

VOLUME VI - 1858-1861

THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

of Saint John Bosco



Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne

FATHER GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE (1839-1916) was the first and great chronicler of the life of St. John Bosco and of the first decades of the Salesian Congregation.

From their first, providential meeting in 1864, Father Lemoyne esteemed Don Bosco as a person of outstanding character and holiness. He not only strove to understand and acquire his spirit, but also took upon himself the task of committing to writing anything of significance that Don Bosco did or said. Information concerning earlier events he painstakingly gathered from eyewitnesses and other sources.

In 1883 he came to the Mother House as editor of the **Salesian Bulletin** and Secretary of the Superior Chapter. The five years that followed he spent in cordial intimacy with Don Bosco and heard from the Saint himself the story of the arduous road he had to climb in his youth to arrive at the priesthood, and of the wonderful manner in which Providence guided the Salesian work.

After Don Bosco's death in 1888, he was formally charged with the compilation of available materials for the life of the Saint. Forty-five large volumes of galley proofs bear witness to his dedicated research and provide the material for the nineteen volumes of the **Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco**, the first nine of which he authored. Noteworthy among his other works are the **Life of Don Bosco** in two volumes and the **Life of Mamma Margaret**, Don Bosco's mother. He died in Turin on September 14, 1916 at the age of 77.

The Salesian Society

1987

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<i>Provinces</i>	77
<i>Houses</i>	1,572
<i>Bishops</i>	63
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1987

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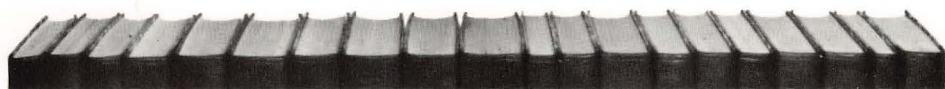
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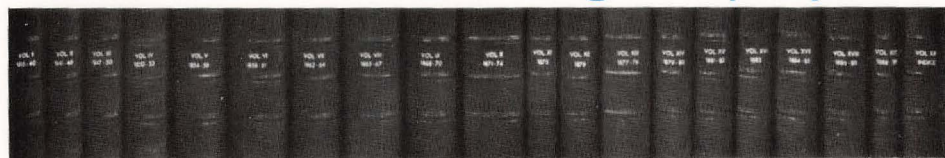
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THE
BIOGRAPHICAL
MEMOIRS
OF
ST. JOHN
BOSCO



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THE
BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS
OF
SAINT JOHN BOSCO

The
Biographical Memoirs
of
Saint John Bosco

by

REV. GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE, S.D.B.

AN AMERICAN EDITION
TRANSLATED
FROM THE ORIGINAL ITALIAN

REV. DIEGO BORGATELLO, S.D.B.
Editor-in-chief

Volume VI
1858-1861

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FIRST EDITION

Dedicated

WITH PROFOUND GRATITUDE
TO
THE LATE, LAMENTED, AND HIGHLY ESTEEMED
VERY REVEREND FELIX J. PENNA, S.D.B.
(1904–1962)

TO WHOSE
WISDOM, FORESIGHT, AND NOBLE SALESIAN HEART
THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION
OF
THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS
OF
SAINT JOHN BOSCO
IS
A LASTING MONUMENT

This Volume
Is Dedicated With Affection
TO
FATHER JOHN CERUTTI, S.D.B.
(1874–1965)

A Brief Meeting With Our Founder
Inspired His Exemplary Religious Life
And Zealous Priesthood.
He Loved Children.
He Spent Himself,
Especially In South Africa And Australia,
In Spreading Devotion To Don Bosco
And
In Fostering Salesian Traditions

Editor's Preface to the First Nine Volumes

SAIN'T John Bosco, the central figure of this vastly extensive biography, was a towering person in the affairs of both Church and State during the critical 19th century in Italy. He was the founder of two very active religious congregations during a time when other orders were being suppressed; he was a trusted and key liaison between the Papacy and the emerging Italian nation of the Risorgimento; above all, in troubled times, he was the saintly Christian educator who successfully wedded modern pedagogy to Christ's law and Christ's love for the poor young, and thereby deserved the proud title of *Apostle of youth*.

He is known familiarly throughout the world simply as Don Bosco.¹ His now famous system of education, which he called the *Preventive System*, was based on reason, religion and kindness, and indicated by its descriptive name that, also in education, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. He always sought to place pupils in the moral impossibility of committing sin, the moral disorder from which all evils flow.

To ensure the continuation of his educational mission in behalf of youth he founded two worldwide religious congregations, the Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesian Society) and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) which today number more than 40,000 members conducting 2,800 educational institutions throughout the world.

To help in the difficult art of educating the young, Don Bosco planned to expound his method of education in a book but, absorbed as he was in the task of firmly establishing his two religious congregations and in unceasing other labors, he had to content himself with a simple outline of his ideas in a golden little treatise entitled *The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*.

¹ *Don* is an abbreviation of the Latin *dominus*, master. It is used in Italy as a title for priests; it stands for *Father*.

Fortunately, *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco* are ample compensation for a book which, if written, might have given us only theories. These memoirs, a monumental work in nineteen volumes, until recently reserved exclusively to Salesians and published only in the original Italian, are now available, unabridged, in this American edition not only to his spiritual children, devotees and admirers, but also to all who are interested in education.

In these volumes Don Bosco is shown in action: not *theorizing* but *educating*. What he said and did in countless circumstances was faithfully recorded by several of his spiritual sons, chief among them Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. From the day he first met Don Bosco in 1864 to his own death in 1916, Father Lemoyne spent his life recording words and deeds of Don Bosco, gathering documents, interviewing witnesses, and arranging raw material for the present nineteen volumes of the life of Don Bosco, eight of which he himself authored besides readying another volume for the press before his death.

In the compilation of *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Father Lemoyne's primary sources were the *Memorie dell'Oratorio dal 1835 al 1855* (Memoirs of the Oratory from 1835 to 1855) written by Don Bosco himself, the diaries and chronicles of various Salesians who daily recorded what Don Bosco said or did, numerous letters of the Saint, the *Cinque lustri di Storia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* (The History of the First Twenty-Five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales) written by Father John Bonetti, S.D.B., and personally checked by Don Bosco, the proceedings of the diocesan process of beatification and other unimpeachable contemporary documents and testimonies. Above all, Father Lemoyne, intelligent, conscientious and well-informed, not only used reliable sources, but was himself an eye witness. He recorded what he personally saw and heard from Don Bosco. This enabled him to write a true history even though not according to modern critical methods.² He concerned himself principally with

² True history in the sense that what he narrates is substantially true, though his method of presentation, his chronology, and his treatment of sources stand improvement. The episodes and incidents he reports did not necessarily take place *exactly* as described.

presenting chronologically his vast selected material and therefore his narrative is somewhat fragmentary and may lack scientific method. It is nevertheless true history, even Volume I which deals mainly with Don Bosco's youth and the training he received from Mamma Margaret, his mother.³ When gifted writers and scholars of the future will produce a critical biography of Don Bosco, *The Biographical Memoirs* will still not be surpassed because Father Lemoyne lived at Don Bosco's side, wrote what he saw and heard, and eminently succeeded in giving us a living portrait of Don Bosco.

In editing the translation of *The Biographical Memoirs* accuracy and readability were the goals we set. This was not easy and occasionally, as regards the latter, we may have fallen short of the mark. Nineteenth-century Italian does not readily lend itself to an agile version that strives to be an accurate translation and not a paraphrase.

We have departed from the original in only one minor point: the lengthy titles or series of subtitles in each chapter. Father Lemoyne's method of chronological sequence in his narration necessarily made the content of each chapter fragmentary. As it was not possible, under these circumstances, to give them a meaningful title and the volumes were not indexed, Father Lemoyne prefaced each chapter with many subtitles. In some volumes such subtitles fill a whole page. Since we have indexed each volume and subtitles become unnecessary, we selected in each chapter the most outstanding episode and gave it a title. Finally, although we did not aim at publishing a critical edition, we researched and — in most cases — were able to enrich the text by adding in brackets first names, dates, and scriptural sources, as well as numerous, helpful footnotes.

May the reading of these *Memoirs* portraying the life of a man whom Pope Pius XI called "a giant of sanctity" inspire his spiritual children, to whom this work is primarily directed, and all men and

³ Cf. Francis Desramaut, S.D.B., *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*, Lyon, 1962, pp. 411ff.

women of good will to walk their own path of life in a spirit of service to God and man.

Fr. Diego Borgatello, S.D.B.
Editor-in-chief

New Rochelle, N.Y.

June 5, 1965

124th Anniversary of Don Bosco's Ordination

NOTE

Starting with this volume — and continuing through Volume X — we will omit material from the original text that is of little interest to American readers and of no direct consequence to these biographical memoirs. Such omissions will always be pointed out in the footnotes, except when they concern *Letture Cattoliche* [Catholic Readings] in which case dots will be used.

Fr. Diego Borgatello, S.D.B.
Editor-in-chief

New Rochelle, N.Y.

June 9, 1970

Acknowledgments

For the publication of *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* we owe a debt of gratitude to the Reverend August Bosio, S.D.B., Provincial emeritus of the Salesians in the eastern United States and sponsor of this project, and to the Very Reverend John J. Malloy, S.D.B., his successor in office.

As regards this volume, we wish to express special thanks to Rev. Paul Aronica, S.D.B., Head of the English Department of Don Bosco College, Newton, New Jersey, for his editorial assistance. We are also grateful to those who have helped in one way or another: in particular, Rev. Guido Favini, S.D.B., Secretary General of the Salesian Cooperators, Turin, Italy; Rev. Arnold Buja, S.D.B., Librarian of the Don Bosco Technical High School in Rosemead, California; Mr. Joseph Isola of the Paulist Press in New York City. We also wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Ufficio Stampa of the Salesian Motherhouse in Turin, Italy, for its *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, a valuable source of many footnotes in this volume.

Rev. Diego Borgatello, S.D.B.
Editor-in-chief

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SALESIAN GLOSSARY

(For the General Reading Public)

ARTISANS: trade school students.

ASSISTANCE: Salesian method of supervision of boys and students, friendly and informal in manner, stressing the prevention of disorders rather than the punishment of offenders.

ASSISTANT: a Salesian engaged in supervising boys.

CLERIC: a member of the Salesian Society training for the priesthood.

COADJUTOR: a lay member of the Salesian Society.

COMPANION OF YOUTH, THE: a prayer book composed by St. John Bosco for the use of boys, originally entitled *Il Giovane Provveduto*.

COOPERATOR: one who contributes in any manner to the development of Salesian work.

EXERCISE FOR A HAPPY DEATH: a monthly practice of piety that promotes spiritual recollection and fervor by meditation on one's eventual death. It stresses the reception of the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion as if for the last time.

FESTIVE ORATORY: a Salesian work which offers boys and young men organized recreational, educational, and religious activities mostly on Sundays and festive days.

The Festive Oratory was St. John Bosco's first work and, for a good many years, his only one. He called it "oratory," that is, a place of prayer, because its primary purpose was to teach boys to go to church and pray. "Its objectives were the practice of religion and virtue, the boys' moral education, and, consequently, the salvation of their souls; recreation, entertainment, singing, and schooling, which followed in due time, were only the means." (*The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Vol. II, p. 71. See also Vol. III, pp. 67f)

GOOD NIGHT: a short talk immediately after night prayers, given by the Director or someone in his stead. It consists of advice, exhortations, or occasional remarks.

ORATORY: see Festive Oratory, Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.

ORATORY, THE: abbreviated form of "The Oratory of St. Francis de Sales." (See below)

ORATORY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, THE: the first festive oratory and the first boarding school for boys founded by St. John Bosco in a district of Turin known as Valdocco; the motherhouse of the Salesian Congregation.

On a rainy night of May 1847 a hungry youngster, drenched from head to foot, knocked at Don Bosco's door. Don Bosco's mother fed him and prepared a place for him to sleep. (See *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Vol. III, pp. 141ff) Thus, side by side with the festive oratory there began a hospice that eventually grew into a large boarding school and became the motherhouse of the Salesian Congregation.

PREVENTIVE SYSTEM: the Salesian method of education and discipline, based on reason and religion. It stresses vigilance, guidance, and sympathetic understanding in the training of the young.

VALDOCCO: a district of Turin.

