents*

“My dear Magone, I want you to do me a favour and I will not take ‘no’ for an answer.”

”What is it? I am ready to do anything you ask.”

“I want you to give me your heart for a while and tell me what is causing you to be so sad these days.”

“It’s true - I have been sad . . . but I am desperate and I don’t know what to do.” Having said this he broke down crying. I let him cry for a little while then, jokingly, I said:

“Come on now! Are you the same ‘General Micky’, the leader of the Carmagnola gang? What a fine general you are! You are not even able to tell me, in a few words, what is weighing on your soul.”

“I’d like to but I don’t know how to begin - I don’t know how to express myself.”

“Just say one word and I’ll say the rest.”

“I have a mixed-up conscience.”

“That’s enough - I understand everything. You had only to say that for me to say the rest. I don’t want to enter into matters of conscience just for the moment. I’ll just tell you what to do to put everything right. So listen: if your conscience bothers you regarding the past, simply make a good confession, relating what you have done wrong since your last confession. If out of fear or for any other reason you did not confess something or if you feel your confessions lacked some necessary conditions, then go back to your last good confession and confess what is lying heavy on your conscience.”

“Here’s where the difficulty is. How can I remember all that has happened over the past years?”

“That’s easy to put right. Just tell your confessor that there is something in the past that is troubling you and he will take up things from there and put certain questions to you which you will only have to answer yes or no to, and how many times you committed that sin.”

## Chapter 4. Michael goes to confession and begins to frequent the Sacraments

Michael spent that day examining his conscience. So great was his desire to put things right that he did not want to go to bed before he made his confession. "The Lord," he said, "has waited for me so long and may not be prepared to wait until tomorrow. So if I can go to confession this evening, I should not put it off: it is time to make a definite break with the devil." He made his confession with great feeling and many times broke down crying. Before leaving he said to his confessor: "Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved?"

"Go in peace," was the answer. "The Lord in His great mercy waited until now for you to make a good confession so I am sure He has pardoned all your sins and if, in His adorable plan, called you to Himself tonight you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation."

He was very moved by these words and blurted out:

"Oh, how happy I am."

Then, sobbing once more, he went to bed. It was to be a night of excitement and emotion. Later on he was to speak to his friends about all the thoughts that went through his mind that night.

"It is difficult to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In some little time I dozed off but soon my imagination made me see hell open before me, populated with hosts of devils. I drove that thought away as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels who showed me paradise, saying to me: See what happiness lies in store for you so long as you keep your resolutions!

About halfway through the night I was so overcome by emotion that I had to get up, kneel by my bed and say over and over again: Oh, how wretched are those who fell into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who live in sin. I believe that if they could only experience for even a single minute the great consolation that being in the state of grace brings they would all go to confession to placate the anger of God, to remove remorse of conscience and to experience peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow your entry into their hearts. If I ever have the misfortune to commit even the smallest sin again I am determined to go to confession immediately."

In this way Magone expressed his remorse for having offended God as well as his firm resolution to be faithful in His service in the future. He began to frequent the sacraments of Confession and Communion and began to find great joy in those practices of piety he previously found boring. He also found confession so pleasing that I had to ask him to go

## *Contents*

less frequently lest he become a victim of scruples. This is a real danger to young people when they make up their minds to serve the Lord with all their hearts. This wreaks great havoc since the devil uses this means to disturb the mind and the heart and so make the practice of religion burdensome. It often causes those who have already made great strides in virtue to retrace their steps.

The most powerful means to avoid this disaster is to abandon oneself to complete obedience of one's confessor. When he says something is bad, let us do everything to avoid it. If he assures us that such and such a thing is not evil, then let us follow his advice and go ahead in peace. In summary, obedience to the confessor is the most effective means to be free of scruples and to persevere in God's grace.



## Chapter 5. A word to young people

The uneasiness and the worries of young Magone on the one hand and the frank and resolute way he went about putting his soul in order on the other, gives me opportunity, beloved young people, to suggest some things that I believe would be useful for your souls. Receive them as a sign of affection from a friend who so ardently desires your eternal salvation.

In the first place I recommend that you do whatever you can not to fall into sin, but if unfortunately you should commit sin, never allow yourself to be convinced by the devil to be silent about it in confession. Always remember that the confessor has power from God to remit every kind of sin, any number of sins. The more serious the sins confessed, the happier his heart will be because he knows quite well that the mercy of God by which your sin will be pardoned will be manifested all the more and that the infinite merits of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ by which He will wash away the sins from your soul will the more be applied.

My dear young people, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and who tries to keep every evil far from you. Do not be afraid that a confessor will think less of you because you reveal to him serious faults you have committed nor should you be afraid that he will speak of these faults to others. A confessor cannot make use of any information he has received in the confessional no matter what it costs him. Even if he had to pay for it with his life he could not divulge even non-important things he has heard as a confessor. I can even assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater his confidence in you will become and the more likely will he be in a position to give you the best advice possible for the welfare of your soul.

I have stressed these matters lest the devil tempt you to keep back some sin when you go to confession. I assure you, my dear young friends, that as I pen these lines my hand begins to tremble as I think of that great number of Christians who are eternally lost because they either did not confess their sins or were insincere in confession! If anyone of you, going back over your lives, discover that you deliberately kept back a sin or if you have any doubts about the validity of past confessions, I say to you immediately: Friend for the love of Jesus Christ, and for His Blood shed for the salvation of souls, I beg you to put your conscience in order the very next time you go to confession, putting all in order as if you were at death's door. If you do not know how to explain yourself, just tell your confessor that there is something in your past life that is worrying you.

The confessor will understand. Follow the advice he gives you and you will be certain that everything is in order.

Go to your confessor regularly, pray for him, follow his directions. When you have chosen a confessor who is able to understand and help you, do not go to another unless

## *Contents*

you have solid reasons for doing so. Until you have a regular confessor in whom you can put all your trust, you will always lack a friend for your soul. Trust in the prayers of your confessor who prays every day in his Mass for his penitents that God may grant you the grace to make good confessions and persevere in doing good; also pray for him.

You can change your confessor without scruple if he goes elsewhere and it would be most inconvenient to go regularly to him or if he is sick or, on the occasion of some great solemnity, there are great numbers wishing to go to him. Likewise if you have something on your conscience which you do not want to divulge to your ordinary confessor change your confessor a thousand times rather than commit a sacrilege.

If what I have written is read by someone who is destined by divine providence to hear the confessions of the young I would like, among countless other things, humbly and respectfully to suggest the following:

Lovingly receive every class of penitents but especially the young. Help them to open their hearts and insist that they come to confession frequently. This is the most secure means of keeping them away from sin. Make use of every means to see that they put into practice the advice given them to avoid sin in the future. Correct them with kindness; never scold them because if you shout at them today they will not come to confession tomorrow or, if they do, they will not speak of those matters which upset you.

When you have gained their confidence, prudently find out whether all their confessions in the past were well made. I say this because famous, experienced authors in both the field of morals and ascetics, and especially a famous author who warrants belief, agree in stating that the first confessions are often null or, at least, defective because of the lack of instruction or the willful omission of matters for confession. Invite the penitent to ponder the state of his conscience well from when he was seven up until he was ten or twelve. At this age he is already aware of certain serious sins but makes little of them or does not know how to confess them. The confessor whilst he must be most prudent and reserved must not avoid asking questions in the area of the holy virtue of modesty.

I would like to say much more about this topic but I will not as I do not want to appear an expert in those fields where I am simply a poor and humble learner. Here I have only said those things in the Lord that I felt would be useful for the souls of the young to whom I am determined to consecrate every moment of that life which the Lord leaves me here on earth. Now let us return to young Magone.

## Chapter 6. His exemplary concern for the practices of piety

In addition to the frequent reception of Confession and Communion, Michael added a lively faith, an exemplary concern and an edifying attitude for all the practices of piety. In recreation he was like an unbridled horse. At first he was ill at ease in church but soon controlled himself so as to become a model for any fervent Christian. He prepared himself well for Confession; whilst waiting he allowed others to go in ahead of him; as he waited till the confessor was free, he was recollected and patient. Sometimes he was seen to wait four, even five hours in recollection, still, on his knees on the bare floor, waiting for the chance to go to confession. One of his friends wanted to imitate him, but after two hours he fainted and decided never again to imitate his friend in that kind of penance. This would seem almost unbelievable for someone of such a tender age if the one who is writing about it had not been an eyewitness to the facts. He took delight in speaking of the edifying way in which Dominic Savio went to the sacraments and tried his hardest to imitate him.

When he first came to the Oratory he barely tolerated going into church. After several months he found religious functions very comforting no matter how long they lasted. He used to say that what we do in church we do for the Lord and what we do for the Lord never goes unrewarded. One day the bell had already gone for a church function when a friend urged him to finish off the game.

“Yes,” he answered, “provided you pay me the same wages as the Lord will.”

Another friend said to him one day:

“Don’t you get fed up with functions in the church when they are long?”

“Oh,” he replied, “You are just like I was some time back; you don’t know what’s good for you. Don’t you know that the church is the Lord’s House? The more we go to church here, the greater chance we will have to be with Him in the eternal triumph of paradise. As well as that, if practice makes perfect in temporal things, why can’t this happen with spiritual things? By remaining in the material house of the Lord in this world we acquire the right to stay with Him one day in heaven.”

After the customary thanksgiving after Confession or Communion or after the sacred functions he remained a long time before the Blessed Sacrament or before the Blessed Virgin to recite some special prayers. He was so attentive, recollected and composed that he seemed insensible to all external activity. Sometimes his companions, going out of church or passing him, gave him a bump; often they stood on his toes and even hit him. But he carried on with his prayers or meditation as if nothing had happened.

He had great esteem for all kinds of devotional items. A medal, a little crucifix, a holy picture, were all objects of great veneration for him. At any time when he discovered

## Contents

that Communion was being distributed, or some hymn was being sung inside or outside of church, he immediately broke off his recreation and joined in. He had a great love for singing and had a very fine voice which he cultivated. In a short time he was proficient enough to take an active part in solemn and public functions. He assured me, and I leave it in writing, that he did not want to open his lips to utter a word if that was not for the greater glory of God.

“Unfortunately,” he said to me, “this tongue of mine has not always performed in the past as it should have done; at least it is in my power to right that for the future!”

He left his resolutions written down on a page, one of which was:

*O my God, make this tongue of mine shrivel up between my teeth rather than to utter a word displeasing you.*

In 1858 he took part in the Christmas Novena which took place during a retreat in this capital. One evening his companions were singing his praises for the part he had played in the day’s function. He became embarrassed and went off on his own. When someone asked him why he acted like that, he started crying and said:

“I have laboured in vain because I enjoyed myself so much when I was singing and lost half of the merit; now this praise has made me lose the other half; all that’s left now for me is that I am tired.”

## Chapter 7. Punctuality in performing his duties

Michael's fiery nature, his vivid imagination, his heart full of affections naturally made him a lively lad and, at first sight, distracted. By constant effort he learned self-control. As we have already said, he was completely at home during recreation. In a few moments after beginning a game all corners of the courtyard echoed to the sound of his feet. There was no game in which he did not excel. But once the bell went for study, classes, rest, meals, church functions, he at once broke off what he was doing and ran to fulfill his duty. It was marvellous to see him who, a few minutes before, had been the soul and inspiration of recreation suddenly being the first to arrive wherever duty called him.

As regards his scholastic duties I feel it could be useful to quote the assessment made by his Latin teacher Fr John Francesia. He writes:

I most willingly and publicly testify to the virtues of my dear student Michael Magone. He was in my class all the scholastic year of 1857 and for a part of 1858-59. As far as I remember there is nothing extraordinary to note in his first year. He conducted himself well. By his application and diligence he did two years of Latin in one so that, at the end of the year, he was able to go into Third Year High School. This is enough to show that his progress was out of the ordinary. I do not remember ever having scolded him because of his behaviour. He was very quiet in class despite his natural liveliness which he gave full vent to in the playground. He made friends of the better elements and tried to copy their example.

In 1858-59 I had a very fine class who were determined not to waste a minute of time and were most anxious to make progress in their studies. Michael Magone stood out. Among other things I was amazed by the change in him both physically and morally. He became more and more serious and thoughtful. I believe that this change was brought about by his determination to grow in piety and he could really be put forward as an example of virtue to others. I can still see you there in front of me, my dearly lamented pupil, in that attitude of rapt attention to me, your teacher whilst I was, at the same time, a great admirer of your virtue! He really gave the impression that he had completely put off the old Adam. In seeing him so attentive to his duties, so unusual for a boy of his age, I could not help applying to him those words of Dante:

Under these fair locks lay hid an old mind.

## Contents

I recall how, one day, to test how well he was paying attention and how much he was absorbing, I asked my dear student to scan some lines I had just dictated to him. "I'm not very good at it," Michael modestly replied. I then asked him to do as much as he could.

He did it so well that I could not restrain in joining in the spontaneous applause of the class! From then on that 'I'm not very good at it' became a catch phrase in the school to indicate a student outstanding for his diligence and attention

These were his teacher's words.

In the fulfillment of his duties he was an example to all. The Superior of the House had often said that every moment of time is a treasure. Therefore, he used to say, if I waste a moment I am throwing away a treasure.

Motivated by this thought he did not let a minute go by without doing all that his strength permitted. I have here before me his marks for conduct and diligence for all the time he was with us. In the first weeks he had only 'fair', then they changed to 'good', then 'very good'. After three months they became 'excellent' and that is how they stayed.

In preparation for the Easter of 1858 he made his Retreat to the great edification of his companions and to the consolation of his heart. He wanted to make a general confession and then to write down some resolutions to guide him for the rest of his life. Among them was a proposal to make a vow to never waste a moment of time. He was not given permission to do this. Then he begged to be allowed to promise the Lord to always aim at excellence in his conduct. His director agreed to this provided it did not have the force of a vow. He then got a notebook in which he wrote down the days of the week as follows:

With the help of the Lord and under the protection of Mary most holy I want to spend:  
Sunday excellently,  
Monday excellently,  
Tuesday excellently, etc.

Every morning his first act was to look up this notebook which he read through several times a day and each time he renewed his promise. If he did happen to make some minor slip he punished himself with some sort of penance such as to miss out on some game, to abstain from something he really liked, to say a special prayer and the like.

This notebook was found by his companions after his death and they were very much edified by holy efforts he employed to advance in virtue. He wanted to do all things excellently. Therefore when the signal was given to do something, he broke off his recreation or cut short his conversation and even put down his pen leaving a line unfinished to promptly go wherever duty was calling him. He often said that it was a good thing to finish off what he had in hand but he got little satisfaction out of doing it and he was often disturbed about it. He said he found the greater satisfaction in performing his duties as indicated by his superiors or by the bell.

## *Contents*

Exactness in performing his duties did not prevent him from showing all those signs of courtesy which good manners and charity require. Therefore he was quick to write letters for those who asked him; to clean the clothes of others; to help carry water; to make beds; to sweep; to serve at table; to give up a game, to teach catechism or singing; to explain difficulties in various school subjects to weaker students - these were all things which he did most willingly as the occasion arose.

## Chapter 8. His devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

It must be said that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is the support of every faithful Christian. This is especially true for young people. This is how the Holy Spirit speaks of her: He who is small, let him come to me. Magone was aware of this important truth, which was revealed to him in a providential fashion. One day he received a holy picture of the Blessed Virgin at the bottom of which was written; Come, my child, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord. He began to consider this invitation seriously and wrote a letter to his Rector in which he stated that the Blessed Virgin had made her voice known to him and called upon him to be good and that she herself had taught him how to fear, love and serve God.

He began to perform certain practices in honour of her whom he invoked as his heavenly Mother, his divine teacher, his most loving shepherdess. Among the main ways in which he manifested his filial devotion was to go to Communion every Sunday for the soul in purgatory who was most devoted to Mary whilst on earth.

He most willingly forgave anyone who offended him, as an act of devotion in honour of Mary. Cold, heat, nuisances, tiredness, thirst, and similar inconveniences due to climate were for him so many ways he could utilise by joyfully offering them up to God through his heavenly and loving mother, Mary.

Before settling down to study, to writing, he took out from one of his books a holy picture of Mary on which was written: Virgin Mother, always help me in my studies.

He recommended himself to her at the beginning of everything he did. He used to say that whenever he found any difficulties in his studies, he had recourse to his divine Teacher and she explained everything to him. One day a boy congratulated him for the good marks he got for one of his assignments. You should not rejoice with me, he replied, but with Mary who helps me and brings to my mind many things of which I was ignorant before.

To always have present before him some object that would remind him of Mary's patronage in his ordinary occupations, he wrote, wherever he could: *Seat of Wisdom: pray for me*. This was written on all his books, on the covers of his exercise books, on his desk, on his seat and on any other surface that could be written on.

In May 1858 he decided to do everything possible to honour Mary. Throughout that month he practiced mortification of the eyes, tongue and all the other senses. He wanted to deprive himself of part of his recreation, to fast, spend whole nights in prayer, but he was forbidden to do these things because they were not compatible with his age.

Towards the end of that month he presented himself to his director and said:

"If you think it is a good idea, I would like to do something beautiful in honour of



## *Contents*

the great Mother of God. I know that St Aloysius Gonzaga was very pleasing to Mary because he consecrated to her the virtue of chastity. I would like to make her this gift also and I would also like to take a vow to become a priest and be chaste forever.”

The director told him he was too young to make such important vows.

“Yet,” he broke in, “I have a strong urging to give myself totally to Mary; and if I consecrate myself to her she will help me to keep that promise.”

“Do this,” suggested his director, “instead of taking a vow just make a simple promise to embrace the ecclesiastical state if, at the end of your classical studies, it seems that there are evident signs calling you to do this. Instead of a vow of chastity, simply make a promise to the Lord that you will in the future, take every precaution not to do anything or say anything, even jokingly, that would be contrary to this virtue. Every day call upon Mary with some special prayer to help you keep this promise.”

He was happy with this proposal and joyfully promised to do all he could to put it into practice.

## Chapter 9. His concern to preserve the virtue of purity, and what he did about it.

Besides the practices already mentioned there were others to which he gave the greatest importance and which he used to call the fathers, guardians and even policemen of the virtue of purity. We have evidence of this in a reply given by him in a letter written by one of his companions towards the end of the above mentioned May. This letter had been written to Michael asking him to suggest some practices which would help in the preservation of that queen of virtues, purity. The friend passed the letter on to me and I quote as follows:

To give you a complete answer I would have liked to speak with you personally rather than write to you. I will merely pass on the advice given to me by my Rector on how to preserve the most precious of all virtues. One day he gave me a little note on which was written: Read this and put it into practice. I opened it and this is what I read:

Five recommendations that St. Philip Neri gave to young people to help them preserve the virtue of purity. Flight from bad companions; Do not pamper the body; Avoid idleness; Frequent prayer; Frequent reception of the Sacraments especially Confession. He often enlarged upon these five hints and I will explain them as I heard them from his lips. Here they are:

Place yourself with total confidence under the protection of Mary; confide in Her, trust in Her. It has never been the case in the whole world that someone had recourse to Her and was not satisfied. She will be your defence against the assaults aimed at your soul by the devil.

When you realise you are being tempted, make yourself busy immediately. Idleness and modesty cannot coexist. Therefore, by combating idleness, you will at the same time combat temptations against this virtue.

Often kiss a medal, or the crucifix, make the Sign of the Cross with lively faith saying: *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, help me to save my soul.* These are the three names which are most terrible and formidable to the devil.

If the temptation continues, turn to Mary with the prayer proposed by Holy Mother the Church: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.

Besides not pampering the body, and custody of the senses, especially the eyes, be on your guard against bad literature. Even if you feel there is no danger for you in reading these things, put such literature down immediately. On the contrary, read good books and, amongst these, prefer those that speak of the glories of Mary and the Blessed Sacrament.

## *Contents*

Flee from bad companions, instead choose good companions, namely those who are praised by your superiors for their good conduct. Speak willingly with these, play with them but especially try to imitate them in their carrying out of their duties and especially the practices of piety.

Go to Confession and Communion as often as your confessor suggests and, if what you have to do allows it, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament often.

These were the seven counsels that Magone in his letter calls 'the seven policemen given to us by Mary to act as guardians of the holy virtue of purity'. To have some particular inspiration for each day, he practised one of these counsels, adding something in honour of Mary. Thus his first counsel was joined to a consideration of the first joy which Mary enjoyed in heaven and this was for each Sunday. The second of Mary's joys was for Monday and so on. Throughout the following week, Michael meditated upon the Sorrows of Mary.

Perhaps some will say these sort of practices are trivial. But it has been my experience that the splendour of virtue can be obscured and even lost by the slightest whiff of temptation, so if anything, no matter how small, can help to preserve virtue, then it is to be treasured. For this reason I most heartily recommend simple things that do not frighten or tire people, especially young people. Fasts, long prayer and similar harsh practices are either put aside or endured with reluctance and difficulty. Let us keep to easy things but let us persevere in them. This was the path that led Michael to an outstanding degree of holiness.

## Chapter 10. Exquisite charity extended to others

In addition to his lively faith, his fervour and his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Michael was outstanding for the charity he showed to others. He knew that the exercise of this virtue was the most efficacious means to grow in the love of God. He practiced this virtue on every occasion offered him, even if it be a very minor one. He enjoyed recreation to such a degree that he did not know whether he was in heaven or on earth. But if he happened to notice that a companion wanted to play the game he was involved in, he immediately gave way and got involved in something else.

More than once I saw him withdraw from a ball game or some other game to make place for someone else; or get down off his stilts, give them to someone else and help him get balanced on them to make the game more enjoyable and to see that his friend did not have a fall.

If he saw a friend in trouble, he went up to him immediately to see if he could help in any way, or to tell him a story to make him forget his hurt or worries. If he came to know the reason for the trouble, he tried to give some counsel or advice or to mediate for him with a Superior or to find someone who could help.

Whenever he could he explained a problem to a companion, got him a drink, made his bed — anything to help. He found great delight in all this. One winter's day he noticed a boy standing out of recreation because he had chilblains — he also discovered he could not carry out his duties for the same reason. Michael wrote out his assignment for him; he helped him to dress, made his bed and even gave him his own gloves to keep out the cold. What more could a lad of his age do? Because of his fiery nature, he easily lost his temper but it was enough to say to him: “Magone, what are you doing? Is this the way a Christian gets even?” This was enough to cool him down, even to humiliate him so he often went to apologise to his companion immediately, beg pardon for any scandal he may have given.

But if in his first months at the Oratory he had to be corrected quite often for his outbursts of bad temper, soon, with his goodwill, he conquered himself and even became a peacemaker among his own companions. However, if some argument arose he put himself, small as he was, between the litigants and even used force to calm them down.

“We are rational beings,” he used to say, “and must act as such and not solve our arguments by means of brute force.”

At other times he used to comment:

“If the Lord were to use force every time we offended Him, we could all be exterminated very soon. Therefore, if Almighty God, when offended, uses mercy in pardoning the offender, why do we miserable creatures not use our reason and tolerate displeasures and

## Contents

even insults without seeking revenge?"

He said to others:

"We are all sons of God, therefore we are all brothers; he who takes revenge on his companion ceases to be a son of God, and by his outburst of temper becomes a brother of Satan."

He willingly taught catechism; he willingly made himself available to serve the sick and earnestly asked to spend the night with them if their sickness was serious. A friend, moved by the many kindnesses he had done for him, said to him: "What can I do for you, dear Magone, to repay you for all the trouble I am giving you?" "Nothing else but a single offering of your sickness in penance for my sins," was the reply.

One of his friends was always in trouble. He was handed over to Michael to see what could be done to bring him to his senses. Michael set to work on him. He started by getting to know him and befriending him. He played with him in recreation; he gave him little presents; he passed on to him little notes on which were written pieces of advice and so got to know him very closely but did not speak about religion with him.

Seizing the opportunity of the feast of St Michael, Magone approached him:

"In three days time we have the feast of St Michael; I want you to give me a present."

"Of course, but I am sorry you did not speak about it before as you have caught me unprepared."

"I wanted to speak to you about it because I want to choose the gift."

"Yes - go ahead. I am ready to do what I can to please you."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"If it costs you quite a bit, will you still do it?"

"Yes, I promise you I will do it just the same."

"I want you on the feast of St Michael to give me the present of the gift of a good Confession and to prepare yourself for a fervent Holy Communion."

Considering the situation and because of his promises his companion did not dare to refuse this request; he surrendered and the three days previous to the feast he was occupied in practices of piety. Magone used all his best efforts to prepare his friend for this spiritual feast, and on the day itself both went to Confession and Communion to the satisfaction of the Superiors and to the edification of their companions.

Michael spent a happy day with his friend and, as evening came, he said to him:

"We have had a beautiful feast, I'm very happy and you have really given me great pleasure. Now tell me: Aren't you pleased with what we've done?"

"Yes, I am extremely pleased and, more so, because you have prepared me for it. I thank you for the invitation you gave me. Now if you have some good advice for me, I would welcome it."

"For sometime now, my friend, your conduct has left much to be required. Your way of living has displeased your Superiors, hurt your parents, cheated yourself, deprived you of peace of heart and then . . . one day you will have to give an account to God for all the time you have wasted. So, from now on you must flee from idleness, be as happy as you like provided you do not neglect your duties."

## *Contents*

The companion he had half converted was now fully converted. He became Michael's close friend, began to imitate him in carrying out his duties fully and presently by his diligence and morality he was the consolation of all who had anything to do with him.

I thought I would give this episode some importance and develop it in a detailed fashion because it emphasises Michael's character and also because I would like to report in full what his companion himself told me.

## Chapter 11. Facts and sayings

What we have recounted so far deals with easy and simple things that anyone could imitate. Now I want to relate certain facts and sayings that are to be admired because they are agreeable and pleasing but not necessarily easy to follow. However they are useful to underline the goodness of heart and religious courage of this young lad. Here are some among many which I have witnessed.

One day he was talking with his companions when some of them introduced topics that a young well-educated Christian should avoid. Magone only listened to a few words - he then put his fingers in his mouth and gave such a loud whistle that it almost split open the brains of the bystanders.

“What are you doing?” said one of the lads, “Are you mad?”

Magone said nothing and gave a whistle even louder than the first.

“Where are your good manners?” yelled another. “Is that the way to act?”

Magone then replied: “It’s you who are mad, talking like that, so why can’t I be mad too, to stop such talk? If you want to break the rules of good manners by introducing talk that is not fitting for a Christian, why can’t I do the same to stop it?”

Those words, one of his companions assured me, were a wonderful sermon to them all. “We looked at each other; no-one dared to carry on with the talk which consisted of a lot of grumbling. From then on every time we noticed Michael in our company we chose our words well for fear we would have our heads split open by his whistle!”

Accompanying his Superior one day in Turin they came upon a hooligan taking the Holy Name of God in vain. Hearing those words Michael seemed to go crazy; without thinking about the place or the danger, with two jumps he flew at the blasphemer and gave him two punches whilst saying:

“Is this the way to treat the name of the Lord?”

But the hooligan was taller than he was and, without thinking and urged on by the shouts of his companions and by the blood running freely from his nose, he flew at Magone angrily. There followed kicks, blows, punches that did not give either time to draw breath. Fortunately, the Superior ran to the scene and, putting himself between the two belligerents, managed with a great deal of difficulty to re-establish the peace to the satisfaction of both parties. When Michael was master of himself once again, he realised his lack of prudence in correcting that silly fellow like that. He repented of his action and gave an assurance that he would be more cautious in the future and limit himself to giving friendly advice.

On another occasion some lads were discussing the eternity of the pains of hell and one of them said facetiously,

“I’ll do my best not to go there, but if I do . . . patience!”

## Contents

Michael pretended he had not heard the remark but he quietly left the group, found a box of matches and then returned. Lighting a match he put it under the hand of the lad who made the remark.

“Ouch!” was the startled cry. “That hurts, are you crazy?”

“I am not crazy,” Michael answered, “but I was just trying to test your patience; considering that you reckon you could bear with patience the pains of Hell, you should not be unduly upset by a burning match, the pain of which only lasts for a minute.”

Everyone burst out laughing, but the burnt companion had to admit: Hell must be an awful place to go to.

Other companions wanted him, one morning, to go with them to make their confessions to a confessor who would not know them, and they offered a hundred excuses for doing so. He refused, saying that he did not want to go anywhere without the Superior’s permission. He also added he was not a bandit, afraid of being recognised by the police, feeling he had to go to places and persons unknown for fear of being recognised.

“I have my own confessor and I confess all my sins to him without fear, big or small. The mania for going to confession elsewhere must be due to the fact that you do not love your confessor or you have very serious sins to confess. At any rate, it’s wrong to leave the House without permission. If you really have a serious reason to change your confessor you should make use of the extraordinary confessor who comes along to hear the confessions of all the Oratory boys on feast days.”

In all the time he was with us he only went home for his holidays once. He would not go again although I advised him to and his mother and relatives were affectionately expecting him. He was often asked the reason for this but his only reply was a smile. Finally one day he gave the reason to someone he trusted.

“I went once,” he said “to spend some days of the holidays at home but, unless I am forced to do so, I will not do that again.”

“Why?” asked his friend.

“Because at home there are still the dangers that were there previously. The places, the amusements, the friends tempt me to live as I did previously and this I do not want to do.”

“You should go with good intentions, determined to put into practice all the pieces of advice our Superiors give us.”

“Good intentions are like a fog that disappears bit by bit as you live away from the Oratory; the advice helps for the first few days and then companions help you to forget all about it.”

“Then, according to you, no-one should go home for the holidays, not even to see one’s relatives.”

“No, according to me, only those who feel they are strong enough to resist temptations should go. I do not feel strong enough to do that. I strongly believe that if our companions could see inside themselves many would be discouraged from going home because they go with the wings of an angel and return with two horns on their heads like so many devils.”

From time to time Michael had a visit from an old friend whom he tried to win over to a life of virtue. This friend used to argue that this was not necessary since he knew a



## *Contents*

person who had not gone to church for a long time yet was doing very well, was thriving and prosperous looking. Michael took his friend by the arm and brought him over to a carter who was unloading building materials in the courtyard and said:

“See that big mule? He is prosperous looking, big and fat, yet he has never been to Confession and never goes to church. Would you like to become like this animal who has neither soul nor reason. His only concern is to work for his owner and then fertilise the fields after his death.”

His friend was silent and never again offered such frivolous motives for not carrying out his religious duties.

I will pass over many other anecdotes; these are enough to make his goodness of heart better known as well as his great hatred for sin which often led him to excesses when, in his zeal, he tried to prevent an offence against God.

## Chapter 12. Holidays at Castelnuovo d'Asti. Virtues practised on that occasion

Seeing that Michael was most unwilling to spend his holidays at home, it was decided, in order to give him some relaxation after the pressure of his studies, to bring him with me to Murialdo, a district of Castelnuovo d'Asti, where the boys from the House often went to enjoy the countryside, especially those who had no relatives of place to go where they could spend the autumn season. Taking into consideration his good conduct I asked him and several others, by way of a reward, to accompany me on the trip. Whilst we were walking together I had a chance to talk with this young lad and to discover that he had reached a degree of virtue much greater than I had ever imagined. Leaving aside the beautiful and edifying conversations he had with me on this occasion, I will limit myself to revealing several incidents that serve to let you know how advanced in virtue he was, especially as regards the virtue of gratitude.

Along the road we were caught by a sudden downpour of rain and reached Chieri like a bunch of drowned rats. We took refuge in the home of Mr. Mark Gonella, a benefactor, who welcomed this little band from the Oratory every time they went to or returned from Castelnuovo d'Asti.

He dried our clothes and then prepared a feast which was a generous gesture on his part and which was very much appreciated by the boys.

After a couple of hours rest we set out once more. For some time Michael lagged behind the group and one of his friends, thinking that perhaps he was tired, fell back with him. He found him quietly speaking to himself.

"Are you tired, Micky?" his friend asked. "Are your feet feeling the effects of this long walk?"

"Oh, no! I am not at all tired; I could walk to Milan."

"What were you saying to yourself just now as I came along?"

"I was saying the Rosary for the intentions of that kind gentleman who was so kind to us; I cannot repay him in any other way and so I am asking the Lord and the Blessed Virgin for many graces for his family that he might be repaid a hundredfold for all he did for us."

It is well here to mention in passing that Michael had the same grateful thought for even the smallest favour, but towards his benefactors he was most sensitive. I would be tiring the readers if I transcribed the many letters and notes he wrote me to express his gratitude for having accepted him into this House. I just say that he went nearly every day to make a visit to Jesus in the Blessed sacrament and that each morning he would

## Contents

say and Our Father, Haily Mary and Glory be for anyone who had been his benefactor.

Not infrequently he took my hand affectionately and looking at me, eyes filled with tears, he would say:

“I don’t know how to express my gratitude for the great charity you showed me by accepting me into the Oratory. I will try to repay you with my good behaviour and by praying to the Lord every day to bless you and your efforts.”

He often mentioned his teachers, those who had gained him admission into the Oratory or who had helped him in any way; he always spoke of them with respect and was never ashamed to mention his poverty on the one hand and his gratitude on the other.

“I regret,” he was often heard to say, “that I have not got the means of showing my gratitude as I should but I know full well what I owe to so many people and as long as I live I will continue to pray to the Lord that He will reward them for all they have done.”

He also expressed his gratitude when the parish priest of Castelnuovo invited our boys to his house for a meal. That evening he said to me:

“If you think it is a good idea, I would like to go to Communion tomorrow for the intentions of the parish priest who entertained us today.”

I not only approved of the gesture but made it a point to recommend the same thing to all the boys, since we must always be grateful to our benefactors.

Whilst we were at Murialdo I noted another fine act of virtue which bears relating. One day our boys went for a walk in the nearby woods. Some went looking for mushrooms, whilst others searched for chestnuts and other nuts; others heaped up leaves or other things - in short, they were really enjoying themselves. Whilst they were busy Michael quietly slipped away and went back to the house. One lad saw him, however, and fearing that he might not be well, followed him. Michael, convinced that no-one had seen him, reached the house but, without saying a word to anyone, he went straight to the church. The boy who followed him found him kneeling before the altar of the Blessed Sacrament wrapt in fervent prayer.

Questioned later why he had disappeared so suddenly from the company of the rest to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he replied with all simplicity:

“I greatly fear that I might fall into sin again and so I go to beseech the dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that He will give me the help and the strength to persevere in His grace.”

Another striking incident occurred at the same time. One evening all the boys had gone to bed when I heard someone sighing and sobbing. He went quietly up to the window and I saw Michael in a corner of the threshing floor, looking up at the moon and crying his heart out.

“What’s wrong, Michael?” I said, “Aren’t you feeling well?”

He thought he was alone and that no-one could see him and he did not know what to say. I repeated my question, he replied with these exact words:

“As I admire the moon I cannot help crying because it has for so many centuries regularly lit up the night without once disobeying the orders of its Creator. I, instead, who am so young and a rational creature who should have been faithful to the laws of God, have disobeyed Him so many times and have offended Him in a thousand ways.”

## *Contents*

Having said this, Michael broke down once more. I comforted him with a few words, calmed him down and saw him back to sleep.

It is certainly a matter for admiration that a boy scarcely fourteen years old had already attained such wisdom and has such beautiful thoughts. But this is a fact and I could bring forward many other episodes that would show how young Michael was capable of reflections much superior to his age, especially in recognising in everything the hand of God and the obligation all creatures have of obeying their Creator.

## Chapter 13. His preparation for death

After the holidays spent at Castelnuovo, Michael lived for only about three months longer. He was rather small but healthy and well-built. He was quite intelligent and had no trouble in mastering anything he took up. He had a great love for study and was making better than average progress. As regards his piety, he had reached a standard where I could honestly say that I would not know what to add or subtract in order to present him as a model for young people. He was lively by nature but he was pious, good, devoted and highly appreciative of the little acts of virtue.

He performed them joyfully, naturally and without scruples - because of his piety, his love for study and his affability he was loved and esteemed by all whilst, at the same time, because of his liveliness and gentle manners, he was the idol of the playground.

There is no doubt that it was our earnest wish that this model of Christian living would be spared to us until his ripe old age so that, whether he felt was his calling was to be a priest or a layman, he would have done honour to his country and his faith. But God had decreed otherwise and wished to take this beautiful flower from the garden of the Church militant unto Himself and transplant it in the Church triumphant in Paradise. Michael, too, without realising it was preparing for his approaching death with an even better and more perfect way of life.

He made the novena for the feast of the Immaculate Conception with particular fervour. I want to put before you those things he proposed to himself for these days and they are as follows:

I, Michael Magone, wish to make this novena well and so I promise:

To detach my heart from all earthly things so as to give it completely to Mary.

To make a general Confession in order to ensure a peaceful conscience at the hour of my death.

To skip breakfast every morning as a penance for my sins and to recite the Seven Joys of Mary to merit her assistance at the last hours of my life.

To go to Communion every day provided my confessor advises it.

To tell my companions an anecdote in honour of Mary each day.

To place this sheet at the feet of Our Lady's statue and, with this act, to consecrate myself completely to Her and, for the future, I wish to be entirely hers until the very last moments of my life.

## Contents

All these resolutions were approved except the General Confession which he made only a short time before. Instead of skipping his breakfast he was advised to say a prayer each day for the souls in Purgatory.

Magone's behaviour certainly gave rise to much amazement in those nine days of novena for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception - he showed extraordinary happiness, but this was always accompanied by efforts to tell good little stories to the others, or invite others to do the same. He gathered whichever friends he could to go and pray before the Blessed sacrament or the statue of Our Lady. During the novena he gave up sweets, fruit, other snacks. He gave away to some of the less devout boys any little books, holy pictures, medals, crucifixes or other items he had been given. He did this either to reward them for their good behaviour during the novena or to encourage them to take part in the practices of piety he suggested to them.

With similar fervour and recollection he celebrated the novena and feast of Christmas. "I really want to make every effort to make this novena well," he said as he began it, "so that the Baby Jesus will come and be born in my soul with an abundance of His graces."

On the eve of the last day of the year (1858), the Superior of the House urged all the boys to thank the Lord for all the favours granted to them over the past year. He encouraged them to promise strongly that they would pass the New Year in God's grace because, he added, this may be the last one for one of you. Whilst saying this his hand was resting on the head of the lad nearest him and that was Magone.

"I understand," Michael said with an air of surprise, "that it is I who should get things packed up to depart for eternity." His words were greeted with laughter, but his companions remembered these words and Michael himself often recalled them. Notwithstanding this thought he did not lose his joviality and air of happiness and continued to perform his duties faithfully and well.