The name is probably a contraction of the Latin *vallis occisorum*, the valley of the slain — i.e., some soldiers of the Theban Legion who were martyred under Emperor Maximian. The Salesian motherhouse stands on the site of their martyrdom. (See *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Vol. II, pp. 233ff, 268)

THE
BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS
OF
SAINT JOHN BOSCO

CHAPTER 1

A Boy's Spiritual Progress

IN 1889, an elderly priest, who, first as a boy, then as a cleric, spent many years at the Oratory zealously shielding many youngsters from moral pitfalls, gave us his impressions of Don Bosco in writing:

As a priest, Don Bosco showed by word and example how one might serve the Lord lovingly and loyally in any state of life. The Gospel tells us that “whoever carries out and teaches [the least of the commandments] shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” [Matt. 5, 19] On this score Don Bosco can and must be ranked among the greatest of his century and of all the Christian era.

With no means of his own, he erected a marvelous edifice that astounds our generation and will last for years to come amid universal admiration. He was but an instrument of God in this great undertaking. God willed it; God sustains it; God will bring it to completion according to His unfathomable designs, regardless of its frail, human components whose deficiencies will be offset by His grace.

Don Bosco was a man of mystery sent by God to prove beyond doubt the strength of one who fully trusts in Him. An enlightened judge of his contemporaries and his times, a priest of firm character, unwavering purpose, unerring farsightedness, incomparable tact, and boundless trust in Divine Providence, Don Bosco brought to reality — almost magically — every plan he conceived, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, by believing that God would provide. Apparently, the word “impossible” was as unknown to him as to Napoleon, though the latter’s aims and means were quite different.

God alone knows what obstacles Don Bosco had to overcome in establishing his work. In view of this, God fittingly endowed him with a strong, well-formed body of slightly more than medium height. A mod-

erate pace and a simple bearing bespoke his thoughtful, tranquil mien, so unassuming as to give no clue to his real worth.

If I may be allowed the comparison, I would say that the slight sway in his walk suggested that good friend of the farmer — the ox — whose meekness, strength, and constancy in pulling the plow through rough and rocky soil he seemed to imitate.

But Don Bosco's most striking trait was his glance — kindly, yet penetrating the heart's inmost recesses; a glance which charmed, frightened, or crushed, as the case might be. In my life I never saw the like of it. Generally his portraits, even his photographs, do not bring this out; they simply make him a good-natured man.

Amid the hustle and bustle of daily life and its problems, Don Bosco was ever self-possessed, unalterably jovial and smiling. Though he was extremely sensitive by nature, rarely, if ever, did I see him lose his perfect self-control. His many lovable traits so charmed those who were lucky to be in close contact with him, that they not only admired him to the point of veneration but, prompted by love, became his servants, his very slaves.

The happy family spirit that reigned between him and his boys smoothed his rough path and comforted him in his toilsome, thorny undertakings. Occasionally he shook off some burdensome thought by exclaiming, "Oh, let things go as they will, as long as they go the right way!" At other times, when hearsay and opposition hurt him deeply, he would tell the boy nearest him, "Tom (or whatever his name), let's keep smiling and doing good! Never mind what people say!" Or else he would say to those around him, "You are my dear little rascals! I'd rather have you than all the comforts of the rich!"

His boys' heartfelt love was his greatest comfort. Unconsciously their affection, which dulled life's sharp thorns, sustained and preserved his precious life which would otherwise have easily come to a premature end. As for himself, he did all he could not to let them even suspect the anxieties and sorrows of his arduous mission. To keep them in good spirits, he composed a funny little ditty dearly remembered at the Oratory to this very day. *Andiamo, compagni!* [Let's go, fellows!] I can still see our beloved Don Bosco in our midst and I hear him call: "Is Chiapale ¹ here?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good! Shall we sing our song? Sing out, son!" And he would join in with his rich silvery voice and sing it to the end, as if enjoying the refreshing comfort of an oasis in a scorching desert.

¹ He later became a diocesan priest. [Editor]

His favorite exclamation was: *Servite Domino in laetitia!* [Serve the Lord with gladness!] He considered it an indispensable requisite for the sound education of youth. Strongly opposed to secretiveness and hidden corners, during playtime he wanted his boys to exercise physically and to practice vocal and instrumental music. He himself eagerly joined them to open the eyes of some who, ill-advisedly, shied away from such activities.

"I want to see my boys running and playing to their hearts' content," he would say, "because then I know what they're doing!" Hence, he had the more skillful ones take in tow the timid and bashful to teach them games and keep them happy. Also, fond of vocal and instrumental music, he started classes for both choir and band after supper. In the first years of the Oratory he himself set several sacred hymns to music and composed a simple *Tantum Ergo* for the more important feasts. I felt privileged to sing it with my schoolmates in 1858. I believe it can still be found in the Oratory's music files.

The holy, mutual affection steadily flowing between the Oratory boys and Don Bosco rose not only from his virtuous life and his boys' gratitude, but from their realization that their spiritual Father, by choosing to remain poor, in truth identified with them. In imitation of Our Savior, Don Bosco loved the poor above all others and from among their children selected his followers. Noteworthy is the reason he gives in a letter to Baron Feliciano Ricci [des Ferres] for not accepting a boy the nobleman had recommended:

Turin, May 4, 1858

My dear Baron,

I am sorry the boy Rosso came, only to be asked to return home. At present we have no room. Besides, his mother, who accompanied him, was so fashionably decked out that I should have sought her help rather than have offered mine. I cannot take among my poor boys the sons of those who come to beg dressed in grand style. But this is a secondary reason. Lack of space is the real reason for not taking the boy.

I hope you will kindly excuse me if I could not cooperate in your charitable intention this time. Please, say a prayer for me. On my part I shall invoke God's blessing on you and your family.

Your grateful, devoted servant,

Fr. John Bosco

The lowliest and neediest boys were Don Bosco's favorites. Among them were some real gems of virtue. Let us just mention one.

Michael Magone² burst into the Oratory like a spirited, untamed colt. Gradually, through frequent reception of the sacraments, he became a model of patience. Before going to Don Bosco for confession, he would carefully prepare himself, kneeling erect and motionless on the bare floor some four or five hours, letting all the others go ahead of him.

After church services, he would stop by the altar of the Blessed Sacrament or of the Blessed Virgin to continue his prayers. Now and then, his companions, pushing their way out of church, would accidentally bump into him, trip or step over him, but he took no notice and tranquilly went on praying. On the other hand, when at play, he covered every square foot of the playground. There was no game he did not excel in, but on the first stroke of the bell he promptly reported to his place of duty. During this school year [1857-58] he studied so hard as to take two years of Latin and go on to Latin III. His rapid progress stemmed from his most ardent devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Asked how he managed with difficult assignments, he would reply, "I pray to the Blessed Virgin. She enlightens me and makes me understand things I could never otherwise figure out." On a little holy picture which he kept as a bookmark and took out when studying, he had written: *Virgo Parens, studiis semper adesto meis!* [Virgin Mother, help me always in my studies!] His copybooks, papers, textbooks, and even his desk carried the inscription, *Sedes Sapientiae, ora pro me!* [Seat of Wisdom, pray for me!] He joined the choir to give glory to Her and Her Divine Son with his silvery, melodious voice at solemn church services. While Don Bosco was away in Rome,³ Michael had taken part in the Easter spiritual retreat of the festive oratory boys and had made his general confession. Then he had written a short letter to Don Bosco, telling him that the Blessed Virgin had spoken to him, urging him to become good and assuring him that She Herself would teach him to fear, love, and serve God. When Don Bosco returned, Michael asked if he could make a vow never to waste a moment of time, but was allowed only to make a promise. Indeed,

² See Vol. V, pp. 487-491. [Editor]

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 523-602. [Editor]

God's grace inflamed this young boy with an ardent desire for perfection.

In May of 1858, he resolved to honor Mary to the utmost. He mortified his sight, taste, and other senses. He wanted to give up some of his playtime, to fast, to spend part of each night in prayer, but these practices were forbidden him as unsuitable to his age. Toward the end of Mary's month he called on Don Bosco and said: "Father, if you'll let me, I'd like to do something special for Our Lady. St. Aloysius pleased Her greatly by consecrating his purity to Her from his childhood. I want to do the same. I'd like to make a vow to become a priest and observe perpetual chastity."

Don Bosco replied that he was still too young, but the boy insisted: "Father, I really want to give myself entirely to the Blessed Virgin. If I consecrate myself to Her, She will certainly help me to keep my promise."

"Do this," Don Bosco suggested. "Instead of a vow, just promise to become a priest if at the end of your Latin studies it is clear that you have a vocation. With regard to chastity, make a simple promise to be most careful not to offend this virtue even slightly and daily ask Our Blessed Mother to help you keep your promise."

Michael was satisfied. A few days later Don Bosco handed him a slip of paper. "Read it and practice it," he said. Its contents were as follows:

St. Philip Neri's Tips to Boys
To Help Them Keep the Virtue of Purity

1. Shun bad companions.
2. Do not pamper your body with dainty food.
3. Keep busy.
4. Pray often.
5. Go frequently to the sacraments, especially confession.

All this Don Bosco more fully explained to Michael on another occasion with the following suggestions:

1. Have a filial trust in Our Lady; confide in Her, rely on Her. It has never been heard that anyone trusted in Mary in vain. She will shield you against the devil's assaults.

2. As soon as you become aware of temptation, busy yourself with something. Idleness and modesty can't go together. In overcoming idleness, you will overcome temptations against purity.

3. Frequently kiss your medal and crucifix; bless yourself with lively faith and say, "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, help me to save my soul!" More than anything else, these three names terrify and vanquish the devil.

4. If temptation persists, pray to Mary as the Church teaches us: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a sinner."

5. Do not pamper your body; guard your senses, especially your eyes. Above all, avoid bad reading. If a book, indifferent in itself, should upset you, put it away. Willingly read good books, preferably those which treat of Mary and of the Blessed Sacrament.

6. Avoid bad companions. Go with good boys, those you know are praised for their conduct by your superiors. Mingle with them willingly. Play with them and try to imitate their speech, diligence, and piety.

7. Go to confession and Communion as often as your confessor allows, and when you can, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

These same suggestions Don Bosco unceasingly gave the Oratory boys publicly and privately, orally and in writing, adding: "Someone may call these practices of piety too commonplace, but I'd like to remark that, just as the brilliance of purity may be dimmed and lost even by a slight breath of temptation, anything — be it ever so small — which may help one keep it should be considered important. My advice is to be careful that we suggest easy things, lest we frighten or tire the faithful — especially the young. Fastings, long prayers, and like austerities are usually dropped after a while or carried out grudgingly and with no heart. Stick to easy things, but be faithful to them."

This was the path that led Michael Magone to lofty spiritual heights and revealed the splendor of his love of neighbor. Ever ready to help his schoolmates, he wrote letters, swept floors, made beds, cleaned clothes, reviewed lessons, cheered the downhearted, interceded with superiors, taught catechism and singing to the festive oratory boys, nursed the sick — volunteering even for night service — and readily forgave offenses. These things won him the hearts of all. He used his influence for his schoolmates' spiritual benefit with advice, exhortations, coaxings, promises, little presents,

playful tricks, and wise corrections. God alone knows all the evil Michael prevented and the good he effected. Passing over other instances, we shall just quote from a hitherto unpublished letter which Matthew Galleano, a classmate of his, wrote to Don Bosco, describing two episodes involving Magone:

Once, Michael, taking a candle stub some three inches long, asked me to go to church with him to pray for the conversion of sinners. He was so nice about it I could not refuse. We knelt at the altar of Our Lady; he lit the candle, and then we said the rosary. By the time we were through I felt tired and made as if to stand up and go out, but he gently asked me to wait. I stayed and prayed until the candle burned out.

Again, one Saturday after supper, quite a few artisans were in the reception room playing a guessing game called "mora" when the bell rang for confessions. They took no heed and went on with the game. Michael entered the room, said hello to all, and suggested they go to confession. His efforts were useless. He tried another tack and joined the game. After some fifteen minutes, he asked, "Hey, fellows, why don't we go upstairs to the balcony?" Expecting to continue the game in the fresh air, they scurried after him to the third floor. Don Bosco's room opened on that balcony. Once there, Michael managed to talk them into going to confession.