The last day of his life was really close at hand and God wanted to give him an even clearer warning of it. On Sunday, January 16th the members of the Sodality of the Blessed Sacrament to which Michael himself belonged got together for their usual Sunday meeting.<sup>22</sup> After the opening prayers and the usual reading and having discussed

---

<sup>22</sup>Here are the main rules for this Sodality:

1. The main aim of this sodality is to foster adoration for the Blessed Sacrament and to make up for the blasphemies committed against Jesus Christ in this most august Sacrament by infidels and heretics and bad Christians.
2. For this reason members will try to arrange their going to Communion in such a way that someone can receive Communion each day. Each member, with his Confessor's permission will see to going to Communion on Sundays and once during weekdays.
3. They will be ready to offer special assistance at all functions to do with the worship of the Holy Eucharist, like serving at Mass, taking part in Benediction, accompanying the Viaticum when it is being taken to the sick, visiting the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle and especially during exposition at the Forty Hours Devotion.
4. Each one will try to learn how to serve Mass well, performing all the rites exactly, and repeating the responses that belong to this holy mystery distinctly and devoutly.
5. Each week there will be a meeting on spiritual matters which each member will do his best to attend and invite others to do so punctually.
6. The meetings will involve matters to do with the worship of the Blessed Sacrament, such as encouraging Communions made with great recollection, instructing and helping those making their

## Contents

those matters that seemed most opportune, one of the members took the little box which contained little slips of paper on which were written maxims to be practised over the following week. This did the rounds and each boy picked one out at random. Michael plucked his out only to read: At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own. He read it and then, as if caught unaware, he said aloud to his companions, "I am sure that this is a message sent me by the Lord to warn me to hold myself in readiness."

After this he went to his Superior and said with a little anxiety that he considered it as a warning from the Lord Who was soon to summon him into His presence. His Superior urged him to keep himself in readiness not because of what was written on the slip of paper, but because of the advice that Jesus clearly gives in the Gospel where he urges us to be always ready.

"Then tell me," insisted Michael, "how much longer I have to live?"

"You will live as long as God wants you to."

"But will I live until the end of this year?" he begged again with a trembling voice.

"Courage, Michael, calm down. Our life is in the hands of God Who is a good Father. He knows how long to preserve us. Besides, it is not necessary to know the hour of our death to go to heaven. It is sufficient to prepare for it with good works."

Then he grew sad: "If you don't want to tell, it is a sign that my end is near."

"That is not necessarily so but, even if it were, I am sure you would not be afraid of going to pay a visit to the Blessed Virgin in heaven."

"That's true! That's true!" He became his old cheerful self and ran out to take part in the recreation.

He was as happy as ever on Monday, Tuesday and the morning of Wednesday. His health was good and he was punctual in all his duties. Only on the afternoon of Wednesday did he stand on the balcony watching the games and taking no part. This was most unusual and surely a sign that he was not feeling well.

---

First Holy Communion, helping those who need it to make preparation and thanksgiving, spreading books, holy pictures, written material for this purpose.

7. After each meeting some spiritual resolution will be made to be put into practice in the coming week.

## Chapter 14. His illness and the circumstances attending it

On the evening of that day (Wednesday, 19 January, 1859) he was asked what was the matter with him and he answered that there was nothing. He had an upset stomach which was nothing unusual for him. He was given some medicine and went to bed. He passed the night peacefully.

He got up the following morning at the usual time with his companions, went to church and received Holy Communion for the dying which was his usual custom every Thursday. Later he went into the playground but he could take no part because he was feeling very tired and experienced difficulty in breathing. He was given some more medicine, the doctor was called but, finding nothing serious, advised him to keep on taking the same remedy.

His mother was in Turin at this time and was told of his sickness. She came to see him and told us that he had suffered similar illnesses ever since he was quite young and the remedies we were giving him were the same as she had given.

He wanted to get up on the Friday to go to Holy Communion in honour of the Passion of Christ which he used to do every Friday to obtain the grace of a happy death. He was not allowed to do this as he seemed to have got worse. He had had problems with worms, so he was given some more medicine and something special to relieve his breathing. Up to this time, there were no signs that he was seriously ill.

At about two in the afternoon matters suddenly changed for the worse..He was experiencing great difficulty in breathing and was beginning to cough and spit up blood. Asked how he felt, he replied that he was still feeling a certain heaviness in his stomach. However, I noticed that he was by now a very sick boy so the doctor was called for once more, to dispel doubt and make sure we were doing the right thing. At that moment his mother, in a true Christian spirit, suggested he go to confession whilst waiting for the doctor.

“Yes, mum, yes! I only went to Confession yesterday and went to Holy Communion but if the sickness is serious I would like to go to Confession once again.”

He prepared himself for a few minutes and made his Confession. After that he calmly and smilingly addressed himself to me and his mother:

“Who knows but this Confession will be for the Exercise for a Happy Death for the real thing!”

“What do you think? Would you like to get better or go to heaven^”

“The Lord knows what is best for me; I only want to do what pleases him.”

“If the Lord gave you the choice of getting better or going to heaven, what would you choose?”



## Contents

“Who would be mad enough not to choose heaven?”

“So you would like to go there?”

“For sure I would! I would like to go there with all my heart. That’s what I have been asking the Lord for now for some time.”

“When would you like to go?”

“Right away if that is according to the Lord’s pleasure.”

“Right, let us say together: In everything, whether in life or in death, may the adorable will of God be done!”

Just at that moment the doctor arrived. He found that the sick boy’s condition was serious.

“The case is very serious,” he confided. “The lad has a hemorrhage in the stomach, and I am doubtful whether we can stop it.”

He did what he could. Blood letting, blistering, medicines - anything possible was done to stop the internal bleeding that at times hindered his breathing. All in vain.

At nine o’clock that night (Friday, 21 January) Michael asked to go to Communion once more before his death which he had not been able to do that morning. He was very anxious to receive the Christ which he had been receiving now for some time with so much fervour.

Before he received it he said to me and those around his bed:

“I recommend myself to the prayers of my companions; may they pray that the sacramental Christ be my Viaticum. To lead me to eternal life he received Communion and was helped to make his thanksgiving.

At the beginning of the Viaticum he told me in the presence of the others:

“I recommend myself to my companions’ prayers. Let them pray that Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament will really be my Viaticum, my companion into eternity.”

He received the Host and then began his thanksgiving with the help of the Assistant.

After a quarter of an hour he stopped repeating the prayers that were suggested to him and, since he did not say anything we thought he had suddenly passed away. But after a few minutes he opened his eyes and in a seemingly joking way, said:

“On that slip of paper last Sunday there was a mistake! It said - At the judgement seat of God you will be on your own. - That’s not true. I shall not be alone. The Blessed Virgin will be there to help me so I have nothing to fear - I am ready to go at any time. Our Lady wants to be by my side at the judgement seat of God.”

## Chapter 15. His last moments and a beautiful death

It was ten o'clock and Michael's condition worsened. It seemed that he would not last the night. Therefore it was arranged that Fr. Zattini, a cleric and a young infirmarian should sit with him for half the night and the Fr. Alasonatti,<sup>23</sup> prefect of the house, with another cleric and an infirmarian should watch by his bedside for the rest of the night.

I did not think there was any immediate danger so I said to the patient: "Michael get a bit of rest. I am going to my room for a few moments and then I will return."

"No,..please don't abandon me," Michael begged.

"I'm only going to say some of my breviary and then I'll come back."

"Then come back as soon as you can."

I gave instructions that I was to be called at the first sign of a worsening condition because I loved that young lad very tenderly and I wanted to be at his side in his last moments. I was no sooner in my room that I was called back to the sick-bed because it seemed that Michael had entered upon his death agony.

This was so. He was slipping away quickly so the Holy Oils were administered by Fr. Zattini. Michael was still fully conscious.

He answered the various prayers of the ceremony for the administration of this august sacrament. At every anointing he added some special prayers of his own. I remember his words at the anointing of his lips:

"O my God, if only you had struck me dumb before I had used my tongue to offend you, how many fewer offences there would have been! My God, pardon the sins of my tongue - I repent of them with all my heart."

At the anointing of the hands he added:

"How many times have I not punched my companions with these hands! Pardon me, O God, and help my companions to be better than I am."

The Anointing over, he was asked would he like us to call his mother who had gone to take rest in a nearby room, also considering his condition was not serious.

"No," he replied, "it is better not to call her. Poor Mum! She loves me so much that witnessing my death would deeply disturb her. Poor Mum! When I'm in heaven I'll pray much for her."

He was urged not to excite himself and to prepare himself for the papal blessing, with a plenary indulgence. During his life he had always held religious practices in high esteem to which indulgences were attached and did his best to utilise them. Hence he

---

<sup>23</sup>This good priest, after a life given in most exemplary fashion to his sacred ministry and various works of charity, died at Lanzo, 8th October 1865 after a long illness. We are now putting together a life of his activity which hopefully will please his friends and anyone else who wants to read it.

## Contents

was delighted to receive the Papal Blessing. He took part in all the prayers but wanted to recite the *Confiteor* himself. He pronounced every word with the greatest fervour, devotion and lively faith and the bystanders were moved to tears.

He then seemed to drowse off and so we did not disturb him but he soon awoke. His pulse indicated that death was fast approaching but his face was calm. He smiled, and was as fully conscious as a man in perfect health. This was not because he did not feel any pain because his internal bleeding caused suffocation - he was panting and was generally exhausted. But Michael had often asked God to allow him to do all his Purgatory on earth so that he could go straight to heaven. It was this thought that enabled him to suffer with joy and that very pain which normally brings sadness and distress produced in him nothing but joy and pleasure. Therefore through a special grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Michael not only seemed insensible to pain but showed that he felt only consolation in putting up with these very sufferings. It was not necessary to suggest any prayers to him because he himself, from time to time, was making moving spontaneous prayers.

It was 10:45 when he called my name and said to me:

“This is it. Help me.”

“Take it easy,” I replied. “I shall not abandon you until you are safe with the Lord in heaven. But if you are really convinced you are about to leave this world, don’t you want to say a last good-bye to your mother?”

“No, Father. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Then, won’t you give me a message for her?”

“Yes, ask her to pardon me for all the suffering I caused her. Tell her that I am sorry. Tell her that I love her and that she should courageously continue her good work. Tell her that I die willingly and that I am leaving this world in the company of Jesus and Mary and that I will be waiting for her in heaven.”

At these words, all those present began to sob. I controlled myself and, to fill those last moments with good thoughts, I kept on asking him questions.

“And what do you want to leave as a message for your companions?”

“Tell them to always make good confessions.”

“Michael, tell me what thing of your past life gives you the greatest consolation at this moment?”

“What consoles me most at this moment is the little I have done to honour Mary. Yet, this is the greatest consolation. O Mary, O Mary, how happy are those at the hour of death who have been devoted to you! “But,” he continued, “there is one thing that puzzles me. When my soul is separated from my body as I enter heaven, what must I do? To whom must I turn?”

“If Our Lady wants to accompany you, leave all that to Her. But before you leave for Paradise I would like to give you a commission.”

“Go ahead, I’ll do all I can to obey you.”

“When you are in heaven and you see the Blessed Virgin, give her our humble and respectful good wishes, from me and from everyone in this House. Beg Her to give us all Her blessing, to take us all under Her powerful protection. Beg her to make sure that

## Contents

none of us who are in this House at present or anyone that Providence will send us in the future will lose their soul.”

“I’ll do that willingly. Is there anything else?”

“Not for the present,” I replied.

It seemed as if he wanted to have a sleep. He appeared quite calm although his weakening pulse signalled his imminent death. For this reason we began to recite the *Profisciscere*; towards the middle of the prayer he awoke as if from a deep sleep and, with a smile on his lips, said to me: “Within a short time now I will deliver your message. - I’ll do my best to make a good job of it. Tell my companions I await them all in heaven.” He took the crucifix in his hands, kissed three times and then uttered his final words. “Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I place my soul in your hands.” He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death.

That blessed soul left this world to fly, as we ardently hope, to the bosom of God at 11 p.m. of January 21, 1859, barely fourteen years old. He suffered no agony. He was not agitated or in pain nor did he manifest any of the symptoms that naturally accompany the terrible separation of the soul from the body. I hardly know how to describe his death except by calling it a sleep of joy that bore away that soul from the sorrows of life to the joys of eternity.

The bystanders were more moved than saddened. Fr. Zattini could no longer control his emotions and exclaimed:

“O Death, you are not a punishment for innocent souls! For these you are the great benefactor who opens the doors to joys that will last for ever. Oh, why cannot I be in your place, Michael? At this moment your soul has been judged and the Blessed Virgin has already conducted you to the enjoyment of the great glory of heaven. Dear Magone, may you live happily for all eternity - pray for us - we will fulfill our duties as friends by offering fervent prayers to God for the eternal repose of your soul.”

## Chapter 16. His funeral - Final thoughts - Conclusion

At daybreak Michael's good mother came into the room to see her son. Her sorrow was great when she learned that he was dead! That Christian woman just stood there for a moment without saying a word, or giving a sigh, then broke forth in these words:

"Great God, you are the Master of all things . . . Dear Michael, you are dead ... I'll always weep for you as a son I have lost but I will thank God who allowed you to die here with every help possible. Such a death is precious in the eyes of the Lord. Rest with God in peace, pray for your mother that loved you so dearly on this earth and will love you even more now that I believe that you are with the just in heaven. As long as I live, I will continue to pray for your soul and hope one day to join you in the homeland of the saints."

Having said these words, she broke down sobbing and went to the church to find comfort in prayer.

The loss of such a companion caused great sadness to all the boys in the House and to all who knew him.

He was well known for his physical and moral qualities and was most esteemed for the rare virtues that adorned his life.

It can be said that his companions passed the following day in praying for the repose of his soul. They found comfort only in saying the Rosary, the Office of the Dead, going to Confession and Communion. All mourned him as a friend yet all consoled themselves by saying: At this moment Michael is already with Dominic Savio in heaven.

The feelings of his companions and of his teacher Fr. Francesia are summed up in the following lines he penned:

On that day after Michael's death I went into class. It was a Saturday. Michael's seat was unoccupied so I told the class that we had lost a student on earth but perhaps heaven had gained another citizen. I nearly broke down as I said this. The boys were appalled and in the general silence only one thing was said and that was: He is dead. All the class broke into sobs. All loved him and who could not but love a lad adorned with so many virtues? The great reputation he had acquired was only realised after his death. Pages written by him were vied for. One of my distinguished colleagues Fr. Turchi, thought himself very fortunate to have a notebook that belonged to Michael and to have his name on a piece cut off from an examination paper of the previous year.

## *Contents*

For my part, because of the virtues practiced by him with so much perfection, I did not hesitate to invoke him in all my needs and I must confess he never once let me down. Please accept my sincerest thanks, dear friend, and I beg of you to keep on interceding for your old teacher before the throne of God. Instil into my heart a spark of your great humility, Michael! Pray for all your companions that they may meet with you one day in heaven.

This was his teacher.

In order to give an external sign of the great affection we had for our departed friend, he was given as solemn a burial as was compatible with our humble condition.

With lighted candles, funeral hymns and the brass band, we accompanied the body to the grave where, praying for the repose of his soul, we said our last fond farewell with the hope that we would one day be companions in a better life than this.

A month later we celebrated the Month's Mind. The celebrated orator, Fr. Zattini, preached Michael's eulogy in moving words. I regret that there is no room in this little booklet for it to be reported in full. However, I want to quote the final part as a conclusion to this biography.

After having reminded us of the principal virtues that enriched his soul, he invited his sorrowing and moved audience not to forget him. He asked them to remember him often, to comfort him with their prayers and to follow the wonderful example he had given them.

Finally, he concluded this way:

These examples and these words in death our friend Michael Magone of Carmagnola places before us. Today he is no more, death has caused him to vacate his seat here in church where he often came to pray - that prayer that he found so beautiful and which brought him so much peace. He is no more and, with his departure, teaches us that every star sets here below, every treasure consumed, every soul reclaimed. Thirty days ago we committed his mortal remains to the earth. If I had been present I would have followed the usual custom of the people and God and would have plucked a handful of grass by the graveside and thrown it in to the coffin whilst repeating in sad tones the words of the Son of Judah: They will flower like the grass of the fields; from their bones will arise other dear young people who will remind us of you, will repeat their example and will multiply their virtues!

Therefore, a final farewell, O sweet, dear, faithful companion of ours, our good, brave Michael! Goodbye! You, the hope of your wonderful mother who shed tears over you more of piety than that of nature and blood . . . You, the beautiful hope of an adopted father who received you in the name of God, who called you to this beautiful and blessed sanctuary where you learned so well and so quickly the love of God and esteem for virtue . . . You, the friend of those who followed along with you, respectful to your Superiors, docile to your teachers, kindly to all! You dreamed of the priesthood . . .

## Contents

even there you would have been a master and example of heavenly wisdom . . . You have left a void, a wound in our hearts! But you have gone from us or, better, death has stolen you from our esteem and affection . . . has death anything to teach us? Yes, to the fervent, to the less fervent and the sinners; the negligent, the sleepy, the lazy, the weak, the tepid, the cold. We pray you to let us know whether you are in the land of the living, in the place of joy; let us hear that you at the fountain-head, in the sea of grace and your musical voice now with the heavenly choirs so pleasing to the ears of God! Give us your zeal, your love, your charity . . . help us to live good, chaste, devout, virtuous lives . . . may we die happy, peaceful, calm deaths, trusting in divine mercies. We beg you that death may not touch us with its torments as it respected you. *Non tangat nos tormentum mortis!* Pray for us with those angelic youths from this House who proceeded you into God's presence: Camillo Gavio, Gabriel Fascio, Aloysius Rua, Dominic Savio, John Massaglia. Pray with them above all for the most beloved head of this House. We will always remember you in our prayers, we will never forget you until we have been granted the joy of reaching the stars. O, blessed be God who formed you, nourished you, supported you and took you to Himself. Blessed be He who takes away life - blessed be he who surrenders it.

# Appendix A.

## Practices of piety which Michael Magone carried out each day.

### *Daily prayer to Jesus on the cross for all who will die today*

O most merciful Jesus, lover of souls, I beg you, through the agony of your Sacred Heart and the sorrows of your Immaculate Mother, to wash the souls of all sinners in your Blood, including those who are dying at the moment and who will pass from life today.

May the sorrowful heart of Jesus have pity on them. Amen.

### *Another prayer to be recited in the morning, at midday and in the evenings for the dying*

My God, apply to the faithful in agony and dying at the moment, the infinite merits of the most Precious Blood of Our Saviour Jesus Christ, his sorrowful passion and death, the martyrdom which Mar suffered at the foot of the Cross, and the prayers that she addressed to you at this moment. Hail Mary...

### *Useful ideas for saying prayers, performing other meritorious works for the dying*

How many thousands will die today, like grass, harvested by the Grim Reaper! All of them must appear before God-s fearful tribunal to hear the sentence of eternal life or death! Alas - perhaps all will be in a state of grace or thousands in a state of mortal sin!

A good Confession or an act of true contrition is enough to save them! Our prayer today, our fasting, or any other religious practice can obtain one or the other grace from the Heart of Jesus in agony: there will be no time tomorrow!

How many there are dying today who are our friends, our benefactors, perhaps even our brothers, husbands or wives, maybe even accomplices in our sinfulness or who have been scandalised by us! Each of them for one or other reason has the right to our charity.

They day will come when we too will be listed amongst the number of those who are dying. What a consolation it will be for us in our last difficult and final moments if there is someone to pray for our soul! What a sweet memory will our prayers be, and the good works we did for those who were dying.

## Note

Those who say three Our Fathers and Hail Marys when they hear the bell toll for someone who is dying, will gain 300 days indulgence applicable to the holy souls in Purgatory.

### *Divine praises*

Blessed be God.

Blessed be his holy name.

Blessed be Jesus Christ true God and true man.



## *Contents*

Blessed be the name of Jesus.

Blessed be Jesus in the most holy Sacrament of the altar.

Blessed be the Mother of God Mary Most Holy.

Blessed be the name of Mary, Virgin and Mother.

Blessed be God in his angels and in his saints. Amen.

### **Note**

*Pius VII grants one year's indulgence each time these are said.*

### **DECLARATION BY THE AUTHOR.**

In whatever has been said or written about young Michael Magone the author offers no authority except for simple historical truth, putting everything to the judgement of the Holy Church whose greatest glory he still holds in honour every time that he can profess himself to be its most obedient son.

Part V.  
Francis

THE YOUNG SHEPHERD BOY FROM THE ALPS, OR THE LIFE OF YOUNG  
FRANCIS BESUCCO FROM ARGENTERA  
by Father JOHN BOSCO  
TURIN

ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES PRESS  
1864

# Contents

## *Contents*

My dear Boys,

Just as I was about to write the life of one of your companions, Francis Besucco died unexpectedly and I decided that his life was the one to write. I feel that as well as pleasing both yourselves and those from his district back at home, my effort will be useful to you; hence I have researched Francis' life and written it up.

Some of you might question whether what I have written really happened. Briefly this is how I went about it. I collected information from the parish priest, the school teacher, his parents and his friends about the years that Francis spent at home; you could almost say that I have simply rewritten and rearranged what they sent me. For the time he spent with us it was simply a matter of collecting the information from many witnesses; these testimonies were written and signed by the witnesses themselves.

It is true that some of the facts recorded will appear far-fetched, and that is one reason why I have been very careful in writing them down. If the facts were unimportant there would be no need to publish them. When you note this boy speaking with a knowledge normally superior to one of his age, you must remember that he showed great diligence in learning, that he was blessed with a good memory and that he was favoured by God in a special way. All of these facts contributed in no small degree to advance him well ahead of his years.

You will also have to take something into account about myself; possibly I have been over indulgent in writing about things which happened between the two of us; for this I ask your forbearance. Please look upon me as a father who is speaking about a son whom he loves tenderly; a father who gives his time to the one he loves and who speaks to his dear sons; he opens his heart to them to please them and to instruct them in the practice of virtue which Besucco was a model of. Read his life then, my dear boys, and if, as you read, you feel yourself moved to turn away from something wrong or to practice some virtue, render thanks to God the giver of all good things.

May the Lord bless us all and preserve us in His holy grace here on earth so that we can one day bless him forever in Heaven.

# Chapter 1. Home - Parents - Young Besucco's early upbringing

If you have ever trudged from Cuneo towards the Alps, you would have found it a long, steep and tiring walk; then you would arrive at a high plain from which you would have some picturesque and pleasant views. At night you can see the highest peak in the Alps, Magdalene Mountain as it is traditionally called by the locals who believe that this saint came from Marseilles to live on top of these uninhabitable mountains. There is a large plateau at the top of the mountain containing a large lake which is the source of the River Stura. In the evening, as far as the eye can see, you see a long, wide deep valley called the Valley of the Lower Alps which once belonged to France. In the morning your eyes are charmed by a succession of hills one lower than the other, resembling a semi-circular staircase descending to Cuneo and Saluzzo. Lying on this plateau and precisely 80 metres from the French border is the Alpine village of Argentera, the home town of the young shepherd Francis Besucco whose life I am writing.

Francis was born in a humble house in this village of poor but honest and devout parents on March 1, 1850. His father was called Matthew, his mother, Rose. In view of their poverty they asked the parish priest, who had the title of archpriest, to baptise the child and look after him as a godson. The zealous archpriest at that time was Father Francis Pepino and he willingly consented to be the child's godfather. His godmother was the priest's mother, Anna, a woman of great piety who could never say no to an act of charity. The parents expressly wanted the child named after his godfather, that is, Francis. The priest wanted to add the name of the saint whose day it was the day he was born, St Albino. Once Francis had made his first communion he never omitted going to the Sacraments each March 1st, and, as far as he could, he passed the whole day in works of Christian piety.

His mother was well aware of the need to give her children a good education and she was solicitous in teaching her son to be pious. The names of Jesus and Mary were the first words she taught him. Often as she looked into his face and thought of the dangers young people are exposed to she would say:

"My dear little Francis, I love you so very much, but I love your soul much more than your body. I would prefer to see you dead, rather than have you offend God. Oh! If I could only have the consolation of seeing you always in the grace of God."

These and similar expressions were daily occurrences for the boy who, contrary to expectations, grew into a robust little fellow; at the same time those around him noticed his growth in grace. With such an upbringing it is not to be wondered at that Francis was a great consolation to all his family. Both his parents and his brothers tell us how pleased he was, as soon as he learned to speak, to say the names of Jesus and Mary. From the

## *Contents*

most tender age he showed great pleasure in learning prayers and religious songs, which he loved to sing in the family circle. It was also a delight to see the joy with which he would join the faithful in singing the praises of Jesus and Mary before Vespers on Feast Days. Love and prayer appeared to be second nature to him. His parents, brothers and sisters tell us that from the age of three he never had to be invited to pray; he pestered them to teach him new prayers. Every morning and evening at the usual time he knelt down and recited the prayers which he had already learned and he would not get up until he had learned a new prayer.

## Chapter 2. Death of his godmother - His delight in things to do with the church - His love for prayer

Young Besucco loved his godmother very much; he regarded her as his second mother and showed his love by little gifts and acts of kindness. He was only three when Anna Pepino fell seriously ill. He wanted to see her as often as he could, prayed for her and showed her signs of his love for her. She died on May 9, 1853, and it would appear that, although he was not present, he had some extraordinary knowledge of her death.

Despite his tender age he began to say an Our Father every morning and evening for his deceased godmother, a practice he kept up all his life. He often said: "I remember my godmother and pray for her every day even though I have every hope that she already enjoys the glory of heaven." It was probably on account of the affection that Francis showed for his dear mother that the parish priest loved Francis in return and kept an eye on him as much as possible.

Whenever Francis saw any member of his family praying he would assume a recollected posture and raise his eyes and his little hands to heaven foreshadowing the great favours that the merciful God was to shower upon him.

In the morning he would not eat anything until he had said his prayers, unlike the custom of boys his age. When he was taken to Church he never disturbed those around him and they, noticing his devout posture, would be drawn to imitate him. It often happened that those who observed his surprising disposition would say: "It is incredible that a boy of that age could be so good." He willingly took part in any kind of church function and it seemed that he set out to please everybody even if it inconvenienced him. Many times in winter a heavy snowfall would prevent anyone going along to serve Mass. Only the intrepid Francis, courageously facing every danger, would carve out a path through the snow with his feet and hands, and arrive alone at the Church. At first sight he looked like a little animal swallowed up in the deep snow. Matthew Valorso is an eye-witness to this. He was summoned to serve Mass one day half way through January 1863 and as he was lighting the candles he saw something strange enter the Church. He was surprised to find out that it was our courageous little boy who was so happy to finally reach the Church and who called out:

"At last I've made it."

He served the Mass too and afterwards spoke to the parish priest with a big smile on his face:

"This is worth two Masses since I have heard it with double attention and it has made me very happy. I'll continue to come here whatever the cost."



## *Contents*

Who could fail to like such a pleasant little lad?

That was how Francis grew in grace before God and men. By the time he was five he knew his morning and night prayers perfectly; he used to say them every day with his family; this was the pattern as long as he lived at home. Whilst he was keen to pray he was equally keen on learning the main prayer as he was the shorter prayers.

It was enough for Francis to hear someone say a prayer which he did not know, and he would not rest until he had learned it. Then he would be as happy as if he had discovered a treasure and he would teach it to the household. He would want his prayer to become part of the repertoire of the household or to hear it recited by his friends. The following prayers were, so to speak, his Morning Prayer and his Night Prayer. As soon as he woke he would make the sign of the Cross and jump out of bed saying or singing: "My soul, get up; look up to heaven, love Jesus; love the one who loves you; turn away from the world which cheats you; remember that you have to die and your body will rot away; and so that you may be heard, say three Hail Mary's to Our Lady."

In his tender years he did not understand what this prayer meant and he would pester first his father, then his mother, or someone else to explain it to him. When he finally understood it he would say: "Now I can recite it with greater devotion." In time this prayer became his rule of life.

In the evening as he was going to bed he would devoutly recite the following prayer: "I am going to sleep; I do not know whether I shall wake up again: there are four things that I desire: Confession, Communion, Holy Viaticum, the Papal Blessing. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

He was particularly pleased to discuss matters concerned with his religion and to talk about examples of virtue practised by others, these he would then try to imitate. If at times he looked sad, and needed cheering up, it was sufficient to speak to him of spiritual things or of the advantages of going to school.

## Chapter 3. His obedience - Good advice - Work in the fields

His parish priest tells us that he was so obedient to his parents that he often forestalled their wishes, that he never refused them anything and that he never showed any unwillingness to carry out their wishes. His sisters tell us that it sometimes happened that they did not do what their parents wanted, either through inadvertence or because they were occupied in some other duty; they were always admonished by their little brother. He would assume an imploring attitude and say to them:

“Look here, mother told you to do this more than half an hour ago and you still haven’t done it. You shouldn’t displease someone who loves us so much.”

He was always kind to his brothers and sisters and never took offence even when he was blamed by them. He generally liked to play with them, because he believed that he could learn only good things from them. He confided in them and he asked them to keep an eye on his defects.

“I regret,” attests the parish priest, “that I am not capable of describing the wonderful harmony which existed in this family; there were eight of them at the time; they were exemplary in everything, whether it be their family life at home or their frequency and devotion at the sacred functions.”

His oldest brother John went to the army five years ago and Francis never stopped giving him advice on how to behave so that he would be as good as he was at home.

“Try,” he concluded, “to be very devoted to Mary most holy. She will certainly help you. For my part I’ll keep praying for you. We shall write again shortly.”

He said all of this when he was about nine years of age. Then he turned to his parents who had lost the son they relied on most for the work in the fields.

“You are sad,” he told them, “but God will console us in another way by keeping us in good health and helping us in our work. And I shall do all I can to help you.”

What a wonderful worker he turned out to be. To the amazement of all he set out on his allotted tasks, and he also wanted to take on another work, but his parents did not think he was strong enough. In the midst of all the work in the fields he maintained his sense of cheerfulness despite great fatigue. If at times his father would jokingly tell him that he seemed tired of work, he would reply:

“Yes, it seems that I am not suited to this type of work; my godfather always tells me that I should study; perhaps he will help me.”

And he never let a day go by without telling the family that he wanted to go to school. He used to go to school during the winter, but he never excused himself from the domestic work, as so many boys do, so that he could play during free time. The tenor of his life during the time he went to school in Argentera is as follows

## Chapter 4. Conduct and events at school

Although his parents really needed him at home, they realised that regular instruction is a very valuable means of learning one's religion, and so they sent Francis to school. He would get up early and recite his morning prayers, stopping often to meditate on their meaning. He said his prayers alone or with his family. Then he studied until it was time to go to school; after school he would come straight back to do whatever was needed of him at home. His progress in class mirrored his great diligence; he was not a brilliant student, but he did his best and made good use of his time to learn his lessons.

His teacher had given the students a general instruction not to wander about of an evening during the winter season, and Besucco gave a shining example. Not only did he obey scrupulously, but he drew many of his companions to imitate him and this helped their learning and their virtue; it also pleased their teacher Antonio Valorso, their parents and the boys themselves.

Seldom would he go out to play after dinner, and he had ceased to do this almost entirely several months before he came to the Oratory.

After some relaxation he got down to his study until the bell for school sounded. His teacher states that he paid the greatest attention to whatever he was taught and was always respectful. He helped the teacher to teach the young pupils to read and he did this quite naturally. For the whole time that he attended the village school he was regarded by his companions as an example of good behaviour and diligence. They had such esteem for our Francis that they took care when, in his presence, not to let unbecoming words slip out. They were sure that he would not have approved and that he would have let them know it; and it did occur on several occasions. If anyone younger than himself needed help outside of school hours, he was only too willing and he insisted on being asked often. At the same time he did not pass over any occasion to give some salutary advice or to urge greater love of God.

His zealous teacher has told me some facts about Francis at school and I shall pass them on as I heard them. "Every now and then there was a fight amongst his school mates, and he would immediately step into their midst to quiet them down.

"We are friends," he would tell them, "and we should not fight each other, especially over these harmless trifles; let us think well of each other and learn to put up with each other as God wants us to."

Words such as these usually succeeded in restoring the peace. If he saw that his words could not pacify them, he immediately walked away.

As soon as he heard the bell for school or for church he invited his companions to finish their games. One day he was playing bocce when he heard the bell for catechism class. Francis immediately said:

"Let us go to Catechism class, we can finish our game after Church."

## *Contents*

With that he left them. After church he returned and gently rebuked them for missing the instruction and practices of piety; and then to show that they were still his friends he bought them some cherries. At this sign of generosity and courtesy they promised that in future they would not miss religious functions because of their games.

He would become upset if he heard someone say an indecent word and he would either leave the company or give a severe reprimand. He was often heard to say:

“My friends, don’t say those words. They offend God and they scandalise others.”

Those same companions state that Francis very often invited them to visit the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady; and that he never missed any opportunity to help them in their school work.

At other times when he heard the Angelus bell he would say:

“Come on, let’s say the Angelus; and then we can continue our games.”

When on holiday he would invite the same companions to assist at Mass.

As the teacher at the Argentera village school I must say, to the greater glory of God, that the pious young boy Besucco was second to none in his diligence in coming to school during his five years there. If he ever saw companions who were negligent he could warn them so kindly that, whether they wanted to or not, they became more diligent. In school his conduct could not have been better, whether it was keeping silence or paying attention to what was being taught. Besides that he took great pleasure in helping the smaller ones to read. He did this so politely and with such kindness that he was greatly loved and respected by them.”

That was what his teacher said

## Chapter 5. Life at home in the family - An evening reflection

As soon as he arrived home from school he ran to kiss his parents and made himself ready to do whatever they wanted before tea time. It was a frugal table but he never grumbled about the quantity or quality of the food. He never wanted his own way and if he noticed others in the family who were dissatisfied he would say to them:

“When you are out on your own you can do it your way, but right now we must do whatever our parents want. We are poor and we cannot live like the rich. It is not important that my companions are well dressed, whilst I cannot have fine clothes. The best suit that we can possibly have is the grace of God.”

He had the greatest respect for his parents; he loved them with the most tender, filial love; he obeyed them blindly; and he never ceased praising whatever they did for him. They in their turn loved him greatly for this, and those times when he was not in their company weighted heavy on them. If sometimes his brothers or sisters jokingly said to him:

“You’ve got every reason to be happy, Francis, for you are the Benjamin of the family,” he would reply: “Yes, that’s true, but I always try to be good and to earn their love and yours.”

This was only too true; if ever he was given a present, or he earned some money for services rendered, he would give it to his parents when he got home or he would share it with his brothers and sisters and tell them:

“See how much I love you.”

Of an evening he would remain at home seldom going out to mix with others. He used the time enjoying the company of his family, studied his lessons or completed some other duty. Then at a set hour he invited all to say the Rosary with the usual prayers, which he prolonged because he liked to say many Our Fathers. He never forgot to ask for special prayers to obtain from God health for his father and brothers who lived away from the homestead in winter seeking work to support the family.

“Who knows,” he used often to say with tears in his eyes, “how much our father suffers for us. He must often be very tired and cold whilst we are comfortable here and eating the fruit of his labours. Let us at least pray for him.”

He spoke about his absent father every day, and, accompanied him in thought everywhere in his journeys.

During the evenings he would often willingly read some devout books which he had obtained from his godfather or his teacher; they in turn only too gladly got hold of them for him. Often when the house was full of people he would say:

“Listen to the beautiful example which I found in this book.” He would then read

## *Contents*

it aloud, in a resonant voice as though he were preaching. If he ever came across the life of some pious young man, the latter became the subject of his conversation and his imitation. "Wouldn't I be fortunate, mother, if I could become as good as he was?"

"Two years ago," says his parish priest, "he read the life of St Aloysius, and promptly became his imitator, especially in keeping quiet about his good actions. Some months later he was given the lives of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. After reading the life of the latter he said that he had a good example for his waywardness, and asked God for the grace to correct his defects, and to imitate the good conduct and holy end of his 'dear Magone', as he called him. He wanted to learn about Magone and imitate him and he asked me whether it would be possible for him to go to the same institution so that he would become virtuous. This is the main benefit that our Francis obtained from the reading of good books. May God grant that all my young parishioners would read good books. It would certainly be some consolation to their parents."

In the morning Francis would raise his innocent soul to heaven; in the evening he would turn his thoughts to death. When asked what he did when he went to bed, he would answer:

"I imagine that I am getting into my grave and then the first thought that comes to my mind is this: What will happen to you if you fall into the grave of hell? I am frightened by this thought and I pray as well as I can to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my Guardian Angel, and I don't stop praying until I fall asleep. Oh! how many wonderful resolutions I make when I am in bed for fear of losing my soul. If I wake up in the night I resume praying and I am quite sorry if sleep surprises me again."

## Chapter 6. Besucco and his parish priest - Sayings - Going to confession

Although Besucco seems to have been a privileged soul from his infancy, we must remember that the vigilance of his parents, his own good disposition and the loving care of his parish priest all greatly helped in his moral education. When he was yet a very young child his parents took him to church, they held his hands, they helped him to make the Sign of the Cross well, they pointed out how and where he had to kneel.

As soon as he was ready for it they took him to confession. Because of the example, the advice and the encouragement of his parents he took a liking to this Sacrament and instead of having the usual apprehension or repugnance which boys show when they have to appear before persons in authority, he experienced pleasure.

We must also note that the success of this young boy is in great part due to his parish priest, Father Francis Pepino. This exemplary priest worked zealously for the good of his parishioners. But he was convinced that you cannot have good parishioners if the young are not well educated. Hence he spared nothing in giving help to young people. He taught the boys how to serve Mass; he even taught school, and often went looking for them at home, at work, or in the fields. Any boy who showed an aptitude for study and piety became the special object of his care and interest. It was for this reason that, when he noted the blessings that the Lord was showering copiously on our dear Besucco, he took special care of him and wanted to give him his first lesson in catechism and also prepare him for his first confession. His kindly manner and his fatherly care gained Francis' heart so that he was only too happy whenever he would speak with his parish priest or hear some comforting and pious words from him.

He chose him for his regular confessor and continued to go to confession to him during the time he spent in Argentera. The parish priest advised him to change his confessor from time to time and even presented him with opportunity to do so, but the lad asked him to be his confessor all the time.

"I have every confidence in you, Father," he would say, "you know my heart. I always tell you every secret, I love you very much because you love my soul very much."

I believe that the greatest thing that can happen to a young boy is the selection of a regular confessor to whom he can open his heart, a confessor who takes care of his soul, and with kindness and charity encourages him to approach this sacrament regularly.

Francis did not depend on his parish priest only for Confession, but also for everything that could contribute to his temporal and spiritual good. The advice given by his parish priest, or even his very wish was a command for Francis, who carefully and happily carried it out. His manner and frequency in going to Confession were also edifying. A few days before, he would speak of his coming confession, telling his brothers and sisters

## Contents

that he wanted to get some good from it this time. He went to them, particularly in the early years, and asked them to teach him to make a good confession; and asked them how they recognised offences committed and how they remembered their sins over the long period of one month. He was also greatly surprised that, after going to confession, a person could again offend God to whom he had promised to be faithful.

“How good God is,” he used to say, “to pardon our sins despite our infidelity in the resolutions we make to him, but how much greater is our ingratitude in the face of such blessings; we should tremble at the very thought of our infidelity. For my part I am prepared to do whatever I can and to suffer anything rather than offend him again.”

The evening before his confession he would ask his father whether he had any pressing work to do next day. When asked the reason for his question he stated that he wanted to go to Confession. His father, always willingly, consented and Francis passed nearly the whole night praying and examining his conscience so as to be better prepared, although his whole life could be called a continual preparation. In the morning, without speaking to anyone, he went to Church and there prepared himself for the great event with the greatest recollection. He always waited for those people who seemed to be in a hurry.