The charming goodness of Magone and several schoolmates of his flourished and bore plentiful fruit largely because of their obedience to Don Bosco's orders and suggestions. One evening, after pacing the porticoes with a large group of boys for some time, Don Bosco, feeling tired, took them to the playground. He squatted on the ground and asked them to join him. It was not very comfortable but, lest they miss a word, no one stirred. Don Bosco spoke of the great spiritual good that still had to be done and its urgent need. Then, after saying that God wished the Oratory boys would help in doing it, he exclaimed: "How much good could be done if I had ten or twelve good priests to send into the world! Who will volunteer?"

"I! I!" all cried together. Don Bosco smiled at their spirited response and continued, "If you want to join me, you must place yourselves entirely at my disposal and let me do with each of you

what I am going to do with this handkerchief." Suiting the action to his words — as was his habit and as we have already described ⁴ — he folded his handkerchief one way and then another, rubbed it between his hands, kneaded it into a ball, knotted and unknotted it, spread it out, and again folded it. The boys looked on in surprise; many could not grasp his point. Don Bosco then went on, "We can do everything, if you will let me do with you what you have seen me do with my handkerchief. If you will obey me, if you will do my will — God's will — you will see that God will work miracles through the Oratory boys." As a matter of fact, many of those boys did place themselves at his disposal to share in his great mission.

Obedience was a virtue that Don Bosco incessantly stressed in speaking to his boys, as, for example, one Sunday evening when he substituted for Father [John] Borel. The cleric John Bonetti took down the substance of his talk.⁵

At the end of May [1858], Don Bosco — for reasons unknown to us — hung a picture in his room. The upper half showed the gunpowder factory as it looked after the explosion of 1852 ⁶ from Piazza Emanuele Filiberto, with troops and the king rushing to give aid; the lower half carried a portrait of the hero, Paul Sacchi.⁷ On each side of the portrait, Don Bosco hung a picture of the Madonna and Her Child. On one was inscribed: "Souvenir of Mary's month in the Church of the Most Holy Trinity, Turin, 1858." Below was the invocation: "Mother of God, I love Him, You know. Make me love Him more and more!" On the other picture was printed: "Souvenir of Mary's month in the Church of the Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, 1858," with the invocation, "Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, make us holy." Attached to the bottom edge of the lithograph was a third picture portraying the Immaculate Virgin with joined hands, and the following inscription: "O Immaculate Virgin, You, alone, did vanquish all heresies! Come now to our aid, who lovingly have recourse to You. Help of Christians, pray for us!" To this Don Bosco added in pencil: *Terribilis ut castrorum acies ordinata!* [Terrible as an army in battle array!]

⁴ See Vol. III, pp. 385f; Vol. IV, p. 294. [Editor]

⁵ See Appendix 1. [Editor]

⁶ See Vol. IV, pp. 267ff. [Editor]

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 269f. [Editor]

Perhaps Don Bosco put this lithograph up to replace the one his friend, Father [John] Giacomelli, had secretly taken away [years before] as a souvenir of Don Bosco.⁸ He took this one too for the same reason, but returned it some years after Don Bosco's death. Father Giacomelli well knew his saintly friend's love for Our Lady.

Don Bosco meanwhile kept working on *Letture Cattoliche* [Catholic Readings]. The June issue was entitled *Joseph and Isidore, or the Danger of Bad Companions*, a story by P. Marcello

While this issue was being mailed out, on June 2, 1858, Don Bosco wrote these few lines to Father Charles Vaschetti, assistant pastor at Beinasco: "Pray to the Lord to bless our spiritual and temporal undertakings, and we shall do great things. Get me a million new subscribers for *Letture Cattoliche*."

Spreading this publication was indeed uppermost in Don Bosco's mind.

⁸ See Vol. III, p. 415. [Editor]

CHAPTER 2

A Tribute to Pius IX

DURING his recent stay in Rome,¹ Don Bosco had taken notes of incidents which threw light on Pius IX's personality, especially on his jovial, kindly, generous character. Now and then he enjoyed telling his boys about the Pope to their great delight. The cleric Michael Rua faithfully recorded two such incidents, as described by Don Bosco one night after prayers:

A charming episode occurred while I was in Rome. A Roman nobleman, Count Spada, called on Pius IX one day on some important business. At the close of the audience, the nobleman said, "Your Holiness, may I have a keepsake of you?"

"What would you like? I will do my best to oblige," the Pope replied very amiably.

"Something unusual, Your Holiness."

"For example?"

"Your snuffbox."

"My snuff is not of the best."

"It does not matter, Your Holiness. I shall treasure it all the same."

"Here you are, then. I give it to you gladly."

The count left more pleased with that than with a treasure. The plain snuffbox, made of buffalo horn with two brass clasps barely worth four *soldi*, was very precious because of the giver. The count, in fact, shows it to his friends as a most revered keepsake. The snuff was indeed of poor quality.

Another curious incident took place last year [1857] when the Holy Father passed by Viterbo on a visit to the Papal States. A poor

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 523-602. [Editor]

little girl had just gathered a small bundle of dry sticks when she noticed a carriage on the nearby road. Hoping the travelers would buy her firewood, she ran up to them.

"Father," she said to the Pope, whom she had never seen before, "do you want some firewood? It's very dry."

"No, thanks," the Pope replied.

"It's only three *baiocchi*,"² the child insisted.

"There, take this and keep the firewood as well," said the Pope, giving the little girl three *scudi*.³

The young girl, however, wanted the Holy Father to keep the bundle at all costs. "Please, Father, do take it. It's really a good one. You have plenty of room in your carriage."

The Pope and his entourage smiled at the child's simple insistence. Meanwhile, her mother who was working in a field close by, recognizing the papal carriage, ran up crying: "Your Holiness! Your Holiness! Excuse her. My little girl does not know you. Have pity on us! We are so very poor."

The Pope added another six *scudi* to his gift and continued his journey. As the news spread about town, the people vied with each other in praising God for having given them so kindly and good-hearted a sovereign.

To increase the boys' love for the Pope, Don Bosco decided to make June 24 a celebration in honor of Pius IX in the three festive oratories of St. Francis de Sales, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, and the Guardian Angel. Since that day — feast of St. John the Baptist — was a diocesan holy day, Don Bosco wanted all his festive oratory boys to enjoy the spiritual and temporal favors the Pope had granted them on Don Bosco's recent visit to Rome. As stated before,⁴ he had granted them a plenary indulgence to be gained on the day they would go to confession and Communion; then he had graciously given Don Bosco a generous donation to treat the boys. The sum had been increased by the generosity of several laymen of Turin who, in their eagerness to own one of those golden *scudi*, had gladly bought them from Don Bosco at a price equal to their

² A copper coin worth five *centesimi*, used in the Papal States until 1866. [Editor]

³ A papal gold coin worth over five lire. [Editor]

⁴ See Vol. V, p. 595. [Editor]

desire to have a keepsake of Pius IX's generosity. As a result, Don Bosco now had five hundred lire to use.

On [June 20] — the Sunday preceding the feast of St. John the Baptist — the boys were told of the celebration by their respective directors. At Valdocco, Don Bosco enthused all by talking of the Pope's warm affection for them and of his gift so as to encourage them to persevere in their Christian duties. On [Thursday] June 24, the boys flocked in numbers to their festive oratories to receive the sacraments and to enjoy the Pope's treat. The celebration could not have been more beautiful and joyful, but at the St. Francis de Sales Festive Oratory it took on special solemnity because Don Bosco had the Cattaneo Press print five hundred and fifty pictures of Jesus Crucified to give out to his benefactors, and the playground was festooned and arched with green boughs, flowers, and bunting. Festivities opened the evening of the 23rd with the celebration of Don Bosco's name day.⁵ There were recitations in prose and poetry — the boys' own compositions — and a special song, the first musical composition of the cleric John Cagliero.⁶ The band concert was directed by [Francis] Massa. At the close of the entertainment Don Bosco thanked everyone, spoke of the Pope, and directed that the next day's attention be all centered on the Holy Father.

Accordingly, after next morning's Mass, about a thousand boarders and day boys assembled in front of the church to hear a cantata whose lyrics⁷ had been written by the young cleric John Baptist Francesia. Alternate recitatives and melodies expressed everyone's joy and gratitude to the Pope for his various demonstrations of benevolence and his recent blessing and treat. The cantata closed with a prayer — featuring a soprano solo and choir background —

⁵ At his Baptism Don Bosco had been named after the Apostle John, but in 1846 the Oratory boys, believing his name to be John the Baptist — a very popular Saint in Turin — began to celebrate his name day on June 24, the feast day of this Saint. [Editor]

⁶ Cagliero had entered the Oratory in 1851. (*See* Vol. IV, pp. 200ff.) Ordained a priest in 1862, he led the first group of Salesian missionaries to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in 1875, became the first Salesian bishop in 1884, and cardinal in 1915. He died in Rome in 1926. In June 1964 his remains were transferred and solemnly laid to rest in the Cathedral of Viedma, Argentina. [Editor]

⁷ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

that all men would revere and obey God's Vicar, that there would be but one fold and one Shepherd, and that all the Oratory boys would one day form a joyful crown for Pius IX in heaven.

Then followed an abundant breakfast marked with *vivas*, toasts, and applause for Pius IX. The festivity closed with another song.⁸

This celebration was followed by the feast of St. Aloysius, observed customarily with that of SS. Peter and Paul. Don Bosco's regard for St. Aloysius urged him to spread devotion to the Saint and set up sodalities in his honor in villages and towns where he preached or gave missions, as, for example, at Poirino.⁹ Invited there in October 1855 by Father Stephen Giorda, pastor of St. Mary Major, Don Bosco enrolled the young lads of the parish in an impressive ceremony. To this very day the sodalities Don Bosco established in several towns and villages are still flourishing; the one in Poirino observed its golden jubilee in 1905. It is therefore easily understandable how eager Don Bosco was to keep devotion to St. Aloysius alive at the Oratory, especially by the solemn celebration of the Saint's feast.

In preceding volumes, we barely mentioned the celebration unless something extraordinary occurred, though — to be realistic — at the Oratory even the extraordinary was routine. Now, though, we cannot pass over the feast of 1858 or omit the comments written by Count Camburzano, a talented nobleman, in the July 4 issue of *L'Armonia*. Justice can be done the article only by reproducing it in its entirety.¹⁰

Count Camburzano, a devoted, generous benefactor of the Oratory, also known as the Montalembert of Italy, this same year [1858] witnessed Don Bosco's mysterious power of reading the secrets of the heart. One day, on vacation at Nice, he had the occasion to speak of Don Bosco to some members of the upper-set nobility whose religious background was very poor. His stirring account of Don Bosco raised more than a skeptical smile among his listeners. One lady interrupted, "I'd be interested in finding out if this reverend gentleman can really read my conscience. If he can,

⁸ Omitted in this edition. We are likewise omitting an article about this celebration published in *L'Armonia* on June 29, 1858. [Editor]

⁹ A small town near Turin. [Editor]

¹⁰ See Appendix 2. [Editor]

I'll believe all you say about him." The bystanders applauded, and then and there it was decided to put Don Bosco to the test. The lady immediately wrote a letter to Don Bosco and sealed it. The count enclosed it in one of his own, in which he asked Don Bosco to comfort this lady who often became depressed and worried.

With customary punctuality, Don Bosco replied in these terms: "Tell the lady that if she wants peace of mind, she must return to her husband from whom she is separated." To the lady herself, he wrote: "Your Ladyship can again enjoy tranquillity of conscience by remedying the confessions of the last twenty years and atoning for past failings."

The news of this lady's separation from her husband came as a surprise to the count and to many others who believed her to be a widow. On relaying the message, Count Camburzano found that Don Bosco had undeniably been enlightened from on high, because the lady herself admitted that she had broken away from her husband. On her part, amazed at Don Bosco's personal note to her, she promptly acknowledged that what he had written was true. A few years later, the count assured Chevalier Frederick Oreglia¹¹ that Don Bosco had not previously known this lady.

A remarkable trait of Don Bosco was his constant effort to spread *Letture Cattoliche*. The July [1858] issue, with a Foreword by Don Bosco,¹² was entitled *The Christian's Vademecum*. It offered suggestions for Christian living. Some were addressed to the general faithful, while others were specifically directed to parents, boys and girls, and domestics. Where morality holds up, faith cannot languish and heresy cannot prevail.