“His thoughtfulness for others,” says his parish priest, “especially in the bitter cold of winter, often impelled me to call him into the confessional, as he would be numbed with cold. He would be asked why he waited so long before going to confession.

“I can wait,” he would reply “because my parents do not blame me for the time spent in church; perhaps others could be annoyed or be told off at home, especially mothers who have children.”

His brothers and sisters sometimes jokingly said to him:

“You go to confession often just to dodge work.” He would reply,

“If you want to go to confession I’ll willingly take your place and do what I can. The more often you go, the happier I shall be.”

And then that master of the spirit would often tell them:

“The laziness you sometimes feel, the uncertainty about confession, the putting it off from day to day are just so many temptations of the devil. He knows what a powerful and efficacious remedy frequent confession is in the correction of our faults, and he makes every effort to keep us away from it. Oh! When it is a matter of doing good we are always frightened of the world; it is not the world but God who will judge us after death; we shall have to give an account of our works to him alone, and not to anyone else, not to the world; from him alone are we to expect eternal reward.”

“When I have been to confession,” he used sometimes to say to the other members of the family, “I experience such contentment that I would like to die there and then so as to avoid the danger of offending God again.” On days when he went to the Sacraments he used to refrain from all recreations. When the parish priest asked him why he did this he replied:

“Today I have no need to please my body, because the Good God has brought such great and sweet consolation to my soul. My great sorrow is that I am incapable of thanking my Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the continued help he gives me.”

Instead he spent the day in holy recollection and, as far as was possible, in Church.



## *Contents*

I have it on good authority that in order to receive the Sacraments more worthily he used to say:

“This confession could be the last of my life, and I want to make it as if it really were the last.”

## Chapter 7. Holy Mass - His fervour - Looking after the sheep on the mountainside

It is not out of place to note that Francis' parents gave him full liberty to go to Mass every day; sometimes, when he was in doubt about going for fear of omitting some duty they themselves sent him to Mass. He was very happy about this and would say to his parents:

“Oh! Be sure that time taken to hear Holy Mass will be abundantly rewarded during the day, because God pays well and I shall work much more willingly.”

On the mornings when he could not go to Mass, he would substitute this with a popular prayer which is widespread in that district. He had learned it when he was four years old. “The Mass begins, St. Mark intones it, the Angels are singing it and the Baby Jesus offers the water and wine. Make me, O Jesus, part of the Mass this morning.”

As a joke his father would ask Francis how he was going to spend that day without Mass and he would reply with the greatest simplicity:

“God will help me just the same, because I have said my prayers and I shall pray more this evening.”

He so readily believed what other people said that his companions sometimes told him some very tall stories. He remained quite calm, however, even when he realised that he was the butt of the leg-pulling. He was never seen to show signs of pride because of the esteem in which he was held by his parents, by his parish priest and by those who knew him. His work at his studies made him better than his companions, but this did not lead him to despise them; on the other hand he was very kind to them when they recited their lessons. If he received a rebuke for some childish prank, he would be quite contrite whether guilty or not and he would answer:

“I won't do it again; I'll be better. You are blaming me, but I know that you pardon me.”

And here he would run to embrace and hug his parents, more often with tears in his eyes. They never had occasion to punish their son. During the summer he went to the fields to work with the family. He loved to help his brothers and sisters and worked as hard as he could. He shunned idleness and during the rest periods he would begin a discussion on religion or he would question his father on something he didn't understand in spiritual matters.

He liked to pray when going to and from work. The parish priest says:

“We would often meet him and he was so absorbed in prayer that he did not notice us. Sometimes he would be scandalised by swearing or bad talk which he could not avoid

## Contents

hearing. He would immediately make the Sign of the Cross or say: 'Blessed be God. Blessed be his holy name'. He immediately began to talk about something else. When warned by his parents not to follow the bad example of certain companions he would answer: 'I would rather have my tongue cut out than use it to offend God'."

When he led the sheep out to pasture he always had a good book with him and he would read it to his companions if they were prepared to listen to him. Otherwise he would read it by himself or say some prayers, following the command of our Saviour to pray always.

To help provide for his family, Francis' father undertook to look after the common flock and he often set Francis this task, particularly on feast days so that his brothers might take part in parish functions at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly.

"If I can't go to Church on these days, I shall try to sanctify the feast in some other way."

He would tell his brothers to remember him in Church. When it was time for the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot, then he would kneel down before a makeshift crucifix to say his prayers or engage in spiritual reading. Sometimes he would hide in a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book and recite the very same prayers being said in Church. Afterwards he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary. It was really a great feast day for him when he could find companions to help him praise God.

To help provide for his family, Francis' father undertook to look after the common flock and he often set Francis this task, particularly on feast days so that his brothers might take part in parish functions at least on those days. Francis accepted the task obediently and willingly.

"If I can't go to Church on these days, I shall try to sanctify the feast in some other way."

He would tell his brothers to remember him in Church. When it was time for the devotions, he would take the animals to a safe spot, then he would kneel down before a makeshift crucifix to say his prayers or engage in spiritual reading. Sometimes he would hide in a cave in the hills, kneel before a picture he had in his book and recite the very same prayers being said in Church. Afterwards he would make the Stations of the Cross. In the evening he sang Vespers on his own and said the Rosary. It was really a great feast day for him when he could find companions to help him praise God. Later he used to recall with great pleasure the pasture fields of Roburento and Dreco in the mountains where he used to take his sheep.

"When I was in the solitude of Roburento," he used to say, "I was always very happy. I looked into the deep ravines which led to a kind of dark abyss; and I thought of the dark abysses and the eternal darkness of hell. Birds would fly up from the bottom of the valleys right over my head; and this reminded me that we on earth must lift up our minds to God. As I gazed at the sun rising in the morning, I said to my heart: 'This is like our coming into the world'. Sunset in the evening told me of the shortness of life and the end which comes without our noticing it.

When I gazed at the peaks of the Maddalena and the other mountains white with

## *Contents*

snow, there came to my mind the innocence of the life that raises us up to God and merits for us his graces, his blessing and the great reward of paradise. After these and other thoughts, I would turn my face to one of the mountains and sing hymns to Our Lady. This was one of my dearest moments because, as I sang, my voice echoed back from the mountains and I rejoiced as if the angels of paradise were helping me to sing the glories of the great Mother of God.”

Such were the thoughts in the mind of the pious little shepherd when he took his sheep up to the mountains and was unable to take part in the sacred functions of the Church.

As soon as he had come home and had something to eat he would run straight to the Church to make up for ( his own words) his lack of devotion during the day. How many apologies would he make to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in those visits!!

He never failed to make the Sign of the Cross and say some prayer when passing in front of a Church and especially if the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there.

If he was only looking after the family flock, in spring and autumn, then, with his parents' permission, he would bring the sheep home or hand them over to some companions and run along to the parish functions morning and evening. Oh! Why can't all boys imitate the example of Francis and not neglect their religious and their home duties? Unfortunately many dispense themselves for trifling reasons from going to the parish functions on feast days. May the example of this good young boy add weight to the recommendations of priests who preach and encourage keeping Sundays days holy.

## Chapter 8. Conversations - Behaviour in church - Visits to the Blessed Sacrament

In his conversations and recreations with his companions Francis was always very jovial. He generally chose amusements that exercise the body, and he would say to his parents and companions: "I am training myself for the time when I'll have to go for military service and I'll certainly want to be a good soldier." He avoided quarrels, and to do so he put up with insults and even ill treatment. To avoid becoming involved, he often left the company and hurried home. He used the same prudence in dodging any conversation injurious to the character of others and frequently instead praised the virtues of others. If corrected for some childish fault, he never took offence and never answered back, but would lower his head and show that he was sorry; he would say:

"This correction is a sign of the love you have for me."

If at recreations, he heard the bell for school, for Mass or for devotions, or if his parents called out to him to come home, he never delayed, "These calls are the Voice of God and they require prompt obedience on my part."

From his early childhood, as stated above, Francis showed extraordinary respect and veneration for God's holy House. When he reached the threshold of the Church his face became serious as befitted this holy place. He wanted to be the first into the sacristy to serve Mass and sometimes ran through the Church, but a look from the parish priest or some other person was enough for him to understand that he should not do this and he would impose a penance on himself. For example he would make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament or remain alone in Church for a considerable period of time and pray in an uncomfortable position, such as holding his arms in the form of a cross or with his hands under his knees.

His parish priest attests:

"How many squabbles have I not seen in the sacristy between Francis and other boys all wanting to serve at the Altar. Often I would put his virtue to the test, and also avoid a reputation for partiality to my godson, by preferring other boys when they came to Church together. He would be somewhat upset, and even shed a tear, but he would not take offence and would remain to assist at Mass with his usual devotion. 'I'll make up for this mortification' he would tell his companions; 'I'll be first here tomorrow', and he nearly always was. These were probably his only squabbles with his companions."

From then on they would be led by the example of Francis to copy his zeal for the service of Holy Mass. Generally he had his hands joined and his eyes fixed on the ciborium or the celebrant, or he read from some devout book. It was touching to see him bring the cruets to the altar. He was recollected, moved about solemnly as he went about his duties as though he were already a cleric perfectly versed in the ceremonies

## Contents

of the Church. Francis was not only happy to give Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament all the honour he could but he tried to make Him honoured also by his companions. Hence on every feast day he went into the sacristy to get the prayer books to give out to his companions so that they would hear Mass with devotion, and not be distracted during Vespers.

“My dear boy, why are you crying so much?” I asked him many times.

“I’ve reason to cry,” he replied, “because some boys don’t want a book. I know they haven’t got one and I see them looking around and not praying.”

He would cheer up only when they came and asked for a book. He offered himself willingly for all services in the Church. He lit the charcoal for Benediction, prepared wine and water for Mass, having first checked that nothing required for the ceremony was missing. You could almost say that he was transplanted into the house of the Lord.

It was his custom not only to go to Church every day for the sacred ceremonies, but also for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He would kneel in front of Our Lady’s Altar for a long time. Not only his parish priest but many of the townsfolk attest that they saw him during these visits in such a devout attitude that he seemed ecstatic. Every day he recited the *Memorare* followed by a Hail Mary and Mary Help of Christians, pray for us. He taught his companions this prayer and had them recite it often. On Feast Days and even on week days he liked to go to the Church to say his night prayers and all the favourite prayers that he had omitted during the week through forgetfulness or inability. Those who saw him admired such virtues in a boy so young.

## Chapter 9. The holy Crucifix - The Rosary - God's presence

Here it seems opportune to point out how very devoted Francis was to the miraculous Crucifix that has been venerated from times long ago by Confraternities in Argentera, Sambucco, Pietra Porzio, Ponte Bernardo and Bersezio. Large numbers of people go to pray in front of the Crucifix in times of drought and flood. The times when they come in procession to ask for favours and are not heard are very rare. The pious boy was hardly able to distinctly pronounce the two words *Blessed Christ* (the name given to the miraculous Crucifix) when he asked his father to say an Our Father in front of the Crucifix. The devotion grew up with him. Besides his frequent visits he recited the Rosary every summer evening for three years (1861, 1862, 1863) with the Confraternity by that name. So that he could satisfy his desire to say the Rosary and to hear Mass every day he sometimes forgot his dinner or his tea, but he said that he preferred to think of his soul rather than his body. His mortification in attending to the works of piety had become so habitual that his parents took great care not to be the cause of it. When the Rosary had finished Francis did not go out of Church with the others, but remained inside for some considerable time to appease his burning desire to honour God and His Holy Mother. He believed he had to do this, as he often told his parish priest, because he always felt that he was really in the presence of God.

The thought of the presence of God was so much part of him in the last years of his life that he could be said to be in continual union with God.

“Francis is no longer with us,” wrote his parish priest, “but we seem to see him in his place near the Altar and to hear him lead the prayers; we were so used to see him at the practices of piety.”

In 1860 he was invited to help in the Pious Work of Devotion to Mary Most Holy and he did so willingly. Every evening of the month he led the public recitation of the Rosary, as well as the usual prayers and some special ones and the faithful accompanied him. There was a good attendance and all admired the extraordinary devotion that stood out in our Francis. If the parish priest needed any help in the discharge of his duties either to exhort a sick person to go to Confession or to prepare him to receive Viaticum, he recommended everything to Francis' prayers and he was sure of a favourable result. There was one particular case, a man known to all to have neglected the affairs of his soul. He was dying and he did not want to be reconciled with God. The parish priest recommended him to the prayers of Francis, and to the admiration of all he yielded quite quickly.

## Chapter 10. He teaches catechism - Young Valorso

A catechist for the young people was needed and Francis filled the position for four years. He taught carefully and enthusiastically, the boys were pleased to have him and showed him great respect. Hence the parish priest chose him to teach catechism to a large class in Lent. After his own class he would invite the children to go with him and sit in on lessons given to more adult classes. During this instruction, as indeed during all sermons, he paid great attention. He would often go to the Priest after the sermon and ask him how he could put into practice what he had heard in the sermon.

When he reached home it was his custom to tell his parents and the whole family what he had heard in church. They were amazed that such a young boy could remember so much.

In all his religious practices he followed the example of another boy of Argentera, his cousin Stephen Valorso who died in 1861. Stephen loved his practices of devotion so much that his loss was felt throughout the district. "I gathered all the young people together," related the parish priest, "and asked them if there was anyone they knew who could replace our deceased youngster in diligence and in the practice of the religious exercises. They looked at each other for an instant, then they all turned and looked at Francis. He went red in the face, but he came up to me and said:

"I am ready to replace my cousin in the religious practices under your direction. I promise, to the best of my ability, to emulate the diligence of my dead cousin in the tasks in Church, but with God's grace I shall try to be better than he was. His clothes were handed down to me; I am wearing them and I also hope to clothe myself with all his virtues."

Francis began his career by inviting his companions to make a novena of prayer at Our Lady's altar for the soul of Stephen Valorso and to go to Mass every day during the Novena. Who would have thought that a second novena would shortly be made at the same altar for the one who first thought of it?"



## Chapter 11. The Holy Childhood - The Way of the Cross - Fleeing from bad companions

In 1857 Francis joined the Confraternity of the Holy Childhood. He was very pleased to be in it, but he had one great problem - no money to pay the monthly subscription. He went to the parish priest, who immediately solved his problem and gave him what was required; he was pleased to reward him for his good conduct. Francis loved to read the annals of the Confraternity. He also admired the solicitude and the diligence of so many boys in helping such a work. Francis often wept in sorrow at not being able to help poor children who did not have the faith, as he would have liked. To make up for his lack of money he offered God his fervent prayers and he got others to join. He took pains to tell his companions about the many children who had been saved.

In 1858 overcoming all human respect he added the Stations of the Cross to his devotions after the Parish Mass on feast days. He kept this up until he departed for the Oratory. But the admirable devotion with which he performed this religious practice frequently made him the object of scorn on the part of some of the boys. Francis' devotion was a sharp rebuke to their own unchristian conduct; they branded him a pretender and a bigot; they exposed him to a kind of persecution in the hope of dampening his enthusiasm for his practices of piety. But, supported by his parents and comforted by his confessor, he paid no attention to them. He took no notice of their gossip nor of their ridicule and kept out of their way; he kept up his devotion of the Stations of the Cross to the edification of many of the faithful who were present.

After that he would often tell his sisters that he no longer paid any attention to the gossip of the world, and that they should not let themselves be intimidated from doing good; they answered that some people were calling him "little monk," "goody goody," etc.

"Do you know why I am ridiculed by the world?" he asked them. "Because I have decided that I no longer belong to the world. We are in the world to please God and serve Him alone, not to serve and please the world. Let us, therefore, work only to gain Paradise for ourselves. This is the very reason why God leaves us in the world."

In line with this thinking when anyone disapproved of the good he was doing, he would turn his back on them and go home, thereby putting into practice what he said every morning on rising:

"Leave the deceitful world alone." The evil world did not like him because Francis was detached from the world.

The priest often joined the family discussions and Francis asked him when he would

## *Contents*

be able to make his first Communion, something very dear to his heart. "Soon perhaps," replied the priest, "if you learn your catechism and you give me further proof of your progress in virtue." Only a few months were to pass before this young boy, like that other Joseph, merited as a reward for his virtue to be admitted to the banquet of the Spotless Lamb of God, even though only 8 years old.

One day in the spring of 1858 he was looking after the sheep with two other boys a little younger than himself in a field near home. They performed some immodest acts in his presence. This offended him and he rebuked them sternly.

"If you don't want to be good and give good example, at least don't give scandal. Would you do such things in front of the priest or your parents? If you don't dare do them in the presence of other human beings, why do you do them in front of God?"

When he saw that they took no notice of him, he was indignant and left them. And then? One of them ran after him and asked him to join them in what they were doing. Poor Francis stopped and turned on his seducer with kicks and punches. When he saw that he could not win this way, he did something worthy of admiration - but not of imitation. He was near a heap of stones and he called out: "Go away or I'll break your head open." By this time he was furious and he began throwing stones at the enemy of his soul. The other fellow was hit on the face, shoulders and head and then fled. Francis, frightened by the danger but happy with his victory raced home to safety and to thank God for his deliverance. This episode was related by someone who watched the whole action from about 50 metres away, says the parish priest, and was an example of the degree of virtue Francis had attained.

## Chapter 12. First Communion - Frequent communion

The following day, on being questioned about the incident by the parish priest, he replied: "God's grace freed me, and I'll never go with companions like that again."

As a reward for his courage the Priest told him that he would be admitted to First Communion as soon as possible. This made him very happy and he set about preparing himself by avoiding every little known defect and by practicing those virtues compatible with his state. In his simplicity, he often asked the priest and his parents to help him.

"When I go to Holy Communion," he would say, "I shall imagine that I am receiving Jesus from the hands of Our Lady, to whom I now feel that I should recommend myself."

He took great care to ask one of his companions, whom he knew to be quite devout, to keep a watchful eye on him so that he would not be guilty of any irreverence. He certainly could not have put more effort into his preparation. His parents, his teacher, his parish priest all affirm that all the time he was at home Francis never did anything which could be judged as a deliberate venial sin., His beautiful robe of innocence was the most important element in his preparation for Holy Communion.

He seemed to be ecstatic just after receiving Communion; his face changed colour and reflected the joy which filled his heart. The acts of love towards Jesus on such an occasion are proportionate to the care taken in preparing for Communion.

From then onwards he went to Confession every month and he went to Communion as often as his Confessor would allow it. In later years he used to help younger boys to prepare for Communion and make their thanksgiving. After Communion he heard Mass with the greatest recollection; he did not even want to serve it on those days so that he could be more recollected. During the Mass he was completely absorbed, as he himself said, in contemplating the infinite condescension of Jesus; he did not even read his prayer book but spent the precious time, his face hidden in his hands, in continuous acts of the love of God. Before leaving the Church he went to Our Lady's Altar with his companions and thanked her for the help she had given them; he also recited the *Memorare* and quite a number of other prayers in a clear voice trembling with emotion. It was at this time that our Francis so inflamed himself with the love of God that he wanted nothing else in this world other than to do the holy will of God.

"I am beside myself," he said, "when I consider that on the days on which I go to Communion, I feel myself so drawn to prayer that I seem to be speaking to Jesus Himself and I tell him: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

His heart was emptied of the things of this world, and God filled it with His grace. The days on which he went to Communion were entirely spent at home or in Church, and he would ask his companions to go with him to evening devotions so as to make a perfect

## *Contents*

end to a solemn day. In his later years he would go to Communion every Sunday and also on Feast Days, but he wanted first to go to Confession. He was so humble that he never believed his soul was sufficiently purged of sin; but on the advice of the Confessor he put aside every doubt and gave blind obedience to him.

## Chapter 13. Mortifications - Penances - Custody of the senses - Benefits from schooling

These rare virtues of his were defended, so to speak, by a continual spirit of mortification. From the time he was a little child he used to fast rigorously for a good part of Lent. When relatives would remonstrate that it was indiscreet for one so young to engage in fasting, he would reply:

“You don’t go to Heaven without mortification. Therefore if both old and young want to go to Heaven, they must go there along the road of mortification. This mortification is also necessary for young people, either to make up for all the offence to God by their many faults or to train them for a mortified life, which everyone needs for salvation. You often tell me that I have many defects; that is why I want to fast.”

His parents, his brothers, his sisters testify that Francis made many wise observations of this kind.

This same spirit of mortification guided him in checking his eyes, so that he would not look at or listen to things offensive to good Christians. He also kept a check on his tongue; if at times he said anything improper, he would impose a penance on himself, e.g. making signs of the cross on the ground with his tongue. Sometimes his parents surprised him when he was performing this exercise of mortification. They asked him one day whether that penance had been given to him in Confession.

“No,” came the candid reply, “but seeing that my tongue is so quick in making coarse expressions I voluntarily drag it along the ground, so that it won’t drag me into hell. I am also performing this penance so that God will grant me the grace to go to the place my Godfather promised to send me to study.”

And as if all of this wasn’t enough to keep him away from the corruption he observed in bad conversations, in his later years he sought only to mix with those companions he was certain would be of no risk to his soul.

He had a growing desire to go to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales<sup>24</sup> but there was one

---

<sup>24</sup>The word ‘Oratory’ can have different meanings. If taken to mean a weekend gathering it means a place where youngsters can recreate with enjoyable games after they have satisfied their religious duties. In Turin there are oratories of this kind: The Oratory of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco; St Joseph at St Salvatio’s; St Aloysius near the viale dei Platani; the Guardian Angel’s in Vanchiglia; St Martin’s near the city mills. There are also weekday oratories with day and evening schools which, in the places already mentioned are on offer during the week for youngsters who cannot pay and cannot attend the city schools. In its widest sense, then, the word Oratory also includes the house at Valdocco in Turin which goes under the name of St Francis de Sales. Youngsters can be taken in there either as working boys or students. Working boys have to be 12 years of age and no older than 18.

## *Contents*

problem in the way. Before they could be admitted as students into the Oratory, boys had to have completed their elementary schooling so that they could begin the first year of High School. But at Argentera the elementary school had only Grade One and part of Grade Two. How could he get over this difficulty? Besucco's good conduct and the charity of the parish priest found the way out. The priest added teaching to his parochial duties, and helped Besucco and other promising boys. Francis was delighted and, with his parents' consent, he set about school duties with added vigour and diligence. He finished up being accepted for First Year of High School. He was forever grateful to his parish priest.

"How can I ever repay his charity on my behalf?"

It was his custom to go to Our Lady's altar every day before school and with the confidence of a son recommend his teacher and himself to the Seat of Wisdom.

"Whatever went on there, I do not know." said the priest "but many a time he came out of Church with tears in his eyes, undoubtedly the effect of the emotions he went through." When he was asked for an explanation, he answered:

"I prayed to Our Lady for you, Father, and asked her to obtain for you from God the thanks I am unable to give you."

"The whole time I taught him," asserted the priest, "he never once gave me any cause to correct him for negligence, because he did his utmost to correspond with all the teaching he was given."

---

They need to be orphaned (father and mother) and completely poor and abandoned. Students cannot be accepted unless they have done well at least at Third Grade level and have been recommended for their diligence and good moral behaviour. Moral and ordinary instruction, admission both to classes and games, acceptance as a working lad are all free. Students are accepted gratis for High School so long as, as said above, they are recommended for their exceptional behaviour and attitude to study and they make it clear that they cannot pay all or part of their regular fee boarding fee which would be fr. 24 a month.

## Chapter 14. His wish and decision to go to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales

The parish priest wrote to me and recommended one of his parishioners whose conduct was excellent, who was rich in virtue, but who was poor in worldly goods. "This young lad," he said, "has been a consolation to me for many years and he is a great help in the parish. He serves Mass, he takes part in Church functions, he teaches catechism to younger children, he prays fervently, he frequents the Sacraments in an exemplary manner. I am quite willing to let him go, because I hope that he will become a minister of the Lord."

I was happy to co-operate in the education of such an exceptional young lad and I willingly admitted him to this house. He had also been recommended to me by Lieutenant Eysautier of the Royal Police as a model in study and good conduct.

"When he heard the good news," wrote the parish priest, "this innocent young lad broke into tears of joy and gratitude."

But there was another problem on the way, namely the poverty of his parents who were torn between the good disposition of their son and their own lack of means. The parish priest recommended that Francis make frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and also pray to Our Lady that he might know the will of God in this regard. God listened to his prayers. One morning he went to Mass and Communion and later arrived at school looking happier than usual.

"Well," said the parish priest, "what good news have you for me this morning, Francis? Have you received an answer to your prayers?"

"Yes," replied the boy, "I have. It was like this. After Communion I promised God that I wanted to serve him forever and with all my heart, which I offered him many times. I also prayed to Our Lady for help in my needs. Then I thought I heard these words: 'Be of good heart, Francis, your wish will be granted'. They made me very happy."

He was so sure that he had heard this answer that he repeated it many times and without the slightest variation to his family. From then on he would say,

"I am certain, Father, that I am going where you want to send me, because this is the will of God."

If at times his parents seemed to be wavering in giving their permission he would

## Contents

explain:

“Please don’t interfere with my destiny, otherwise I shall become a disgrace to you.”

He would ask his mother, his brother, his sisters, his parish priest and other people to persuade his father to give his consent. His father did not require a great deal of persuasion. It seemed quite clear that God was calling Francis to work in his vineyard.

At the end of May 1863, as all difficulties had disappeared and as it seemed to be the will of God, his parents decided to send Francis to the Oratory. He was very grateful to them.

“What a lucky boy I am,” he said. “Oh, how happy I am. Be certain that I want to repay you by my good conduct.”

“He redoubled his fervour and his piety,” wrote his parish priest, “he did nearly a year’s work in June and July.” Francis was aware of this himself.

“You tell me, Father, that you are happy with me. I can’t explain either how I have been able to learn so much in so short a time. To me it is a sure sign that I am following God’s will.”

“But,” interrupted the priest, “what are you going to pay me for all that I am doing for you? I hope you know that I expect to be paid well.”

“Yes, I do,” answered Francis. “I promise that I shall pray often to God and to Mary most holy that you will be granted all the graces you desire. Be sure that I shall never forget you nor those who shortly are to be so many other fathers to me.”

Gratitude was one of the strong points of this good-natured boy.

The last day of July came, the day before Francis was to leave for the Oratory. That morning he went to the Sacraments for the last time in Argentera. His parish priest stated:

“I saw him, with tears in his eyes, gaze at the confessional and the altars, with what thoughts who knows. His face shone with remarkable happiness after Communion. The fervour and long time taken for his thanksgiving were certainly abundant compensation for the many Communions that he thought he would still make in this Church. That whole day was a feast day for Francis and I am not capable, due to my present emotion, of describing the very tender scene which followed in my room.

There in the presence of his father he fell on his knees and thanked me profusely for what I had done for him, he assured me of his eternal gratitude and of his docility to all the advice I had given him.

At home he seemed to be no longer of this world; he went about stating how happy and how lucky he was. ‘Oh! How can I ever thank God for having favoured me like this!’ He said good-bye to all his relatives who were amazed to see their nephew or cousin as the case may be, so happy.

“But,” they told him, “you will be homesick and sad being so far away from your relatives, and, who knows, perhaps you will find Turin too hot in the summer.”

“No, now don’t worry about me. And my parents, my brothers and my sisters will be happy provided they get good news about me, and I shall try to console them with my letters. I am not afraid of suffering, or of being depressed, because I am sure that I am going to find there everything to make me happy. Imagine how happy I am going to be



## *Contents*

staying at the Oratory, if just the hope of going there fills me with happiness. The only thing I want is that you will pray for me so that I can always do the will of God.”

“When he met me in the street later that day,” continued the parish priest, “he told me that he was sorry to be leaving me but that the good reports I would get would console me. That night he could not sleep, but he passed it in prayer and union with God.”

## Chapter 15. Events and the trip to Turin

Early next morning he said goodbye to his dear mother, his brothers and his sisters; they were crying, but although he felt the parting, he remained quite calm. He encouraged them all to have perfect resignation to the will of God. But when he recommended himself to their prayers so that he would always follow the voice of God who was calling him to His service, he burst into tears. His parish priest bade him farewell with these final words: "Go, my dear Francis, God who is taking you away from us is calling you to the Oratory where you will be able to sanctify your soul by emulating the virtues which opened Paradise to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. During your last months with us you obtained your desire to go to the Oratory of St Francis of Sales from your reading of their lives and holy deaths."

His father accompanied Francis to Turin; he took a small trunk with him: they left on August 1, 1863. As they left Argentera behind, his father asked Francis whether he was sorry to leave his home, his family and above all his mother. Francis' reply was always the same:

"I am sure that I am doing God's will, and the further I get from home, the greater is my happiness."

After answering, he continued with his prayers and his father attested that the journey from Argentera to Turin was for Francis almost one continuous prayer.

They reached Cuneo at about four in the morning of August 2. As they passed the Bishop's palace Francis asked:

"Whose is that beautiful house?"

"The Bishop's," came the reply. Francis signalled to his father that he wanted to stop for a moment. His father went on a little; when he turned around he saw Francis kneeling in front of the Bishop's gate.

"What are you doing now?" he asked.

"I am praying to God for His Lordship that he also might help me to get enrolled in the Oratory at Turin and that in due time he might number me amongst his clerics and hence do something useful for me and for others."

When they arrived in Turin, his father pointed out the wonderful sights of the Capital. His father observed the symmetrical streets, the large squares, the tall majestic porticoes and the well-decorated arcades; he admired the height and the elegance of the buildings; he thought that he was in another world.

"What do you think of it, Francis?" he asked the boy, full of wonder. "Doesn't it seem to you that we are already in Heaven?" Francis smiled and answered:

"All these things mean little to me. I won't be happy until I have been accepted at the Oratory to which I have been sent."

## *Contents*

Finally they reached the longed-for place and full of joy he exclaimed: "Now we are here." Then he said a short prayer to thank God and Our Lady for the successful journey they had made and for granting his wishes.

His father was moved to tears when leaving him, but Francis comforted him saying:

"Don't worry about me, the Lord won't fail us; I shall pray to Him every day for all our family."

Further moved his father asked him if he needed anything;

"Yes, dear dad, thank my Godfather for the care that he has taken of me; assure him that I shall never forget him and by my concentration on study and my good conduct I shall make him quite pleased. Tell all those at home that I am very happy and that I have found my paradise."

## Chapter 16. Lifestyle at the Oratory - First meeting

What I have written about Francis Besucco so far forms the first part of his life, I obtained my information from those who knew him and those who lived with him in his home environment. I am now going to write about the second part of his life; but I shall recount things I heard myself, saw with my own eyes or things I was told by the hundreds of boys who were his companions during the time he spent with us. I have been particularly helped by a long and detailed account prepared by Father Ruffino, a teacher in the school here. He had the time and the opportunity to witness and note down the many acts of virtue practiced by our Besucco.

For a long time Francis was very eager to come to this Oratory but when he actually arrived he was quite bewildered. More than 700 boys soon became his friends and companions in recreation, at table, in the dormitory, in church, in school and in the study-hall. It seemed impossible to him that so many boys could live together in the same house without turning everything upside down. He wanted to ask questions of them all, he wanted to know the reason and explanation for everything. Every bit of advice given by the Superiors and every inscription on the walls became for him the subject of reading, meditation and deep reflection.

It was the beginning of August 1863, and I had never seen him before. All I knew of him was what Archpriest Pepino had told me by letter. One day I was out with the boys at recreation when I saw a boy dressed like the mountain people; he was of medium build, a freckle-faced country boy. He stood there, eyes wide-open, watching the others play. When his eyes met mine, he smiled respectfully and came over to me.

“Who are you?” I asked him, smiling.

“I am Francis Besucco from Argentera.”

“How old are you?”

“I’ll soon be fourteen.”

“Have you come to us to study, or to learn a trade?”

“I’m keen to study.”

“How far have you gone in school?”

“I finished elementary school back home.”

“Why do you want to continue going to school rather than learn a trade?”

“My greatest wish is to be a priest.”

“Whoever advised you in this?”

“I have always wanted it, and I have always prayed to the Lord for help to realise my aim.”

“Have you ever asked anyone for advice?”

## *Contents*

“Yes, I spoke about many times with my Godfather; yes, with my Godfather . . .” He became emotional as he said this, and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Who is your Godfather?”

“My Godfather is the Parish priest, the Archpriest at Argentera; he is so good to me. He taught me my catechism, he taught me school, he clothed me, he kept me. He is such a good man; after teaching me for two years he recommended me to you so that you would accept me at the Oratory.”

He began to cry again. His recognition of the benefits he had received and his affection for his benefactors gave me a good idea of his character and good-heartedness. Then I remembered the reverences of his parish priest and of Lieutenant Eysautier and I thought to myself: This boy, with proper education, will become a very good boy. Because experience shows that gratitude in young people is a good pointer to a successful future: on the other hand those who easily forget the favours they have received and the attention given to them stay insensitive to advice and to religious training; they are therefore difficult to educate and their results are uncertain.

So I said to Francis: “I am very pleased that you like your Godfather so much, but I don’t want you to be worried. Love him in the Lord, pray for him, and, if you want to really please him, try to conduct yourself in such a manner that I can send him good reports about you; or, if he comes to Turin, he will be able to appreciate your progress and conduct. Meanwhile go and play with your companions.” He wiped away his tears, smiled affectionately at me and then went to take part in the games with his companions.

## Chapter 17. Happiness

In his humility Francis looked upon his companions as more virtuous than himself and he rated himself poorly when comparing his conduct with theirs. A few days later he again approached me with a rather perturbed look on his face.

“What’s the matter, my dear Besucco?” I asked him.

“Here I am with so many real good companions; I’d like to be as good as they are but I don’t know how to go about it. I need your help.”

“I’ll help you in every way I can. If you want to be good, practise three things only and all will go well.”

“What are these three things?”

“They are: Cheerfulness, Study, Piety. This is the grand programme. Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul.”

“Cheerfulness...cheerfulness - I am already too cheerful. If being cheerful is enough for me to be good, I’ll go and play from morning to night. Will that be all right?”

“Not from morning to night, but only during the hours of recreation.”

He took my advice too literally; convinced that he was doing something pleasing to God by playing, he became very impatient waiting for play time. He was not very good at some of the games, and often knocked into things or fell over. He wanted to walk on stilts, and had a tumble, he wanted to exercise on the parallel bars and fell head over heels. At bocce he either hit others on the legs with the ball or he spoilt the game for others. To sum up, his games always ended up by his falling over or some such mishap. One day a worried Francis limped up to me.

“What is it, Besucco?” I asked him.

“I’m bruised all over,” he answered.

“How did that happen?”

“I’m not very good at the games they play here; I’ve fallen on my head, I’ve hurt my legs and my arms; yesterday I collided with a companion and we both finished up with blood noses.”

“You poor boy! Use a bit of sense, take it easy.”

“But you told me that these recreations pleased God; and I want to do well in all the games with my companions.”

“You don’t quite understand; you must learn these games gradually and play them in accordance with your ability. They are meant to be a means of recreation and not of harm to the body.”

He then understood that recreation should be taken in moderation and directed to the relief of the spirit, otherwise it can cause bodily harm. He continued to be a willing participant in the games, but he was more careful. Also, if free time was somewhat prolonged, he would break off from a game and talk to a studious companion about

## *Contents*

the rules and discipline of the house or about some scholastic difficulty. Furthermore he learned the secret of doing some good to himself and to his companions in the recreations themselves, by giving some good advice or courteously warning others when an occasion presented itself, just as he used to do at home in a far more restricted setting. By spending part of his recreations in this way, in a short time Besucco became a model in study and in piety.

## Chapter 18. Study and diligence

One day Besucco read these words on a placard in my room: Every moment of time is a treasure. He was puzzled and he said: "I don't understand what these words mean. How can we gain a treasure in every moment of time?"

"But it's true. In every moment of time we can learn some scientific or religious fact, we can practice some virtue, we can make an act of the love of God; before the Lord there are so many treasures which will help us in time and in eternity."

He made no further comment, but he wrote the words down on a piece of paper, and then said:

"I understand." He understood how precious time was and, recalling a recommendation of his parish priest, he added:

"My Godfather also had told me that time is very precious and that we must occupy it well, beginning in our youth."

After that he set about his various tasks with even greater application. To the glory of God I can say that, in all the time he spent in this house, there was never any need to encourage him or advise him in the carrying out of his duties.

It is a custom in this house to read out every Saturday marks the boys are given for their conduct and study during the previous week. Besucco's marks were always the same, namely EXCELLENT.

When it was time to go to the study-hall, he went immediately without a moment's hesitation. It was wonderful to see him so absorbed in his study and writing away like someone doing something really to his liking. He never left his place for any reason whatever; and no matter how long the study period lasted he never took his eyes off his text books or exercise books.

One of his greatest fears was that he would involuntarily break the rules; and, particularly in his first few days, he often asked if he could do this or that. For example, he once asked in all simplicity if he were allowed to write in the study hall, since he thought that they weren't supposed to do anything else there except study. Another time he asked whether he was permitted to put his books in order during study time. He asked the help of the Lord for proper use of his time. Once some companions saw him make the Sign of the Cross during study time; then raise his eyes to Heaven and pray. Afterwards they asked why he did that and he answered: "I often have difficulties in learning and so I ask the Lord to give me his help."

He had read in the life of Michael Magone that before study Michael always said: *Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro me*. He began to do this also. He wrote these words on his books, on his exercise books and on some strips of paper which he used as book-marks. Sometimes he wrote notes to his companions and either at the beginning or on a separate sheet of paper he wrote for them the same invocation to his heavenly mother



## Contents

as he used to call her.

I read one of the letters he wrote to a companion. It stated:

You have asked me how I have been able to keep going in Second Year when had I been following the usual routine I would barely have made First Year. I answer frankly that this is a special blessing of the Lord, who has given me health and strength. Besides that I have discovered three secrets which I have used to great advantage. They are:

Never to waste a moment of time when it comes to duties in school or in the study hall.

On holidays or other days when recreation is lengthened I go to study after half an hour, or I discuss school matters with some companions who are further advanced in study than I am.

Every morning before going out of church I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary to St. Joseph. This is the means that has helped me advance in knowledge. From the time I began saying this Our Father I have always found it easier either to learn my lessons or to overcome the difficulties that I often meet in scholastic matters.

“Try it yourself,” concluded the letter, “and you’ll certainly be happy with it.”

We should not be surprised to read that, with such great diligence, he was able to make such rapid progress in school.

When he came to us he almost gave up hope of being able to cope with First Year, but after only two months he was already getting quite satisfactory marks in his class. In school he dwelt on every word spoken by his teacher who never had to reprimand him for inattention.

What has been said about Besucco’s diligence in matters of study must also be said about all his other duties, even the smallest: he was exemplary in everything. He had been given the task of sweeping the dormitory. He won admiration for the exactitude with which he discharged this duty without giving the least sign that it was a burden to him.

When he was sick and could not get out of bed, he apologised to the assistant for not being able to do his usual task and he profusely thanked a companion who took his place.