Meantime Don Bosco thought of returning to Rome in July, but then gave up the idea. We do not know what had prompted the change, whether some matter of interest to the Holy See or the spreading of *Letture Cattoliche*. Perhaps he was able to entrust whatever business he had to others. That he had planned to go to Rome we gather from a letter [of Count Rudolph De Maistre] to a canon in Rome:

¹¹ A distinguished layman of Turin, Oreglia came to the Oratory in 1860, became a Salesian in 1862, but left in 1869 to join the Society of Jesus. His name will frequently occur in these memoirs. [Editor]

¹² Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

Turin, July 2, 1858

Very Reverend and dear Canon,

Father John Bosco — whom you met at my house in Rome — is planning another trip to Rome to settle unfinished business from his previous visit.

I thought it might not be indiscreet on my part to call upon your kindness and ask about the availability of the spare room in your brother's apartment which was used by the baron of Morgan. If it is not available, I would be obliged if you would find some other respectable place where Father John Bosco could have room and board for two or three weeks. He will, of course, pay for it.

Reverend Canon, you know that Don Bosco — a most worthy friend of ours — is easy to please as a guest and his company is edifying and delightful. I trust that you will welcome this request as our mutual friend and do us this good turn. I'm about to leave for France. If you will favor me with a reply, please send it to Franceschina or to my wife in Chieri.

I hope your mother is well in spite of the excessive heat. Please give her my regards. My respects to you.

Your humble servant,
Count De Maistre

CHAPTER 3

Deathbed Conversions

THE good that Don Bosco had done and was doing through *Letture Cattoliche* had earned him such a reputation for virtue and learning that people instinctively sought him whenever the conversion of an obstinate, dying sinner was at stake. We shall add two more instances to those already described in preceding volumes.¹

A government employee at Turin who had enforced laws detrimental to the rights of the Church was grievously ill. He also had not been to the sacraments for many years because he had lost his faith through regular reading of irreligious publications. His druggist, who had been told by the doctor that the patient would hardly survive another day, promptly informed the pastor. The latter, knowing the patient would have nothing to do with priests, asked Don Bosco to try to save his soul.

Don Bosco went immediately. To his surprise, on calling at the man's house, he was joyfully welcomed by his lively young son who was a faithful member of the Valdocco festive oratory. His father loved the boy very deeply as he was everything to him, his only happiness in life. Sometimes the lad would offer his father the crucifix to kiss; the man — though not religious — would comply so as not to hurt his feelings. At other times the boy would say, "Dad, let me ask Don Bosco to give you his blessing. It will do you a lot of good. It will make you better." His father would decline but always so as not to pain him. Later, the father would mutter

¹ See Vol. II, pp. 130ff; Vol. IV, pp. 109ff; Vol. V, pp. 435ff. [Editor]

to himself, "Such superstitions these priests put into the heads of the young!"

As soon as he saw Don Bosco, the boy immediately exclaimed, "Oh, Don Bosco! Come to my dad! He is very sick!"

"Is he? Then please go in and tell him I am here."

"Dad will surely be happy to see you!" he replied, hurrying to his father's bedroom.

"Dad, Don Bosco is here! I can bring him in, can't I?" Without waiting for a reply, he ran back, took Don Bosco by the hand, and led him in, saying: "Come! Dad wants your blessing."

Don Bosco tried to hold back, wanting to know what the father had said and insisting he be better announced than that. But the boy did not give him a chance, half leading and half pushing him into the room.

The sick man gave Don Bosco an angry look which he ignored.

"How are you, sir?" he asked kindly.

"As you can see," was the dry response.

"Cheer up! Albert will pray for you, and I'll do the same."

"Don't bother. I don't need that. Forget it."

The youngster, embarrassed by the rude reception, walked out of the room. Availing himself of the privacy, Don Bosco went on, "Don't you believe in the power of an innocent child's prayer? Still, I didn't come here to talk about that. I just wanted to say hello. I think highly of you."

He then began a friendly conversation that gradually softened the patient and put him into a better mood. Noticing his favorable reaction, Don Bosco said at one point, "It's getting late, and I don't want to impose on you any longer. May I give you a blessing before I go?"

"As you wish," the patient replied rather coldly but without ill feeling. Don Bosco then called in the boy.

"Why are you calling my son?" the man asked him.

"I want him to say a Hail Mary with me for you."

"It's not necessary. Don't bother him."

But Don Bosco insisted, and when the boy came in, Don Bosco said to him: "Albert, let's say a Hail Mary together for your dad. He is quite sick, and we must ask Our Lord to spare him. Were he

to die, you would be all alone, you'd lose your best and dearest friend, and you would be exposed to moral dangers with no one to guide and help you. Your inexperience could lead you to sad consequences. And then, at the end of your life, how much you would regret not having had a friend at your side. And what a tragedy if you should perhaps be parted from your father through eternity!"

Such thoughts Don Bosco briefly, prudently, and strongly expressed to the boy, while meaning them for the father. Somehow, he was describing the father's own life who had been an orphan from his early youth. Albert was crying, while his father tried to hide his feelings with only too little success.

"Come now, Albert," Don Bosco went on, "let us kneel and say not one, but three Hail Mary's." After the prayers, he sent the boy out of the room and said to the father: "Please make the Sign of the Cross." The man indifferently obliged as Don Bosco blessed him.

Then Don Bosco blandly inquired of his studies, the positions he had held, his boyhood, youth, and adult life. The patient gradually opened up and Don Bosco tactfully extracted from him all that was essential for sacramental absolution while gently probing his frailties. Finally, seeing that the patient was very tired, he said to him: "Now, if you wish, I'll give you absolution."

"Absolution? I must first make a confession, and I have no intention of doing that."

"You did already. What you told me is quite sufficient."

"You mean it?"

"I certainly do!"

"I can hardly believe it!"

"Now make an act of contrition and God, most good and merciful to those who are sincerely sorry, will forgive you everything."

At these words the patient broke into tears and sobbed, "God is good indeed!"

The emotion exhausted him alarmingly. Fearing he might only last a few more hours as the doctor had warned, Don Bosco hastened to ask a few more questions. Then, since the patient was willing to do all the Church required, he gave him absolution. Finally, after promising to take care of Albert, he sent word to the pastor to hurry with Holy Viaticum. He came quickly and brought

the Holy Oil, but had barely time to administer the sacrament with one anointing.

Another time Don Bosco was asked to visit a critically ill notary public in the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Other priests had tried to reconcile him to God, but in vain. Don Bosco had had dealings with him in the past. The man received him coldly but courteously. As usual, Don Bosco solicitously asked about his sickness. His comforting words cheered and strengthened the patient, but as soon as he began dropping a few cautious hints regarding his soul, the man quickly interrupted him.

"Let's change the topic," he said. "You know my principles. I'll never bring myself to a confession."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't believe in it. Look at these books."

Don Bosco picked up one of the volumes. They were the works of Voltaire.

"What are you trying to prove?" Don Bosco asked him.

"Just one thing. I agree with Voltaire and therefore I will never degrade myself by going to confession."

"You won't degrade yourself! Don't you know that this man whose ideas you claim you share, whom you think the world of, wanted to go to confession as he lay on his deathbed?"

"I can't believe that!"

"Yet it is true! And he would have made his confession, had not his false friends cruelly prevented him."

And then Don Bosco described Voltaire's death. As the patient listened with growing interest and feeling, Don Bosco concluded, "Now I will tell you why I'm inclined to believe that Voltaire could have saved his soul."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the notary as a shiver shook his frame.

"Quite possible! From Holy Scripture we know only of one who was certainly damned — Judas! God has kept us in the dark about others so that we may hope for their salvation."

"You really believe that Voltaire could be saved after all he said and did and wrote?"

"God is most good and merciful, my friend. A single act of love can wipe away any sin."

"Voltaire saved! I can't get over it!"

“I am entitled to an opinion on the matter. Therefore I may believe that Voltaire was saved because he did want to make his confession and was deeply sorry. He was only unfortunate in not being able to get a priest. But, if in his last moments, as he saw himself on the brink of eternal loss, he made an act of love of God — and consequently of genuine sorrow — it is certain, it is of faith, that he saved his soul.”

The sick man had listened in silence. He remained pensive a few moments and then exclaimed resolutely, “I want to make my confession. Get rid of those books!”

He made his confession at once. At eight that evening he received Holy Viaticum, and at ten the Anointing of the Sick and the papal blessing. He passed away before midnight with true sentiments of faith, sorrow, confidence, and love of God, leaving in everyone a well-founded hope of his eternal salvation.

Don Bosco returned to the Oratory with a load of forbidden books, which he at once burned, telling his boys: “Let us thank God for everything!”

We have reason to believe that Don Bosco opened the gates of heaven also to many others. John Bisio,² who from 1864 to 1871 acted as receptionist for Don Bosco, declared to us: “I can say that Don Bosco was many times summoned to hear confessions of obstinate, dying sinners. When on his return I asked whether he had been successful, he invariably answered, ‘Yes, he made his confession.’ ”

² An Oratory pupil and, later, a lifelong Salesian cooperator. [Editor]

CHAPTER 4

A New Recruit

DURING the school year 1857-58 the Oratory enrollment totaled 199 boarders, of whom 121 were students and 78 artisans.¹ When school closed, Don Bosco, as in previous years, went to St. Ignatius' Shrine above Lanzo with Father Cafasso for his annual spiritual retreat. While there, he answered several of his pupils' letters. His reply to the cleric Michael Rua was in Latin:

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 26 Julii 1858

Fili mi,

Gaudium et gratia Domini Nostri Jesu Christi sit semper in cordibus nostris. Nonnulla monita salutis postulasti; libenter faciam et paucis verbis.

Scito ergo et animadvertite quod non sint condignae passiones huius temporis ad futuram gloriam quae revelabitur in nobis. Ideoque hanc gloriam incessanti animo et labore quaeramus.

Vita hominis super terram est vapor ad modicum parens; vestigium nubis quae fugit; umbra quae apparuit et non est; unda quae fluit. Bona, igitur, huius vitae parvi habenda, coelestia studiose optanda.

Laetare in Domino. Sive manduces, sive bibas, sive quid aliud facias, omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam fac. Vale, fili mi, et deprecare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum.

Tuus sodalis,

Sac. J. Bosco

¹ Boys taking an academic course were called "students" to distinguish them from those learning a trade who were known as "artisans." [Editor]

St. Ignatius' Shrine above Lanzo, July 26, 1858

My son,

The joy and grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be ever in our hearts. You have asked me for spiritual advice; I shall oblige gladly and briefly.

Know, then, and keep in mind that the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come which shall be revealed in us. Let us therefore unceasingly and earnestly seek this glory.

Man's life on earth is a mist that appears for a little while, the trace of a fleeting cloud, a shadow that was and is no more, water that keeps flowing away. Hence, goods of this life should be held of little account and heavenly goods ardently desired.

Rejoice in the Lord. Whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all for the greater glory of God.

Good-bye, my son, and pray to the Lord Our God for me.

Your friend,

Fr. John Bosco

After his return to the Oratory, one day, as a crowd of boys pressed around him, one of them — Joseph Reano — told him of having seen an extraordinarily large comet. At this Don Bosco remarked, "It may or may not be an evil omen, but unavoidably a devastating scourge will smite Italy."

Meanwhile, the August issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled *Anthony, Little Orphan of Florence*, was out. . . .

At this time, too, a new dining room for the boys was being constructed under the whole length of the Church of St. Francis de Sales; an arched ceiling in the new basement supported the church floor. The old dining room was to be converted into a kitchen. Repairs and alterations were also going on at the Guardian Angel Festive Oratory in Borgo Vanchiglia, as we gather from a letter of Don Bosco to Mr. Alexander Bronzini Zapelloni, one of the landlords.²

Though busy at these and other tasks, Don Bosco kept accepting preaching engagements outside the Oratory. A letter of his to Count Pio Galleani of Agliano tells us of one such engagement:

² Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

Turin, September 1, 1858

My dear Count,

I'd like you to know that I will soon be with you to keep my promise of preaching on the feast of St. Philomena. I shall leave with the first afternoon train on Sunday. At Cuneo I shall call at the bishop's residence and then will proceed to Palasazzo.

I must tell you, however, that I cannot fully oblige and preach also on the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady because on Tuesday afternoon I must catch a train around two o'clock and return to Turin. A shortage of priests and other duties deprive me of the pleasure of spending the whole week with you, as I had planned.

God bless you, the countess, and your whole family.

Your humble servant,

Fr. John Bosco

Perhaps Don Bosco was in a hurry to ready the September issue of *Letture Cattoliche* entitled *The Youth's Guide to Salvation* by Claude Arvisenet, a translation from the French. . . .

A very important document clearly attesting the Holy Father's benevolence and high regard for *Letture Cattoliche* introduced this particular issue. [A few months before] Don Bosco had obtained a singular favor from Pius IX — an order to the Pope's vicar, Constantine Cardinal Patrizi, to send a circular to all bishops and archbishops of the Papal States urging them to introduce *Letture Cattoliche* in their respective dioceses.³

The circular had its desired effect. *Letture Cattoliche* now spread not only through the Papal States but through nearly all of Italy. Following the Pope's example, many bishops recommended it to their pastors and the latter to their flocks. The increased circulation brought great spiritual benefit to a larger number of people and financial help to the Oratory. More people were reached and encouraged to lead a Christian life, work was provided for more young artisans, and the modest profit enabled Don Bosco to look after a larger number of poor boys.

³ See Vol. V, p. 579. In this edition we are omitting the reprint of this circular, dated May 22, 1858, and the Preface Don Bosco wrote for it. [Editor]

These and many other favors that Our Lady had granted Don Bosco in inspiring him to go to Rome called for some special act of gratitude. Another pilgrimage to the shrine of the Madonna di Campagna [Our Lady of the Countryside] seemed the most natural thing, for it was there that in 1846 the Oratory had obtained the grace of a permanent abode in the Pinardi house.⁴ There was also the added reason that this year, with the Holy Father's approval of Don Bosco's plans [for a religious congregation⁵], the latter felt assured of his work's stability. At the pastor's suggestion the pilgrimage took place on September 12. *L'Armonia* briefly described it in its issue of September 21, 1858.⁶

One of the young pilgrims was a boy to whom Don Bosco had predicted his future. Among the several Latin students of Our Lady of Mount Carmel school who one day went to confession to Don Bosco at the Oratory, there was one named Coccone. To him Don Bosco said: "One day you will be a priest." The boy did not like this at all, for he felt rather disinclined to the priesthood and made this clear to his friends who now and then teased him about it. To win him over Don Bosco asked him and his friends to join the Oratory pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Countryside. About a year later, though, the youth stopped frequenting the Oratory. Then, in 1861, Paul Albera⁷ again came across him and attended classes with him in the seminary. Fifteen years since his first talk with Don Bosco, the same young man, now a priest, caught up with Don Bosco as he was, on his way on foot to San Vito [in the hills of Turin]. He stepped up to him and joined him without introducing himself. As they walked and conversed freely, Don Bosco suddenly stopped and, looking at him, said: "You are the young man I told fifteen years ago that he would become a priest! Right?"

"Yes," Coccone replied, astonished. In God's plans this priest was destined to do much good in the prison apostolate.

In September of this same year 1858, Divine Providence quite

⁴ See Vol. II, pp. 327ff. [Editor]

⁵ See Vol. V, pp. 561, 575f. [Editor]

⁶ See Appendix 3. [Editor]

⁷ Paul Albera (1845-1921) entered the Oratory in the fall of 1858, donned the clerical habit in 1861, and made his religious vows in 1862. Ordained a priest in 1868, he filled important positions, became Don Bosco's second successor in 1910, and remained in office until his death in 1921. [Editor]

unexpectedly sent Don Bosco another young man who was to be a great help to him. We learned of this through Mr. Angelo Gambarà of Mirabello who wrote to us as follows:

Francis Provera, a fellow townsman of mine from Mirabello, had excellent Christian parents. They owned a shop and wanted their son to carry on the business for which he showed remarkable aptitude. The boy, however, wanted to become a priest. His confessor, Father Joseph Ricaldone, counseled him not to oppose his father but to bide his time, see if he would be called to military service, and keep praying. When luck favored him and he was not drafted, Father Ricaldone, who had heard of the Cottolengo Institute and knew that it was seeking candidates for the priesthood, sent Provera there with an excellent letter of recommendation. He did not, however, broach the subject of fees, as he expected the young man himself to see to that, with perhaps better results. It should be noted that at this time Don Bosco was hardly known at Mirabello. Francis Provera set off for Turin. A few days later, he returned to Mirabello and reported to Father Ricaldone, who, from the boy's beaming joy, took it for granted that he had been accepted at Cottolengo.

"Oh, no," he replied. "They didn't take me. They said they had no room."

"No room? Didn't you tell them that you could pay part of the fees?"

"No. They didn't ask me."

"Then go back at once. I will give you another letter explaining things better. I'm sure they will take you."

"That won't be necessary," he replied. "I have found another place."

"You have?"

"Yes! As I left Cottolengo and was walking toward the railroad station I saw a priest playing with some boys and lingered to watch. The priest then called me and asked me a few questions. I told him why I had come to Turin and he asked me to return and stay with him. I promised I would."

Indeed, a few days later Francis Provera returned to Turin and became the great Salesian we all know.⁸ This I came to know because Father Ricaldone, the Provera family, and Francis himself told me about it several times.

⁸ Provera made his first vows in the Salesian Society in 1862 and was ordained a priest in 1864. More will be said about him in this volume and other volumes as well. [Editor]

CHAPTER 5

A Sermon on Purity

AS the autumn excursion to Becchi was drawing near, the October and November issues of *Letture Cattoliche* were being readied. The first one — *The Lamp at the Shrine* — was a very simple, moving story translated from English . . . while the second — *The Life of St. Callistus I, Pope and Martyr* — was another of Don Bosco's biographies in the series of the lives of the popes of the first three centuries¹

These short lives Don Bosco used to narrate to his boys in the Sunday sermons, inspiring in them respect and submission not only to the Pope but also to bishops, especially their own exiled Archbishop Louis Fransoni. A segment of the clergy had criticized this prelate's line of conduct, but Don Bosco's boys and clerics firmly and loyally stood by him. For example, this year [1858] on the occasion of a religious celebration at Airasca, one of Don Bosco's clerics was in the rectory with several priests. One of them — a teacher in Turin — started to run down the archbishop, saying his exile served him right because he had unreasonably denied Holy Viaticum to Minister De Rossi di Santarosa. The latter had incurred ecclesiastical censures and had refused to make retractions.² Seeing that no one was taking a stand in support of the archbishop, the cleric stood up and vigorously upheld the prelate's action which had been in conformity with Canon Law. Astonished, the offending priest inquired who his youthful opponent was and, hearing that he

¹ See Vol. V, p. 383. [Editor]

² Pietro De Rossi di Santarosa (1805-1850), Minister of Public Works, Agriculture, and Commerce, died assisted by his confessor, and his exequies were allowed by the archbishop. See Vol. IV, pp. 65f. [Editor]

was one of Don Bosco's clerics, remarked: "We had better steer clear of certain topics when Don Bosco's boys are around." The cleric was John Cagliero.

Meantime, the novena for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary had just started. At Easter Michael Magone had gone home for the holidays to please his mother, but — also at Don Bosco's suggestion — he determined not to go for the fall recess. His friends often asked why, but he always managed to put them off with a smile. One day, though, he gave one of them the real answer.

"I did go home once for a few days, but from now on I won't go unless I am forced to."

"Why?"

"Because, once I'm home, the old hangouts, games, and pals drag me back to my old ways. I am through with that."

"Why not go home with a little good will to follow our superiors' suggestions for the holidays?"

"Good will is like a fog. It hangs around a while, and then melts into thin air. Good advice helps for a few days, but then the old gang makes me forget everything."

"So you think nobody should go home anymore!"

"I didn't say that. If others can keep from sin, let them go. I'm too weak, so I'd rather stay here. I am convinced that if we could see our spiritual condition, we would see many going home with angels' wings and returning with devils' horns."

Don Bosco, however, did not want Magone to be cheated of a few days' vacation and took him along with the first group of boys going to Becchi.³ Among them was John Garino,⁴ who witnessed what we are about to narrate.

The group left on September 30, feast of St. Jerome. As they trooped along, Don Bosco had a chance to talk with Magone at some length and to realize that this young boy was far more virtuous than he thought. A storm overtook them on the way, and they reached Chieri drenched to the skin. Don Bosco's great friend, Chevalier Mark Gonella, who always welcomed the boys on their

³ See Vol. V, pp. 223ff. [Editor]

⁴ Garino, born in 1845, entered the Oratory in 1857. A few years later, in 1862, he took triennial vows in the Salesian Society. Ordained a priest in 1869, he distinguished himself as a Latin and Greek scholar and a fervent religious. He died in 1908. [Editor]

trek to and from Castelnuovo, gave them dry clothing and served them a lavish meal. After a few hours' rest, they again took to the road, but Magone soon trailed behind. One of the boys, thinking he was tired, slowed down, and as Magone got closer, he heard Michael whispering to himself.

"Tired, Mickey?" he inquired.

"Not at all," he replied. "I can walk all the way to Milan."

"What were you whispering a few moments ago?"

"I was just saying the rosary for the good gentleman who treated us so well. I can only repay him by praying to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin to bless his family and reward him a hundredfold."

We cannot overemphasize Magone's gratitude for any favors he received. Often he would affectionately take Don Bosco's hand and, tearfully looking up, say: "I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for letting me come to the Oratory. I'll try to repay you by my good conduct and by asking Our Lord to bless you and your work."

After another stop at Buttigliera and a snack provided by Countess Miglino, the boys reached Becchi toward nightfall. The novena in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary was being preached by Father [Michelangelo] Chiatellino.⁵

Sometime that week, Don Bosco called on a neighboring pastor. His housekeeper, an elderly woman, was so thrift-conscious that she had practically driven all the priest's friends away by her curt, dry manners and ill-served skimpy dishes. She also kept the pastor on a very lean fare; the latter, knowing her for a trusty old soul who was guarded in speech and truly pious, very patiently put up with her when he realized he could never change her ways.

Don Bosco was well aware of the situation. In response to his knock, the housekeeper came to the rectory door and coldly asked, "What do you want?"

"May I speak to the pastor?"

"He is out."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know. He may be out for hours."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to wait. Meanwhile, I am delighted to meet you. I have heard so many nice things about you."

⁵ One of Don Bosco's first co-workers. See Vol. II, p. 437. [Editor]

“Really?” the housekeeper replied, mellowing a bit.

“Certainly! You’re Domenica, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. But how do you know my name? Who told you?”

“Who told me? Those who praised you as an excellent cook and a good-hearted woman.”

“And who are you?”

“Don Bosco.”

“Don Bosco? From Becchi?”

“Right!”

“Oh, Don Bosco! Please, come in.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose on you.”

“Not at all! It’s a pleasure. Come in, make yourself comfortable. . . .” And she ushered him in while he continued to praise her.

“Surely you will stay with us for dinner?”

“I’d be content with a little soup!”

“That would never do!”

As soon as the pastor got home, she tersely informed him that Don Bosco had arrived and dashed back into the kitchen. The good priest welcomed Don Bosco most cordially but felt quite uncomfortable at the thought of the meager meal to come. His worries increased when the clock struck twelve and no word came from the kitchen.

Presently, though, the housekeeper, beaming all over, announced that dinner was ready. When the pastor saw the lavish spread, he was astonished. Don Bosco tactfully kept complimenting her as she served dish after dish. On her part, Domenica apologized for not having done more due to lack of time, and kept suggesting to the pastor the choicer wines of his cellar.

“How did you manage to win her over?” the priest whispered to Don Bosco when she was out of hearing. “What’s the secret?”

“I’ll tell you later. Now enjoy your meal.”

“Most willingly! Am I happy you came! Come back every week.”

“Why?”

“It’s the only way I’ll have a break in my perpetual Lenten fast.”

A generous dose of praise and the magic of addressing her as “Signora Domenica” had truly worked a miracle, and Don Bosco managed to win over the housekeeper’s good will in anticipation of

the time when he would take his boys there on an outing. He did not fail, though, to give her a handsome tip.

In the evening Don Bosco returned to his boys. That day, they had had a chance to admire Michael Magone again. They had all gone in the woods nearby looking for mushrooms and nuts, or just playing. At the height of the fun, Magone quietly slipped away. One boy noticed it and, thinking he might be sick, went after him. Michael, unaware of being followed, returned to the house and, without a word to anyone, went straight to the little chapel, where his friend found him kneeling by the Blessed Sacrament rapt in prayer. Questioned afterward why he had left the group, he frankly replied: "I'm very afraid I'll slip back into my sinful habits. That's why I go to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and pray for help and strength to persevere in His grace."