Besucco came to the Oratory with a fixed purpose; in his life here he always had in view the point to which he was aiming, namely to dedicate himself completely to God in the priesthood. To this end he sought to make progress in knowledge and virtue. He was speaking with a companion one day about their studies and the reason why each of them had come to the house. Besucco gave his own reasons and then concluded: “To sum it all up my reason is to become a priest; with the help of the Lord I’ll do everything possible to achieve this.”

## Chapter 19. Confession

You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have not found any other firm basis for education than frequent Confession and Communion; and I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing. Besucco, as we have seen, was trained to approach these two sacraments frequently. When he arrived at the Oratory he grew in fervour in going to Confession and Communion.

At the beginning of the Novena for the Birthday of Mary Most Holy, he went to his director and said:

“I would like to make this Novena well, and, amongst other things, I want to make a general Confession.”

When he had heard the reasons for this request the director replied that he did not see any reason for a general confession and he added:

“You needn’t worry, especially as you have made a general confession at other times to your parish priest.”

“Yes,” he replied, “I did so on the occasion of my First Communion and also at a Retreat in my parish, but, as I want to put my soul in your hands, I want to reveal to you everything that is on my conscience so that you can with greater surety give me the advice best adapted to help me save my soul.”

The director agreed; he praised him for his decision to choose a regular confessor; he exhorted him to think well of his confessor, to pray for him, and to always lay open before him anything which troubled his conscience. Then he helped him prepare for the general confession he wanted to make. He performed this act with very great expressions of sorrow for his past and resolutions for the future even though, as anyone could judge from what was known of his life, he had never committed any fault which could be deemed a mortal sin. Once he had made a choice of Confessor he did not change him for the whole time that the Lord spared him to us.

He had full confidence in him, he consulted him even outside of confession, he prayed for him and he was very pleased every time he was able to get from him a piece of good advice for his rule of life.

One day he wrote a letter to a friend who had told him that he too would like to come to the Oratory. He recommended that he pray to the Lord for this grace and then he suggested some practices of piety to him, such as the Stations of the Cross; but above all he advised him to go to Confession every week and to go to Communion several times during this week.

Whilst I greatly praise Besucco in this matter, I recommend with all my heart, to all people, but especially to young people to choose a regular confessor in good time, never to change him, except for reasons of necessity. Let them avoid the mistake of some

## *Contents*

people, who change the confessor almost every time they go to Confession; or, when they have to confess something of greater importance, go to another confessor and then return to their regular confessor. When they act this way they are not committing any sin, but they will never have a sure guide who thoroughly knows the state of their conscience. They will meet the same fate that befalls a sick man who goes to a different doctor each time. The doctor will find it difficult to diagnose the illness, and hence will be uncertain as to what remedies to prescribe.

If by any chance this booklet should be read by anyone who is destined by Divine Providence to be engaged in the education of young people, I would strongly recommend three things to him. First, zealously encourage frequent Confession as a prop to the instability of young people and do everything to assist regularity at this Sacrament. Secondly let them insist on the great usefulness in choosing a regular confessor who is not to be changed without necessity, but let there be a supply of confessors so that everyone can choose him who seems best adapted to the needs of his own soul. But let them always bear in mind that if one changes confessor he does not do anything wrong and that it is better to change him a thousand times than to keep back any sin in confession.

Let them never fail to speak very often about the great secret of Confession. Let them explicitly teach that the Confessor is bound by a secret which is natural, ecclesiastical, divine and civil, and that he cannot for any reason at all, cost what it may, even death, reveal to others what he has heard in confession or make use of it for his own purposes; that, moreover, he cannot even think of things heard in this Sacrament; that the confessor is not greatly surprised nor does he lose his esteem and affection for people because of serious things heard in the confessional; on the contrary the penitent goes up in his eyes. A doctor is quite pleased when he finds out why his patient is seriously ill, because he can then apply the correct remedy; the confessor who is the doctor of the soul does the same thing. By absolution he cures in God's name all the ills of the soul. I am convinced that we shall obtain wonderful moral results among our boys if these things are recommended and explained; and the results will be the wonderful moral effect the Catholic religion has in the sacrament of penance.

## Chapter 20. Holy Communion

The second prop for young people is Holy Communion. Fortunate are those boys who begin in good time to go to Communion frequently and with the right dispositions. Besucco had been taught to go to communion often and with fruit by his parents and by his parish priest. At home he used to go to Communion every week; then on Feast Days and even some times during the week. When he came to the Oratory he continued to go to Communion with the same frequency, then he went several times a week, and during novenas even every day. Although his innocent soul and his very exemplary conduct made him worthy to receive Communion frequently, nevertheless he considered that he was not worthy of it. His apprehensions grew when a person who came to this house told Besucco that it was better to go less frequently so that he could make a longer preparation and receive Communion more fervently.

One day he went to his superior and told him all his worries.

“Don’t you eat material bread for your body with great frequency?” the superior asked him.

“Yes, I do.”

“If we eat material bread so frequently for the body which is only meant to live for a short time on this earth, why should we not often, even every day, take spiritual bread for the soul, i.e. Holy Communion (St. Augustine)?”

“But anyone who eats less frequently has a better appetite.”

“Anyone who eats sparingly and goes for days without food either faints through weakness or dies of hunger, or when he does decide to eat he runs the risk of getting indigestion.”

“If that is the case, I’ll try to go more frequently to Holy Communion in the future, because I really know that it is a powerful means for making me good.”

“Go as frequently as your Confessor suggests.”

“He tells me to go every time that there is nothing disturbing my conscience.”

“Good; follow that advice. Meanwhile I want to tell you that Our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to eat His Body and drink His Blood every time that we are in spiritual need, and we live in continual need in this world. He goes so far as to say: ‘If you do not eat my body and drink my blood, you shall not have life in you!’ For this reason, as the time of the apostles the Christians were persevering in prayer and in feeding themselves with the Eucharistic Bread. In the first centuries all of those who went to hear Mass received Holy Communion. And anyone who heard Mass every day, also went to Communion every day. The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent recommended to Christians that they assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as often as possible, and amongst others there are these beautiful words: ‘It is the wish of the Council that when the faithful go to Mass they go to Communion not only spiritually but also sacramentally so that

*Contents*

the fruit which comes from this Most August Sacrifice may be found more copiously in them'. (Sess. 22, C.6)

## Chapter 21. Reverence for the Blessed Sacrament

Francis showed his great love for the Blessed Sacrament not only by going frequently to Communion, but whenever an occasion presented itself. At home he was always very pleased to accompany the priest carrying Holy Viaticum. Whenever he heard the bell he immediately asked his parents for permission to go out, and they willingly granted it; then he ran to the Church to offer his services in a manner befitting his age. He was always delighted to do whatever was required, such as, ring the hand bell, carry a lighted torch, carry the *ombrellino*, say the *Confiteor*, the *Miserere* or the *Te Deum*. At home he would willingly help companions who were younger or less instructed than he was to prepare to receive Communion worthily and afterwards to make the appropriate thanksgiving.

His fervour continued at the Oratory and, amongst other things, he formed the very commendable habit of making a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day. He was often seen with a priest or cleric when they were taking a group of boys to say some special prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. It was also edifying to witness the way he managed to take a companion with him into Church. One day he invited a companion saying:

“Come with me and we shall go and say an Our Father to Jesus, who is there all alone in the tabernacle.”

The companion who was completely absorbed in his game answered that he did not want to go. Besucco went in alone just the same. The companion felt sorry the next day for having refused the kind invitation of his virtuous companion and went up to him and said:

“Yesterday you invited me to go into the Church with you and I refused; today I am inviting you to keep me company in doing what I didn’t do yesterday.” Besucco smiled and answered

“Don’t worry about yesterday. I prayed for both of us. I said three Our Fathers for me and then three for you in front of the Blessed Sacrament. However, I shall go most willingly now and whenever you want to have me for company.”

More than once I have had to go into the church after the evening meal to perform some duty whilst the boarders were happily engaged in a lively recreation in the yard. I did not have a lamp in my hands and I tripped over what seemed to be a sack of wheat. I was quite surprised to find out that I had bumped into Besucco who was kneeling in the dark behind the altar but quite near it. He was praying to his beloved Jesus asking for heavenly help to make himself better, or even to make him a saint.

He would serve Mass very willingly. He took delight in preparing the altar, lighting the

## *Contents*

candles, taking out the cruets and in helping the priest to vest. Whenever someone else wanted to serve the Mass, he willingly gave way and then heard it with great recollection. Those who have observed him assisting at Mass or at Benediction in the evening are unanimous in asserting that it was impossible to look at him without being struck and edified by the fervour he showed in praying, and by his composure.

He was also very eager to read books and to sing hymns about the Blessed Sacrament. Among the many little prayers he recited throughout the day, his favourite was:

“Blessed and praised every moment be the most holy and divine Sacrament.”

“With this prayer,” he would say, “I gain 100 days indulgence every time; and moreover every time I began saying it all the bad thoughts running through my mind disappear. This brief prayer is a hammer with which I am certain to break the horns of the devil whenever he comes to tempt me.”

## Chapter 22. Spirit of prayer

It is so difficult to get boys to enjoy prayer. Their fickle age makes anything which requires serious mental attention seem nauseating and heavy. A boy is very fortunate if he has been trained in prayer and likes it. The fountain of divine blessings is always opened by prayer.

Besucco belonged to the number of these boys. The assistance given him by his parents from his earliest years, the care taken by his teacher and especially the help of his parish priest all produced the desired end in our Francis. He was not accustomed to meditate, but he recited many vocal prayers. He uttered the words clearly and distinctly and he pronounced them in such a way that he seemed to be speaking to Our Lord, or Our Lady or some saint to whom he was directing his prayers.

He got up and dressed himself as soon as he was called in the morning, made his bed and then went straight to church or else he knelt down by his bedside to pray until the bell called him elsewhere. His punctuality in going to church meant that he could sit next to those companions or go to those places where he knew he would not be distracted. He was always upset whenever he saw anyone talking or acting in a dissipated manner. One day as soon as he left the Church he went looking for a boy who had misbehaved in this way. When he found him he told him what he had done and, having made him see he had done wrong, he urged him to be more recollected in church.

He had a special devotion towards Mary most holy. He was particularly fervent towards her during the novena in preparation for her birthday. Every evening the Rector used to propose some practice in his exercise book. This way, he would say, I shall have a fine present to give to Our Lady at the end of the year. Throughout the day he repeated the practice and reminded his companions of it. He wanted to know the exact spot where Dominic Savio used to kneel to pray in front of Our Lady's Altar; he would go there to pray also. He used to say that he would dearly like to stay there from morning till evening to pray to Our Lady.

"Because I seem to have Savio praying with me; he seems to answer my prayers, and his fervour instils itself into my heart."

Generally he was the last to leave the church because he used always to stop for a short time in front of Our Lady's statue. This often caused him to miss breakfast. Those who noticed it were amazed that a strong, healthy boy of fourteen years would forget his bodily food in favour of the spiritual food of prayer.

Often, especially during holiday time, he went into the church with some of his companions to pray the seven joys of Mary, the seven sorrows of Mary, the litanies or the prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He never wanted to let others lead these prayers. On Friday whenever he could, he made or at least read the Stations of the Cross. This was one of his special practices of piety.



## *Contents*

“The way of the Cross,” he used to say, “is a spark of fire for me; it helps me to pray and it drives me to put up with anything for the love of God.”

He loved praying so much, and he was so used to it that whenever he was on his own or had nothing to do, he would immediately say some prayers. He often began to pray during recreation, and at times involuntarily used little spontaneous prayers during his games. One day he saw his Superior, ran up to him, greeted him by name and then said to him,

“Oh, Holy Mary.”

Another time he wanted to call out to a companion with whom he was playing and he shouted:

“Oh, Our Father.”

Whilst these actions caused his companions to laugh at him, they also showed his love for prayer and his ability to recollect himself, to raise his mind to God. According to masters of the spiritual life this denotes a high degree of perfection which is rarely seen in people even far advanced in virtue.

After night prayers said in common every evening he went to the dormitory and knelt down on top of his trunk—not a very comfortable position—for a quarter of an hour or even half an hour to pray. When he was told that this disturbed his companions who were already in bed, he shortened his prayers and made sure that he was in bed at the same time as his companions. However, as soon as he settled into bed, he joined his hands on his breast and prayed until he fell asleep. If he woke up during the night he immediately began to pray for the souls in purgatory and he experienced great displeasure if sleep overtook him before he finished his prayer.

“I’m sorry,” he told a companion, “that I can’t spend some time in bed without sleeping. I’m quite distressed. How much good I could do for the souls in Purgatory if I could pray as I want to.”

In short, if we examine the spirit of prayer of this boy we can say that he literally followed the precept of Our Saviour who commanded us to pray always, because he passed his days and nights in continuous prayer.

## Chapter 23. His penances

Boys generally get frightened when you speak to them of penance. But when the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in this world and no suffering distress it; on the other hand every affliction in this life is a source of consolation. Tender hearts believe that suffering brings great results, and that a glorious reward in heaven is reserved for those who suffer during life.

From the earliest years Besucco had a great desire to suffer. Here at the Oratory he redoubled his fervour for suffering. He went to his Superior one day and said:

“I am very worried: Our Lord says in the Gospel that you can only gain entrance to Paradise by innocence or by penance. I can’t go there through innocence because I’ve already lost it. Therefore I have to go there through penance.”

The Superior replied that he should accept as his penances diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to his superiors, putting up with the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst.

“But,” Besucco interjected, “we must suffer these things as a matter of necessity.”

“That’s right. But if you add suffering for the love of God to what you must suffer as a matter of necessity, it will become real penance, it will please the Lord, and it will bring merit to your soul.”

He quietened down for a time, but he always asked to be allowed to fast, to give up this or that at breakfast, to wear something uncomfortable under his clothing or to put things in his bed. These were always forbidden him. On the Vigil of All Saints Day he asked as a special favour to be allowed to fast on bread and water, but this was changed to abstinence at breakfast time. This pleased him greatly because, as he said would be able, at least in something, to imitate the Saints in Paradise who saved their souls by walking the path of suffering.

It is not necessary to speak of the custody of the senses, especially of the eyes. Anyone who for any length of time had observed his very composure, his behaviour towards his companions, his modesty both inside the house and outside of it would not hesitate to affirm that he could be proposed as the perfect model of mortification and external behaviour of young people.

Although he was prohibited from performing corporal penances, he obtained permission for penances of another kind, namely doing the most humble tasks in the house. Some of the things he tackled with pleasure and great satisfaction were: running messages for his companions, carrying water, cleaning shoes, serving at table when he was allowed to, sweeping the refectory, sweeping the dormitory, carrying away the rubbish, carrying parcels and trunks, provided he was strong enough. These are all examples which could be imitated by certain young people who, when away from home, find it hard to lend a helping hand when they could do so. Sometimes there are young people

## Contents

who are ashamed to accompany their parents because they are not well dressed. It is as though being away from home changes their condition and makes them forget their duty of reverence, respect and obedience to their parents, and of charity towards everyone.

But these small mortifications contented Besucco for a short time only; he wanted bigger mortifications. Sometimes he was heard to complain that he had performed bigger penances at home and his health had never suffered. His Superior always answered that real penances does not consist in what pleases us, but in what pleases the Lord and promotes his glory. "Be obedient," added the Superior, "and diligent in your duties, be kind and charitable towards your companions, put up with their defects, give them good advice and you will be doing something which pleases the Lord more than any other sacrifice."

Taking literally to heart what he had been told about patiently putting up with cold, he did not clothe himself properly when winter came along. One day I saw him looking very pale and asked him if he were sick.

"No," he answered, "I'm quite all right."

I took his hand and then realised that he was still in summer clothing even though we were within the novena for Christmas.

"Haven't you any winter clothing?" I asked.

"Yes, it's in my room."

"Why aren't you wearing it?"

"Ah . . . for the reason you already know: put up with the cold of winter for the love of God."

"Go and put it on immediately. See that you are well protected against the cold of winter. If you need anything ask for it and you'll be given it straightaway."

Despite all this, however, we could not prevent one behaviour which was possibly the beginning of the illness which carried him to the grave, but more about that later.

## Chapter 24. Particular deeds and sayings

There are some things Besucco said and did which have no direct relation to what we have already described, so they will now be recounted separately. I shall begin with his conversations. When speaking he was somewhat reserved, but jovial and witty. He would willingly talk about his experiences as a shepherd when he took sheep and goats out to pasture. He spoke of the bushes, pastures, valleys, caves and storms in the mountains of Roburento and Dreco as so many other wonders of the world.

He also had some proverbs which for him were undisputed truths. Whenever he wanted someone not to think too much of the things of the world, but rather to think of heavenly things he would say:

“It is very difficult for Heaven to open to anyone who looks at the earth like a goat.”

One day a companion was speaking about religion and he let slip a few seriously mistaken points of view. Both because he was young and because he wasn't sufficiently well instructed, Besucco kept quiet but he was uneasy and annoyed.

Later he gained courage and with a smile on his face he spoke to all those present:

“Listen, some time ago I read in the dictionary the meaning of the word “trade” and amongst other things I noted this phrase: ‘Let everyone stick to his own trade’. My father said the same thing in different words: Anyone who does what he doesn't know spoils what he does.”

They all understood his meaning; the one who had spoken indiscreetly kept quiet whilst the others admired Besucco's shrewdness and prudence.

He was always happy with the arrangements of the superiors. He never complained about the timetable, the setting of the table, the organisation at school, and so on. He always found everything to his liking. When asked how it was that he was always happy with everything he replied:

“I am made of flesh and bones like the others, but I want to do everything for the glory of God; therefore everything that does not suit me will certainly be pleasing to God; hence I always have a good reason for being contented.”

One day he was with some boarders who had recently come to the house and who could not settle down to the new kind of life. He comforted them saying:

“If we joined the army, would we be able to determine our own timetable? Would we be able to go to bed and get up when we liked? Or would we be free to go for a walk?”

“No,” they answered, “but a little bit of freedom ....”

“We are definitely free,” interrupted Francis, “if we are doing the will of God and we only become real slaves when we fall into sin, because then we are the slaves of our greatest enemy, the devil.”

“But at home I was able to eat better and sleep more comfortably than here,” complained one of them.

## Contents

“I grant that what you say is true, that is, that at home the food was better and the beds more comfortable, but I’m telling you that you were fostering two great enemies—gluttony and laziness. I’ll go further and tell you that we weren’t born just to sleep and eat as the goats and sheep do, but we have to work for the glory of God and flee idleness which is the father of all vices. Moreover, haven’t you heard what our Superior said?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yesterday our Superior said, amongst other things, that boys remain here voluntarily and not by force. If anyone is unhappy, he concluded, let him tell me and I’ll try to satisfy him; anyone who doesn’t want to remain here is free to go, but if he does stay I don’t want him spreading discontent.”

“I would go elsewhere, but that would cost money and my parents can’t afford it.”

“All the more reason for you to be happy here; if you can’t pay you should show yourself more satisfied than others, because you never look a gift horse in the mouth. And so, my friends, we must be aware that we are in a house of Divine Providence; some pay a little, some pay nothing; and where could we get something else at this price?”

“What you say is true, but if we could have something better to eat. . . .”

“Since you’re dying for want of something better to eat, I’ll tell you how to get it; go and board elsewhere.”

“But I haven’t got the money to pay board.”

“Well then, keep quiet, and be content with the food they give you. Especially so since all our other companions are happy with it. If you really want me to speak my mind, my friends, I’ll tell you that strong young people such as we are should not give too much attention to the niceties of life. As Christians we must do some penance if we want to go to heaven; we must mortify our tendency to gluttony in good time. Believe me, this is an easy way for us to obtain the blessings from the Lord and to gain some merit for Heaven.”

It was these and other similar ways of speaking that he helped his companions and became a model to them of Christian politeness and charity.

Whilst we’re on this point, he used to write proverbs and moral sayings on his exercise-books. He was also quite eloquent in his letters and I think it worthwhile to reproduce some of these, which were kindly given to me by those to whom they were written.

## Chapter 25. His letters

These letters are a manifest sign of the goodness of heart and the sincere piety of our Besucco. It is a rare thing, even in older people, to find letters written without human respect and full of religious and moral sentiments. Yet this we should expect of every Christian. But it is indeed very rare to find young people doing this. I should like all of you, dear young readers of mine, to avoid the kind of letter which has nothing religious in it, a letter which could well be written by the pagans themselves.

No, let us use this wonderful means to communicate our thoughts and our plans to those who are far away from us, but let us always distinguish between the Christian and the pagan in our correspondence; and let us never forget some moral thought. Hence I am including some of young Besucco's letters which I think will please my readers because of their simplicity and tenderness.

The first bears the date 27th September, 1863, and was addressed to his Godfather, the Archpriest of Argentera. In it he informs him how happy he is at the Oratory and thanks him for sending him there.

My dear Godfather,

Four days ago my companions went home for twenty days' holiday. I am very pleased to see them have a happy holiday, but I am better off than they are because by staying here I have time to write this letter to you. I hope that you will be pleased with it. First of all I must tell you that I cannot find sufficient words to thank you for all the good you have done for me. Apart from the favours you have done me, especially that of teaching me in your home, you have also taught me so many things, both spiritual and temporal, that are of great help to me. But the greatest of these favours was to send me to this house where nothing is lacking for my soul or my body. I thank the Lord more and more that he has given me this great favour in preference to so many other boys. I ask him with all my heart to give me grace to correspond with so many signs of heavenly kindness. I am more than happy in this place, there is nothing that I want, my every wish is taken care of. I thank you and all the other benefactors for the things you have sent me. I had hoped last week for the consolation of seeing you here in Turin so that you could speak with my superiors about my conduct. Patience, the Lord wants to defer this consolation for me.

From your letter I learned that my dear ones at home cried when they heard my letter read out. Tell them that they have reason to rejoice and not to cry, because I am very happy. I thank you for the precious advice that you

## *Contents*

gave me, and I assure you that so far I have done all I could to put them into practice. Thank my sister for the Communion that she made especially for me; I'm sure that it has helped me with my studies. Although it seems impossible in such a short time I have been able to get into Second Year. Greet my parents for me and tell them to pray for me and not to be worried because I am in good health, have everything I need and in a word am very happy.

Please excuse me for the delay in writing; over recent days I have had a lot to do preparing for the exams, which I did better in than I expected to. I really want to express my gratitude to you, but having no other way to do so, I will try to make recompense by asking the Lord to give you good health and happy days.

Give me your blessing, and consider me always as

Your devoted godson,

Francis Besucco.

Francis' father, a knife-grinder by trade, spent summer working in the fields and looking after the animals at Argentera, but in autumn he left and went to other districts to earn his and his family's bread, working with his trade. On 26th October, Francis wrote him a letter in which, noting how happy he was to be in Turin, he expressed his tender filial affection in the following way:

My dear father,

Time is coming, dear father, when you will have to set out through the countryside to provide what the family needs. I cannot possibly accompany you on your trip but I will be with you in my thoughts and prayers. I assure you that every day I ask the Lord to give you health and his holy grace.

My Godfather was here at the Oratory and that gave me great pleasure. Amongst other things he told me you were afraid I am going hungry; no, don't worry, I have bread in abundance, and if I were to put aside what I didn't need, you would be able to make a huge loaf out of it, as we say. You just need to know that we eat four times a day and always as much as we want; there is soup for dinner, as well as a second course, and for supper, soup. Once we had wine each day but it has become so expensive that now we have it just on Sundays. So don't worry about me. I have nothing else I want since everything I want is given me.

There are two things which give me great pleasure, and these are that my Superiors are very happy with me and I with them. The other was the visit from the Archbishop of Sassari. He came to see the Rector; he visited the house, spent time talking to many of the boys, and I had the pleasure of kissing his hand and receiving his blessing.

## Contents

Dear father, greet all the family for me and especially my dear mother. Give my news to my Godfather and keep thanking him for what he has done for me. Do well on your trip through the countryside and should you find a fixed place to say somewhere let me know and I will quickly give you more news.

Pray for me,

Your affectionate son always,

Francis.

From the time his Godfather came to visit him, he was very keen to get letters from him. There was one letter which satisfied this burning desire, in which the zealous priest gave him some advice for his spiritual and material wellbeing. Francis wrote back saying how happy he was; he thanked him and promised to put his advice into practice.

The letter, written on 23rd November, expressed the following sentiments:

My dear Godfather,

I received your letter on the 14th of this month. You can imagine what a consolation it gave me. I spent that whole day like a feast day. I read it and reread it many times and the more I did so the more courage I gained for my study and to be a better person. I know now what a great gift you gave me by sending me here to the Oratory. I cannot possibly express my heartfelt gratitude except by going to the church and praying for my benefactors and especially for you; and in order not to lost study time, I go during recreation. Perhaps I should slow down a little because as much as I find great contentment in study and prayer, I should be at recreation with the others because that's what our Superiors tell us to do as something which our study and our health.

Now all classes have started up and from morning to evening, between school, study, singing practice, music, religious practices and relaxation I have no time left to think about myself.

I am happy to say that Lieutenant Eysautier often comes to visit; some days ago he brought me such a beautiful cloak that if you saw me in it you would think I was a little lord.

He recommended that I find a good companion and I did so immediately. This boy is better than me at studies and also more virtuous. As soon as we met we became firm friends. We speak of nothing else between us but study and matters of piety. He also likes recreation but after we have run around for a while we start walking up and down discussing things to do with school. The Lord is helping me in noticeable ways; I am always going ahead with things here: of the ninety in my class there are only fifteen still ahead of me.

I am consoled to think my friends still remember me; tell them I love them very much and to be diligent in their study and piety. Thank you for the



## *Contents*

beautiful letter you wrote me and I will try to put into practice the advice contained in it. I have a burning desire to be good because I know that God has prepared a great reward for me and for those who love and serve him in this life.

Forgive me for taking time to write and if I have not put into practice the advice you have given me, my dear benefactor. I ask you to greet everyone at home for me, and since I cannot greet my father personally I do so in my heart, praying to God for him. May God's will, not mine, be done in everything.

Your devoted godson in the most lovable hearts of Jesus and Mary,  
Francis.

Francis enclosed a letter with this one to his parish priest; it was addressed to his friend, a virtuous cousin named Anthony Beltrandi, also of Argentera.

The construction, the diction, the thoughts of the letter make it worthy of inclusion here as a model of letters that can be exchanged by two good young friends.

My dear friend Anthony,

My Godfather has given me good news of you. He tells me that you should take up study like I did. I can tell you that this is a very good idea and you will be very happy if you go on with it.

Since our good parish priest is prepared to teach you, try to repay him by diligence in the fulfillment of your duties. Throw yourself into the study but accompany it with prayer and devotion; this is the only way to succeed in this undertaking and to be truly satisfied. I am pleased to think that next year you will be my companion in this house.

There is just one little thought I want to leave you: obedience and submission to your parents and your parish priest. And I recommend that you give good example to your companions.

And I want to ask a favour of you. During this winter make the Stations of the Cross after the sacred functions as I used to do when I was home. Endeavour to promote this pious practice and you will be blessed by the Lord. Time is precious, try to use it well; if you have any free time, gather some boys together and get them to revise the Christian Doctrine lesson taught on the previous Sunday. This is a very good way of earning God's blessing. Tell my Godfather to give me some news about you when he writes to me, and in that way I shall be ever surer of your good will. Dear friend, what great suffering I endure when I think of the time that I have wasted and that I could have spent in study or in other good works.

I hope that you will take my letter in good part and if there is anything that displeases you, I ask your forgiveness. Do your very best to ensure that next year we shall be schoolmates here in Turin, if this is pleasing to the Lord.

*Contents*

Cheerio, dear Anthony, pray for me.

Your loving friend,

Francis Besucco.

## Chapter 26. Last letter - Thoughts written to his mother

The great piety of Francis is revealed in his letters in the previous Chapter. Every spoken or written word contributes to a network of delicate love and holy thought. It seems however that, as he gradually approached the end of his life, he became even more inflamed with God's love. Indeed, it seems from certain expressions that he had some forewarning. When his Godfather received his last letter he exclaimed: "My godson wants to leave me; God wants him for himself."

I refer to it here in its entirety as a true model for whoever wants to wish someone a Happy New Year in a Christian manner. It bears the date, 28th December 1863.

My beloved Godfather,

Any well brought up young lad would certainly commit a serious act of culpable ingratitude if he were not to write to his parents and benefactors at this time of year to wish them every blessing and happiness. But what should I say to you my beloved and illustrious benefactor? From the day I was born you began to be good to me and look after my soul. My first learning about life, about piety, fear of God, I owe to you. If I have completed some years at school, if I have been able to fly from dangers to my soul, is all due to your advice and your care.

However can I recompense you for this then? Since I have no other way to do so, I will at least try to give you a sign of my continual gratitude by keeping in mind all the benefits I have received, and in these few days left to me I will try with all my strength to wish you copious blessings from Heaven, a good end to the current year and a good beginning to the new year.

There is an ancient proverb which says: Well begun is half done; so I too want to begin this new year well, begin it according to the Lord's will and continue it according to his will.

My studies are going well right now; my conduct in study, dormitory and in piety have always been EXCELLENT. I have had news that my father and brother are in good health. Give this news to those at home and I am sure they will be pleased about it. Tell them not to be worried about anything. I am well and lack nothing.

Could I ask you too to greet my good teacher Antonio Valorso, and tell him that I ask forgiveness for the times I was disobedient and the many times I upset him while I was at school there.

## *Contents*

Finally, I renew my assurance that not a day will pass without my asking God to keep you healthy and give you a long life. My dear Godfather, I ask your forgiveness too for all the bother I have been; keep helping me with your advice. I have no other wish than to be good and to correct all my faults. May God's will and not mine always be done.

With great respect and affection,

I remain,

your devoted godchild,

Francis Besucco.

In the letter to his godfather he enclosed a note for his mother, the last one he wrote and which can be considered as his last testament or final words to his parents.

My beloved mother,

We are at the end of the year. God has helped us to live it well. Indeed, I can say that for me this year was a continual run of heavenly favours. While I wish you a good conclusion to the few days that remain, I ask the Lord to give you a good beginning to the new year and one which continues and is filled with all kinds of spiritual and temporal good things. May the Blessed Virgin Mary obtain for you from her Son a long life and happy days.

Today I received a letter from my father, from which I know that both he and my brother are in good health and this gives me great consolation. I am sending you here a note of some items they still need.

My dear mother, I was a lot of bother to you at home, and I still am. But I will try to make up for it through my good conduct and my prayers. I ask you to do whatever you can so my sister Maria can study, so that through this she can be better instructed in her religion.

Goodbye, my dear mother, goodbye. Let's offer the Lord our actions and our hearts and recommend the salvation of our souls especially to him. May the Lord's will always be done.

For my part, wish every good to all those at home, pray for me,

Your affectionate son,

Francis.

From these last letters we see clearly that Besucco's heart seemed no longer of this world but of someone who though walking with feet on the earth has his soul already with God whom he wants to constantly speak and write about.

As his fervour grew for religious things, so too did his keen desire to withdraw himself from the world. If I could, he often said, I would like to separate my soul from my body

## *Contents*

so that I could better understand what it means when we say we love God. "If it weren't that I am not allowed," he went so far as to say, "I would like to abstain from all food so that I could enjoy at length the great pleasure experienced in suffering for the Lord. What great consolation the martyrs must have experienced in dying for the faith."

In short, he exemplified by word and deed what St. Paul said: "I desire to be annihilated so as to be glorified with my Lord."

God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him and to prevent the evil of the world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself; he allowed an inordinate love of penance to a certain extent to be responsible for it

## Chapter 27. A badly chosen penance and the beginning of his illness

Francis had read in the life of Dominic Savio how once he had imprudently let the cold of winter set in without putting heavy blankets on his bed. Besucco decided to imitate him. He deemed that the order given to him to be warmly clothed applied only to the daytime, and that he was free to mortify himself in bed at night. He said nothing to anybody, took the woollen blankets issued to all the boys but, instead of putting them on his bed he folded them up and put them under his pillow. Things seemed to be all right until the early days of January, when one morning he was so benumbed with cold that he couldn't get up with the others. The Superiors were told that Besucco stayed in bed because he was ill, and the infirmarian was sent to see him and find out what he needed. When he arrived, he asked what was the matter.

"Nothing at all," Francis replied.

"If it is nothing, then why did you stay in bed?"

"Well - I'm just a little off colour."

The infirmarian went to pull up his blankets and found that he was covered by only one summer blanket.

"Where are your winter blankets, Besucco?"

"Here under the pillow."

"Why did you do this?"

"No special reason - when Jesus was on the cross he wasn't covered any better than I am."

It didn't take long to realise that Besucco was quite ill and he was transferred immediately to the infirmary. The doctor was called at once, he thought at first that the illness was not serious and diagnosed it as a simple cold.

But on the following day he noticed that instead of going away, the illness was causing inflammatory congestion in the stomach, and that it had taken a turn for the worse. The usual remedies were applied - laxatives, emetics, blood-letting and doses of various medicines, but nothing seemed to work.

One day he was asked why he had been so careless as not to cover himself sufficiently in bed. He replied: "I am sorry that this has displeased my superiors, I hope however that the Lord will accept my little penance in satisfaction for my sins."

"But what of the consequences of your imprudence?"

## *Contents*

“I shall leave the consequences in the hands of the Lord. I am not interested in what the future holds out for my body provided everything turns out to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of my soul.”

## Chapter 28. He is resigned to his illness - Edifying words

His illness lasted for eight days; for him it was an exercise, for his companions an example, in patience and Christian resignation. The illness hampered his breathing and this led to severe, continual headaches; he had to submit to further painful surgical treatment; they tried several drastic remedies. But nothing they did was able to alleviate the illness and it served only to highlight his admirable patience. He never gave any sign of resentment nor did he complain. If it was suggested that the medicine did not taste nice he would immediately reply:

“If it tasted sweet, it would be more pleasant in my mouth, but it is only right that I should do some penance for my greediness in the past.”

Another time he was asked if he was suffering greatly.

“Yes, it is true that I am suffering a lot, but what is this compared to what I should suffer because of my sins? I should like to assure you, however, that I am quite happy; I had never thought that I would get so much pleasure from suffering for the love of the Lord.”

If anyone did something for him, he thanked him profusely, saying immediately:

“May the Lord reward you for your kindness towards me.” Not sure as to how to express his gratitude to the infirmarian, he said to him more than once:

“May the Lord reward you for me, and if I go to Heaven, I’ll pray with all my heart for you that the Lord will bless and help you.”

One day the infirmarian asked him whether he was afraid of dying.

“My dear infirmarian,” he replied, “if the Lord wanted to take me to Paradise with him I should be very pleased to obey his call; however, I fear that I am not sufficiently prepared. But despite this I place hope in his infinite mercy and I recommend myself wholeheartedly to Mary Most Holy, to St. Aloysius Gonzaga and to Dominic Savio. I hope that with their protection, I shall have a happy death.”

On the fourth day of his illness, the doctor began to fear for the life of our Francis. Beginning to speak to him of this last moment, I said:

“My dear Francis, would you like to go to Heaven?”

“Can you imagine me not wanting to go to Heaven? But I have to earn it first.”

If you had a choice between being cured and going to Heaven, what would you choose?”

“These are two different things: to live for the Lord, or to die to go to the Lord. The first pleases me, and the second pleases me even more. But who can assure me of Heaven after the many sins I have committed?”

“In making such a proposal to you, I took it for granted that you are sure of going to Heaven. But, if you are assuming that you might go elsewhere, I only wish that you



## Contents

would forget about it.”

“How then can I deserve Heaven?”

“You can lay claim to Heaven through the merits of the Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Will I go to Heaven then?”

“Most surely, but when the Lord wants it.”

He then looked at those present, rubbed his hands and joyfully exclaimed:

“It’s a contract then: Heaven and nothing else; to Heaven and nowhere else. Don’t speak to me of anything else, only Heaven.”

“I am happy,” I then told him, “that you show such a strong desire to go to Heaven, but I want you to be ready to do the holy will of God ...”

He interrupted what I was saying with:

“Yes, yes, let the holy will of God be done in everything, both in Heaven and on earth.”

On the fifth day of the illness he asked to receive the Sacraments. He wanted to make a general Confession: this was denied him. There was no need for it as he had made one a few months previously. However, he was deeply moved as he prepared for that last confession with very great fervour. After confession he appeared to be very happy and he said to the person who was assisting him:

“In the past I promised Our Lord a thousand times that I would not offend him anymore, but I did not keep my word. I have renewed this promise today and I hope to be faithful right up to my death.”

That evening he was asked if he had any messages for any one.

“Yes,” he told me, “tell everyone to pray that my time in purgatory may be short.”

“What would you like me to tell your companions on your behalf?”

“Tell them to avoid scandal, and to always make good confessions.”

“And to the clerics?”

“Tell the clerics to give the boys good example and good advice whenever it is needed.”

“And your Superiors?”

“Tell my superiors that I thank them for all their kindness towards me; tell them to keep working for the salvation of souls; and when I am in Heaven I shall pray to God for them.”

“And what have you to say to me?”

He was quite moved by these words, he looked at me straight in the eye and then replied:

“I ask you to help me to save my soul.” For a long time I have prayer to the Lord that I may die in you arms. I ask you to carry out this work of charity and help me until the last moments of my life.

I assured him I would not abandon him whether he recovered or remained ill, and even more so if he found himself at the point of death. He was very happy after that and wanted only to receive the Holy Viaticum.

## Chapter 29. He receives Viaticum - Other edifying words - Something he regrets

On the sixth day of his illness (January 8), he asked to go to Holy Communion.

“How I would like to go to Communion with my companions in church,” he said, “it is eight days since I last received my dear Jesus with them.” Whilst he was preparing to receive Communion he asked someone who was helping him the meaning of the word Viaticum.

“Viaticum,” came the reply, “means help and a companion for the journey.”

“Oh, what wonderful help shall be mine, having with me the bread of Angels for the journey I am about to undertake.”

“Not only will you have this heavenly bread,” he was told, “but you will have Jesus himself as your help and companion on the great journey you are preparing to make to eternity.”

“If Jesus is my friend and companion I have nothing to fear; on the other hand I have everything to hope for in his great mercy. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.”

Then he made his preparation. He did not need help as he had his usual prayers which he recited one after the other. He received the Holy Host with those signs of piety which are better imagined than described.

After Communion he settled down to make his thanksgiving. When asked if he needed anything, he answered nothing other than: “Let us pray.” After a long thanksgiving he turned to those standing by and asked them not to speak of anything to him except Heaven.

Then the Bursar of the House visited him, to his great delight.

“Oh, Father Savio,” he said with a smile, “this time I’m going to Heaven.”

“Courage now! Let us place both life and death in the hands of God; let us hope to go to Heaven but when God wants it.”

“Father Savio, please pardon me for all the trouble I’ve given you; pray for me, and when I’m in Heaven I’ll also pray to God for you.”

Some time later when I saw that he was reasonably at ease, I asked him if he had any messages for his parish priest. This seemed to disturb him,

“My parish priest,” he answered, “did a lot for me. He did his utmost to help me save my soul. Tell him that I have never forgotten his advice. I shall not have the pleasure of seeing him again in this world, but I hope to go to Heaven and I shall pray to the Blessed Virgin to help him keep all my companions on the right track and then one day

## Contents

I'll be able to see him and all his parishioners in Heaven.”