Another singular episode occurred in these days. One night, while all were in bed, Don Bosco heard someone crying outside. Quietly he went to the window. Magone was standing in a corner of the little yard, looking up into the sky and crying. "What's wrong, Michael?" he whispered.

Realizing he had been overheard, Magone was distressed. "Nothing, Father; I'm all right." But when Don Bosco insisted, he told him: "I was looking at the moon and the stars, Father. For centuries they've been coming up every night to brighten the night and they never even once disobeyed their Creator. And I instead, only a few years old, have often broken His law and offended Him in a thousand ways. How bad I am to have been so unfaithful to Him." And he broke into sobs. Don Bosco cheered him and, somewhat comforted, Michael went back to bed.

The feast of the Holy Rosary was nigh. On its eve, about sixty more boys, including the choir, arrived from the Oratory along the same route as the first group. The celebration was most edifying — boys and villagers devoutly received Holy Communion, the choir sang fervently and beautifully at Mass and Benediction, and Don Bosco himself gave the homily.

Although even during the novena the boys had hiked to neighboring villages, the real outings were always scheduled after the feast itself. As in the past, so also this year, they lasted one full

day or just half a day, the boys always starting from and returning to Becchi — their headquarters — by nightfall. The number of outings depended on how much time Don Bosco could spare for that. Led by him, the boys received a warm welcome in Montiglio, Passerano, Primeglio, Marmorito, Piea, Moncucco, Albugnano, Montafia, Cortazzone, and Pino d'Asti. They also hiked several times to the abbey of Vezzolano ⁶ whose history Don Bosco narrated to them. Their last hike was to Mondonio to Dominic Savio's grave. Some of his schoolmates had received signal favors from him in answer to their prayers. Finally on their way to Turin, they stopped at Castelnuovo where the pastor, Father Anthony Cinzano, treated them to dinner. On reaching the Oratory that evening, Michael Magone said to Don Bosco: "If it's all right with you, Father, tomorrow I'd like to offer up my Holy Communion for the pastor who was so good to us today." Of course, Don Bosco not only approved, but, as he would on such occasions, exhorted all the boys to do the same.

As winter was not far off, Don Bosco hastily took steps to get suitable clothing for his boys by writing to Marquis [Alfonso] La Marmora, Minister of War, for surplus army clothes and blankets.⁷ He also needed money for the new dining room which, from December on, began to double as an auditorium. To this effect he sent an appeal to the president of the Society of St. Paul.⁸

Notwithstanding these and other material concerns, Don Bosco, remarkably, never relaxed his union with God, as is evidenced by his active priestly ministry. We are indebted to Father John Bonetti ⁹ for a detailed outline of a sermon on purity given by Don Bosco this year. An attentive reading makes one sense its power, though his voice, gaze, and warmth are missing. [On Sunday, October 17, 1858] Don Bosco spoke [substantially] as follows:

⁶ About three miles from Castelnuovo. [Editor]

⁷ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁸ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁹ Bonetti was enrolled at the Oratory as a student in 1855 at the age of seventeen. He soon became a capable assistant to Don Bosco and filled important positions in the Salesian Society. He was also a prolific writer. His best-known work is the history of the first twenty-five years of the Oratory — *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio San Francesco di Sales* — a valuable source for *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*. [Editor]

The Church consecrates October almost totally to Mary Most Holy. The first Sunday is dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary in memory of countless favors and stupendous prodigies wrought through Her intercession. The second Sunday honors Her maternity and reminds us that She is our Mother and we Her children. Today — the third Sunday — the Church exalts Her purity, that virtue which made Her the most beautiful of creatures, the most pleasing to God. The past two Sundays I spoke of Mary's glories; this evening I will tell you about this beautiful virtue and show you how highly God values it. Oh, how happy I would be if I could fill your tender hearts with love for this angelic virtue! Listen carefully!

What is the virtue of purity? Theologians say it is a hatred and a loathing of anything contrary to the Sixth Commandment. By this standard, any person in any state of life can keep this virtue. Purity is so pleasing to God that in every age He rewarded most wondrously those who preserved it and most severely punished those who gave themselves up to the opposite vice. At the very beginning of mankind when people — few as they were — abandoned themselves to a sinful life, Enoch kept his heart pure. For this reason, God did not want him to live with the wicked, and had His angels carry him off to a mysterious place whence, after his death, he would be taken into heaven.

Later, men multiplied and, unmindful of their Creator, again steeped themselves into the most shameful vices. As Holy Scripture says, "God saw that the earth was corrupt." [Gen. 6, 11] Angered by such iniquity, God decided to wipe the human race out with a universal deluge except for Noah and his family. Why? Because they had kept the priceless, beautiful virtue of purity.

Again, after the deluge, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into every kind of vice, and again God decided to destroy them — not with water, but with fire. Yet what did He do first? He looked at those unfortunate cities and, seeing that Lot and his family had observed His laws, immediately sent an angel to warn Lot to leave with his family. No sooner had they done so than, amid frightful lightning and thunder, a rain of fire fell on those doomed cities, burying them and all their inhabitants. Lot's household was saved, but his wife incurred God's wrath through a sin of curiosity. The angel had explicitly told the fugitives not to look back when they would hear the roar of God's punishment. Unfortunately, Lot's wife, hearing such blasts as if all hell were breaking loose, could not resist a quick glance; instantly she was turned into a statue of salt. Though saved from fire because of her purity, she was punished for failing to guard her eyes. Thus God wants to teach us

that we must control our gaze, that we must not always yield to curiosity lest we become its victims, not just physically — as Lot's wife — but, worse still, spiritually. Our eyes are the doors through which the devil nearly always steals into our souls.

But let us continue. Let us imagine that we are in Egypt. There you see a young man — Joseph — slandered and imprisoned for refusing to commit a shameful deed. Does God abandon him? Not at all! Wait a while, and you will see him as ruler and savior, not only of Egypt, but of Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, and neighboring lands during a terrible famine. Who made him so glorious? God did. And why? To reward his heroic purity.

I could go on and on, telling you how glorious is the lot of pure souls. I shall just mention Judith, savior of the city of Bethulia; Susanna, whose unshakable virtue was praised to the sky; Esther, who saved her people from extermination; the three youths in the fiery furnace; Daniel in the lions' den. Why did God work such astounding prodigies in their favor? Because they were pure. Yes, purity is so beautiful, so pleasing to God that at all times and in all circumstances, God never abandons those who possess it.

But there is still more to be said. When the long-desired Messiah was about to come, who among the daughters of Sion would have the honor of being His Mother? One alone did God find worthy of that dignity — the Virgin Mary. Of Her was Jesus born by the Holy Spirit. Why was She so wondrously privileged? Again, because of Her spotless purity. Mary was the purest, the most chaste of all.

Why did Jesus love to be with children, to talk to them, and to caress them? Because they were pure! The Apostles, annoyed by their noise and chatter, wanted to shoo them off, but Our Lord reprimanded them. "Let the little ones come unto Me," He said, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven." He then added that the Apostles themselves would not enter heaven unless they first became simple, pure, and chaste as those little ones. The Savior raised a boy and a girl to life. Why? Because — according to the Church Fathers — they were still innocent.

Jesus showed a special predilection for John the Evangelist. When He went up to Mount Tabor He took John along; when one day He went fishing with the Apostles, He chose John's boat; at the Last Supper, He allowed John to lean on His breast; He also wanted him as a companion in the garden of Gethsemani and a witness on Mount Calvary. Finally, hanging on the Cross, He turned to John. "Son," He said, "behold your mother." And to Mary, "Woman, behold Your son." To John He entrusted His Mother, the loftiest of God's creatures, peerless

among women. Why this singular preference, boys? Again, because his virginal purity above all endeared him to Jesus. Such was the favor shown him by Jesus that the other Apostles felt a tinge of jealousy. They even believed that he would not die because Our Lord had said to Peter: "And if I want him to live until I come, what is that to you?" As a matter of fact, St. John survived the other Apostles by many years, and he had a vision of the glory enjoyed in heaven by those who have preserved baptismal innocence. He himself wrote in the Apocalypse that, borne to the highest heaven, he saw a vast multitude of people, white-robed and girded with golden sashes, holding palms in their hands, constantly following the Lamb wherever He went. They were singing a song so sweet and beautiful that, under its spell, John asked his guide, "Who are these that follow the Lamb and sing so beautiful a song which others cannot sing?" And the angel replied: "They are those who have preserved the virtue of purity. They are virgins."

Oh, how lucky are you who still possess this beautiful virtue! I beg you, redouble your efforts to keep it unsullied. Guard your senses, frequently invoke Jesus and Mary, visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, often and worthily receive Him in Holy Communion. Be obedient and pray. You possess a treasure so beautiful, so great, that the very angels envy you. You are, as Our Lord Himself says, "like angels."

And those who unfortunately have lost this priceless treasure, don't lose heart. Prayer, frequent good confessions, the avoidance of dangerous occasions, and visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament will help you to regain it. Do your utmost and do not fear. Victory will be yours because God's grace will never fail you. True, you will no longer be among the privileged ones, you will not be able to sing the song of the virgins, but that will not affect your perfect happiness. You too will have a heavenly throne, so beautiful and majestic that the thrones of mighty kings are as dust in comparison. And your glory will be such that neither man nor angel can ever describe it. Finally, you will enjoy the presence of Jesus and Mary, our most loving Mother, and of the angels and saints who anxiously await us. Now and always they are ready to assist us, provided we are determined to preserve the beautiful virtue of purity.

CHAPTER 6

Fatherly Vigilance

AMONG the new students entering the Oratory at the start of the school year 1858-59 was Paul Albera, who one day was to fill the highest positions in the Salesian Society. As in the past few years, Don Bosco continued directing boys to the Cottolengo seminary,¹ furnishing them with a short note of recommendation. We shall quote one such note addressed to the cleric Frattini who was in charge of the young seminarians, commonly called "Tommasini."²

Valdocco, October 22, 1858

My dear Frattini,

Anthony Melotti called on me to inquire about openings in your seminary. Please see him and introduce him to your reverend superior. It will be up to both of you to do what seems best in the Lord. The boy's father is ready to pay ten lire per month.

God bless you and your labors. Pray also for me.

Yours affectionately,

Fr. John Bosco

First, Second, and Third Year Latin were taught respectively at the Oratory by the clerics Secundus Pettiva, John Turchi, and John Baptist Francesia, while the students of humanities and rhetoric continued to attend Father Matthew Picco's private school.

At the beginning of the school year — and several other times as

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 254f. [Editor]

² *Ibid.*, p. 254. [Editor]

well — Don Bosco used to give conferences to the teachers, crafts-masters, and assistants, stressing the importance of the spiritual welfare of their charges. He would say: “Boys come to the Oratory. Their parents and benefactors entrust them to us for either an academic, technical, or vocational education, but Our Lord sends them to us that we may look after their souls and that they may find here the path of their eternal salvation. Our uppermost aim is to make them good and to save their souls for eternity. We must, therefore, regard everything else as just a means.”

We have a written record of one such conference given to all the Oratory clerics toward the end of 1858:

On occasions I have the pleasure of speaking to all my children assembled together; at other times, only to those living in the house; often to only the students or artisans; now and then to the clerics alone.

The school year is well on its way, and that is why I am very anxious to resume, as in the past, our get-togethers at least once a week after night prayers because this seems to be the most opportune time. I am not going to give you a sermon. I only want to tell you that what I most earnestly wish and insist upon is that you practice what St. Paul so often insisted upon and what God Himself recommended to Moses as the latter was about to descend from the holy mountain — be exemplars, genuine exemplars to all your students. You must be the path which all the Oratory boys may safely follow. You must so behave as to edify all who see you; you must try to help others not only by advice but mostly by example. How can you exhort others to receive the sacraments if you do not set the example yourselves? How you would spur them on if you would edify them with fervent reception of the sacraments and modest, devout deportment in church! On the contrary, what harm, what scandal would result if the boys should unfortunately hear a cleric speak less becomingly or let a word slip that is even slightly offensive to the beautiful virtue of purity! St. John Chrysostom compares God’s ministers to fruit trees set in a fine, fenced orchard. How delightful to behold their leafy, fruit-laden branches! On the other hand, what a disappointment they would be if — being fruit trees — they were barren. They would arouse anger and malediction because they encumber the soil. We are like fruit trees. People come to us in search of good fruit. What a shock if they find none!

St. Ambrose says that we should be like so many moons. Just as the

moon does not shine of its own light but receives it from the sun and, being lighted itself, reflects it to the earth, so we too, since we have nothing of our own, must take from God the Most High — Sun of Justice — that divine word which enlightens men's minds. After using it for our own sanctification, we must pass it on to enlighten those who wait for us to light them the way to heaven.

St. Augustine used to say: "Do you want to know the meaning of the toga which young Romans were dressed in at the age of seventeen? It meant more than the age; it was a symbol of the knowledge, virtue, and other qualities expected of one who wears that garment." So with us. Under our clerical habit, we must wear the moral qualities demanded by so holy a garment.

When Joshua had to cross the Jordan, God told him: "Let the priests lead the way with the ark; the waters of the Jordan will be divided, and the people will cross over dry-shod." And so it happened. The waters parted: those above rose as a wall; those below flowed away and left a dry bed. Thus, the Israelites were able to cross into the promised land. We must do the same. With the ark of our faith, with our holy religion, with our good advice and example, we must safely lead men from this world into a happy eternity. Let us therefore do all we can to save souls. You are surrounded by many boys who constantly watch you. Do your utmost to set them on the right path by good example, advice, and exhortation. Do this, and I shall be quite satisfied even though your number is not greater than last year. I am sure the Lord will bless us all and will continue, as in the past, to help us with His mighty hand, to make all our labors bear fruit. Amen.

In his conferences, Don Bosco never tired of urging his young clerics to be painstaking in their supervision of the boys, for it would have been naive to assume that the Oratory could be immune from human weakness. He himself set the example by his steady, prudent supervision to prevent evil or uproot it, if it had found its way into the house. During the Oratory's first twenty years he showed up everywhere and — occasionally — when least expected: in the dormitories, the workshops, the classrooms, the dining rooms, and the most unlikely places. He took notice of the smallest things. He wanted to know and see all. For example, two boys might be loitering in the dining room leafing through the book which was being read aloud during meals. They were considered as good, yet

Don Bosco would kindly call them out. Others might be grouped apart, discussing some project, planning a little party, or gambling a few coins; Don Bosco would suddenly show up and send them to play with the others. A boy might be walking hand in hand with a pal or with an arm around his shoulder. Don Bosco would come along and playfully remove the boy's hand or arm. "Have you forgotten the rule not to lay hands on one another?" he would ask. "Well-mannered people do not do that."

One day in the playground he saw a boy arm in arm with a cleric and the latter offered no objection. He did not intervene, but later he remarked to the cleric, "I was sorely tempted today to slap you publicly! Do you know why?"

"Yes, Father."

"Enough. Be careful."

Don Bosco was highly sensitive in this matter. On many occasions his vigilance was baffling. He seemed to have a mysterious sixth sense, which we shall further illustrate in due time. Often, while at work, prayer, meals, or recreation with his boys, he would suddenly call one of his co-workers and whisper, "Go to such and such a dormitory; there are three boys locked in there (*and he would name them*) reading an objectionable newspaper. Tell them to get out at once." Another time he would say to a trustworthy boy, "Go and tell the assistant³ that in such a place behind the porticoes boys are hiding. Tell him to chase them out." Or he would say to a cleric: "Go to the top of the stairs and tell so and so that Don Bosco knows what's going on."

These occurrences were quite frequent. In all cases, facts proved that Don Bosco was right in every detail of place, persons, and circumstances. But, while playing guardian angel, he also imitated the angel's discretion and patience. The plausible motives of his abrupt appearances, his goodness and simplicity, his constant show of affection and esteem for all without exception, and his forgive-and-forget policy were such that the boys felt no mistrust in his regard. In fact, no sooner did they spot him than they all flocked to him.

³ Usually a young Salesian brother entrusted with the supervision of the boys in practically every activity. [Editor]

From the time Don Bosco began to accept boarders [1847]⁴ until about 1870, a touching scene would take place daily — after dinner or, more often, after supper if there were no important guests in the faculty dining room.

When their meal was over, the boys would crowd into the hallways of the faculty dining room — a long and low-ceilinged basement room with a single row of tables in the middle — waiting for them to finish saying grace. At the prayer's end they burst into the room causing a friendly crush as the clerics tried to get out against the tide that forced them to squeeze against the wall lest they be swept along. The boys unfailingly won, vying with each other to be the first to get to Don Bosco at the far end of the room. What took place next defies description. The more fortunate ones would close around Don Bosco, the nearest resting their heads on his shoulders, other merry faces forming a hedge behind him. Meantime the hastily cleared tables were being stormed: rows of boys squatted cross-legged on the one closest to Don Bosco, others knelt behind them, and further back more boys stood on them. Other boys moved the benches close to the wall and quickly stepped on them while late-comers filled every space between the benches and the tables. The room was so packed that it was seemingly impossible to squeeze one more boy in. And yet, some enterprising little fellows would crawl under the tables and finally pop up near Don Bosco for a fatherly pat.

It also happened often that Don Bosco, detained by work, would just be starting dinner or supper. Still, he always joyfully welcomed them. Almost deafened by their singing and shouting, indifferent to the air made so heavy by the crowding that oil lamps flickered, he finished his frugal meal while dispensing an affectionate smile, look, or word to this or that boy. This daily, filial importunity never annoyed him; in fact, he missed it when some casual visitor deprived him of this family intimacy.

Sometimes he would signal that he wanted to speak. Instant silence followed, and he would tell a little story, propose a little problem, or ask questions until the bell would call the boys to choir practice or night prayers. Clearly the boys' confidence in Don Bosco

⁴ See Vol. III, pp. 141f. [Editor]

did not suffer one bit from his incessant vigilance, more acceptable to them than the supervision of other superiors.

Like everyone else, at this time the clerics too had begun their philosophy classes. Since the seminary was still occupied by the army,⁵ and the theology students used the small unoccupied section, the philosophy professors lectured in their own private homes early in the morning, to the great inconvenience of the Oratory students. Hoping to remedy the situation, Don Bosco respectfully wrote to Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti, diocesan provicar and seminary rector, as follows:

Valdocco, November 16, 1858

Very Reverend and dear Canon,

May I request a favor on behalf of our philosophy students? Their class schedule conflicts with our own, especially for Mass. If the reverend professors, Father [Joseph] Mottura and Father [Lawrence] Farina, would kindly reschedule their classes for nine o'clock, the problem would be solved.

However, if this is too inconvenient for them, I shall look for another solution.

Respectfully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

These and other handicaps to the proper supervision of the boys were amply offset by the efficacy of Don Bosco's words. Unfailingly, at the start of the school year, his first talks to the boys would be about eternal truths. One November evening in 1858, Joseph Reano⁶ took down one such talk at the Good Night:

Two things alone I fear: mortal sin which kills the soul, and dying in mortal sin. (*Deeply moved, he paused a moment and then went on.*) I fear that some of you may fall victims of your own negligence of your spiritual welfare. Death skips no one. Ever since the world began, patriarchs, princes, kings, conquerors (*and Don Bosco named some of them*) made an appearance on this earth and then vanished into their graves with the rest of their countless contemporaries. Billions of men are now dust! Let us be convinced, dear boys, that our turn will come

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 428f. [Editor]

⁶ Reano had entered the Oratory a few years previously. [Editor]

too. Death will come like a thief. When we least expect it, death will enter our house and sever the thread of our lives with its scythe. Let us therefore put our accounts in order with a good confession. Death waits for no one — neither pope, nor king, nor beggar . . . Be vigilant! *Mors non tardat!* [Death tarries not!] What follows but eternity?

This holy fear of God, inspired by Don Bosco's words, was both a guide and a brake for the boys' conduct; it trained them to manly virtue and made them worthy of Our Lady's protection.

Don Bosco also kept alive in their hearts their love of the Church and of the papacy by narrating the lives of the popes in his Sunday morning sermons. This year [1858], when he came to Pope St. Urban I, he took three consecutive Sundays to describe the heroism of St. Cecilia. Knowing, as he did, most minutely the topography of imperial Rome, the layout of patrician palaces with their atria, porticoes, halls, and fountains, and the customs of the ancient Romans, he described them in a lively fashion and vividly appealed to the boys' imagination. The cleric John Bonetti attempted to reconstruct one such sermon from memory. Thirty years later he gave it to us. Of course he could only put down what he could recall, but it is enough to show us how Don Bosco in his homilies made use of the smallest details in order to enhance his descriptions and dialogues and make them more impressive.⁷

On November 24 [1858], the choirboys and those belonging to the band celebrated the feast of St. Cecilia. A deacon, Joseph Re — now [1907] a canon of the cathedral — gave the homily.

A few days later, on November 29, a stroke carried away Father Ferrante Aporti, who — as we have already said⁸ — had introduced new teaching methods in the "normal" schools in Piedmont. He had been made a senator, had been unsuccessfully proposed to Pius IX for the archbishopric of Genoa, and had also been president of the Royal University of Turin until the promulgation of the law of June 22, 1857. It is to his credit, however, that despite certain opinions of his and his secular garb, he never took part in anti-clerical legislation. For this he was several times frowned upon by the liberal press.

⁷ See Appendix 4. [Editor]

⁸ See Vol. II, pp. 148f, 165ff, 311f. [Editor]

CHAPTER 7

A Fervent Novena

THE December [1858] issue of *Letture Cattolice*, entitled *A Christmas Novena* by Blessed Sebastian Valfré, was mailed out early in the month with the almanac *Il Galantuomo*.¹ The novena — enriched with daily meditations — was quite inspiring and spiritually comforting; it also contained the [messianic] prophecies and the major antiphons and psalms now found in *The Companion of Youth*,² with the addition of a few hymns to the Divine Infant. The Introduction³ carried exhortations and suggestions for a devout, fruitful use of the novena, while the Appendix contained two circulars⁴ commendatory of *Letture Cattolice*, issued in October by Bishop John Anthony Gianotti of Saluzzo and Archbishop Alexander d'Angennes of Vercelli. Don Bosco was quite pleased.

Shortly afterward, he celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception which was all the more joyful this year because of a prodigious event that had made the world resound with the glory and goodness of Our Immaculate Heavenly Mother. Don Bosco narrated it to his boys several times, and later dedicated an entire issue of *Letture Cattolice* to it.

On February 11, 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, a simple fourteen-year-old shepherdess in the little town of Lourdes at the foot of the Pyrenees, went into the woods to gather firewood. She could neither read nor

¹ See Vol. IV, p. 449. [Editor]

² See Vol. III, pp. 6-18. [Editor]

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁴ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

write; all she knew was the *Pater, Ave, Gloria*, and the Apostles' Creed, and she had not yet made her First Holy Communion. On reaching a cave known as "Massabielle," she was about to cross a brook when she heard the harsh rustle of a strong wind, though not a leaf was stirring on bush or tree. Taken aback, she looked toward the cave and immediately fell on her knees, trembling with awe and fear. Above the cave, in a niche of sorts, just over wild rosebush branches, stood in the air the glowing figure of an unbelievably beautiful Lady. She was of medium height; Her oval face had most delicately exquisite features, and Her blue eyes were unspeakably pretty and attractive. She seemed about twenty years old. Beauty, grace, majesty and gravity, wisdom and virtue above human power of imagination shone from Her countenance. Her snow-white robes were gathered about Her waist with a sky-blue knotted sash reaching to Her feet. A white veil covered Her head and shoulders and touched the ground. Her feet rested lightly on the rosebush branches without bending them, and a full-blown rose sparkled on each foot. Her hands, devoutly joined, clasped a rosary whose white beads, seemingly linked by a golden cord, were gliding through Her fingers as if She were praying, though Her lips were motionless. Her eyes rested upon Bernadette.

Frightened at first, the girl took out her rosary but had no strength to make the Sign of the Cross. Presently the Lady crossed Herself as if to encourage Bernadette to do the same. Immediately all fear left her, and joyfully she began to say her beads. When she finished, the vision vanished. From February 11 through July 16 there were eighteen apparitions, always in the same place, and visible only to Bernadette. On February 18, the Lady made Her voice heard for the first time. "Do me a favor," She said. "Come here for fifteen days in succession." Among the few other words She spoke either smilingly or with a touch of sadness were these: "I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the next." "It is My wish that people come here." "Pray for sinners!" "Penance! Penance! Penance!" "My child, tell the priests in My name that I want a chapel to be erected on this spot."