He was choking with emotion as he finished speaking.

After he had rested I asked him if he wanted to see his relatives.

“It is not possible for me to see them,” he answered, “because they are too far away, they are poor and they can't afford to come here. And also, my father is working away from home. Tell them that I die resigned, cheerful and happy. Tell them to pray for me. I hope to go to Heaven. I'll wait for them all there. To my mother ...” He could not go on.

Some hours later I asked him: “Have you by any chance a message for your mother?”

“Tell my mother that God has heard her prayer. Many times she told me: ‘My dear Francis, I want you to live for a long time in this world but I would rather have you die a thousand times than see you become the enemy of God because of sin.’ I hope that my sins have been forgiven and I hope I am the friend of God and that I shall soon go to enjoy Him for eternity. Bless my mother, O my God, give her courage to accept my death with resignation; give me the grace to see her and all the family in Heaven, where we shall enjoy your glory.”

He wanted to go on talking, but I told him to be quiet and rest a while. He became worse on the evening of January 8 and it was decided to give him Extreme Unction. When asked if he wanted to receive this Sacrament he answered:

“Yes, with all my heart.”

“Have you perhaps anything bothering your conscience?”

“Yes there is something that has been on my mind all my life, but I never imagined that it would give me so much sorrow at the point of death.”

“What is it that is troubling you and causing remorse?”

“I have the deepest sorrow for not having loved God as much as he should have been loved in my life.”

“Don't worry about that for in this world we can never love God to the extent that he deserves to be loved. We need only do our best; only in Heaven can we love him as he should be loved. There we shall see Him as He really is, we shall know him and enjoy his goodness, his glory and his love. How fortunate you are because shortly you're going to have this wonderful opportunity. But now prepare to receive Extreme Unction, which is the sacrament that wipes away the stain of sin and also gives us bodily health if this is good for the soul.”

“I don't want to discuss the health of the body any more,” he replied, “as for my sins, I ask forgiveness and I hope that they will be completely forgiven. I trust also that I shall obtain the remission of the punishment I must suffer for them in Purgatory.”

## Chapter 30. He receives the Holy Oils - His spontaneous prayers during this

When everything had been prepared for the last sacrament that man receives in this mortal life, he wanted to say the *Confiteor* himself, along with the other prayers; and he said his own prayer at each anointing.

Father Alasonatti, Prefect of the house, was administering it to him. At the anointing of the eyes, our pious sick boy said: "O my God, pardon me for looking at things I should not have looked at and for reading things I should not have read." At the ears: "O my God, pardon me for all that I have listened to that was contrary to your holy law. Please grant that while being closed for ever to the world they may be opened to hear your voice calling me to enjoy your glory."

At the anointing of the nostrils.

"Pardon me, O Lord, for all the satisfaction I have taken in smelling things."

At the mouth:

"O my God, pardon me for my gluttony and for all the words which have offended you in one way or another. Grant that as soon as possible my tongue may sing your praises for all eternity."

At this point, the Prefect was quite overcome with emotion and said:

"What beautiful thoughts, how wonderful in a boy so young."

Continuing with the administration of the Sacrament he anointed the hands, saying:

"By this holy anointing and by his most compassionate mercy, may God pardon you every sin committed by the sense of touch."

The sick boy continued:

"O my great God, with the veil of your mercy and through the merits of the wounds in your hands cover and wipe out all the sins I have committed by my actions throughout my life."

At the feet:

"Pardon, O Lord, the sins that I have committed with these feet, either by going where I should not have gone or by not going where my duties summoned me. May your mercy pardon all the sins I may have committed by thought, word, deed or omission."

He was told more than once that it was sufficient to say these spontaneous prayers silently in his heart and that God did not ask for the great effort he was making to pray aloud. He was silent for a few moments but then continued in the same tone of voice as before. At the finish he seemed so tired and his pulse was so weak that we thought that he was about to draw his last breath. Shortly afterwards he recovered slightly and, in the presence of many people, he addressed these words to the Superior.

## *Contents*

“ I have prayed a lot to the Blessed Virgin so that I would die on a day dedicated to her and I hope I shall be heard. What else could I ask of the Lord?”

In answer to his question he was told:

“Ask the Lord to grant you to do all your Purgatory in this world so that when you die your soul will go straight to Heaven.”

“Oh, yes,” he immediately replied, “I ask for this with all my heart. Please give me your blessing. I hope that the Lord will make me suffer in this world to the point that I have done all my purgatory and so, when my soul is separated from my body, it will fly straight to Heaven.”

It would seem that the Lord heard his prayer as he improved somewhat and his life was prolonged for about twenty-four hours.

## Chapter 31. A marvellous fact - Two visits - His precious death

Saturday, 9th January, was the last day on earth for our dear Besucco. He had perfect use of his senses and his reason throughout the day. He wanted to pray all the time, but he was told not to as it tired him too much.

“Well, at least,” he said, “let someone near me do the praying and I shall repeat in my heart the words he says aloud.”

Just to please him it was necessary to have someone by his bed praying continuously. Amongst those who visited him that day there was a companion who was a bit troublesome.

“How are you Besucco?” he asked.

“My dear friend,” he replied, “I am at the end of my life. Pray for me in these my last moments. But remember that one day you too will find yourself in a similar state. Oh, how happy you will be if you have been good! But, if you don’t change your way of life, how sorry you are going to be at the moment of death!” His companion began to cry and from that moment onwards thoughts more about his soul; today he is still one of the good boys.

At ten in the evening he was visited by Lieutenant Eysautier and his wife. The Lieutenant had had a hand in Francis’ admission to the Oratory and he had helped him considerably. Besucco was very happy to see them and he showed lively signs of gratitude. This courageous man was greatly edified when he saw the happiness in the boy’s face, also the signs of devotion which he demonstrated and the assistance he was getting, and he said:

“Dying like this is a real pleasure, and I would like to find myself in a similar state.”

Then he turned to the dying boy and said:

“Dear Francis, when you get to Heaven pray for me and for my wife ...” But he was overcome with emotion and could not continue; he departed after giving the sick boy a final wave of his hand.

About half past ten it seemed that Francis had only a few more minutes to live. He moved his hands from under the blankets and tried to lift them up. I took them and joined them together on top of the bed.

He separated them and lifted them up again. He was smiling and his eyes were fixed as if gazing at something he liked. Thinking that perhaps he wanted a crucifix, I put one in his hands. He took it, kissed it, and put it on the bed, and straightaway lifted up his arms again in an outburst of joy. His face appeared to be stronger and to have more colour in it than when he had been healthy. Its beauty and radiance was such that it eclipsed the infirmary lights. The ten bystanders were dumb-founded and their

## Contents

astonishment grew when the dying boy lifted his head a little and stretched out his hands as if to shake hands with someone he loved. Then in a joyful resonant voice he sang:

“Praise Mary, Oh you faithful tongues; let your harmony resound in the heavens.”

Afterwards he made several efforts to lift himself up and devoutly stretching out his hands, he began to sing again:

“Oh Jesus, on fire with love, would that I had never offended you. Oh my dear good Jesus, I do not want to offend you any more.”

Without interruption he intoned the hymn:

Pardon, dear Jesus ,

Mercy, my God,

Before sinning again I want to die,

We all listened in stunned silence. Our eyes were riveted on Francis who seemed to have become an Angel with the Angels in Paradise. To break the tension the director said: “I believe that at this moment our Besucco is receiving some extraordinary grace from the Lord and his heavenly Mother, to whom he has been so devoted during his life. Perhaps she has come to take his soul to Heaven.”

We were all further astonished as Besucco continued to sing, but his words were all truncated as if he were answering questions. I was only able to catch these phrases:

“King of Heaven ... so beautiful ... I am a poor sinner ... I give you my heart . . . Give me your love . . . My dear good Lord . . .”

Then he fell back on the bed without a sign of life. But when he realised that no one was praying and no one was suggesting spontaneous prayers to him he immediately turned to me and said:

“Help me. Let us pray. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in this my agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you.”

I suggested to him that he rest, but without paying any attention to me he continued:

“Jesus in my mind, Jesus in my mouth, Jesus and Mary I give you my soul.”

It was eleven o'clock when he wanted to speak again, but he could say only two words:

“The Crucifix.” He asked to be blessed with the crucifix to gain the plenary indulgence at the moment of death, something he had often asked for and that I had promised him.

When he had given this blessing the Prefect began reading the Depart, Christian soul whilst the others prayed on their knees. At eleven fifteen Besucco looked intently at me, and tried to smile; then he raised his eyes heavenward indicating that he was departing. A few moments later his soul left his body and flew gloriously, so we fondly hope to enjoy heavenly glory in the company of those who have served God by the innocence of their life in this world and who are now enjoying him and blessing him in Heaven.

## Chapter 32. Suffrages and upset

One cannot describe the grief and sorrow caused throughout the whole house by the loss of such a dear friend. Many prayers were said there and then around the bedside. Next morning the news spread amongst his companions, who gathered in the Church to find some comfort in their sorrow and also to pay a tribute to their dead friend. They prayed for the repose of his soul, if indeed he still had need of prayers. Many went to Communion for this purpose. The Rosary, the office, prayers in common, and in private, Communions, Mass, in short, all the practices of piety which took place in our Church on that Sunday were directed to God for the eternal repose of the soul of our good Francis.

Something rather unusual happened that day. His features became so handsome and his face took on such a healthy glow that in no way did he seem to be dead. As a matter of fact he had never seemed so extraordinarily good-looking even when he was in good health. His own companions far from displaying the morbid fear boys generally have for the dead were eager to go to see him and they all said that he really looked like an angel from Heaven. That is why in the portrait drawn after his death he looks better than when alive.

Then, those who spotted objects connected in some way or other with Besucco vied with one another to get them and to keep them as remembrances of him. It was commonly voiced about that he had gone straight to Heaven. Some said that he did not have any need of our prayers for he is already enjoying the glory of Heaven here and now.

“For sure,” added another boy, “he is certainly enjoying the sight of God and praying for us.”

“I believe,” stated a third boy, “that Besucco already enjoys a throne of glory in Heaven and that he is invoking divine blessings on his companions and friends.”

On the following day, January 11th, Mass was sung by his companions here in the Church at the Oratory. Many went to Communion as always for the greater glory of God, and also to pray for the eternal repose of the soul of Francis, if indeed he still had need of prayers. After the Mass the boys escorted the coffin to the parish church and then to the cemetery.

Francis was buried in grave number 147 in the fourth row on the western side.



## Chapter 33. Commotion in Argentera and veneration of young Besucco

The virtues which had shone forth in this young boy for the space of about fourteen years at Argentera appeared even more resplendent when he died and when news arrived of his holy death. Fr Francis Pepino sent me a moving account of what occurred there; it possesses something of the supernatural. I shall keep the full story for a more opportune time but I'll give a few excerpts here.

Father Pepino writes:

When news of the serious illness of Francis arrived there were public prayers with a sung Mass, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and prayers for the sick. The news of his death reached us on the evening of January 13 and it quickly spread. In less than an hour Francis was being presented by most of the parents as an example to their respective children. I cannot say enough about the sorrow of the parents and the benefactors of this dear boy, who always pleased everybody with his exemplary conduct and who never offended anyone. Mary, the younger sister of Francis, clearly told me of his death on January 10th. She told me that at about midnight of the previous night, when she was in bed with her mother, she heard a loud noise in the upstairs room where Francis used to sleep. She clearly heard a handful of sand fall on the floor, and fearing that the noise would make her mother suspect that Francis was dead, she began speaking to her in a loud voice - something this girl did not usually do. Several other people, convinced of his holiness, prayed to him for favours and obtained what they sought.

I don't want to discuss what I have just quoted; I intend only to be factual and to leave whatever inferences can be drawn from these facts to the judgement of my readers. Here are a few more excerpts from the source previously quoted.

During February a two year old boy was in danger of death. The parents considered the case hopeless and turned to our Besucco, whose virtues were being proclaimed by everyone. They promised furthermore that if the boy were cured they would promote the practice of the Stations of the Cross in imitation of Francis. The boy recovered quickly and is now in perfect health. A few days ago I myself recommended to the prayers of our dear boy the father of a family who was seriously ill. At the same time I also recommended him to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to whose honour and glory this man had consecrated himself as a cantor. I am not giving the names of these people simply to save them from any undue criticism. The sick man showed immediate improvement and within a few days appeared perfectly cured.

Anna, Francis' oldest sister, was married in March. She was later troubled with an affliction which gave her no peace, day or night. In a moment of greater pain she called out: My dear little Francis, help me in my need, obtain some rest for me. No sooner said

## *Contents*

than done. From that night on she began to sleep peacefully and she has continued to do so.

Encouraged by the success of her prayer Anna again turned to Francis for help at a time when her life was in great danger, and again her every wish was granted.

Whilst, for the greater glory of God, I have collected accounts of what happened to others, I must not omit telling you that I used to recommend myself to the prayers of my godson when he was alive and I continued to do so with greater faith after his death. As a result of my faith I have obtained favours at different times.

## Chapter 34. Conclusion

I have come to the end of the life of Francis Besucco. I would like to have said much more about this virtuous boy, but, since this could be the cause of certain criticism from those who do not recognise the wonders of the Lord in his servants, I shall await a more opportune time to publish them, if the divine goodness allows me to live long enough.

Meanwhile, my dear readers, before I finish writing, I would like both of us to come to a conclusion which will be to our mutual advantage. It is certain that sooner or later death will come for both of us, and it is possible that it will come sooner than we think. It is equally certain that if we don't perform good works during our life we won't be able to reap their fruit at the point of death, nor we can we expect any reward from God. Now since Divine Providence gives us time to prepare for this last moment, let us occupy this time in good works and so be assured that we shall collect the reward we merit at the appropriate time. We can expect to find people who will laugh at us because we practice our religion. Don't pay any attention to them... Who ever listens to them acts wrongly and betrays himself. If we want to be wise before the face of God, we must not be afraid of appearing stupid before the world, because Jesus Christ assures us that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God. Only the continuous practice of our religion can make us happy in time and in eternity. Anyone who does not work in summer has no right to enjoyment during winter, and anyone who does not practice virtue during his life cannot expect any reward after death,

I encourage you, Christian reader, I encourage you to perform good works whilst we have time; our sufferings are of short duration and what we shall enjoy lasts forever. I call down the divine blessings upon you, and in your turn please pray to the Lord God to have mercy on my soul, so that after having spoken about virtue, about the method of practicing it, and about the great reward that God has prepared in the next life for those who practice it. I may not suffer the terrible misfortune of neglecting to do it myself with irreparable harm to my own salvation.

O Lord, help me, help me to persevere in the observance of your precepts during the days of my life so that we can one day go to Heaven to enjoy great happiness for ever and ever. Amen.

Part VI.  
Valentino

VALENTINO OR A VOCATION OBSTRUCTED  
presented by Father JOHN BOSCO  
Turin.  
Oratory of St Francis de Sales Press  
1866.  
PROPERTY OF THE PUBLISHER

# Contents

## Chapter I. Mother of the family

Because I am writing about something that really happened and that refers partly to people still living, I judge it better not to mention names of people and places referred to in this story. There were two parents, somewhat advanced in age, who had only one child called Valentino, the sole heir to their considerable fortune. The mother, a good Christian woman, was fully intent on giving her son a sound upbringing. For many years she herself was his teacher. While he was still very small she taught him his prayers and the Little Catechism, along with the rudiments of reading and writing. She was well educated and had learned much from experience and was very careful to see that her son was far removed from wayward types and from idleness.

"Dear Valentino," she would tell him, "Never forget that idleness is the father of all vice and that bad companions lead themselves and whoever follows them to ruin: woe to you if you allow these two fatal enemies to control your life."

But the good mother found her husband to be something of an obstacle. Osnero, her husband's name, was a courteous and upright individual who did good to anybody he could and evil to no one, but he did have one seriously erroneous idea in his head. He believed he could make his son a virtuous and upright citizen without being first of all a good Christian.

"Dear Valentino," he would sometimes tell him, "Be good and everyone will always respect you. One's honour, esteem and good name must never be overlooked in this world."

Given his tender age Valentino did not take a great deal of notice of his father's advice. To both correct and ennoble her husband's teaching, the virtuous mother would often tell Valentino:

"My child, remember that God sees everything. He blesses virtuous youngsters in this life and rewards them in eternity; on the contrary he brings bad luck on the wicked, shortens their life and punishes them forever in the next world."

Each morning she took him by the hand and led him off to church where she gave him holy water and showed him how to make the sign of the cross properly. Then she knelt down beside him, opened a prayer book and pointed out the prayer used for Mass. She always took him with her on Sundays to Mass, Catechism, instructions and Benediction. When it was time for him to receive the Sacraments she prepared him some days beforehand and then took him to the confessional.

After his Confession she helped him with his thanksgiving, adding advice that any good and affectionate mother would find appropriate for her children. She would be upset if she saw him begin eating without first making the sign of the cross and saying the grace that all good Christians are accustomed to saying on such occasions. One day Valentino did forget and his mother reproached him severely.

## *Contents*

“Dear Valentino,” she told him, “you should know that only dumb animals begin gorging themselves without reflecting on where their food comes from. We are given life and food from the Lord, so we must always be grateful but especially when we make use of his blessings: meaning when we take food to preserve our life.”

While Valentino was sometimes a bit careless he forgot none of the loving advice his affectionate mother did her best to sow in his tender heart. But so her son would not get bored, she knew how to temper piety at the right moment with good fun. Games, walks, presents, toys, sweets and other eats were things the good mother used to encourage and reward her son’s good behaviour. So the mother won over his heart, and he took great delight in going with her for walks, talking and spending time with her.

Then tragedy struck! Valentino lost his mother just when he had greatest need of her.

He was barely twelve when his beloved mother was struck down by serious illness and died a few days later. There was just time for her to receive the comforts of religion then she called Valentino to her bedside and spoke to him thus:

“Dear Valentino, I must leave you at a time that you are most at risk. Remember to always avoid idleness and bad companions. Whoever advises things that are to the detriment of your soul is an enemy and you should avoid him like a snake-in-the-grass. I will no longer be your mother on earth, but I hope to help you from Heaven; from now on Our Lady will be your Mother, so pray to her often; she will not abandon you. God bless you.....”

And the severity of her illness prevented her from continuing. She was but a corpse a few moments later.

Valentino was distraught at her loss and was so overcome by sadness for several months that his very life seemed to be in danger. He could find consolation only in prayer, alms giving, penance, and by attending Mass in suffrage for his beloved mother’s soul. He never forgot her throughout the many and serious events that he experienced throughout his lifetime.



## Chapter 2. First year of boarding school.

Osnero also felt the serious loss of his wife, especially for his son's upbringing which he could not give much time to. Running his business, markets, fairs, his celebrations at cafes and inns did not allow him to take up the matter of his son's upbringing.

Valentino had already finished primary school and since there was no high school in his town it was necessary to send him to boarding school to pursue his studies. He chose a school well-known for its teaching, standing in society and behaviour. The pupils and parents at the school were very pleased with the uniform and the cap with its fancy trimmings.

Valentino agreed with this proposal and set off for a new kind of lifestyle at boarding school. At first he found it difficult to settle in. Instead of his mother's tender voice there was a director who seemed kind enough but his orders were clear and severe and he was a strict disciplinarian. Nevertheless Valentino soon won the affection of his new superiors and applied himself well to fulfilling his duties.

He paid attention to orders, was punctual for class and wasted no time while studying. But there was a great gap in terms of practices of piety. Up until now he had gone to Mass each morning and done some spiritual reading of an evening with his mother; he had gone to Confession every fortnight and to Communion whenever his confessor allowed him to.

It was not like that at school. There was no meditation or spiritual reading; prayers were said in common but only once a day, with everyone standing, and they were said hurriedly. The pupils only attended Mass on Sundays, and Confession was once a year at Easter time.

This caused a great deal of anguish for Valentino. Also, in the past he had never heard bad language but his new class mates were very free in their language, tolerated any kind of jokes and things had even reached a stage where dirty books and papers were being freely swapped amongst the pupils. Afraid of the risks he was facing Valentino wrote his father a letter where he pointed out in detail the risks to his soul, noting that boarding school life was dangerous for him. But in the letter he also complained about the discipline and how the school was run, so the director thought it best to hold on to it and not send it to its destination. Some time later Osnero went to visit his son who was then able to inform him of his concerns. His father did not take a great deal of notice and told him not to be scrupulous; he needed to be more open-minded. ”

“If you can't pray, go to confession, attend Mass every day,” he told him, “you can make up for it all when you come home for holidays. But for now you should imitate your more cheerful school mates and also copy their attitude to life.”

Valentino had a mild and malleable nature, so he calmed down at his father's words and without worrying too much about what the future held he settled down to reading

## *Contents*

anything that came his way. He mixed with all kinds of company including their off-hand conversations, which was rarely good and often bad.

Only a few weeks had passed and not only did he no longer feel any repugnance at this life style but anxiously sought out all kinds of wanton behaviour. No surprise then that with such a disorderly existence he thought no more of Confession and Communion. But despite his wanton approach to life he could not stop thinking of his mother's reminders and felt much remorse for not putting them into practice. One evening, between regret for his wrongdoing and the good he was ignoring he became so emotional that he broke down and cried, and cried. But it made no difference - he continued with his unruly existence. The only thing he had not forgotten was to pray for his mother's soul, and he did this every evening before going to bed.

How were his studies going?

When good behaviour goes out the window studies go down the drain. Little by little, as Valentino began to enjoy his 'open-minded' approach, as his father had advised him, he began to dislike studying and the last five months of that year became a lost cause. He had received good marks for the semester exam and his father had rewarded him with a nice watch. But his final exams went poorly and he was not promoted to the next level. When he heard this Osnero was upset both for the money wasted and the year that had been lost. He felt even more sorry because Valentino had always done well and he knew that even a mediocre effort would have been enough for him to be promoted.

## Chapter 3. Holidays.

But Osnero's displeasure grew even more when Valentino came back from college. He saw his son arrive home, almost without bothering to greet him. When Osnero made some comments on his poor school performance this was the reply he got:

"I did what could and nobody could have done more; had I known I would be chastised for it I wouldn't even have come home."

That evening of his arrival he went to bed without even saying his usual prayers nor making the sign of the cross. In the morning, instead of going to Mass and serving with the pleasure he had in the past he slept in till very late. After having something to eat he went off to have fun with some friends whom his mother had once forbidden him to mix with.

One day his father wanted him to come for a walk with him, but Valentino refused, saying he had an appointment with some friends, therefore he couldn't go with him. He did not even want to open the *Lives of the Saints*, for years his favourite book. Instead of his favourite reading he had some dirty novels a friend had given him before he left college. Osnero was astounded at the change in his son, and although in the past he had not loved piety very much, he would still have liked his son to have remained religious so he could stay good.

He thought of taking him to the parish priest, whom Valentino had been fond of earlier, but Valentino refused saying that everyone had to go to him at Easter for Confession and it was not good to disturb him during the year with useless visits. One day while Valentino was with some friends the parish priest walked past, but Valentino turned the other way pretending not to have seen him and wanted to go without even greeting him. The priest noticed all this but pretending that he hadn't noticed he went up to him.

"Valentino," he said, "Did you have a good trip? Are you OK? Is your father well?"

Valentino gave him a hasty reply, and saying that he would soon come and see him, continued on his way talking to his mates. As well as this Osnero saw that Valentino had adopted some dangerous habits like lying, gambling and stealing from home. Filled with sorrow his poor father told Valentino one day:

"My dear son, whatever has caused such a shocking change in you?"

"You told me not to have any scruples, and to be more open-minded, so I think I have obeyed."

"I did not mean..."

"That's what I understood, and if you don't want me at home then I know where else I can go."

Osnero advised him, often corrected him and also punished him, but without result. One day he would answer back, another disappear, and he spent three days away from home.

## *Contents*

For Osnero it seemed impossible that in just ten months such a religious, obedient and affectionate child would have changed so much as to answer his father back, want to know nothing more of religion, and had become a domestic thief. He was on the point of taking the desperate decision to put him in a correctional institution, but did not want the term 'correctional' or 'prison' to stain the family's honour so he tried a milder approach.

"Last year," he said to himself, "I chose a fashionable college but was tricked by appearances, and these were not based on learning or behaviour. I should choose another boarding school where religion is properly taught, recommended and practised. Unfortunately, I have to confess, without religion it is impossible to raise a child. But how can I get Valentino to attend a school like this now that he has already contracted so many bad habits?"

The end of October was fast approaching and he needed to make a decision on what to choose for Valentino.

One day Osnero, in order to begin persuading his son to agree with his idea, took him to a meal out in the country; there he ordered the kind of dinner that he thought he would like, gave him some presents, a hug, and promised various things that the boy asked for. In the evening back home the father called him to his room and spoke to him thus:

"Dear Valentino, do you still remember your mother?"

"Yes I do and I will always remember her, and I never go to bed without saying a prayer for her."

"Do you still love her?"

"Very much so. How could one ever forget a mother who was so good and worthy of being loved?"

"Would you like to do something that would please her and be of great advantage to you?"

At those words Valentino felt moved and tears came to his eyes, then weeping copiously he hugged Osnero saying: "You know how much I owe my mother and how I loved her when she was alive; if she were still alive I would go through water or fire for her. Do you want to propose something she would dearly want? Speak, tell me; I am ready for any sacrifice that might please her."

"Valentino, I would like to propose that you go to a boarding school your mother had told me about before she died, a school where you can study and practise piety just like you used to in the good times when your late and beloved mother was alive."

"Father, I am in your hands; whatever you believe pleases my mother pleases me and I am ready for any sacrifice to do it."

## Chapter 4. The new college. His return to piety.

Osnero did not think he would have changed his son's mind so soon, and recognised it as a blessing from Heaven. In case any hesitation might cause problems, on the following day he sought to take him to the school to see the director and talk about admission.

The director was not a little surprised when he saw Valentino for the first time. New, elegantly made clothes, a plumed hat, cane in hand, a shiny chain on his chest, hair nicely parted and spruced up, all suggested the spirit of vanity that reigned in Valentino's heart. His father agreed easily on conditions for admission, then saying he had other things to do he left the boy to talk with the director. At the sight of a boy with airs like this the director considered it would be best not to begin talking about religion but spoke instead of walks, athletics, gymnastics, fencing, singing, playing music. Just listening to him talking about these things made the fatuous young lad's blood boil. When the father returned, and when he could speak freely with Valentino, he asked him what he thought, if he liked the place and what the director had said.

"I like the place a lot, and the director seems nice, but there is one thing I didn't like about him."

"What's that? Tell me. There is still time to do something different."

"I like everything about him except that he's a priest, and this gives me the shivers."

"You don't need to take any notice of his priestly qualities but the other qualities he has."

"But going with a priest means praying, going to Confession, Communion. From some of the things he told me I gathered he already knew what I have been up to.... But that's enough.... I promised. I will keep my word and we will see."

A few days later Valentino went to the new boarding school. His father had judged it best to tell the new director what had happened to the boy and of the affection he had for his mother. Away from his other friends, with none of the bad reading, then by being with good class mates in class, the music, recitals, some stage plays he soon forget the unruly lifestyle he had been leading for a year. His mother's reminders about fleeing idleness and bad companions often came to mind. He easily returned to his earlier habit of practices of piety. The real problem was deciding to go to Confession. He had already been at college for two months. There had already been novenas, feast days when the other pupils had been to the Sacraments, but Valentino could not decide to go to Confession. One evening the director called him to his room and mindful of the impression the memories of his mother had on him, he began by saying:

"Now my good Valentino, do you know what commemoration we will have tomorrow?"

"Yes, I certainly do. Tomorrow is the anniversary of my mother's death. O my beloved

## *Contents*

mother, if I could just see you once more or at least hear your voice once again!"

"Tomorrow would you like to do something that would please her very much and also be of great advantage to yourself?"

"Oh yes I would! Whatever it might cost!"

"Go to Communion tomorrow in suffrage for her soul and she will be helped so much if she should still be suffering the flames of Purgatory."

"I would gladly do so but before going to Communion I would have to go to Confession..... But if this pleases my mother I will do it, and if it's ok with you I will make my confession to you immediately."

The director, who only wanted this, praised his decision, let him calm down a little then prepared him and helped him make his confession; and the following day Valentino went to holy Communion and prayed much for his late-lamented mother.

From that day on, his life was one of real satisfaction for the director who did not let his newly acquired spiritual son out of his sight.

Valentino had still kept some books that were partly forbidden, partly harmful for young boys, and he brought them all to the director to be burned, saying: "I hope that by burning these they will no longer be cause for my soul to burn in hell."

He had also kept some letters from his former friends and they contained bad advice, so he tore them into pieces.

He picked up on his studies again, and on the covers of his books he wrote down the reminders from his mother: flee idleness and bad companions.

He sent his father a letter wishing him a Happy New Year and that gave him great consolation, seeing him return to the kind of thinking that he had nurtured for so many years. This was how his time in senior school passed.

Recalling that there were a number of bad books and papers back home Valentino wrote many letters to his father, and was so nice to him especially during holidays, made so many promises, that his father decided to destroy them all. His father also used to eat meat on Fridays at any simple pretext, although it was forbidden. Valentino's behaviour, his words, the exemplary stories he told, and then finally a humble request to his father, succeeded in getting him to stop that and encouraged him to observe the Church's vigils as any good Catholic should do.

## Chapter 5. His vocation.

Valentino spent five years at the college to the great satisfaction of his father and his superiors. He had earlier found some difficulty adjusting to the new discipline, but reflecting that this was like his earlier life with his mother he was content and got much pleasure from it. During holidays he was also of comfort to his father and pleased him; the older he got the more he felt affection for and placed his hopes in his dear son. Meanwhile Valentino was in his final year, with behaviour that left nothing to be desired, though over the five years he had not spoken once of his vocation. More than once he had asked the college director what he advised him to do when he had finished school. "Be good," he had replied, "study, pray, and in his own time God will let you know what is best for you."

"What must I do for God to make it known what my calling is?"

"St Peter says that we can be certain of our vocation and choice of state through our good works."

At Easter time in this fifth and final year, before the retreat, he said that this time he would like to deal with his vocation and although for some time he had felt attracted to the ecclesiastical state, just the same he felt impeded by his earlier bad behaviour. So he came to the director over those days and had a long talk with him, notes of which we have found amongst his letters; here they are:

*Valentino.* "What are the signs that show if a young man is called or not to the ecclesiastical state?"

*Director.* "Moral integrity, learning, ecclesiastical spirit."

"How do you know if you have moral integrity?"

"Moral integrity is known especially by victory over vices which run contrary to the sixth commandment, and for that you need your confessor's opinion."

"My confessor has already told me that in that respect I may go ahead in the ecclesiastical state in all tranquility. And for learning?"

"For learning you have to listen to your superiors' judgement and they will have you sit for the appropriate examinations."

"What is meant by ecclesiastical spirit?"

"By ecclesiastical spirit we mean the tendency and the pleasure we feel when taking part in Church functions compatible with our age and what we have to do."

"Nothing else?"

"There is one aspect of ecclesiastical spirit that is more important than anything else. It consists in having a leaning towards this state by which one wants to embrace it in preference to any other state that could be more advantageous or bring greater glory."

"I have all these things. My mother really wanted me to become a priest and I was even keener than she was. I was against it for two years, the two years you know about,

## *Contents*

but now I don't feel inclined to do anything else. I will meet some difficulties from my father who would like me to take up a civil career but I hope God will help me overcome any obstacles."

The director also let him know that wanting to be a priest meant rejecting earthly pleasures, renouncing wealth and the world's honours, not looking for career advancement, being ready to put up with the scorn of mockers, and being ready to do anything, put up with anything to promote the glory of God, to win souls and firstly to save ones own soul.

"It is precisely these observations," Valentino replied, "that urge me to embrace the ecclesiastical state. Because in other states in life you are wading in a sea of risks of which there are far fewer in the state we are speaking about. But the difficulties are likely to come from my father."



## Chapter 6. Difficulties.

In May that year Valentino wrote his father a letter in which he spoke of his decision and asked his permission. "Father," he said, "I have given careful consideration to my vocation, and I have asked the advice of my superiors and especially my confessor, after which I have decided to embrace the ecclesiastical state. I know that you love me and want my true good, therefore I hope that you will be as content as I am about this. When I was a small boy my mother brought me before the altar to Our Lady in our church, and after many prayers I heard her say more than once: 'Mary, may my child always be yours, and if it is not against what is good for his soul, make him a zealous priest.' I hope my mother's wish is also yours."

When he read this letter Osnero was deeply troubled. He had a substantial fortune; Valentino was the only son and heir and given his more than ordinary intelligence, his love for work, lively character, kindness and his malleable nature he could take up one of the more glittering civil careers. His affectionate father wanted him to take up a secular career so he could be his support, his crutch, so to speak, in old age, and maintain his name and family. He wrote him a letter in which he said he was angry and regretted ever putting him in the college; he criticised his superiors for having taught him too much religion and ordered him to return home immediately forbidding him to ever speak to him again of his vocation. But reflecting on the serious consequences the letter might have, did not send it, writing another instead that had the following milder tone.

My dear son.

I have understood from your letter that you intend to embrace the ecclesiastical state. This is an immature decision since your age means you are not capable of understanding what you have decided to do. You should depend on me, not on others. I am your father and only I can and want to make you happy. You will not lack things at home, a bright career is yours to have and a happy future awaits you. Only take notice of your father. Write back to me immediately and tell me what you sincerely think and want to do.

Valentino read the letter and calmly replied to his father thus:

Your letter confirms the great affection you have always had for me. Father, you seek my happiness and I see this happiness in the ecclesiastical state. No honour, career or other wealth can make me happy outside the ecclesiastical state. Father, the God of Heaven and earth is our master. If He wants me to be His minister, would you oppose it? Is not the dignity of the priesthood superior to all of earth's dignities? I we can ensure the salvation of our souls, will we not have gained the greatest treasure man can gain on earth? I can

## *Contents*

also assure you that whatever I do I will never abandon you. While I am still alive I will spare nothing to comfort you in your old age, love you and respect you and give you a happy life.

Osnero understood he would get nowhere through opposition so he thought it better to hide his opinions and wait for the holidays. So he wrote that he had received the letter with pleasure, to cheer up, and that once the exams were over he should come home quickly. Then he wrote about things at home and said they could talk about other matters at the end of the school year.

Valentino passed his exams brilliantly, but could not decide whether or not to go home for fear that his father would continue to oppose his vocation. When Osnero saw that his son had not come home, he went off himself to bring him home for his holidays. There was a quite emotional scene at this point.

Valentino wanted his father to agree to him becoming a priest before he would leave; his father wanted to promise nothing of the kind, so his son did not want to go with him. In the end Osnero put it this way: "If your vocation comes from Heaven I will not oppose you and will give you my full and absolute consent. But since I fear that you do not know what you are doing, I want you to come home; after a few days of holidays we can both open our hearts to one another freely and if you persevere in the same desire I will leave you completely free, indeed will spare no effort on your behalf in supporting your noble plan."

At those words and with such promises Valentino gave in. When he said goodbye to the director at the college the latter said to him:

"Good Valentino, you have a significant battle ahead of you. Watch out for bad companions and bad reading. Let Our Lady always be your mother have often have recourse to her. Let me know soon how things are."

Valentino was all emotional, and promising to do all this, left with his father to return home.

## Chapter 7. A fatal guide.

The saddest thing that can possibly happen to a young man is to have poor guidance and this is what Valentino fell victim to. The pen is shaking in my hand as I write this, and I would not believe it was true had not the story left me in no doubt of its truth. Let this disaster at least serve as a warning to others.

When Valentino arrived home he was left free for a few days to do his own thing without any word being said about vocation. Meanwhile, his father was blinded by the desire that his son be the support for his name and that he would continue the family tree, so he wanted, at any cost, to alter his plans for his vocation. So he thought up a diabolical plan to entrust him to a man of disreputable character so he could teach his poor son some more wicked ways. What a wretched father - for some miserable temporal advantage he was prepared to ruin his son's home, honour, body, and soul!

So Osnero entrusted Valentino to a certain Mari so he could introduce him to the world and get him to know its ways well, and then he could make a decision about his vocation. This Mari was an elderly individual who had spent his life wasting his time and in vice. He had only stopped because of his age. Osnero told him:

"Dear Mari, you have always been a sincere family friend; I now have something very important for you to do. Valentino wants to become a priest and I do not want that.....You understand me? Take him with you, take him around and let him see and enjoy what the world has to offer. Any expenses I will pay, just look after his health."

"Leave it to me," Mari replied, smiling, "I fully understand. You could not have chosen a better person for this job, and I will try to keep your son happy and render you the service you want."

They left, and when they left Mari saw to it that Valentino would have no prayer books with him. But to help relieve the boredom of the journey he told him a thousand stories of friars, priests, monks - harmless enough to begin with but gradually involving shameless behaviour. Then he gave him books filled with filthy material, which Valentino at first recoiled from in horror but little by little began to read to pass the time, then out of curiosity and by the time a month had gone by poor Valentino was almost accustomed to any kind of reading and conversations.

Perhaps at that moment a single word from a friend could have pulled him back from ruin, but he had no such friend.

So, malicious Mari, after taking poor Valentino to hotels, gambling, cafes, balls, theatre, and taking him around villages and towns, finally succeeded in seducing him and engulfing him disastrously in the vice St Paul never wanted even mentioned amongst Christians.

Valentino saw the abyss he was plunging into and at the beginning felt deep remorse. He often sought to go to Confession but his wicked guide always prevented it. One

## Contents

evening he wanted at any cost to go to a nearby Capuchin Monastery and Mari gave him wrong directions, leading him to a house of ill-repute.

Valentino was sorrowful and felt much regret. He had arrived at such a point of desperation that he was about to throw himself out of the third floor window of a hotel had not Mari run and held him back by his clothes.

“Just then,” Valentino said later, “I thought death would be a lesser evil than the remorse of conscience I was embroiled in then.”

But the remorse did not last long. Almost without his being aware of it Mari accustomed Valentino to bad talk, all kinds of perverse reading, and recalling the good fun he had had in his first year at college he abandoned himself to all kinds of vice, indeed after six months of a thoroughly dissolute lifestyle he no longer not only did not oppose Mari, but followed his every wicked wish.

Seeing where things were at this stage, and believing he had carried out his diabolical mission, Mari brought Valentino back to his father.

“I believe I have done what you want,” Mari said, greeting Osnero.

“Thank you, Mari, you have always been a family friend and now there is one more reason for me to be grateful to you.”

“Father,” Valentino said, running to him and embracing him, “Father, I am now very much of your opinion.”

“You don’t want to be a priest?”

“Certainly not. I will do anything else, but not a priest.”

“Heaven be praised, what a lucky father I am! Tomorrow I want to invite all my friends and we will have a party to celebrate your return.”

Osnero was like someone walking softly on a bed of flowers, not noticing the deep abyss beneath, nor could he have imagined that Valentino’s return would have boded so badly for him.

## Chapter 8. Osnero's bitterness.

Osnero was much consoled at the news that his son was no longer thinking of the ecclesiastical state but did not think that the time spent with Mari would have led to such abominable debauchery. Valentino no longer spoke of the Sacraments, took up bad reading, gambling, drinking and other detestable vices. But where was he to get money to satisfy all these passions?

At first his father gave him the money but when he refused, Valentino began by pawning his watch then selling clothes and sacks of wheat. One day he even succeeded in prizing open his father's safe and filled his purse with gold pieces. His father then realised the bad state his son had reached and to keep him away from his mates and even Mari himself he sent him off to study philosophy in another city. But he did not keep at that for long. Valentino took up a dissolute lifestyle again. He spent his accommodation money on billiards and when he had no money left he racked up one or another debt which Osnero paid so his son would not be dragged before the courts. His sorrowful father, despite his old age, went off to the city many times, prayed, advised his son, recommended he return to religion and the happy life he had once enjoyed.

"Father," Valentino replied, "Mari's lessons have had their effect on me and I cannot turn back. I know I am on the road to ruin but I need to push on."

"But dear Valentino," his father said, weeping, "Listen to me. Come home, do what you want so long as you abandon this wicked path you have set out on. Your life will lead to disgrace, poverty, infamy, and will lead me to the grave."

Valentino's gaze bored right through him, and as if he really wanted it to strike home, he asked him: "Then why did you get in the way of my vocation?" And having said that he left his father standing in the middle of the square, went off down the road to contract another debt larger than the first ones, then returned to his wretched friends.

This was a like a sword plunged into Osnero's heart. It was then that he understood the fatal consequences of an obstructed vocation, detested the fact that he had ever known the perverse Mari, deplored the very moment he had entrusted his dear Valentino to him, but it was repentance that bore no fruit. Plunged into sorrow he began weeping and walking through the city streets crying out: "If Valentino were to come home I would be happy for him to be a priest, friar, anything so long as he turns away from the road to disgrace! What an unhappy father I am and what an unfortunate son you are! What a sad future lies ahead for you!"

When he got home he begged his parish priest to give him enlightenment and advice. The priest tried writing Valentino a letter, but there was no reply. He asked some friends living in the same city to try any means to persuade his son away from his descent into debauchery. But when they tried, news came back that Valentino was now mixing with criminal types who were involving him in the worst kind of activities. He was caught

## *Contents*

red-handed and thrown into prison with them. Osnero could not deal with this last fatal blow given his age and his weak heart and he went out his mind. He collapsed into the arms of a friend who had come to bring him comfort. Regaining his senses for a moment he shouted:

“Cursed Mari, you have ruined me and my son! I am going to have to give account to God.....for an obstructed vocation.”

And having said that he became delirious again and with a violent shudder, died.

## Chapter 9. Recent news of Valentino.

When Osnero died, Valentino's creditors all wanted to be paid, so a part of the family inheritance was put up for auction. The rest went to the internal revenue office to pay legal costs, debts, and to indemnify some people that Valentino had caused serious harm to. That left nothing. About Valentino we had only heard that he had been shifted from one prison to another, that his case was judged to be a serious one and his very life was in danger. Then years went by and nothing more was heard of him. Finally, a letter came to the director of the college where Valentino had done his final years of secondary schooling. In it he gave an account of his sentencing and some news that I believe should be repeated here in its entirety:

My beloved Director,

The one writing is an old friend and a dear pupil who has now been condemned to hard labour. You may be horrified, but forgive me, and read on.

When I left you to go on holidays with my poor father, you were kind enough to give me some reminders which would have helped me had I put them into practice; but idiot that I was, I ignored them to my irreparable harm. You told me to write soon. But once through my own fault and then quite unable to, I never did. Now I am sending this to you by secure means and so fulfilling my duty. I want to pour out all the bitterness of my soul into your fatherly heart, as I once used to tell you all the secrets of my conscience - How sad are the things that happened after we separated! To block my vocation my unfortunate father entrusted me to a wicked individual who in one way or another seduced me and led me into all kinds of vice.

Remorse, horror at my wickedness always went with it but I could never decide to turn back.

The final crime, I am ashamed to say, was murder. Heavens above! What a shocking word! A pupil of yours who had gained first prize for good behaviour, who wanted to embrace the ecclesiastical state or take up a brilliant secular career is now covered in the worst kind of infamy and calls himself a murderer. Hear me out.

After spending some years gambling and in revelry I found myself weighed down by debts and being pursued by creditors. Hoping to win something I spent a night gambling with some criminal types. When we all found ourselves completely broke one of them suggested entering a house where the owner was asleep, and commit robbery. Everyone stared at the man who was making

## *Contents*

this dreadful suggestion and trembled at the thought of it, since he seemed to everyone to be from an upright family, but nobody dared make any comment.

With some false keys and by breaking in we had already reached one room, opened a safe and put our hands on a considerable sum of money when the owner awoke and began shouting "Thieves, thieves," then the servants started yelling "Thieves" and they soon arrived with wooden planks, sticks, forks or whatever else they could lay their hands on. One of my friends, to quieten them down and out of self-defence, unfortunately fired his pistol and hit the arm of the owner's wife who was still in bed, where she had been lying ill. With everyone shouting we tried to escape but there was no longer time. The security forces had blocked the exits and the five of us fell into the hands of the police. The poor woman, whether it was because of the wound or her illness, or perhaps the fright of it all was in a serious condition and died the following day. Meanwhile we were taken to one, then another prison. Finally, after two years one of us was condemned to hard labour for life; I and another three to fifteen years of the same. I have now been here for three years and in view of my good behaviour they have reduced my sentence by two years. Who knows if some favourable event might not further reduce my sentence!

Dear father of my soul, who could ever have imagined that one of your pupils, who had so gladly accepted your advice and was often comforted by you, would one day become, horrible as it is to say it, a jailbird? Now you can see where all my family comforts ended up and what condition I now find myself in. From morning to evening I am condemned to hard labour without any reward other than constant beatings and often being whipped. My bed is a hard straw mattress; I get a ladle of soup, a slice of bread and some water as my only daily nourishment.

But this is nothing. There is the hatred, contempt, the cursing, obscenities, blasphemies in your ears that make this place like hell. The disgrace I have brought on my family, the infamy my name now has, my sad future, the expected death of my father all bring me remorse both day and night.

Maybe you will ask: "How could you have become so wicked when you were so good with us for five years?" I have never been, nor am I even now a wicked person. I am an unhappy young man, an unfortunate one, but not a perverse one. My father's opposition to my vocation, and a wicked guide led me first of all to go with bad companions and then into the abyss I now find myself in. But religion was always with me and whatever I was doing wrong I could never forget the kind words you often whispered in my ear: "If you lose your soul everything is lost; if you save your soul you will be saved for eternity."

Now that I know the enormity of my crimes I adore the hand of the Lord that has struck me and I accept my woes in repentance for my misdeeds. I do not know what my future will be but if one day I can come out of this



## *Contents*

place of disgrace I will run to your feet immediately; your counsel will guide my actions for the rest of my life; indeed I have the firm hope that with your great kindness you may be able to give me some work, no matter how menial it is, so long as I can work, do penance and save my soul.

Meanwhile you should warmly advise parents of other young students to see that they put their children where they will be brought up in religion and good behaviour, and never oppose their choice of vocation. Never cease to recommend two things in particular to my old friends or to any boys who are still under your fatherly control:

1. Avoid bad companions as terrible enemies who will lead body and soul to ruin;
2. When deciding on their vocation to give it serious consideration and after praying about it to accept the advice of a pious, learned and prudent guide. And when they encounter difficulties from their parents, they should not follow my example, but calmly pray, insist in all peace and tranquility with their parents until obstacles are removed and then act in accordance with the adorable will of the Lord.

I ask God to grant me the grace to be able to see you once again and be guided by your fatherly advice, and make up for my scandal with a Christian life so that through the Lord's great mercy I may leave this exile and vale of tears to fly to the bosom of the Creator to praise and bless him for eternity.

## Chapter 10. Mari's death.

Mari had been present at Osnero's death, and while the latter was cursing him he had glared at him so threateningly and cruelly that he had left him utterly terrified. That stare seemed to be saying: "Mari, you are the reason for all this catastrophe and for my death," and although the real cause was Osnero himself, who should never have entrusted his son to a person of such disrepute, it is also true that Mari was the fatal instrument of iniquity and should never have agreed to his friend's ill-advised idea by employing such wicked means.

Now you should note that Mari boasted of being very open-minded where religion was concerned, and had never given any sign of fear either of the living or the dead; but after Osnero's death he felt that that last terrible glare would be with him night and day. He was sometimes seen leaving his dinner and running out terrified by the stark appearance, as he used say, of Osnero threatening him.

And it was not rare for him to awake at night shouting and calling his servants to come and keep the ghost of Osnero from haunting him. This shade, this ghost, I believe, was nothing but the remorse of conscience which evildoers feel.

Mari himself, unable to convince himself that it was more than imagination, sought relief in gambling, big dinners, parties with friends, but he could not improve his lot because as soon as he got home these spectres, shades, imaginings would terrify him more than ever.

One of his former friends suggested one day that he go and ask the parish priest for some wise counsel. "Priests," he told him, "have certain secrets or counsels or blessings, as they say that are often very effective for calming inner disquiet." Mari was not familiar either with the parish priest or any other priests, but he did know how to treat anyone kindly and courteously; nor had he ever shown any particular aversion to the parish priest other than what any worldly man usually has for ministers of religion.

Nevertheless he delayed for some days but seeing his woes and concerns increase, he decided to take up the idea of visiting the parish priest. The man of God kindly welcomed him and heard the whole story of Mari's anguish and ills. At the end the good pastor sought to calm him, observing that it was the result of the deep impression that his friend Osnero's death had made on him. Then taking Mari affectionately by the hand, he said to him: "Nevertheless, Mari, I think I can suggest an effective remedy for your ills that will also bring you real advantage."

"Yes, tell me and I will take up the remedy you suggest; I have much respect for you and confidence in you."

"You have never given much thought to religion in the past. Maybe your serious business concerns have been the reason for that. But listen now to your pastor, prepare yourself and make a good Confession and you will find powerful relief for your woes in

this.”

At these unexpected words Mari’s face altered colour, then looking severely at the parish priest, and taking his hat, he stood up. “Father, I am your servant, but these are not the kind of things to be telling Mari.”

And having said that, he left before he became really angry.

When he arrived home, to his great surprise he found a letter there from Valentino. The letter reproached him in hard and resentful terms for the wicked way he had led him into disgrace and desolation. “Your twisted advice,” the letter ended, “led my home to ruin, sent my dear father to an early grave, and made a criminal of an upright young man.”

These reproaches were like a lightning bolt that struck Mari’s already distraught mind and he felt even more haunted by Osnero’s ghost and by the remorse for what he had done to Valentino. He then fell into a state where he could not touch any food at all and in a short time he became exceedingly weak. Fever, inflammation of the intestines, ulcers were added to his already existing ills.

In that pitiful state Mari began to think seriously about his affairs, and noting that the ulceration in his bowels had advanced to his throat. With his tongue covered in blisters and swollen so much that he could hardly talk, he had no further illusions as to the seriousness of his condition.

“Poor Mari,” he was heard to exclaim to himself, “it is all about to end, you must leave this world - but to go where? Your body will go to the cemetery, but your soul? Poor Mari! Had you thought about this moment in good time, how you would now be comforted!” He then asked for a drink but was unable to swallow it. He sent his servants and friends away so he could rest for a while but as soon as he began to enjoy a few moments of sleep he began yelling out and calling for help.

“Right at the moment I fell asleep the terrible ghost of Osnero appeared, revealing that I would soon die and appear before the Supreme Judge. Perhaps there will not be time but all the same I would like to make one last attempt; go quickly to the parish priest and tell him I am close to death, but to come quickly.”

The parish priest usually wanted to find out about Mari each day but had always been prevented from coming to his bedside. and there he was right at that moment at the door to the house, asking to enter. He was immediately brought to the sick man.

“Father,” Mari told him emotionally and marvelling that he was there so quickly, “Forgive my offences; I have insulted you . . .”

“Don’t speak of forgiveness, I was never offended by you. I have always loved you and even more so now that you have allowed me to come to you.”

“Father,” Mari said, breaking down, “do I still have a hope of being saved?”

“Yes, dear Mari, God’s mercy is infinite. He has given you time, the desire and seen that I am here to help you. Have courage. You are in the hands of a friend.”

“Will God forgive all my iniquity?”

“Yes, Mari, I assure you in the name of our Saviour whose immense kindness you see represented here on the crucifix.” And saying that he showed him the crucifix he always carried on his visits to the sick.

“What do I do now?”

## Contents

“You make a good Confession.”

“I cannot do that any longer, I have no strength left.”

“Do not worry, I am your parish priest and I will help you, so you only need to reply to my questions.”

And with zeal and charity he began to hear his Confession. One was asking questions, the other replying, and when Mari was confused the priest played the part of both confessor and penitent with admirable self-confidence.

But then.... “What the...?” And a few minutes later Mari so seemed so lacking in strength and his tongue was so swollen that he could barely speak. He was able to finish his Confession, though not without serious difficulty.

When that was over Mari felt very peaceful, and even given his illness seemed happier than anyone had ever seen him. He called his relatives and friends and making a huge effort, spoke thus: “I have given scandal, so forgive me. My illness and death are penance for my sins. My God I thank you, you are a merciful God. I would very much like to receive Viaticum, but the ulcers in my throat and my swollen tongue prevent me.”

He lived another two days in that anguished and suffering state but fully conscious, fully resigned to the divine will, though unable to speak. His parish priest stayed with him day and night, and any time he tried to leave, Mari would quickly take him by the hand, kiss the hand affectionately and indicate that he should stay. He often kissed the crucifix and would say, as best he could, the brief aspirations that were occasionally suggested to him.

A few hours before he breathed his last he seemed very agitated: he wanted to speak but couldn't, kissed the crucifix, then looked at those standing around him, and being unable to speak, began to cry. The people standing there were concerned because they could not understand what he wanted to say so they brought him a pen and paper to see if he could write down his thoughts in some way.

Mari showed how pleased he was, took the pen and supported by his friends and resting his hand on the parish priest's arm, wrote:

“Valentino, forgive me for the scandal I gave, live as a good Christian and you will be happy until you die. I die repentant; may divine mercy be mine and yours, and I shall wait for you in eternity.”

Then he let the pen fall and with a kind of smile, like someone with a great wish that has been satisfied, he lay back on his bed, entered his final agony and gave no further indication that he was conscious. The parish priest, who a few moments earlier had anointed him, gave him the papal blessing, then while he was reading the prayers for the dying, Mari left this mortal coil to enter into eternity where we hope he found mercy in the Lord's sight.

With Ecclesiastical approval.

**A prayer for the present calamities faced by the Church.**

Sweet Jesus, Divine Master! You always frustrated the wicked machinations of the Pharisees, dispelled the advice of the wicked and the fainthearted who sought to deceive people through their false arguments. Let the light of your grace shine on us, your disciples, so that we will never be corrupted by the guile of those who are worldly wise, and who spread their pernicious thinking to draw others into their errors. Grant us the light of faith that we may recognise the lures of the wicked, and that believing steadfastly in the Church's teachings, we may continue to reject false arguments masquerading as truth.

His Holiness, Pope Pius IX by Divine Providence, this 22nd October 1866 graciously grants 100 days indulgence in the Church's customary form to those who piously and devoutly recite this prayer.

AL. CARD, BARNABÉ

Pref. of the Sacred College of Propaganda Fide.

Part VII.  
Comollo

## HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF CLERIC LOUIS COMOLLO

Written by a colleague

TURIN SPEIRANI & FERRÈRO Press, near the Church of St Rock

1844

### **To the seminarians in Chieri**

Since the example of virtuous actions is of much greater value than any elegant discourse, it would not be unreasonable to offer you an outline of the story of someone who, having lived in the same place and under the same discipline as yourselves, can serve as a true model for you to be worthy of the goal to which you aspire and succeed in becoming excellent priests in the Lord's vineyard.

It is true that this item lacks two notable features: polished style and elegant presentation. I delayed in the hope that there might be someone better than I to take up the task but to no avail, so I have decided to do it myself as best I can, urged on by the repeated requests of my colleagues and other notable individuals, convinced that the affection you have shown towards this most worthy companion of ours, and your charity, will supply for my lack of talent.

Though I may not be able to charm you with fine words I am much consoled in knowing that I can in all sincerity promise that what I write is true and are things I myself saw, or heard or learned from reliable witnesses. You will also be able to judge since you were partly eyewitnesses too.

If, as you read this, you feel inspired to imitate one of the virtues indicated here, give glory to God for it. While I pray that it may be evermore advantageous to you it is to God alone that I dedicate this effort.

# 1. Louis Comollo's childhood

Louis Comollo was born on April 7, 1817 in the Cinzano region, in a hamlet called Pra. His parents were Charles (Carlo) and Joanne (Gioanna) Comollo, who although not well off materially have something even more valuable than wealth, their piety and fear of God.

Louis was by nature a good soul, compliant, and with a docile and gentle character. When he had reached the age of reason the first seeds of piety and devotion were seen to be taking root in him. They then continued to grow wonderfully throughout the course of his life. From the time he had learned to say the holy names of Jesus and Mary, from then on he kept them as the object of tenderness and reverence. He never showed aversion to or slackness in prayer, something common in children; in fact the longer the prayer time, the more content and happy he was.

He easily learned to read and write, and soon used this to his own spiritual advantage and that of others, since on Sundays and holy days mainly, when others his age would be playing or going here or there, he would get some of them to come with him then would read to them or explain what he had learned, or would tell them some edifying stories. This won him the respect and veneration of his peers such that when he was around, nobody dared use indecent or questionable language. If something like that happened inadvertently, they would soon warn one another: "Quiet, or Louis will hear you." If he heard any talk that was unbecoming or disparaging of religious matters he would say "Don't talk like that" in his admirably pleasant way, adding: "Words like that don't sound good in the mouth of a young Christian." It was this tenor of life that edified his companions and won him the admiration of good people who were amazed at such virtue in a child.

"I had a son," said one father, "and I just didn't know what to do with him: I had treated him kindly and firmly, but all in vain. The idea came to me to send him to Louis, and maybe he could succeed in making him more obedient, so he would no longer be reason for me to think so badly of him. My little rascal at first was reluctant to go with someone who had little in common with his view of things but soon, enticed by what he saw of Louis, he became a friend and companion in virtue to the point that he still shows the moderation and goodness he absorbed from that kind soul."

He was outstanding for his obedience to his parents; always ready and attentive to whatever was asked of him and was anxious to carry out any indication of theirs, making every effort even to see what they would want in advance. When drought, hail storms or loss of animals befell them and his parents were affected by it, Louis was the one who comforted them and urged them to see whatever happened as coming from the Lord. "We need this" he would say. "Whenever the Lord's hand touches us, he always treats us with kindness; it is a sign that he remembers us and wants us too to remember him."



He would never leave his parents without their express permission. He observed this so carefully that once, when he had gone to visit some relatives with permission to do so briefly, charmed by his edifying and pleasant conversation, they did not let him return in time. He felt so regretful about it that he went away to cry in private when he saw that he would have to disobey, and as soon as he got home he asked forgiveness for the disobedience that he had committed despite himself. He kept away from others sometimes, but to withdraw to some quiet corner of the house to pray, or meditate. "I often saw him eat in a hurry," one person who had grown up with him told me, "quickly do all his assigned tasks and while others were taking time for some recreation, he would look for a pretext to leave and go off to some furrow amongst the vines, if he was out in the countryside, or in the hay shed if he was at home, and there he would pray aloud, or read devout books." It is true that even amongst the least of us God knows how to lead the simple and unlearned and guide them towards the sublime paths of holiness. Real features of devotion and great affection for religious matters were bound up strictly with these wonderful signs of virtue. This became evident after he made his first Confession. He made a careful examination of conscience; he then went off to present himself to the confessor, and given a certain confusion and his reverence for the Sacrament, his apprehension over his faults (if indeed he had committed any), and feeling so sorry for his sins, he broke down in copious tears and needed to be comforted in order to begin and then continue with his Confession.

He shared in the Body of Christ to the similar edification of those around him. From then on he became so fond of these two Sacraments that approaching them gave him the greatest of consolation; he never let an opportunity go by to benefit from them. But however frequently he allowed himself the opportunity for Communion, just the same, when he was not able to satisfy his fervent love for Jesus, he found ways to do this through spiritual communion. When he became a cleric and found himself at the Seminary he was often heard to say:

"It was because of the important work of St Alphonsus with the title: Visits to the Blessed Sacrament that I learned how to make a spiritual communion, which I can say has been my comfort through many dangers when I was a lay person."

Frequent visits to the Church were added to spiritual and sacramental communion. He felt so embraced by the presence of Jesus that often he would spend entire hours there, pouring out his fervent and tender feelings of affection. He was often sent to the church, where his uncle was the parish priest, to do particular tasks, and he often went there himself on the pretext that he had things to do, but he would never leave without spending some time with Jesus, and recommending himself to his dear mother Mary. There was no Solemnity, catechism class or sermon, no Benediction or other function in church that he was not present at cheerfully, and he was always ready to serve or help in any way he could.

Comollo's nature was so alien to the childish mischief normal to his age. He put up with whatever happened to him so calmly, was friendly and pleasant with his peers, modest and respectful with whoever was his superior, obedient in all things, devout, ready to lend any service which the Church allowed him to and which was compatible with his age, and did everything in such a way that it seemed to predict that the Lord

had destined him to a state of greater perfection. He frequently spoke to his spiritual director about this and he answered that as far as he could see, God was calling him to the Ecclesiastical State. he was happy to hear that since it was also his own inclination.

His uncle, the parish priest at Cinzano, whose virtue Louis was emulating, seeing him so keen and so promising, also wanted to support him in this. He called him to come and see him one day:

“Do you really want to be a priest?” he asked him.

“This is exactly what I want, and nothing else”, came the reply.

“Why?”

“Because since priests open Heaven for others, I hope I could also open it for myself”.

And so he was sent off to do his Grammar year at Caselle near Ciriè. And refining even more the virtues which had made him well known as a model of Christian living, there too he was admired by all who had occasion to meet him. He stood out in particular for his spirit of mortification. Already as a small child he used to make little offerings to Our Lady by abstaining from some food or fruit that would accompany his main meal:

“This I should give to Mary” he would say.

He went still further in Caselle; as well as offering a fast each week for Mary, he would often, under some pretext, abstain from the best food. It would be enough for there to be something which he particularly liked for him not to choose it, and he always did this out of love for Mary.

## 2. He goes to Chieri to study

At the beginning of the school year, 1835, when I was attending school in Chieri, I found myself on one occasion at a boarding house where they were talking about the good qualities of some of the students.

“I was told,” the person running the house began “that a very holy student will be coming to such-and-such a place.”

I laughed, considering the matter to be a joke.

“But it’s true,” he added “he would be the nephew of the Parish Priest at Cinzano, and a young man of remarkable virtue.”

I did not take much notice of it, except that one particular fact made me recall it. It was just a few days later that I had seen a student (without knowing his name) who showed such poise, such modesty as he went on his way, was so pleasant and courteous with whomsoever he spoke, that I really was wonderfully taken by it all. This wonderment grew when I observed the way he carried out his duties so precisely, and how he always turned up exactly on time at school. As soon as he got there he would take his assigned place and not move, unless there was something he had to do, unless his duties meant he had to.

It was the usual custom for the students to pass their time while coming to school joking, playing around, even doing dangerous things. Comollo was also invited to get involved, but he always excused himself saying that he wasn’t the practical type, he didn’t have the skills. Nevertheless one day one of his schoolmates came up to him and wagging a finger at him, told him to take part in the rather wild games they were engaging in at school.

“No, my good friend,” he replied kindly, “I’m not very good at that, I’d end up making a fool of myself.”

The cheeky friend, when he saw that he wasn’t interested, insolently and quite unacceptably whacked him across the face. I was appalled to see this, and given that the one who did it was not as strong nor as old as the one he had assaulted, I expected that he would give back as good as he had got. But the attack turned entirely in another direction: he turned to the one who had hit him and seemed happy just to say:

“If doing this makes you happy, then go in peace, knowing I’m ok with that.”

This made me recall what I’d heard said, that there was a saintly lad coming to our school, and when I asked what his name was and where he came from I knew then that he was the one whom I had heard spoken about in such a praiseworthy manner.

As for his studies and diligence I can think of no better way to express this than in the words of his good teacher, who wrote to me in these words: Although the character and nature of this fine young man Comollo might well be already well known to you since he was a fellow student, and you would have seen him close up, just the same I most gladly

send you this letter with the opinion that I had already formed then when I had him as a student for two years from 1835 to 1836 in Humanities and Rhetoric at the School in Chieri.

He was a talented young man with a most pleasant disposition. He worked diligently at his studies, was always so attentive to everything, and was so scrupulous and watchful of every detail concerning his duties that I cannot recall a single instance of having to scold him for something he might not have done properly. He could be proposed as a model for any young person because of his conduct, obedience, pliability; so I wished him all the very best when I heard that he was entering an ecclesiastical career.

I never saw him get into arguments with other friends; instead he would answer injury or insult patiently and pleasantly. I saw him as destined to comfort his venerable uncle, the worthy Parish Priest of Cinzano, in his old age. He loved him dearly and had sown such rare and remarkable virtues in his heart.

So I was very sad to hear of Louis' death, and my only comfort was the thought that by his virtuous life he had achieved ahead of time and in such a short time what he might have done over a long ecclesiastical career. Perhaps God wanted to call him to Himself through his untimely death because God looked beyond his age to all the good that he had done and the merit deserved, and we must accept the divine will.

You have asked me to speak of what I observed that was remarkable in him; but what else could I say that is more remarkable than his even-temper, his steadfastness at such a young and normally fickle age? From the first day that he came to my school until the end of the two years he was always the same - always good and always intent on practising virtue, piety, diligence. . . .”

These were his teacher's words.

And outside of school these wonderful gifts were equally put into practice.

“I came to see in young Comollo all the virtues proper not just to his age, but to someone who was long practised in them”, the man running the boarding house said. “He was always happy and even-tempered, unperturbed by whatever was going on, and he was never looking out for what might be particularly of his own taste. He was always happy with whatever was on hand; one never heard him say: this has no taste, or it's too hot, or very cold; one never heard him say anything that was less than honest or intemperate. He spoke willingly of spiritual matters, and if someone spoke badly of religion, he demanded that they speak about sacred ministers with the greatest reverence and respect. He was very fond of solitude and never went out without express permission, always giving the time, place and reasons as to why he would be absent. For all the time he lived here, he was a great encouragement for others to live in a virtuous way, and the others were sorry when he had to change abode to put on the clerical habit and go and live in the Seminary, thus depriving us of an exceptional model of virtue.”

I could also say the same, since on various occasions when I spoke with him, or we worked together, I never heard him complain about things at the time, or about the seasons, or that he had too much work to do or too much study; in fact whenever he had some free time, he would hurry off to see a friend to help him with a problem, or talk about things to do with study or devotion.

He was no less zealous about religious observances and vigilance in everything to do

with devotion. This is what the Spiritual Director of the schools had to write.

He would certainly have come to know him very well. You have asked me to say something about this young man whose memory is very dear to me, so I am very happy to respond. Young Louis Comollo is not one of those people about whom I should be speaking in vague terms, nor will I be exaggerating in giving the most praiseworthy testimony.

You already know that he belonged to a very special class of student, of the kind given to devotion and study, but Comollo stood out and shone amongst these; I am sorry to say that the Prefect of the schools has died, since he would have been able to say many wonderful things about his studies, his excellent conduct including his conduct outside of school hours. As for me, other than assuring you that I never had reason to scold him for any fault, no matter how slight, I can also assure you that he was keenly present at our meetings, very self-assured, always listened attentively to the Word, was very devout in attending Mass and other sacred ceremonies, frequented the Sacraments of Confession and Communion regularly, and was truly diligent in every pious duty, exemplary in every act of virtue. I would willingly have been able to offer him as a shining and exceptional model of virtue to the other students.

As for his behaviour in class, the Rhetoric year was a demanding one and only the most outstanding students in study and devotion were granted access to it. We wanted then as we want now, young students of character and habits like Louis Comollo had.

His name reminded one of St Aloysius and he emulated many of his virtues in what he did. There's no other student that I would more willingly give testimony about than this one; I could speak of everything that is good in a young man. There's no other student that I would more willingly give testimony about than this one; I could speak of everything that is good in a young man. *Raptus est ne malitia mutaret intellectum eius.* I hope he is in Heaven now praying for me.

And that is what his Spiritual Director had to say about him.

I would not know what more to add to the opinions expressed above, except for what I had observed about his external behaviour. As soon as the exercises of piety, held at weekends in the Congregation's chapel, were over, most of the students would go for a walk or some other form of relaxation. But Comollo, who preferred fewer such pastimes, would immediately go off for Catechism classes for youngsters held at the church run by the Jesuits. And as with all other religious functions, he was a devout participant at these classes.

It could have been the result of his good nature, or it could have been the result of virtue acquired by self-control, but it seemed that he had none of that anxious curiosity which youngsters normally have when they come from the villages into the city and want to see and hear everything around them. Coming to and going from school he was recollected and modest, never dilly-dallied here or there either physically or in looks, other than to offer due respect to Superiors, churches, or some wayside shrine or other statue of the Blessed Virgin. It never happened that he would pass such by without uncovering his head as a sign of veneration.

Often when walking with him I saw him tip his cap without knowing the reason why, but looking around I would then notice some picture of Our Lady on some wall or other.

Our Rhetoric year was about to finish when I asked him about some of the interesting features or monuments in the city, and he told me that in fact he was not well-informed about these, as if he were just a visitor. The more Comollo was far from temporal occupations and things of interest, the more he was well informed and instructed on things pertaining to the Church. If there was a Forty Hours devotion or other public religious function he would know about it and, if he had the time, would take part.

He had a timetable for prayer, spiritual reading, visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and he observed it scrupulously. Circumstances had it that for a few months I went to the Cathedral precisely at the time that Louis went there to spend time with Jesus. So I would be happy to describe what he was like there. He would take up a place near the altar if he could, kneel down, join his hands, bow his head slightly, cast his eyes down and would stay absolutely still; he would be insensitive to any voice or sound. It would often happen that when I had finished my duties, I wanted to invite him to come home with me. So I would nod my head or, coming a bit closer, would cough, to get him to move; he would always stay the same until I actually came up and touched him. Then, as if woken up from sleep, he would move and although a little unwillingly, would accept my invitation. He willingly served Mass even on school days; but on holidays it would be normal for him to serve as many as four or five.

Although he was so focused on things of the spirit, you would never see him with clouded face or sad but always happy, always content, and with his pleasant way of speaking he made everyone he spoke with happy. He used often say that he liked the words of the Prophet David: *Servite Domino in laetitia*: Serve the Lord in gladness. He liked to talk about history, poetry, the difficulties of Latin or Italian, but humbly, amiably enough such that while offering his opinion he always deferred to others.

He had a special friend, a confidante with whom he would speak of spiritual matters. He gained great consolation when dealing with and speaking of such topics. He considered that Jesus showed immense love by giving himself to us as food in Holy Communion. When he spoke of the Blessed Virgin, one saw him full of great tenderness, and after telling or hearing tell of some grace of healing for the body, at the end he would blush or break down in tears exclaiming: "If Mary is so good to our miserable body, how much more will she do something for the soul of whoever calls on her?"

Such was the esteem he had for religious matters that not only did he suffer when someone spoke disparagingly of them but he could not remain indifferent. It happened to me once that I spoke jokingly using the words of Holy Scripture, and I was reminded of the fact immediately. He told me not to joke about the Lord's words.

If someone wanted to say something about priests he immediately urged them to speak well or remain silent, since they were God's Ministers. This was how Louis prepared himself for his clothing day as a Cleric. Whenever he spoke of this he showed how happy and content he was.

"Is it possible," he used say, "that I, a poor herdsman, could be a priest and pastor of souls? Well, I feel inclined to nothing else, my Confessor tells me to do this, my will tells me, and it is only my sins that tell me to the contrary; so I will sit for the exam, and the result will be the judge as to the Divine Will regarding my vocation."

He often asked his friends to pray for him so that the Lord might enlighten him and

let him know whether or not he was called to the ecclesiastical state. So, admired by his companions, loved by his superiors, respected by all, this true model of virtue completed his Rhetoric year in 1836.

### 3. After his Clothing Day he goes to the Seminary in Chieri

He took the exam as indicated, and given the favourable result, prepared for his clothing as a cleric. I would not know how to adequately express all the feelings of affection he felt on that occasion. He prayed and asked others to pray for him, fasted, often broke down in tears, spent a lot of time in church so that when the day arrived for his feast (as he called the day he received the clerical habit) he made a general confession and received Communion with great fervour. He was as happy as if he had received the most honourable job in the world. He was caught up in a spirit of devotion and religious sentiment, recollected and modest. He seemed like an angel, dressed as he was in the ecclesiastical habit that he so much longed for and respected. That day was always a memorable one for him and he used say that his heart was completely changed: from a pensive and gloomy type he became amiable and cheerful, and every time he thought back to that day his heart was overwhelmed with fondness and joy.

Meanwhile the opening day of the Seminary had arrived. He would duly take up residence and stand out not so much for extraordinary virtues, but for accomplished ones. The ones that he especially stood out for were the exact fulfilment of his duties, his study, and his keen spirit of mortification. He had read how Saint Alphonsus made a vow never to waste time. This was cause for his highest admiration and he sought to imitate him in it in every way possible. So from the very moment he first entered the Seminary he applied himself with such diligence to study and devotion that he benefited from whatever occasion, whatever means would keep him busy all the time. When the bell went he immediately interrupted what he was doing to answer God's voice (which was what he called the sound of the bell), calling him to his duty. I noticed more than once that even if the bell rang just once, it was impossible for him to continue what he had in his hands; he became confused and didn't know what to do. The virtue of obedience was so firmly rooted in him.

I won't speak of the superiors, for whom his obedience was prompt and heartfelt without ever asking why he was being asked to do something. But the college assistants, and his equals received the same attention and ready obedience to any order or advice, as well as his superiors. When the bell went for study he was there most punctually, and applied himself in such a recollected way that any noise, chatter, or frivolous behaviour from anyone else went as if he did not notice it. He did not move unless there was another bell. One day it happened that a classmate, passing behind him, knocked his coat to the floor. He was content to make a simple remark about it being better if he looked where he was going next time. His classmate, forgetting that he too was a cleric, and forgetting that charity demands we put up with the faults of others and not insult them, got angry



and raised his voice using offensive and threatening words. So Comollo, taking no notice of the insults thrown at him, settled himself again at his desk and continued to study calmly as if nothing had happened or been said.

In recreation, in groups, when going out for a walk he liked to always talk about academic matters, and in fact at study time he used to mentally prepare a series of things that he didn't fully understand so that he could soon raise them with a classmate in free time, someone he had special confidence in and who could explain them.

He knew how to liven up conversations with various items of useful research and with anecdotes, but constantly observed his praiseworthy trait of good manners, keeping quiet when someone else was talking. And often enough he would stop halfway through a word to make room for someone else to speak. He greatly abhorred the spirit of criticism or complaints about others; he spoke of his superiors but always reverently and respectfully; he spoke of his friends but always charitably and with moderation; he spoke about the timetable, the constitutions and rules of the Seminary, meals, but always expressing satisfaction and contentment. He did this in such a way that I could in all honesty say that in the two and a half years that I was at the Seminary I never heard him once offer a word that was against the principle he had firmly established in his mind: speak well of others or not at all. When he was forced to offer his opinion on someone else he always tried to interpret them in the best sense, saying that he had learned from his uncle that if an action had a hundred possibilities, ninety-nine of which were bad, one ought take the one that was good and judge things favourably. On the other hand speaking of himself he remained quiet about anything that might redound to his benefit without ever speaking about things that would give him importance or honour. In fact when he was being praised he would joke about it, putting himself down while others were putting him on a pedestal.

Those little 'flowers' of devotion that we had seen him adorned with amongst the clods, in the fields, in his studies, far from withering with the years, flowered in all their charm and perfection. It was wonderful to see how Comollo, given the bell for prayer or other sacred function, immediately ran there with the greatest diligence and kneeling or sitting up straight, in edifying recollection, he carried out his religious practices; one never saw the least reluctance in him about going to chapel or any other place to be there for his religious duties. In the morning at the first sound of the bell he got straight out of bed and adjusting whatever he needed to was there in church a quarter of an hour before everyone else to ready himself for prayer.

Every time the seminarians attended solemn functions in church they no longer recited the Rosary there, but Comollo never left that devotion aside, so once the public functions were over he would, with another friend, withdraw to the chapel to 'pay his debt' as he used say, to his good Mother by reciting the most holy Rosary. On holidays and especially over the Christmas holiday period, or Carnival, and the Easter solemnities, he would, even more than once a day, draw apart from common entertainments and recite the penitential psalms, or the Office of the dead, or of the Blessed Virgin in suffrage for the souls in Purgatory.

He loved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and as well as frequent visits or spiritual communion, he took advantage of any occasion for spiritual communion to the great

edification of those who were nearby. He would fast for a day in honour of Mary most holy before receiving Communion. After Confession he did not want to speak about anything except the greatness, goodness and love of Jesus whom he was going to receive the following day. When it was time for him to approach the sacred table I saw him taken up with the most lofty and devout thoughts. With full composure, walking slowly and deliberately with his eyes cast down, and at times trembling with emotion, he would approach the Holy of Holies. When he had returned quickly to his place he seemed beside himself, deeply moved and fully taken up in devotion. He prayed, but his prayer was interrupted by sobs, groans and tears; he could not quieten his rapture of affectionate piety until Mass was over and the morning hymn began. I often warned him to curb his external show of emotion since it might offend others:

“I feel so full of affection and so happy of heart,” he told me, “that if I can’t express it I feel I will suffocate.” “On the day I go to Communion,” he said at other times, “I feel so full of joy and goodness that I cannot understand or explain it.”

From this anyone can see clearly that Comollo was well advanced on the way of perfection. Those movements of love of God, of gentleness, of contentment in spiritual matters are the result of his keen faith, his burning charity which was deeply rooted in his heart and constantly guided him in his actions. The exemplary mortification of all his external senses went hand in hand with his inner devotion. He was modest in the use of his eyes when there was often an outing to gardens or villas, so that he saw little of the remarkable things around him which all the others used admire. He never let his eyes wander but would carry on a conversation with a friend in Latin taking no notice of anything else that was happening around him. It sometimes happened that on return from an outing he would be asked if he had seen his father, since they had passed nearby and if he had greeted him. He would answer that he hadn’t seen him. He was often visited by some of his cousins in Chieri, but he found this a real cross, having to talk to people of the opposite sex. So as soon as they had said what they wanted to and needed to, he would encourage them kindly to visit him as little as possible, then would quickly take his leave. He was sometimes asked if his relatives (those he treated with such reserve) were little or big, or particularly pretty, and he would reply that they looked tall in the shade but he knew nothing else about them since he had never ever looked them fully in the face. What a wonderful example and worthy to be emulated by youth especially those who aspire to or find themselves in the ecclesiastical state!

The simplest and most indifferent of activities became a way for him to exercise virtue. He had a habit of crossing his legs and resting his elbow on the table when at the table or in the study hall or in school. Out of love for virtue he wanted to correct this too, and to succeed he asked a friend to tell him immediately he did it and even to give him a small penance every time he saw him take up that position. This is where his exterior composure in church came from; from the study hall, to school or the refectory he edified and charmed anyone who saw him.

Mortification in food was something he practised daily: ordinarily the more he felt the need to take something (breakfast), that’s when he would stay away. He was extremely frugal at table: he drank little wine and what he did drink was watered down. Sometimes he did not eat the main course or drink wine but was content to eat bread dipped in

water, using the specious pretext that it was better for his health, but in reality it was his spirit of mortification. In fact, when he was told that this way of eating would be bad for his head or his stomach, he replied:

“For me it’s enough that it doesn’t harm my soul.”

Every Saturday he fasted out of love for the Blessed Mary. and on other vigils in Lent even before he was obliged to fast, he fasted so severely and took food in so small quantities that a friend he sat near at table said on a number of occasions that Comollo wanted to commit suicide! These were the main external acts of penance that I noticed, from which one can imagine what he practised in his heart, and how Comollo’s soul was constantly taken up in affectionate love for God, active charity towards his neighbour and a burning desire to suffer for love of Jesus Christ.

Comollo’s life at the Seminary (so one of his Superiors says) left people with such an excellent impression of him, and his holiness: his exactness in fulfilling his duties be they study of piety, his exemplary moral conduct. His entire approach showed his gentle, obedient, respectful and religious demeanour. His conversation was pleasant, so if anyone felt a bit down, speaking with him brought some consolation. He was so modest, edifying in word and in dealing with people that even the most indiscreet individuals were obliged to recognise in him a mirror of modesty and virtue. One of his companions used say that Comollo for him was a constant sermon; he was like honey that sweetened hearts, including the most bizarre types. Another said several times that he wanted to do everything possible to become a saint and to succeed he had decided to copy Comollo; and although he saw himself way behind such a model of virtue he was, just the same, very happy with the little he had been able to emulate.

As far as his behaviour during the holidays was concerned, it was the same as in the Seminary. He went very regularly to the Sacraments frequented sacred functions, was punctual in teaching Catechism to the youngsters at church (he did this dressed in lay attire), and even people he met along the way. This is how he described his timetable in a letter he wrote to a friend.

I have already spent some two months on holidays which, even though it has been very hot, have been very good for my health. I have already studied what was left over from logic and ethics, which I had left aside during the year; I would willingly take up reading Giuseppe Flavio’s *Church History* as you suggested, but I have already started reading the history of heresies, so I won’t have time. I hope I can do it another year. As for the rest my room is a little piece of earthly paradise; I go in and do exercises, laugh, study, sing, and the only thing missing is you to joke with. At table. at recreation, going for a walk I always enjoy the company of my dear uncle who, despite his age is always happy and gracious and every time he tells me something better than the one before, all of which makes me very content.

I am waiting for the moment we agreed on, be happy; and if you think well of me then pray to the Lord for me... etc.

He was extremely fond of anything regarding the ecclesiastical ministry and was very happy when he could be busy about those things, a clear sign that the Lord was calling him to the state that he aspired to. His uncle the Parish priest, in order to nurture such fertile soil and encourage his nephew’s inclinations, gave him the task of giving a sermon

in honour of Mary most holy. He wrote about this task in another letter addressed to the usual friend. I have to tell you about something that makes me happy on the one hand but has left me a bit worried on the other. My uncle has given me the job of preaching on the glorious Assumption of the Virgin Mary. My heart is full of joy and excitement at being able to speak of my dear Mother. But on the other hand, knowing my own inadequacy I can clearly see how I am far from being able to worthily thread her praises together. Be that as it may, with her support, which I must speak of, I am ready to obey; I have already written it out and studied it a bit; on Monday I will come to you and you can listen to me give it and make observations which I will find very acceptable, regarding gestures and content.

Recommend me to my Angel Guardian for the trip ...

We'll catch up later.

I still have this sermon with me which, although he used various quotes from creditable sources, is no less written by himself, and one notes expressions of those keen sentiments with which his heart burned regarding the great Mother of God. And he was a great success in delivering it.

"Just as I was about to stand before the people," he wrote, "my strength and my voice failed me, and my knees were knocking together. But Mary quickly put her hand on me and I became vigorous and strong; I started and then continued without the least hesitation. Mary did this, not I. Praise to her."

A few months later when I was in Cinzano, I asked what people were saying about the cleric Comollo and the sermon he had given. Everyone answered full of praise for him. His uncle said he saw God's work in his nephew. It was a sermon delivered by a saint, someone said.

"Oh," another exclaimed, "he seemed like he was an angel in the pulpit, so modest and so clear in his argument!"

Others spoke of the wonderful manner in which he preached. And then they repeated some of the ideas and even the very words which were still fixed in their memory.

Without doubt a farmer of such good will would have done great good in the Lord's vineyard. Such were his uncle's expectations, such was the hope his parents had, and such was the desire of his townsfolk, superiors, and friends. But God saw that he was pretty much ready for heaven. And so the evils of the world might not affect his intellect, he wanted to recompense his good will and call him to enjoy the fruits of the merits already acquired and the merits he earnestly still wanted to acquire.

## 4. Circumstances preceding his illness

It is not my intention to talk about matters I consider to be supernatural; I intend only to speak of facts that happened, leaving everyone free to judge as they see best.

In the autumn holidays of 1838. One nice day I went walking with Comollo up a hill, and seeing the poor crop that year in the countryside, I began saying to him:

“Next year the Lord will give us a more abundant harvest and we will make better wine.”

“You will be drinking it” he said.

“Why?” I replied.

“Because,” he said “I hope to be drinking a better one”.

And when I forced him to clarify he finished up by saying that he was burning with desire to drink the nectar of the Blessed.

When these holidays were over, he went to Turin and spent a few days with someone who is a good judge of people, and I write down here what he said: We were very much edified by the modesty of good Louis. Courteous, pleasant, simple, he inspired devotion in every thing he did, but especially when he prayed, he seemed like another St Aloysius. It was our great wish that he would spend some more days with us, but he really wanted to go. As he was leaving I said:

“Goodbye, perhaps we will see each other again.”

“No, no,” he replied, “we will not see each other again.”

“It wasn’t you I was thinking of when I spoke that way,” I replied, “but because of my advanced age I would like, indeed I hope, that you will come to celebrate one of your first Masses.”

“Well then,” he replied frankly and resolutely: “I will not be saying a first Mass; you will still be here in the coming year, but I will not be. So pray to the Lord for me. Goodbye.”

These last words, said so frankly by someone so beloved, left us quite moved and we found ourselves often asking if Louis had some inkling of his death? So when we heard the sad news of his death we said, full of admiration, that he knew all too well.

I lend much credence to this story since I have checked it out with other people and noted the same ideas and words.

When these holidays were over and he was heading back to the Seminary, he reached a spot from which he could look back over his home town. He paused and said to his father: “I cannot take my gaze off Cinzano,” and when asked what he was looking at and if he was regretting going back to the Seminary he said: “Not only am I not sorry, but I want to get to that peaceful place as soon as possible; what I am looking at is our dear Cinzano that I am seeing for the last time.”

When he was asked again if he was not feeling well, if he wanted to return home, he said:

“Nothing, it’s nothing; I’m fine, let’s move on happily, the Lord is waiting for us.”

“These words”, his father says “we have often repeated in the family, and every time I go past that spot, even now, I find it hard not to burst into tears.”

This detail was reported to me and others before Comollo’s death. This detail was reported to me before Comollo’s death. Despite these forebodings concerning the end of his mortal life, ones that Comollo had uttered on more than one occasion, in his usual calm way and with his customary imperturbability and even-temper he got back to his studies again and continued to be exemplary in his practices of piety. But since I everything he was doing I noticed he was even more attentive than usual in prayer and in anything else to do with piety. He always wanted to talk about the (Tonkin) Martyrs.

“These are real pastors of the Lord Jesus Christ’s sheep”, he said, “since they gave their lives to save the lost sheep. How much glory will be reserved for them in heaven.”

At other times he exclaimed:

“Oh, if I could at least, as I am about to depart this world, hear the Lord’s consoling words - *euge, servi bone*; come faithful servant!”

He spoke about paradise in joyful rapture; and one of the most beautiful things he used say was this:

“When I am alone or unoccupied I when I can’t sleep at night then I go for the most beautiful walks. I imagine that I am on a high mountain and from its peak I can see all the beauties of nature. I contemplate the sea, the land, towns, cities, and all the magnificent things about them; I exalt when I see the peaceful sky, I admire the firmament where all the scattering of stars form the most wonderful spectacle. Then to all this I add the idea of beautiful music, that with voice and sound seems to echo through the mountains and valleys. My mind takes delight in my imagination, I turn around, lift up my eyes and there I am before the City of God. I see it from the outside, then I come closer and can penetrate within; just imagine all the innumerable things I then see up close.”

Continuing on his ‘walk’ he would then talk about all the interesting and edifying things that he would inspect closely during these sessions in Paradise. It was in this year, too, that he discovered the secret of praying without distraction.

“Do you want to know,” he told me “how I begin to pray? It is a very material image that will make you laugh. I close my eyes, and in my thoughts I am carried into a large hall whose ceiling is held up by many columns that are most exquisitely decorated, and towards the back of the hall a huge throne rises up above which I imagine God is in all his majesty; then around him all the choirs of the Blessed. This material image is a wonderful help to me to lift up my thoughts to the infinite Divine Majesty before whom I prostrate myself and then with all the respect I can muster, I begin to pray.”

Following what the spiritual teachers say, this demonstrates how much Comollo’s mind was detached from sensible things and how much control he could exercise in gathering up all his faculties of mind to enter into spiritual conversation with God.

He would read meditations on hell, during weekday Masses, by P. Pinamonti, and I heard him often comment on this:

“During this year I have been reading meditations on hell in the chapel. I had already read them and I read them again, and even though the contents are sad and frightening, I want to keep on reading since while considering the intensity of those torments while I am still alive, I might not have to experience them in real terms after death.”

During Lent and with keen devotion, he also made his retreat. After this, he said that he did not have long to wait in this world and that the greatest favour the Lord could grant a Christian was that of making a retreat.

“It is the greatest of graces”, he told his friends rapturously, “that God can give a Christian, to give him time to arrange matters of soul in full awareness, at his leisure, and with the support of all kinds of favourable circumstances such as meditation, instructions, readings, good example. Oh! How good you are to us, Lord! How ungrateful would the one who did not make use of all this goodness from God!”

So, while he was perfecting himself in virtue, enriching his soul with merit before the Lord, the time was approaching for him to receive the reward that it seems he had a premonition of in so many ways.

## 5. He falls ill and dies

Such an innocent soul adorned with so many virtues as was Comollo's tells us that there is nobody who does not dread the approaching hour of death. He too experienced great apprehension. What will it be like for the sinful person if such good souls fear the moment they must present themselves before the Divine Judge to render account of their actions!

It was the morning of 25th March 1839, the Feast of the Annunciation, when I met Comollo in the corridors as I was going to the chapel. He was waiting for me. I asked him if he had slept well and he replied frankly that he was all done in. I was very surprised, given that the day before we had walked a good bit together and I had left him in perfect health. I asked him why he had spoken thus. He replied: "I feel cold throughout all my body, my head aches and my stomach seems blocked; but my bodily ills don't hurt all that much, what terrifies me (this he said in trembling voice) is that I must present myself before God's grand judgement."

I encouraged him not to be so anxious, even though these were serious matters, but rather remote for him and he still had time to prepare himself. We went into the chapel. He heard Mass after which he suddenly became very weak and had to immediately go to bed. Once the functions were over in the chapel, I went to visit him in the dormitory. As soon as he saw me amongst those standing around, he made a sign for me to come closer, as if he had something of great importance to show me, and then he began saying:

"You were telling me that it was something remote and that I still had time to prepare myself before going, but that's not the case; I am certain that I must appear before God soon; I have little time left to get myself ready; need I say it more clearly? We will be saying goodbye."

Nevertheless I encouraged him not to worry and not to make himself anxious with ideas of the kind.

"I am not worried, and I am not anxious," he interrupted me and then said "I am only thinking that I must go before this judgement, a judgement which brooks no appeal, and this makes me feel agitated."

I was much affected by these words; so I was constantly asking if there was any news about him and every time I visited him he repeated the same things: "The time to present myself to divine judgement is at hand; we must say goodbye."

During his illness he would have said this not once but more than fifteen times. And from the first day of his illness he told others the same when they went to visit him. He also said that his illness would be misunderstood by the doctors, that operations and medicines were to no avail; and this in fact was the case. These matters which at first I attributed to mere fear of divine judgement, when I saw that little by little things were happening as he had said, I spoke about them with some friends and with our Spiritual Director. At first he did not take much notice but then he was very surprised when he



began to see the effects.

Meanwhile Comollo was still in bed and feverish on the Monday; Tuesday and Wednesday he got up but seemed sad and melancholy, all taken up with the thoughts of divine judgement. On Wednesday evening he went to bed sick again and never got up again. On the Thursday, Friday and Saturday of that week (Holy Week), he was bled three times, took various medicines, broke into copious sweats, but there was no improvement. On the Saturday evening, Easter Vigil, I went to visit him:

“Since we must leave one another and soon I must present myself before the judgement seat,” he said to me “I would dearly like you to stay beside me tonight.”

The Rector, seeing that the patient was getting much worse, willingly granted me permission to spend the night at his bedside. It was the 30th March just before the solemn day of Easter. Around eight o'clock the fever became very strong; at a quarter past eight he began to go into convulsions and lost his senses. At first he cried out at length as if he were terrified by some frightening object or some grim spectre. From then until half past eight he came back to his senses somewhat and looking at those standing around he cried out in a loud voice: “Oh, judgement!” Then he began writhing with such strength that five or six of us around him could hardly keep him in the bed.

This went on for a good three hours after which he returned fully to his senses. He spent a long time then looking pensive as if caught up in serious reflection, then discarding all that atmosphere of mournfulness and terror that he had shown for the last few days concerning divine judgement, he began to look peaceful and calm. He spoke, laughed, answered questions and we thought that he had almost returned to his regular condition of health again. He was asked why the sudden change given that he was so melancholic earlier and now so happy and amiable. He seemed a bit embarrassed to answer that question; then, with his eyes darting here and there as if nobody would hear him he began to speak in a whisper to someone near him:

Up until now I dreaded dying for fear of divine judgement; this terrified me utterly; but now I am at peace and have no fear of what is to come and what they will tell you about in friendly confidence. While I was extremely agitated out of fear of divine judgement, I seemed suddenly to be transported into a wide, deep valley where the power of the wild currents and a strong wind sapped all the strength of anyone who was there. In the middle of this valley was a great abyss like a huge deep furnace, with flames flaring up from it ...

At this frightening scene I cried out for fear of falling into that frightful chasm. So I turned back to flee and there was a countless number of monsters all of horrible and different shapes trying to hurl me into that abyss ... I cried out more loudly and even more terrified, without knowing what I was doing and I made the Sign of the Cross. When I did that all the monsters sought to bow their heads but unable to do so they began squirming in agony and drawing away from me somewhat. Still I was unable to flee and get away from that accursed place; then I saw a multitude of armed men like strong warriors coming to my aid. They vigorously attacked the monsters, some of whom were torn apart, others were lying on the ground while others still hurriedly took flight.

Freed from danger I began walking through that broad valley on foot until I reached the foot of a tall mountain which could only be climbed by a staircase. But the stairs

were full of fat serpents ready to devour anyone who tried to climb up. But there was no other way and I did not dare to go forward, fearing that I would be devoured by the serpents. I was beaten by weariness and anxiety, without any more strength left in me, when a lady whom I consider to have been the Mother of us all, dressed in great magnificence, took me by the hand and made me stand up straight, and signalled that I should follow her up the stairs.

As she put her feet on the steps, all the serpents turned their deadly heads away and did not look at us until we were quite a distance from them. When we had reached the top of the staircase I found myself in a delightful garden where I saw things that I could never have imagined existed. "These things," Comollo finished by saying, "filled my heart and made me feel at peace so that instead of fearing death I wanted it to come quickly so I could join the angels in heaven and sing the praises of my Lord."

These were his words.

Whatever you might want to say about this story, the fact was that however great was his fear of appearing before God, he then demonstrated his desire that this moment should come immediately. There was no more melancholy or sadness on his face. He was all smiles and happily wanted to sing psalms, hymns or spiritual praises. The patient was advised that it would be a good thing for him to receive the Sacraments that day, it being Easter Sunday: "Willingly", he replied, "And since they say that the Lord rose from the tomb about this hour (it was four thirty in the morning) I would like him to rise in my heart with the abundance of his grace. There is nothing that bothers my conscience, but just the same given the situation I am in, I would like to speak to my confessor for a moment before receiving Holy Communion."

Here is something worthy of note: a young man of our time, in the bloom of life, convinced that he must soon present himself before the divine judgement, says frankly that there is not the least thing to reproach his conscience . . . that he is at peace. You might say that it was his well-regulated life, his pure heart and pure soul.

His Communion was a truly edifying and wonderful spectacle. When he had finished his Confession and prepared himself to receive Holy Viaticum, the Director, who was the minister, followed by the seminarians, entered the infirmary; as soon as he appeared the patient, deeply moved, his face bloomed, his appearance changed, and in holy rapture he cried out:

"Oh what a beautiful sight. So wonderful to see. Look how the sun is shining! Look at the crown made by the stars! Look how many are prostrate in adoration and do not dare to lift their heads! Oh! Let me go and kneel with them and adore that sun like I've never seen it before." While he was saying this he tried to get up and made strong efforts to approach the Blessed Sacrament. I made every effort to hold him down in bed; I was crying tears of affection and wonder; I did not know what to say nor how to answer him. And he struggled all the more to approach the Holy Viaticum; he was not satisfied until he had received it. After Communion, all focused on his affectionate thoughts of Jesus, he remained unmoving for a while then, breaking into raptures of joy once again, cried:

"Oh! Marvel of love! Who am I to be made worthy of such a precious treasure! oh! The Angels in heaven exult, but I have more reason to be happy since He whom the prostrate Angels respectfully see revealed in heaven, is now held within me to look after: *Quem*

*Coeli capere non possunt, meo gremio confero: magnificava Deus facere nobiscum: the Lord has done wonders for me, and I am filled with heavenly joy and divine consolation: et facti sumus laetantes.*” These and many other similar brief prayers he continued to say for a good period of time. Finally he lowered his voice, called me to him and then asked me not to speak to him about anything else other than spiritual matters, saying that these final moments were too precious, that there was not much life left in him, and that he had to spend all the time glorifying God; therefore he would answer no other questions other than something to do with these matters. In fact all that time when he was writhing and convulsing and being asked about temporal matters, he was raving; but when asked about spiritual matters his answers were more lucid.

Given that his condition was getting worse, his relatives sought opinions from various good doctors who proposed remedies and did various things: in other words they did what doctors do and what surgeons could suggest but all without effect, verifying in every way what Comollo had already predicted. Finding himself free to speak in confidence with a friend (the other seminarians had all gone to the Cathedral) he spoke in a way that was so filled with affection and religious sentiments that I am passing on what I was told he said:

In a tone that indicated something special he told his friend: “Here we are my dear friend, we are just about at the moment when we must leave one another for some time. Friendship is important not only to do what your friend asks while he is alive, but to do the same as we promised one another after death. Therefore the agreement that we made, our many promises to pray for one another to be saved, I want that to extend not just as far as the death of one of us, but of both of us; as long as you spend your days down here, promise and swear to pray for me.”

Although hearing these words from my friend I felt like weeping, I held back my tears and promised to do as he wanted. He went on: “So this is what I can say concerning yourself: you do not know if your days on earth will be short or long; but however uncertain may be the hour of death, it will certainly come; therefore do things so that your entire life is a preparation for death, for judgement . . . Men only think of death occasionally, they believe that this hour will come even though they don’t want it to, but they do not ready themselves, so when the moment arrives they are agitated and afraid, greatly embarrassed in finding themselves needing to sort out matters of their soul. Whoever dies amidst such confusion must be very afraid of eternal perdition. Happy those who spend their days doing holy and devout works and find themselves ready for that moment. If you are called by the Lord to become a guide for other souls, always nurture this idea of death, judgement, respect for the church, because one sees even important people who have little reverence for God’s house; it sometimes happen that simple people, simple servants have holier attitudes while the minister of the Sanctuary goes around without reflecting that he is in the house of the living God!”

“Since for all the time that we struggle in this vale of tears we have no other more powerful advocate than Mary most holy, you must therefore profess a special devotion to her. Oh! If people could be persuaded of the happiness that comes at the hour of death from devotion to Mary, everyone would be competing to find new ways to give her special honour. It will be her, with her son in her arms, who will be our defence against

the enemy of our soul at the final hour. Even though all of hell might be arrayed against us, with Mary in our defence, victory will be ours. Look for other things from those who recite some prayer to Mary, or offer some simple mortification, and then believe they are protected by her, while they lead a shameless life. Instead of this kind of devotion it would better not to be devout at all, because if they act like this, it is pure hypocrisy to think they will be favoured in their evil designs and even more so, if it were possible, given approval for their dissolute lives. May you always be truly a devotee of Mary by imitating her virtues, and you will experience the sweet effects of her goodness and love.”

“Add to this frequenting the sacraments of Confession and Communion which are the two tools or two weapons with which you will overcome the assaults of our common enemy, and all the shoals in this stormy sea of the world. Be careful with whom you deal, speak and where you go. I am not speaking of people of the opposite sex or other lay people, who are evidently a danger for us and whom we should avoid; I am speaking of our very companions, clerics and even seminarians. Some of them are bad, others are not so bad but not very good, while others still are truly good. The first group you must absolutely avoid, and deal with the second group when you have to, without developing any particular familiarity; it is the last group you must spend time with and draw both spiritual and temporal benefit from. It is true that they are few, but precisely for this reason you need to exercise the greatest caution looking for them, and then when you find them, spend time with them. Form spiritual friendships with them and draw much profit from this. With the good ones you will be good. With the bad ones you will be bad.”

“I have one thing still to ask of you and I ask you this kindly. When you go out for a walk and you pass by my grave you will hear our classmates say: ‘our classmate Comollo is buried here’. Suggest prudently to each of them that they say a Pater and a Requiem for me. This way I can be freed from the pains of Purgatory. There are many other things I would like to say to you, but my illness is getting worse and weighs on me, so recommend me to our friends’ prayers, pray for me to the Lord, and we will see each other again when he wishes that to happen.”

Sentiments like these expressed from the depths of his heart draw a true picture of his soul. These thoughts about eternal maxims, frequenting the Sacraments, tender devotion for the Blessed Virgin, fleeing dangerous companions, seeking out those from whom to draw some benefit for one’s studies, devotion, were the scope of all his activity.

On the evening of Easter day he was so exhausted that he could hardly articulate any words. He was then attacked by an even stronger bout of fever, with painful convulsions to the point where it was very difficult to talk to him. Despite losing consciousness, or agitated by the violence of his illness, as soon as someone said:

“Comollo, who are you suffering for?” He would immediately smile and become amiable: “For the crucified Jesus.”

Without a single complaint about his severe pain he spent the night and almost all the following day in this state. Meanwhile he was visited by his parents whom he barely recognised but he recommended to them they be resigned to the divine will. From time to time he began to sing in an extraordinary voice and kept this up in such a way that he might have been considered to be in good health. He was singing the Miserere, the

Litanies of Our Lady, the Ave Maria Stella and spiritual praises. But since the singing wore him out completely, we suggested some prayers to him; so he stopped singing and recited what we suggested to him.

At seven in the evening, on 1st April, things began to get worse and the Spiritual Director considered it wise to administer the Holy Oils. He had hardly begun the sacred function when the patients seemed to appear to be perfectly recovered, answered whenever he needed to, to the point where the priest commented that while a few minutes ago he seemed to be in agony he was now able to assist correctly and respond to all the prayers and responses which are part of this rite. The same thing happened at eleven thirty when the director, seeing a cold sweat break out over his pallid face, gave him the papal blessing.

Once he had received all the comforts of our holy Catholic religion, he seemed no longer to be a sick patient, but someone lying in bed to take a rest; he was fully aware, his soul at peace; he was happy and at any one moment said brief prayers to the Crucified Jesus, Mary most holy, the Saints. The Rector said:

“He does not need others to recommend his soul; he is doing this sufficiently for himself.”

An hour after midnight on 2nd April he asked one of those around him how much time there was still; he told him:

“Still half an hour.”

“There is more”, the patient added.

“Yes,” he replied believing that he was raving; “still half an hour and then we start again.”

“Ah my good friend” he replied smiling, “what a great repetition! There is more than repetition.”

When a friend asked him to remember him in Paradise, he replied:

“I will remember all of you, but especially those who help me escape from Purgatory.”

At half past one, although his face was as serene as usual, he seemed to be very weak and unable to breathe. Rallying a little soon after and gathering what strength he had left, with halting voice, eyes raised to heaven, he broke into this prayer:

Holy Virgin, kind mother, dear mother of my beloved Jesus, of all creatures you alone were worthy to bear him in your immaculate womb. Through the love with which you gave him suck, held him on your arms, suffered with him in his poverty, saw him ill-treated, spat upon, flogged and finally die suffering terribly on the cross. Through all of this obtain for me the grace of courage, keen faith, firm hope, ardent charity, sincere sorrow for my sins; and to all the favours that you have granted me throughout my life add the grace that I might die a holy death. Yes, dear and merciful Mother, assist me at this moment when I am about to present my soul to divine judgement; you yourself can present me in the arms of your divine Son; if you promise me this here I am with ardent and frank spirit, dependent on your clemency and goodness and I present my soul through your hands to the Supreme Majesty from whom I hope to receive mercy.

These were the exact words he said so emphatically and penetratingly that everyone around him was deeply moved to the point of tears.

When he had finished this fervent prayer he seemed suddenly overcome by a mortal lethargy. To keep him with us I asked him if he knew at what age St Aloysius had died

and he answered:

“St Aloysius was twenty three and I am dying when I’ve not yet turned twenty two.”

Seeing that his pulse was failing, I thought about getting close to him right at the moment that he was about to abandon this world and his friends; so I thought of saying something to him that came to mind in similar circumstances. He was all attention to to what was being said to him, his face and lips smiling, maintaining his peacefulness, eyes fixed on the Crucifix which he held tightly between his hands joined on his breast, and he made every effort to repeat every word suggested to him. For about ten minutes before he expired, he called one of those standing around him and said “if you want something for eternity I ... Good bye, I’m going.”

Those were his final words. Because his lips and tongue had stiffened he was unable to vocalise the brief prayers we whispered to him, but he mouthed them with his lips. There were also two Deacons present, Deacon Sassi and Deacon Fiorito who read him the *Proficiscere*. When that was finished and as they were recommending his soul to the Holy Virgin and to the Angels to offer him to the Most High, just as they were saying the holy names of Jesus and Mary, his beautiful soul quietly left his body and flew, as we devoutly hope, to its rest in the Lord’s peace. His face was serene and a smile played about it as if he was seeing something marvellous.

His happy release took place at two after midnight, before the first rays of dawn on 2nd April 1839. In another five days he would have turned 22. Thus was the death of the youthful cleric Louis Comollo, he was able to plant the seeds of virtue in his heart through the most ordinary of occupations, nurture them amidst all the words illusions, perfect them in two and a half years as a cleric, then bring them all to maturity through his painful death. And while everybody counted himself fortunate to have had him either as a model, or to be guided by his advice, or as a loyal friend, he left us all in the world in order to go to heaven and protect us from there.

It would seem, at first, that such a good Christian soul as was our Comollo would have nothing to fear of divine judgement. But if we observe things well, this is the ordinary behaviour of God’s elect. When they consider that they must present themselves before the rigorous divine seat of judgement, they are filled with fear; but God comes to their aid in his own time and instead of the fear of a sinner, which continues in agitation, remorse and desperation, the fear of the just changes to courage, confidence and resignation and produces the most wonderful happiness in the soul.

This is really the point where God has the just savour the hundredfold of their good works as the Gospel promises. The bitterness of death is sweetened by tranquillity of soul, contentment and inner joy which restores faith, confirms hope and inflames charity. Evil loses its violence and there is the advance sense of the enjoyment of the goodness that God is about to share with them for all eternity. This should be sufficient encouragement to lead us through the travails of life and to help us to put up with them with resignation and govern all our actions according to the divine precepts.

## 6. The funeral rites

Once daylight came and word spread of Comollo's death, the entire Seminary was in a state of great consternation. One said:

"Comollo is already in paradise praying for us"; while another said:

"How well he predicted his death!" And another:

"He lived as a just man and died as a saint" while yet another:

"If as a human judgement we can say that a soul departing this world flies to heaven, we can certainly say that about Comollo."

So each person competed with the other to find something especially relevant to him. One did his best to get his crucifix, others to have some of his holy pictures. Others considered themselves fortunate if they could have one of his books. There was one even who, not able to get hold of anything else, took his collar as a way of preserving the memory of such a beloved and venerated colleague.

The Rector of the Seminary, also very much moved by the special circumstances that had accompanied his death, and unhappy at the thought that his body would be brought to the town cemetery, went to Turin to ask the civil and Church authorities for permission to bury him in the church of St Philip adjacent to the Seminary itself. The professor for the morning conference, Fr Prialis, began school at the usual hour, but when it came time for him to speak, seeing the sadness written across the faces of all his listeners, also became emotional, and left the hall sobbing and in tears, without the strength to continue his conference.

The other professor, Fr Arduino, also came to class in the afternoon but instead of his usual talk offered a eulogy on Comollo's death wherein he expressed the sorrow that everyone felt at the loss of such a beloved companion. He also indicated that each one should take heart in the hope that given such an edifying life and wonderful death, he would now have a protector in heaven. He urged everyone to take him as a model of propriety and virtuous clerical behaviour. He described his death in various ways: the death of a just person, a death which was special in the eyes of the Lord, and concluded by recommending that we cherish this moment as a dear memory and try to imitate him in virtue.

On the morning of 3rd April, all the Seminarists present, along with the superiors, the Parish Priest (Canon) and the other Canons and clergy, the body was carried in through the streets of Chieri and after a lengthy procession during which funeral hymns and prayers were sung, was brought to the Church of St Philip. The bier was placed in the church accompanied by funereal music and the Director presided at the solemn sung Mass. After Mass the coffin was laid in a prepared grave close to the communion rails almost as if Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to whom he had turned with such love and with whom he had converse so willingly, also wanted him close to him in death.

Seven days later there was a solemn funeral Mass again celebrated with all pomp and circumstance, lights and decorations.

These were the final honours bestowed on him by his fellow clerics who, despite their sorrow spared nothing to celebrate such a dear friend.



## 7. Consequences of his death

It is an undeniable truth that the memory of good souls does not finish with their death but that their example is passed on to the benefit of posterity. An illness and death accompanied by such signs of lively faith and sentiments of virtue and devotion reawakened in many Seminarians the desire to imitate Comollo. Not a few, therefore, began to follow the advice he gave them whilst still alive, and others followed his example and virtue such that some who earlier had not demonstrated much the vocation they aspired to, used his death to make firm resolutions to become models of perfection.

“It was at the time of Comollo’s death,” one of his friends said, “that I decided to lead the life of a good cleric and become a holy ecclesiastic; and although my determination might thus far have not had great effect, just the same my commitment will continue, indeed I will redouble my efforts each day.” Comollo’s virtue did not just produce these first good resolutions, but they have continued even until today. The Rector of the Seminary a short time ago assured me that “the change of behaviour in our Seminarians on Comollo’s death has continued until today.”

It seems appropriate for me here to observe that the reason why Comollo’s death made such a great impression was the two appearances he made after his death. One of these was witnessed by the entire dormitory. It would also be appropriate to speak of some heavenly favours obtained through his intercession.

But I would like to leave all that aside and conclude this account, for whatever it is worth, with two facts which given the dignity and character of the people who have told them, would suggest to me that we can lend credibility to them.

One of these, a woman who has been very much involved in the service of God had been tempted for a long period. She had, one way or another, managed to overcome this temptation. One day the temptation was so strong that it seemed she would succumb and the more she tried to distance herself from her sinful imagination the more it went wild. She was unable to pray - her prayer was arid, dry; but turning her gaze to the table she saw something on it that had belonged to Comollo and it reminded her pleasantly of him.

“I began to cry out,” the same person says: “If you are in Paradise and can intercede with the Lord, ask him to free me from this terrible predicament. Then something wonderful happened! I had hardly uttered these words and was about to say something else when this unwanted temptation ceased and I found myself at peace. From then on I have never neglected to invoke that young angel in all my needs, and I was always answered.”

The other fact I write exactly as it was told me by the who who was the chief character in and eyewitness to the event.

“One morning I was called to go quickly to recommend the soul of a friend to the Lord.

He was in his last agony. Having arrived there, I found things just as they had been described to me. Deprived of his senses and unable to reason, his eyes were watery, his lips stiffened, and he was bathed in a cold sweat. It seemed his blood had ceased to flow and one would have said that he would breathe his last breath within a few minutes. I spoke to him several times but he did not respond. Not knowing what else to do, I broke down in tears; in in that predicament I suddenly thought of the cleric Comollo and all the wonderful virtues of his I had heard about. 'Come on', I said, 'If you can do something with the Lord, pray to him to raise up this poor soul and free him from the anguish of death.' As soon as I had said this the dying man suddenly dropped the end of the sheet which was clenched between his teeth, shook himself, and then began to speak almost as if he had not been ill. His improvement was such that after eight days he was fully recovered from his illness, although he needed several months more of convalescence, and he was able to resume his previous work."

In the course of this account little has been said of the virtue of modesty which was precisely the one that stood out most in Comollo. Such good outward behaviour, such exact conduct, such edifying composure, mortification made up of all the sense but especially the eyes, leads us to say that he possesses such a virtue to an eminent degree. And I do not believe I am exaggerating when I say and maintain the view that he took the beautiful stole of baptismal innocence into the next life.

I argue this not just from his scrupulous reserve in dealing with or speaking with the opposite sex but more so from certain theological subjects that he could not understand at all, and from the questions he would ask, that demonstrated his simplicity and purity.

My view was confirmed by what his spiritual director revealed when, after a long talk with him concerning Comollo, he concluded that he saw in him an angelic behaviour as he fervently and devoutly tried to imitate St Aloysius. In fact whenever he spoke about this Saint (other than the fact that he said a special prayer to him morning and evening), he always spoke in tones of rapture and joy. He glorified in the fact that he bore the same name. "Ah," he would say, "my name is Louis (Aloysius)! Maybe I could be Louis in fact, one day". It follows that if he did his best to emulate St Aloysius' virtues, he would certainly have emulated what is that Saint's special characteristic: his innocence and purity of behaviour.

From what has been said so far one could easily understand how Comollo's virtues, though not extraordinary, were of a special kind, and it would seem to me that he can be proposed as an example for anyone, be it a lay person or religious. One can certainly be sure that by following Comollo, he will become a virtuous and exemplary cleric and a true and worthy Minister of the Sanctuary.

So this is what I have been able to write about young Louis Comollo, assuring everyone that I have done so only wanting to speak the complete truth, and satisfy the various requests of my colleagues and others. Just the same I would be happy, if there is a better writer than myself, for these memories which I have so poorly presented, to be used, added to or subtracted from in whatever way would make them a better, more complete and ordered account.

The author of these outlines wishes to give them no further weight than that of purely human credence.

— With permission.

Part VIII.

Angelina

ANGELINA OR THE WAIF FROM THE APENNINES

By FR JOHN BOSCO

Turin

ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES PRESS

1869

PROPERTY OF THE PUBLISHER

**To the Reader**

Last Autumn, for reasons to do with the sacred ministry, I visited a place where they told me things about a young girl, things that seemed very interesting to me. Although she died at the beginning of this century, she is remembered amongst them as if she had only died last month. The parish priest of the place furnished me with a good number of details and amongst other things a copy of a manuscript the original of which is kept in the parish archives. From the details recounted and more so from the manuscript I have picked out what seems to me to be most interesting, enjoyable and important for our readers. I am a simple story teller, and it will be a great reward for me if someone reads it to their advantage, or at least shows understanding where I have not been able to satisfy. May God bless us all with his heavenly grace and grant us many years of happy life.

## Chapter I. A fortunate family

On the slopes of the Apennines, not so far from one of Italy's main cities, about halfway through last century there lived a family that enjoyed all the happiness one could hope for on this poor earth.

Peter was the name of the head of this fortunate family. He was raised as a good Catholic, and thanks to his diligent and economic approach succeeded in improving his circumstances to the point where he was listed amongst the most wealthy inhabitants of the area.

But he was able to combine a frugal lifestyle with generous almsgiving.

"My business," he would say "began doing well from the moment I made a personal rule never to send any beggar away empty-handed from my door."

He attributed his prosperity to a field that he called the field of fortune but which the public called the field of the poor. It consisted of a handful of acres which Peter sowed with various kinds of beans. He cultivated it and looked after it until he could pick the crop, and then ceasing to look after it as his own it became the property of the poor who could freely take whatever they needed for life's necessities from it. One can imagine the blessings and best wishes for continued abundance that everybody had for charitable Peter. When they met him on the road beggars would run to greet him and express their gratitude.

To provide shelter for the most abandoned, he kept a hay shed ready and well stocked with hay and some sheets for them to cover themselves with. In the evenings he would also go along in person to see that there were no problems, say their prayers with them and wish them a good night with some Christian thought for them to remember. "That you are poor," he used tell them, "does not matter; that is not a vice; but see that you are not irreligious or evildoers."

It occasionally happened that some of those whom he had taken in would not respond in a worthy way to the charity he had shown them and would disappear at night taking whatever they could steal. Therefore Peter closed the door of the hay shed each night and did not open it again until morning. Peter had also learned music and Gregorian chant, or 'canto fermo' as it was known, and he enjoyed this a lot. As well as going to Vespers, Benediction, Sung Mass he had also collected a number of boys with good voices and steady character and had taught them to sing. So for the bigger Feast days the Masses were so majestic that they caused nearby villagers to be both envious and admiring.

The entire village had full confidence in Peter and he was never overlooked for the tasks that were usually entrusted to people who were honest and principled. He was head of the choir, treasurer for many charitable works, town councillor and had been mayor on several occasions.

The parish priest had a faithful parishioner in Peter and could count on him for any help and advice in the more confidential and important affairs. Everyone liked dealing with him because he did good for whoever he could and evil to no one. Therefore everyone willingly agreed to whatever he suggested. Divine Providence saw that he had found a wife who, like him loved religion, economy, charity; so Cecchina (a version of Francesca) looked after all the domestic arrangements. She was in charge of food, clothing, the linen, discipline, the servants and the children's upbringing, and they were the constant object of her care; she loved them as precious gifts from Heaven.

This was how things were with Peter's family when something happened to disturb the peace. Cecchina was given strong and faithful assistance by a maid who helped her with her temporal affairs especially for the growing children. A faithful maid is a great help to a family, but a real treasure for the children whose upbringing and behaviour is largely in her hands. Now, the maid had become very ill and died a few days later.

Peter and Cecchina were as upset as they would have been had it been their own daughter. After the burial Peter told the rest of the very sad household: "The loss of Manetta, (the good maid's name) has been a terrible misfortune; let us ask God to find us another who can be a new angel to look after our dear children.

## Chapter 2. Strange encounter

Cecchina was attending Mass over those days whenever her duties allowed her to. But after Manetta's death she saw that she was back in time to awaken the children. We should note that Peter's home was about a kilometre from the village, and to reach the church Cecchina had to pass by the cemetery. She would never go past without a prayer for the people buried there, adding an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Requiem in suffrage for the soul of their dear maid. One morning on her way to church, she stopped as usual at the cemetery and since there was a thick fog it was difficult to see who was passing by. At the gate to the cemetery she tried to kneel down on what seemed to her to be a mound.

"Hey" came a foreboding voice of protest as soon as she knelt down. "Hey! Mercy! Help!"

"Oh my God" Cecchina cried, hurriedly getting up and starting to run. But just as she got up this ghostly woman appeared, shouting, and running full tilt into her such that both of them fell backwards. Poor Cecchina no longer knew if she was on the ground or in the grave, but she leapt up and ran home shouting:

"Help, for God's sake, help." The half-dazed, unknown woman, also thinking she was being chased by a ghost, ran after her, she too yelling for help and mercy.

Peter was in the farmyard at that moment fixing the plough to the oxen, while the cowherd was carrying a sack of seed to be sown. Believing that some evildoer had insulted his wife, he grabbed a pitchfork; his helper took a shovel and as quick as a flash they ran to help his wife.

"What's the matter" they shouted from a distance, as soon as they were in hearing distance. "I'm warning whoever's coming - I'll stick you with this fork, you ..."

"I'm being followed by a dead person" Cecchina yelled, "It's running, calling my name, threatening me... it's coming... it's coming."

"No need to fear the dead," Peter replied, "if it's running behind you it's alive, not dead."

While the good woman ran into the house ready to faint, and threw herself into a chair, Peter with his pitchfork and the cowherd with the shovel were tackling the feared spectre and had surrounded it, shouting:

"Stop or we'll kill you."

Imagine their surprise when instead of a dead person, or spectre or ghost they saw a young girl who was even more terrified than they were.

"Who are you?" Peter quickly asked her, "Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you following honest people like this?"

"Please don't harm me," the girl replied, "I'm just a poor unhappy waif, a victim of misfortune."



“But what do you want?”

“I’m asking you to save me.”

“From who?”

“From someone following me.”

“But no one’s following you - in fact you were following someone else.”

“Woe is me. Where am I? Where will I go? Who will give me advice.”

“Quickly, come back into the house, I’m afraid something will happen to you” his wife shouted at them, as soon as she had recovered and could offer a word. Then Peter worked out that they were both the reason for frightening one another, and urged on by the desire to do good to all and evil to no one, he decided to bring the stranger into the house to calm his wife down and find out what this strange incident was all about.

“Cecchina,” he said “don’t be afraid; it is not a ghost, nor is it a dead person: it is a poor girl who is more frightened than you are. She needs to be settled down; look at her, poor girl, she’s half dead.”

“Who are you?” the wife asked her.

“I am a poor girl fleeing from misfortune.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I came from a city very far from here.”

“What were you doing at the cemetery?”

“I had walked almost the whole night, and as day broke I felt so tired that I lay down against a wall that I thought belonged to some building and fell asleep there. While I was sleeping it seemed like some murderers were following me and had caught up with me, so I awoke and started shouting. Oh poor me!”

“You weren’t to know that the building was the cemetery. I was going to Mass, and to say a prayer for my poor Manetta, I wanted to kneel down there, convinced that the hump was a mound of earth, so I ended up kneeling on top of you. I’m sorry I scared you so.”

“And how! It’s a wonder I didn’t die there and then.”

“But it’s enough to make you laugh” Peter said.

“Just like the theatre” added the cowherd who of course had never even been to the theatre or any kind of play.

## Chapter 3. The good maid

Peter saw that the girl was given a little something to eat and at the same time asked her several questions to find out who she was but he got nothing from her, no document that would offer some guarantee that this strange mystery girl was a woman of good repute.

“Now” Peter said, “you’ve recovered, so head off on your business. I am off to do some ploughing that needs to be done.”

“If you don’t want to take me in as a hired hand, at least give me some good advice, point me to an honest employer where I can earn a crust and live without peril to my soul. God will reward the charity you show me.”

“If I could have some guarantee that you are a person of good repute it would be easy to find you a good employer, but an unknown woman, all on her own, without documents... I would not know where to direct you to.”

“I would like someone to take me if only on trial for a few days, and then through my hard work and with the Lord’s help I hope I can win their trust and establish my good name.”

“What kind of work can you do?”

“I have no particular trade but can do a bit of everything. I am healthy and strong and I believe I could adapt to any work in a short time.”

“Also hoeing?”

“With the Lord’s help, also hoeing.”

“With a woman’s hands like yours, using a hoe would be a real laugh.”

“I only want to try.”

Cecchina had been following this discussion with much interest and noting her courtesy, her correct language and more so the religious sentiments that peppered her speech she thought it might be worth giving her a try as a daily help.

“We have quite a few things to do in the garden,” she told her husband “we could give her a try and meanwhile see.”

“I am very hesitant to take someone in whom we don’t know; but if it pleases you, ok, but keep an eye on her so we don’t have a repeat performance of some earlier problems we’ve had.”

“What should we call you?” Peter concluded:

“I was always called Angelina.”

“Well, do what my wife tells you and then we will see.” Meanwhile he left with the plough and cart and went about his work.

The good wife left the lass to rest for a while, and both of them couldn’t stop talking or laughing about the fright they had had at the cemetery gate. “Now” the mistress of the house said, “come into the garden where there are many things to be done and get started on what you know how to do and can do.” And as if gardening was her

profession, Angelina put on a white apron, took a small fork and began weeding a row of spinach, another of lettuce, uncovering then pulling out the couch grass and other noxious weeds from the legumes. Then she transplanted leeks, onions and cabbages; she picked beans, pumpkin and potatoes; then hoeing the ground that was free she sprinkled it with compost then resowed it with the kind of lettuce that keeps fresh and green during the cold winter. But she did it in such a correct and skilful way that one would have been amazed just watching her. That evening Peter asked about the girl and his wife promptly said:

“The girl is an excellent gardener; I watched her carefully from a window and she worked tirelessly all day. She dug, transplanted and sowed in such a way that our garden looks like new. But what I liked most was her devotion. Thinking that no one was watching her, when the midday bell rang she knelt down and with hands joined said the Angelus in a most recollected way, praying like this: ‘My God, stay with me. You have helped me up until now! Complete your work! If this is the place where I can love and serve you all my life, inspire this good farmer to keep me with him.... She also said other things that I couldn’t understand but I think there is some mystery about this girl. We will find out everything gradually.”

“Let’s see how things go” Peter answered. “Meanwhile she can stay with us.”

The following day Peter came home at midday and found the lunch very much to his taste.

“What have you done, Cecchina? Why spend money for such a delicious dish... we only have things like this on very special solemnities.”

“I didn’t spend a cent,” his wife replied.

“So who made this excellent dish?”

“Angelina.”

“Angelina! But with what?”

“I don’t know. She can tell you herself.”

“It’s so simple,” Angelina said. “Some eggs, half a litre of curdled milk, a small pumpkin and some sugar was all I used in the cooking.”

“Good, very good” Peter said. “With a cook like this we could challenge the king’s kitchen. You are doing well” he told Angelina, “it seems you are able to work and your behaviour convinces me you are not a woman of ill repute, so we will keep you on; and unless things go wrong, who knows but you might be able to help raise our children, something that Manetta had to interrupt to go to Heaven.”

“I assure you you will not regret the kindness you have shown me. I will do what I can to work and measure up to your kindness. Nor will I cease praying for God’s mercy and that he will give you your just reward in good time.”

## Chapter 4. The young girl's rare gifts

Within a few days Angelina became the wonder of Peter's household. Her knowledge surprised everyone. She knew when to sow and when to reap. She spoke of the harvest, winnowing the wheat, binding the sheaves, manuring, pruning the vines, cutting back the leaves to the point where everyone would have thought she was an accomplished agronomist. And what we can say of her work in the house? With admirable self-confidence she cooked, set the table, made the beds, swept, did the milking, the curdling, the butter, the ricotta, the cheese, and finally the sewing, mending, ironing. She did all these things as if each of them was her special competence.

But her rare qualities were even more on display when Peter, assured of the treasure he had found in this new maid, entrusted his children to her. His hopes were not in vain. She began to sow the seeds of religious ideas in their hearts.

"Children," she told them, "never forget that God is our Creator. We were nothing; He created us in his own image and created us to love and serve him faithfully in this life. And when we cease to live and our body goes to the grave, then the soul returns to the Creator to render account for its actions. What a great reward there will be in Heaven for those who do good on earth."

She told them they would have a long life on earth if they were always obedient and respectful to their parents. She instructed them in the principal mysteries of the Faith then prepared them, a little at a time, to make the sign of the cross devoutly, say their daily prayers, receive the Sacraments of Confession, Confirmation and Communion.

She did this cheerfully, briefly, explaining things with many nice images and examples that she knew. So the children never grew bored with her teaching, in fact they enjoyed it and were always keen to spend a lot of time with their 'grandma' as they called the girl.

Things like this could not be kept a secret. One day the parish priest walked as far as Peter's house and had a chance to talk with the new maid. "My good girl," he told her, "I have been happy to hear what they are saying about you. I know that you are working, teaching Peter's children and other children in the neighbourhood. That makes me very happy, and I also believe you frequent the Sacraments, is that true?"

"Yes, Father. I can see that you have already found out about me, since I go to confession to you every week."

"Good, well, carry on, and teach others what you do too, and you will have twice the merit. Now, I would like to draw up a register of all my parishioners and I need you to tell me your name, surname, family and where you come from; I don't believe that should be a problem for you."

"Father," said Angelina looking upset, "I am just a poor girl, victim of a misfortune. Telling you who I am would only increase my problems and might even compromise your

and my peace of mind.”

“But if I don’t put you on the register, I might be compromised before the law.”

“My name is Angelina. Write that down and the rest we can put off till another time.”

The parish priest, seeing her all in consternation, thought he would stop any further questioning but seek information about her from others. He spoke with Peter and his wife, asked the neighbours, but they all spoke of her good moral qualities and nothing more.

“I have often thought,” Cecchina said jokingly, “that this lass was Marietta resurrected but wiser, more virtuous and knowledgeable than she was before she died.”

They all laughed and the priest said: “We should respect this good girl’s secrets and her sensitivity. Let’s accept what is good, and perhaps we will discover just what we need to and no more.”

## Chapter 5. Assisting a dying person

At that time, due to some political events, the French army had come to Italy. A regiment was stopping over in the town where Angelina was. When they left, some of the soldiers who were sick and unable to continue on their journey were recommended to Peter who had some spare room for them. He willingly took them in because there was no public hospital in the town. Despite all the help one of them got worse and very soon found himself in mortal danger. There was a slight problem for administering the Sacraments because French was virtually unknown amongst the locals and although the parish priest knew a bit from his reading, he had never really had occasion either to write it or speak it and was unable to enter into a conversation about something as important as the Sacraments were. It was then that our young girl showed yet more of her qualities. She was very good with the sick whenever there was an occasion. Up until then Angelina had held back somewhat, allowing the nurses to do the task they were paid for. But when she became aware of the danger the soldier was in, she put all human respect aside and began speaking French in an elegant and polished manner. The sick man was amazed along with others around, since none of them thought she was anything else but a poor serving girl. How embarrassed she was then to discover that the soldier was not a Catholic!

“I am a Lutheran” he responded when she offered him some advice, “and so I do not know what the Sacraments are.”

“But without the Sacraments you cannot be saved, because the Lord instituted them to save our souls.”

“Can’t I just be happy with my religion?”

“No, you cannot be happy with your beliefs because when you call yourself a Lutheran it means you are following Luther and not Jesus Christ any more.” “But wasn’t Luther following the true religion?”

“Certainly not; before Luther nobody professed a belief like his. When Luther began preaching his beliefs they were a real novelty. He was preaching a new system of beliefs that was in fact contrary to faith in Christ.”

“To be honest I have never bothered much about religion. Nor can I hide a thought that has always bothered me a bit. I see that Catholics all agree in obeying the Pope and they all confess the same faith, so there is uniformity in teaching and discipline everywhere and through all time. But amongst us we interpret things as we like, accept or reject what we want. In our own city and I can say in our family we have some people who profess something very different to the others. Is it possible, I have said to myself often, that truth can reside in opinions that are opposite? If one necessarily must be wrong, how do we know which is the true one? Who could assure me of that? Now it seems that you have studied more than I have and if you judge that in order to be saved I need to be a Catholic then I am ready to obey.”

“Thank the Lord for inspiring this holy resolution. But your peace comes not from my word which could err at any time but from God’s promise that cannot err. There is one God, one Faith, one Baptism, and therefore one Church of Jesus Christ. He appointed the Apostle Peter as Head of this Church; others succeeded Peter as the Vicar of J. C. right down to our own days. They have always condemned error and spread truthful ideas that were developed and preached by the Apostles. So beginning from the reigning Pontiff we go back from one Pope to another until Peter, until Jesus C., and if you compare the teaching of the Popes today with the teaching of the Popes in those times, you will find it unchanged as if there were only a single Pontiff. This assures us that we have the entire and complete teaching of the Gospel, all and each of the truths preached by the Apostles. On the contrary Lutherans have no head, and if you want to draw up a time line of Lutheran ministers you cannot go back further than Luther. This is where Lutheranism falls down, that there is no one who professed his teaching before him.”

“I accept what you say, but in my present state I can hardly take instructions. So what can I do to ensure my eternal salvation in some way.” “Leave your religious needs to me. I am going, but to talk to our priest and he will see to everything.”

And in fact Angelina did go to the parish priest who, assured of Miret’s good dispositions, (that was the sick man’s name), asked her to take on the task of instructing him further in the Faith. The doctors said that the sick man was in danger of death so she got him to renounce his heresy and make a profession of the true faith. Then she gave him conditional baptism thinking that this Sacrament may have been administered but invalidly; he then made his confession, received viaticum, was anointed and then given the papal blessing. He gave up his soul peacefully on the evening of that day, kissing the crucifix and calling on the Lord’s mercy. These were his final words:

“Praise be the Lord’s great mercy. He gave me an angel of consolation to take me out of darkness and lead me to the light of truth. This is a great gift from the Lord. If all my fellow Lutherans could enjoy the consolation I feel at the moment they would all become Catholics. Blessed be God: may his infinite mercy save me and everyone in the world.”

## Chapter 6. The priest and the waif

To this point our young girl was considered a good Christian, a peasant lass of good will who loved her masters and spared no effort to do as much good as she could. Furthermore they saw in her a young girl with solid principles, and with an excellent memory for retaining the things she read. But when news got around that she spoke excellent French and had clearly been able to persuade Miret to become a Catholic, everyone was marvelling at the fact. The priest who had been present and had recommended the dying soldier's soul, said to himself and then told others:

"There is a mystery hidden in this girl. Such profound and extensive learning is not to be found in someone who has not studied for a long time."

One was saying it was revealed learning from the Lord; another that the girl was someone else really and that in expiation for her sins she had been condemned to being a peasant lass. And of course there were some who said she was a witch, while others believed she was an angel sent from Heaven. Meanwhile the priest used every opportunity to gather the most edifying news he could about the girl, and the day came when he was able to do a little more in this regard. Angelina had become ill and it brought her to the brink of the grave. The parish priest gave her much good help and sometimes spent a lot of time with her comforting her through some of the most painful moments of her illness.

"Father" she said one day, "I think my life is coming to an end. You can ease my fear of death if you promise to recommend me to the Lord at Mass after my death so that my soul can be freed from the pains of Purgatory."

"I give my word that I will do that and also have people pray for you at the Church, but I would also like to ask a favour of you, one that I believe will be for the greater glory of God."

"Ask whatever you want, Father. I will be happy to do something for you before dying."

"Could you tell me about what happened to you before you came to Peter's house?"

"Oh poor me! You are asking me something I cannot refuse but which I very much dislike doing, because in doing so it may cause me problems and not a few for you too. That will not help you in any way."

"Let's do it this way: you can write down all the details about yourself, where you come from and your family but without mentioning names of places or people; then you can give me everything written and sealed. I will keep it confidential and no one will see it until after your death."

"In my present state I cannot write."

"Then it is enough to promise you will do so if you recover."

"If that's the case then I promise and will do so."



Divine Providence saw that the sick girl regained her former health and she wrote down some information which, although it does not give a complete picture, serves to let us know of her situation and her upbringing. All this was in fact written down, sealed and given to the parish priest who kept it sealed until after her death. We obtained a faithful copy from the parish priest who succeeded him, and it is from this that we have taken some things that help our purpose and add them in her to complete the story, so we can tell you about her final activity.

## Chapter 7. Who this poor girl was; her upbringing and education

Angelina began speaking of herself this way:

I was born in the city of ... the capital; Angela was my baptismal name. After the King, my family held the next most important title and dignity. My father was very wealthy and his wealth meant he could spend four thousand scudi, more than twenty thousand francs a week. My mother and a nurse looked after me until I was eight. Then I was sent to a house of education to prepare me for my first Confession, Confirmation and holy Communion. It was my parents' intention that I should live there for some weeks only but seeing that I liked being there they decided to leave me there so I could also study literature, something that would have been very difficult at home. Since I was being guided by pious, learned and prudent teachers I soon learned of the beauty of virtue and the value of learning, and I learned to read, write, speak correctly in both Italian and French. Cooking, mending, ironing, painting, playing the piano were things I liked and they all became very familiar to me. And amongst the things I learned were some elements of agronomy and botany. Every Thursday from ten and until twelve in the morning the girls were taken to a large garden attached to the place and things were explained to them - flowers and all the words for the parts of a flower; and the same was done for all the other plants. I recall that while the teacher was talking, one farmer was holding a hoe, one a spade and another a shovel. We had a small trowel; then they explained all the uses of these tools in Italian. They did the same thing with the wines. We had a long pergola as a model, and while one of the vintner's was at work the teacher was explaining what was meant by words like 'prune', 'cut the vine leaves', 'clean', 'harvest the grapes', 'decant the wine', 'bunch', 'grape', 'grape stalk', 'cask', 'tub', 'vat', 'steel band', 'wooden slats', 'keg', 'barrel' and similar.

Another teacher likewise would give us practical exercises in cooking, the table, the bedroom. She would stand in a corner while the pupils set the table, or fixed up the beds; but for anything they picked up they would have to give the name clearly and loudly for everyone else to learn from. This way we became familiar with all the words of domestic items and this helped our knowledge of the language and was to the satisfaction of our families. But there were two things I didn't like: going for walks and dancing. These were optional things so I could easily miss them. I would use the time to work in the garden and go back over practical things I had learned. But my real delight was to spend some hours in my room not only learning vocabulary but the proper way to make all kinds of soup, other dishes, sauces, special dishes, to the point where for holidays my teachers made me happy by asking me on my own to prepare the meals for lunch and supper. So I was learning these things as a hobby, but they became very handy when I

came to Peter's house. Out of charity but because he had so much work that I was able to do, he took me on as the maid. I likewise learned nursing at a place I used visit often to talk with or console the girls who were sick or do some little service for them. I still bitterly recall the time I spent with my best friend as she lay dying. She always wanted me at her bedside, and with religion and signs of kindness I did my best to lighten her agony. She left me a memento which I can never forget. "Angelina" she told me, her voice quavering, "dear Angelina, what a terrible moment death is for a wealthy person. Always remember what the Saviour said: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to be saved'. You have much wealth at home, therefore.." She wanted to say something else, but she could no longer talk and soon breathed her last. "Oh my faithful friend, may God welcome you amongst the blessed in Heaven. You did not finish what you were saying, but I understood sufficiently and it will stay with me for the rest of my life". After seven years of education my family called me back home to complete, as they said, my education, but in reality it was to stop me from becoming a nun, something they knew I was very much leaning towards becoming.

## Chapter 8. Ease and comfort

When I came back to the family, my father immediately wanted me to take dancing lessons, something I had always had great aversion for. I always used think it was a kind of madness when I saw men and women moving in unison to the sound of instruments, or gliding, turning, jumping to the chords, all excited, like they were haunted or something. Then the problems and all the opposition began.

My father wanted to make a lady of me, someone who could be the life of all genteel conversation; to the contrary I abhorred all kinds of vanity and luxury. My father took me to the theatre on one occasion, but only once; the language, the acting, the way they dressed were all incompatible with an upright Christian conscience. My concerns increased at the waste of money spent on useless and sometimes even harmful things. Forty servants for four people: me, my parents and my brother. We had two carriages each, one for summer, one for winter and a corresponding number of horses and coachmen; two doorkeepers, two porters, two majordomos, two teachers of etiquette, or, as they say, masters of ceremony. The rest were occupied in various domestic chores. So many servants, when a tenth of this number would have been enough.

Then chairs, floors, beds, silver and gold on the table - what a waste. It wasn't that my father had no religion or that he didn't treat friars and priests well whenever the occasion presented itself; indeed he enjoyed having some famous person dine with him, like a canon, parish priest or prelate; but that was always for human reasons, so he could talk about himself and be praised. If he was asked for some charity he would explain that he had many expenses, taxes, that income was going down and the like. Meanwhile he could find huge sums to put on evenings for friends, tackle long and expensive journeys, change and modernise all the house fittings every year, without mentioning the constant change, selling, buying of carriages, horses and all at enormous cost. As for his almsgiving I never saw what the Gospel says: 'The left hand should not know what the right hand is doing'. It was quite the opposite. If they didn't make deep bows, or offer public and repeated thanks, or if his offerings were not advertised, then that would be the last offering he made, mostly; he would not give a cent more, under the specious pretext that the person was ungrateful, while in reality it was because he had not sounded the trumpet to the four points of the compass. I felt I could say with the Saviour: 'They have already received their reward'. One day I asked my father how he understood the words of the Gospel: 'Give what you have in surplus to the poor'. He said this was just advice, not a command.

"It seems to me," I added, that the word 'Give' is in the imperative and therefore a command, not just advice."

He made no reply. Another time I asked him how he understood other words of the Gospel: 'Woe to you who are rich; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a

needle than for a rich man to be saved’.

“These things,” he said, “have to be studied, known, but don’t spend too much time on them otherwise you lose your peace of mind, in fact your brain might flip if you give too much thought to them.”

This response was like a flint setting fire to my concern.

“If something is true,” I said to myself, “Why not always consider it? Why is the world forgetting about it? Does that ‘woe to the rich’ mean that they will all be lost? Since it would be a miracle for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle, then maybe we need a miracle for a rich man to be saved? If it is so difficult for a rich man to be saved, would it not be better to put the Saviour’s advice into practice: ‘Sell what you own and give it to the poor?’ My father says that thinking seriously about these things might cause your brain to flip. But if just thinking about it causes such a terrible effect, what would be the misfortune of experiencing the consequences of the Saviour’s threat of eternal loss?”

## Chapter 9. Distress

Disturbed by the idea of the difficulties a rich person has in being saved, I went to see a well-respected ecclesiastic to receive instruction and comfort. The man of God told me these words should be interpreted in their true sense.

“The Saviour means to say” he said “that riches really are thorns and a constant source of danger to salvation because of the abuses that mostly come from them; useless expenditure, unnecessary trips, intemperance, balls, gambling, oppression of the weak, workers not properly paid, satisfaction of unworthy passions, legal squabbling, hatred, anger and revenge: these are the results for many of their wealth. Temporal goods are a great risk of perversion for them, and the Lord says to them: ‘Woe to the rich; it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved’.”

“But those who make good use of their wealth and use it to clothe the naked, feed the poor who are hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, provide shelter for pilgrims; those who without vainglory and ambition give what they have over to the poor, it is these, I say, who find a way to salvation through their wealth and can change wealth, which is a real thorn, into flowers for eternity. Believe me: when God gives someone temporal wealth, it is a grace but the grace is even greater when it gives someone the courage to use that wealth for the good.”

“Meanwhile,” the priest concluded, “you should not be worried about the wealth you have because you can do so much good with it and gain much merit for the next life. Just try to make good use of it. But I recommend two very important things. The first is not being too careful in calculating what you have left over. Some believe that by giving a tenth or a twentieth in alms leaves them the rest to use for their own pleasure. That is not the case. God says to give what we have left over to the poor without mentioning a tenth or a twentieth. Therefore we should only keep what we need and give the rest to the poor. Secondly, I recommend you never forget that we cannot take our wealth to the grave, and so whether we want to or not, out of love or by necessity, in life or in death, we have to leave everything behind. So it is better to detach ourselves from earthly things willingly and gain the merit and make good use of them in life, than to leave them behind out of necessity and without any merit at the moment of our death.”

Instead of quietening my conscience this simple and clear response only increased my worries. I was confirmed in my belief that wealth is a great danger and leads to perversion, and that it is very difficult to make good use of it.

Given my doubts I wanted to consult the works of a saint that my father had encouraged me to read often. It was St Jerome whom the Church has proclaimed as a great Doctor of the interpretation of holy Scripture. My father used tell me:

“I would like my children to be familiar with the letters of this great fellow citizen of ours. His eloquence, teaching, clarity have always made me enthusiastic.” So this was

the teacher I wanted to consult.

He likewise recalled wealth here and there in his letters: thorns that prick, something that weighs a man down and keeps him bound to earth rather than Heaven. Things that blind the wise; objects of perversion; unfortunate things which a man uses to dig the pit of perversion for himself; something that feeds pride, vainglory and ambition; supports our wildest passions.

St Jerome wanted to give the example himself of what he thought about things of this world. He left his country, family, friends, disregarded the vast field of glory that lay ahead of him because of his extraordinary intellect; he chose to leave all behind to go and hide in the terrible desert of Calce. But what struck me most were the words with which he finished the life of St Paul the first hermit. After having spoken wonderfully of the actions of this glorious inhabitant of Thebes, he concluded thus:

At the end of this account allow me to ask the rich and powerful in this world who waste money building palaces of gold and marble and buy things without taking note of price or limits. Ask them what was lacking for this poor old man Paul? You wealthy people drink from jewelled cups, and Paul drinks from his cupped hands and satisfies his thirst. You wear clothes embroidered in gold and Paul was always happy with a poor tunic which even the least of your servants would not wear. Meanwhile Heaven was opened for this poor man and hell is opened for you. He loved to go threadbare but looked after his cloak or the grace of Jesus Christ while you are dressed in silk and have lost the garment of Christ's grace. Paul was buried in a pauper's plot beneath the soil but he arose in glory while you are buried in exquisite marble decorated with gold and will rise to burn in flames. So! A pity on you and your wealth. Do not spend it on useless and vain things. Why dress the corpses of your dead in clothes of gold? Do not ambition and vanity cease with the grave? Perhaps the bodies of the rich will not rot if clothed in silk? All you who read these things remember to pray for me, Jerome the sinner.

I tell you in truth that if God gave me the choice I would rather choose Paul's poor tunic with its merits than all the purple and kingdoms of this earth.

This was St Jerome.

This saint's teaching and example only made my concerns increase and I was thrown into real consternation.

Then another sad event brought my worries to their peak. My dear mother, my support, who directed the temporal and moral affairs of the family, who was my guide, my everything, died after a brief illness.

One thing she said remained with me firmly.

When the priest gave her the crucifix to kiss she said:

"Here is our friend, our model, let us put all our trust in him. No one who trusted in him was left unaided."

"How is it," I said to myself, crying, "that Jesus Christ is our model; he died poor, naked on a hard cross, and his thirst was slaked with vinegar and myrrh! What a terrible comparison! In our home there is silver, gold, luxury; the best drinks are not dipped with a sponge but poured from crystal jugs or some other precious metal. What likeness is there between Christ our model and the one who should imitate him?"

Finally my dying mother spoke to me in these words:

“Angelina,” she said taking my hand and crying, “I will live no longer, and I hope to die in the Lord’s mercy; but remember that death is terrible for one who has enjoyed comforts that now have to be left behind out of necessity. If God calls you to some generous act, be generous and do it, and never forget that sacrifices made in this life are rewarded at the moment of death. Then will man reap the fruits of what he has sowed in life.”

These words alluded to the idea that my mother had often expressed in wanting me to go to a monastery and consecrate my life definitively to the Lord.



## Chapter 10. Her flight

After my beloved mother's death things in our family changed a lot. My brother, thanks to his marriage had almost doubled his wealth. And a modest allotment was even being prepared for me. My whole family spoke of the value of it for me. But I experienced great repugnance, and every day grew more and more keen to go off and hide in a Capuchin monastery that our family has some connections with.

My father wanted me to accept the fiancé he was offering me and forbade me severely of thinking of becoming a religious.

"If you go to a monastery," he told me severely, "I will go and pull you out of there, dead or alive."

And for his own particular reasons he wanted me away from the family and, forbidding me to go to a monastery, I was to choose marriage. He did everything himself as if I had already given full consent and had even fixed the time for the wedding. I found myself in the greatest of consternation.

"Who will advise me, who will give me direction in all my doubts?" I would say, wandering around my room. It was then that, almost mechanically, I ran and prostrated myself before a picture of the Blessed Virgin where my mother always knelt to say her prayers. Perhaps out of tiredness or worry, or perhaps just recalling her loss, I fainted. I don't know if it was a dream then, or imagination but I saw my mother telling me severely: "You can escape by running away."

When I came to, I thought about that and decided on it.

But where could I go? Become a Capuchin nun? I would end up compromising all the good Sisters; who could foretell what my father might get up to? When he was away from home for a few days I took that opportunity, and went to a rag collector, bought a maid's clothing, replaced my own clothes with these and told the man to keep them with him until such time as I returned. Then hidden from others' view by a large bonnet, and with a basket in my hand with some bread and fruit for the day I left to go wherever Divine providence would lead me.

I walked the entire day but when evening came I found myself in a sad situation. The night was dark and I had to walk along a deserted road with not even the shadow of anyone visible, nor any sign that any living being was in that area. Towards midnight, and unable to walk any further, I pulled off to the side of the road to sleep for a few minutes. I was already sitting down when I saw a light not far off. So keeping very quiet I approached, thinking I might find a friendly person and was all ready to open my mouth and ask for shelter for the evening when instead I saw eight men eating and drinking and cheerfully talking the robberies and murders they had committed the day before. I didn't collapse, because God supported me, but I was terribly frightened. Walking on tip toe so I'd make no noise, I went back to the road I had been on and walked a few

more hours until I could go on no longer. Then I decided to sit near a bush growing by the roadside. "What the ... ." It might have been a dog, a wolf or another animal lying in the bush, and he was as afraid of me as I was of him. His bark sounded more like a wolf's howl and as he ran he cannoned into me and I fell to the ground. I was able to get up, walk a few steps but then I fell again as if I was dead. Without my knowing it, this happened near the gate to the cemetery. My tiredness and complete lack of strength completely overcame me and I just lay there till morning. I was dreaming about those men and how they were following me and had almost caught up with me when Peter's wife came and knelt on top of me, thinking I was a mound at the edge of the cemetery.

Someone might ask what about my father. From news I received later I found out that as soon as he discovered I had gone he went off in a rage to the Sisters. When he didn't find me there he was very upset and concerned about my lot until a friend told him:

"Why bother yourself? Your daughter through this action has rejected you as her father so she is no longer worthy of the family name."

He quietened down at these words and addressed his efforts to carrying out a project he had in mind for some time and that had only been delayed by my presence in the family. My brother took things more kindly.

"If my sister," he said, "wants to close herself in a monastery, then let her be. This is her pleasure". So, happy to take over the wealth that had been apportioned for me, he had no further concern.

I had run away in order to detach myself from the world and get away from all the domestic comforts in which I saw a real danger of eternal loss. I wanted to work, do penance for my sins and thus ensure the salvation of my soul. I could not do that in a monastery, where I would not have been accepted unless I told them my circumstances; nor would any monasteries that I knew of be prepared to take me because of the serious difficulties they would have been exposed to. So I decided to flee as a unknown person and put my life entirely in God's hands, in whom lies the fate of every man; not a hair of our head falls without his wanting or allowing it. God led me to Peter's home that was my ark of salvation.

This was what Angelina had written.

## Chapter 11. The girl's final activities

Her life in Peter's home was a constant series of good actions. Not knowing her high status everyone saw in her only a simple and hardworking maid. Whatever the task, whatever the work, it was done quickly and well. Her behaviour was a model for everyone. Never a word of vainglory came from her mouth, nothing that would deserve the least reproach.

Murmuring, criticism of others were things she forbade. "We have so many of our own matters to be worried about, why go and meddle in others' affairs? She did good for whoever she could and evil to no one. This way she enjoyed everyone's good will and they all vied to do what would please her." On Sundays she carried out her religious duties by attending Mass, the sermon and Benediction. The rest of the week she would tell edifying stories and do some reading with other serving girls which especially on Sundays and holy days they enjoyed. They liked gathering around her to listen to what she had to say and the pleasant tales she told them.

At first she would go to Confession every fortnight, then every week. If we make so much effort to keep our clothes clean, how much more should we do to keep our souls clean and wash them clean from the stain of our sins.

One day she heard a friend talking badly about confession, to which she replied simply:

"Take no notice of what the world says, but what God says. He told his ministers in the Gospel: 'Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain they are retained'. With these words God gave confessors the faculty of remitting or not remitting, meaning forgiving or not forgiving sins according to the penitent's dispositions. Besides, to know whether or not there is something which would prevent absolution it is necessary for sins to be told, therefore the need for external confession of sins, without which there is no forgiveness for sins committed after baptism."

She often went to Communion and tried to go every Sunday and whenever her confessor advised it she would also go during the week. During the novenas for the major Solemnities she tried to go to Communion every day. It is true that this took up some time, but she would get up early in the morning, fulfil her practices of piety and be at work in time to fulfil her other duties. Peter was very happy with her and often told her not to worry if in order to attend to religious matters she need to put off or even omit some domestic chore.

"God has many ways" he told her "of rewarding what we do out of love for him."

One day while she was coming from church a man whom the town thought was a wise man said:

"Poor Angelina why do you need to go to Communion so often and miss out on so much sleep?"

"I have great need," she said. "God has told us to go often. The early Christians used go to Communion every day so why do we not do the same? If we feed our body

every day that must soon go to the grave, why not have equal or not greater care for our soul that lives on in eternity." This way Angelina was the admiration of all and whoever wanted to point to a virtuous and charitable person would point to Peter's maid.

She was venerated like an idol in her master's house, and Peter regarded her as he would his own daughter, making her the mistress of the house to the extent that when it was necessary she could leave the house to look after the sick, teach catechism to poor girls, get them ready for their Confession and Communion. Angelina was like the queen of the town and in her own hearts was telling herself that God was rewarding her even too much in this present life. But every mortal thing on this earth comes to an end. And even our maid was approaching the time when she would receive the reward for all her virtue. She saw her master's family grow in number, virtue and wealth. Peter was by now of advanced age, and with a smile on his lips and the peace of the just in his heart he went to rest in the Lord's embrace. Franceschina had preceded him shortly before. Angelina stood by them both with great affection in their final moments. She did not abandon them day or night until they had breathed their last. She wept for them after their death as though they had been her own parents, and as long as she lived she did not fail to pray for them morning and evening, saying the special prayers for the eternal repose of her masters' souls. She always called them her benefactors.

## Chapter 12. Angelina's death

Finally Angelina also had to leave this earthly exile to fly to the heavenly abode that had always been the constant object of her heart and her thinking. Her constant Christian way of living, her heroic detachment from comforts and the good things of this world, her constant practice of piety made her think of death as the desirable end of troubles in order to be able to enter into possession of true happiness.

Although by now more than seventy years of age she still had good health, the envy of all those younger than her, and she might have lived much longer had not a sad event contributed to cutting off that possibility.

It was the beginning of this century: political events had created turmoil throughout Europe and the Catholic religion had suffered much because of it. Churches were stripped or profaned, convents suppressed, monks dispersed, nuns thrown out of their cloisters, priests, bishops and cardinals persecuted and exiled, and the Supreme Pontiff himself, Pius VII, deposed and taken prisoner from country to country. These were all facts which give one some idea of the evils oppressing the world in 1810 the year Angelina died.

One morning she went off to Church as usual, made her Confession and Communion with unusual and even more fervent thanksgiving. Then she returned home and began work as she usually did. But at midday Peter's eldest son came running into the house all upset.

"Angelina," he said "a terrible tragedy has happened in the world: What will become of us?"

"What's happened?" Angelina replied her voice trembling.

"Our Supreme Pontiff, Pius VII, the head of Christianity, successor of St Peter, Vicar of J. C. has been taken from Savona to France, and maybe even while I am speaking he has died."

"O great God," Angelina exclaimed "save your representative on earth. You are angry because of man's sins! Take my poor life in expiation for so much iniquity, but save the head of the Church."

Having said that she began to faint and sat down on a chair. She was quickly taken to bed, and they hurriedly called the priest to provide her with the comforts of religion. When he came, Angelina seemed dead, but a few moments later she revived a little, opened her eyes and said:

"Father, Help me." she said with some difficulty. "Give me the holy Oils, the crucifix." And when she had them she said in barely intelligible words: "My Jesus you were born, lived in poverty and died stripped on a cross. I left everything for you and now I place my soul in your hands."

Then kissing the crucifix she smiled sweetly and with that her soul flew to the bosom of the Creator.

Thus ended the days of the poor girl from the Apennines. She would have sold what she had and given it to the poor, as the Saviour says, but she judged it better to put into practice the other counsel our Saviour gave to a young man who before following him wanted to go him and bury his father. 'Leave the dead to bury the dead, and come follow me,' the Lord said.

She was always very happy with the sacrifice she had made by abandoning all the world's comforts.

"Had I remained at home," she had written in her memoirs, "to sell my goods, my relatives would certainly have interfered with my plans. Then the pleasure of administering temporal things, the excessive praise the world gives to someone who does something outstanding, would have also caused me to change my plans or at least diminish the merits. I wanted to cut off those difficulties, taking no further heed of what is in the world and thus let the dead bury the dead."

"The most wonderful day of my life" she said elsewhere "was when I fled from my father's home. That was a serious act I would not advise others to do but for me it was the beginning of happiness and I can say that from then on I lived like someone living in an earthly paradise. If only the wealthy could enjoy the consolations one experiences from abandoning the things of this world, or in giving to the poor out of love for God, their hearts would certainly no longer be attached to this earth's goods."

It seems that God was pleased with the sacrifice that Angelina made of her life; shortly afterwards the Roman Pontiff, set free, left Fontainebleau and peacefully returned to his throne in Rome.

"Here" the parish priest told me, amongst other things "is where Angelina is buried. Some of her pupils or friends still living, often come with other younger girls to pray at her graveside; the town remembers her keenly as if she had only recently died and whenever we want to point to a perfect model of Christian living we recall the name of Angelina. In the parish memoirs and in public she is spoken of as the Waif from the Apennines.

With ecclesiastical permission.