On February 25, when Bernadette, at the Lady's command, began to scoop with her bare hands a little hole in a dry, dark corner of the cave, there suddenly gushed forth a fountain that to this very day still yields over a thousand gallons of water per hour. On March 25, after a third request to reveal Her name, the Lady replied with infinite sweetness: "I am the Immaculate Conception."

No sooner had the news of these wonderful apparitions been noised

about, than people began to flock to the grotto in tens of thousands, astounded by countless prodigious cures worked by the miraculous water. So many wanted to confess their sins and make their peace with God that priests were insufficient to the task. This marked the beginning of miracles which turned Lourdes into an everlasting testimonial to Mary's power.

Moved by the narration of these apparitions, the Oratory boys celebrated the novena and feast of the Immaculate Conception with greater fervor and love than usual. At Don Bosco's suggestion, many wrote out the various acts of devotion they intended to make during those days. Michael Magone was one of them. His resolutions follow:

I, Michael Magone, want to make this novena well. I promise:

1. To tear my heart from all earthly things and give it all to Mary.
2. To make a general confession in order to be tranquil at the hour of death.
3. To skip breakfast every day in penance for my sins or to recite the Seven Joys of Mary to merit Her assistance at my last hour.
4. To receive Holy Communion daily with my confessor's permission.
5. To tell my companions a story about Our Lady every day.
6. To place these resolutions at Mary's feet. I intend now to consecrate myself entirely to Her. From now on I want to be completely Hers to my very last breath.

Don Bosco approved these resolutions with the exception of the general confession which Michael had just made and that of skipping breakfast, for which Don Bosco substituted the recitation of the *De Profundis* for the souls in purgatory.

CHAPTER 8

Forming the Heart

THE Oratory steadily kept the excellence of its moral and spiritual fabric. The secret? Don Bosco's daily short talk after night prayers.¹ He looked upon this task as a personal one and would delegate it only when unavoidably forced to do so. In such cases, he directed his substitute to limit himself to three or at the most five minutes depending on circumstances. His advice was: "Just a few words around one striking thought to impress the boys and send them to bed fully taken up by the truth presented to them." Needless to say, sensing his love for them, the boys would rather listen to Don Bosco than to anybody else. Father [Hyacinth] Ballesio — [an Oratory alumnus] — thus expressed himself in his book, *Vita intima di Don Bosco*:

When evening classes of music and singing, grammar and arithmetic were over, at the tinkling of a handbell, we gathered for night prayers. I still thrill with joy as I recall that dear, sacred moment. A hymn was started and three hundred voices took up the strain in an imposing chorus heard far beyond the Oratory. Then, kneeling on bare stone slabs in the parlor or on the porticoes, we all said our prayers aloud with Don Bosco. How edifying was his posture! When prayers were over, we would respectfully help him up a little pulpit. Just seeing him there as he smiled and looked over us sent a shiver of joy and expectation through us. In reverent silence, all eyes were riveted on him as we eagerly awaited his words.

¹ Since these short talks always ended with the words, "Good night," they came to be known as "Good Nights." They have been a custom in Salesian Houses since 1847. For their origin *see* Vol. III, p. 142. [Editor]

At this moment, lost-and-found articles were handed up to him to be immediately retrieved by their owners. Then he would start to speak. His whole manner told us: "Whatever I do, all fatigue and hardship I endure is all for you — for your eternal salvation. 'Children, hear the precepts of your father and obey them, that you may be saved.'" [Sir. 3, 1]

He would give directions for the morrow, recommend a devotional practice, mention some deceased benefactor, or briefly explain a point of the catechism. On every possible occasion he would exhort the boys to receive the sacraments frequently, without however making it sound like an obligation. He coaxed them so engagingly and inflamed them so ardently as to obtain what he desired. He excelled in promoting visits to the Blessed Sacrament and spoke in such terms of God's goodness, providence, and mercy that he gave his listeners a foretaste of heavenly bliss. Whenever he mentioned Our Lord's passion, his love would burn its way through his words, or tears would well in his eyes and his voice would quiver with emotion.

A surprising variety of topics kept everyone from tiring of listening to him. At his fingertips he had an inexhaustible store of anecdotes and sayings from bible and church history, from ancient and modern history, from the lives of saints, philosophers, and artists, from the works of John Gerson, famous chancellor of the University of Paris, from the Bollandists² and many other authors. He spoke too of contemporary events, drawing from them moral lessons suitable to boys.

The moral and spiritual formation of his young hearers was not Don Bosco's only immediate aim of these short talks after night prayers; he strove, too, in appropriate ways, to capture their minds and give them something to think about.

An example will serve as an illustration for many others which we shall narrate in due time. If he wanted to treat his boys to a picnic or some other diversion, he would instruct one of the priests beforehand to interrupt him in the middle of the "Good Night" and

² A small group of Jesuits in Antwerp, Belgium, organized into a society in the 17th century by Jean Boland (1596-1665) for the critical study and publication of the lives of the saints. Jean Boland edited the first volume. His collaborators and successors were named after him. [Editor]

ask whether he thought the boys deserved a treat. In reply Don Bosco would raise objections of sorts and hem and haw. The priest would press the point. Naturally, the boys followed the dialogue with utmost interest. Finally, Don Bosco would yield.

These dialogues helped obtain promises of better conduct and bring out breaches of discipline which he could adroitly and successfully correct without hurting feelings. The boys' minds, too, were kept busy for weeks. They talked about the treat, wrote home about it, looked forward to it, and made plans for it. No room was left for unwholesome thoughts. With this reason in mind, Don Bosco promoted and excitingly announced forthcoming religious celebrations, concerts, stage plays, and lotteries. Occasionally he narrated extraordinary events, fascinated them with fantastic dreams, or shared with them ambitious undertakings he was planning.

These "Good Nights" made so deep an impression on boys and clerics alike that some jotted them down the next day to treasure them and later again benefit by them. Revered Salesian and diocesan priests and distinguished laymen have handed over to us many such previous recollections of their boyhood in order that we might make a copy of them. They are simple outlines, at times quite lengthy. Unavoidably, one misses in them — though not entirely — Don Bosco's holy unction and the impact of his spoken word. Nevertheless, they have preserved much of his spirit and bring us back to those happy days when the writers had the priceless privilege of living with him. Now and then we shall report these precious summaries of Don Bosco's "Good Nights." As a start, we shall begin with six of them, given in December [1858]. Since their exact date is not known, we shall simply number them consecutively:

1

Napoleon had faith, despite his hostility to the Pope, his pride, and his boundless ambition. During his exile in St. Helena, he often spoke amazingly of God. Once a general of his remarked: "You speak of God as if you actually saw Him, whereas I cannot even convince myself that He exists."

"Take a compass and measure the sky," Napoleon replied.

"Impossible," the general retorted.

"Well then, deny that the sky exists."

On another occasion, Napoleon, noticing another general's obvious ignorance of religion, took it on himself to teach him. At the end of the lesson, he asked him if he had understood.

"Hardly," the other replied.

"Too bad," Napoleon continued. "I thought you were more intelligent. I should never have made you a general."

Napoleon was a great mind; some of his writings could well rank with those of the Church Fathers. At the end of his life he repented and died a good death. But do you know why, my sons? Because as a boy he had learned his catechism and had made his First Communion well.

2

At the university of ancient Athens, two students — Gregory Nazianzen and Basil — were great friends. They were very close, but theirs was a holy friendship, aiming at mutual edification and spiritual progress. Their devout behavior in church, their hymns and prayers were matched by their progress in knowledge. There was another student at that university, and his name was Julian. His features reflected an evil disposition; his eyes betrayed precocious malice, his lips curved into a haughty smile of contempt. The two good friends were quick to recognize Julian for what he was and steered clear of him, though he often sought their company. Julian ridiculed them for receiving the sacraments or performing other religious duties. One day Gregory said to Basil, "God help the Church if Julian becomes emperor. He will be her cruelest persecutor." Julian was the youngest son of Julius Constantius, half brother to Constantine the Great.

The foreboding came true. Julian became emperor, better known as "Julian the Apostate," because he proved a most ruthless enemy of Jesus Christ. But he did not escape God's wrath. After a few years of power, he died in battle, blaspheming Him whom he had refused to acknowledge as God. Gregory and Basil, on the contrary, growing in virtue as well as in age, became two great beacons of faith and Doctors of the Church. Both are canonized saints.

See then, my dear boys, whoever wishes to become truly great must begin by practicing virtue fearlessly from his youth. A brave start in youth gives one good reason to hope for the Lord's help in every need. But if a youngster pays little or no heed to religion or, worse, mocks those who care, he must fear, and fear greatly, that sooner or later God's wrath will fall upon him.

3

As a youngster in Florence, Philip Neri often visited the city's Dominican monastery. More than once, he heard this story from one of the monks: "There were two good religious who used to make their confessions to each other before reciting Matins in the choir. One night the devil decided to trick them. At the usual hour he went and knocked at one of their cells and said it was time for church. Unsuspectingly, the friar went down and, on entering the choir, saw his companion — or so he thought — seat himself in the confessional. As usual, he knelt at the little grate and began to tell his sins. To his surprise the confessor told him not to worry about them. The friar went on to graver faults but the response was still, 'Oh, give it no thought.' Acting on a suspicion, he made the Sign of the Cross. At once there was silence. The friar asked a question but received no answer. He looked into the confessional and found it empty. The devil had vanished."

Dear boys, remember that the devil's favorite bait for leading one into sin is, "Oh, that's nothing to worry about." Some friendships are too sentimental and looked on askance by superiors, but the devil whispers, "Oh, that's nothing!" It's the same refrain when one steals from his schoolmates or disobeys superiors or breaks house rules. At times, when one has grave doubts about actions or thoughts, or is ashamed to confess them, the old deceiver keeps saying, "Oh, that's nothing!" My children, I don't want you to see evil where there is none, but I warn you not to listen to the devil when he whispers, "That's nothing!" A fault is always a fault, and one must try to correct it. Besides, let's not forget that "he who neglects little things shall fall little by little." [Sir. 19, 1]

4

Once a young man called on St. Macarius in order to become a disciple of his. The Saint welcomed him kindly and said, "Do you see yonder cemetery?"

"Yes," the young man replied.

"Well, then," the Saint went on, "go over and shriek the worst insults you know to the people buried there!"

"That's easy!" replied the youth, and off he went, to return an hour later.

"Did you carry out my orders?" the Saint asked.

"Yes."

"Good! Now go back again and praise them to the sky."

Once more the young man obeyed. On his return, St. Macarius again asked, "Did you carry out my orders?"

"Yes, Father!"

"What did the dead reply to your insults and praises?"

"Nothing."

"Good! Now keep this in mind. If you wish to be my disciple, you must be dead to insult or praise."

My dear boys, being indifferent, for God's love, to whatever may befall us, good or bad, requires great virtue, but I would like you not to be oversensitive to praise or criticism, whether public or private. Sometimes a boy with special talents from God successfully performs a task or excels among his classmates. Then he goes strutting about, giving himself airs, showing off, drumming up praises. He may even look down on others and feel hurt if he is not treated as he thinks he should be. This is nothing but pride, and it can be very harmful. Such conduct makes one ridiculous, hurts people's feelings, and sooner or later draws God's humiliation upon him.

Likewise some boys cannot stand being criticized; much less can they take a joke, a pointed remark, or an insult. They flare up, fret, answer tit for tat, and look for a fight. God help anyone who just happens to be present. This too is pride. It hurts charity, makes us forget the Lord's commandment to forgive, turns our friends away, and makes us hateful to all. Eventually, we may even meet someone stronger than ourselves who will pay us back in our own coin. Then there is resentment, discontent, anger, regrets.

So, if we are praised, if we have no troubles, let us thank the Lord, but let us remain humble, reminding ourselves that all good things come from God and that God can take them back in a moment. If we are blamed justly, let us correct ourselves; if undeservedly, let us bear it patiently and calmly for love of Jesus, who humbled Himself for us. Learn to control yourselves, for this is the way to make friends and have no enemies. If someone delights in annoying you, your superiors will stand by you. In conclusion, though, remember that he who is meek and humble will always be loved by all — by God and by man. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth." [Matt. 5, 4]

5

A devout Catholic soldier kept fulfilling his religious duties in the army post regardless of his fellow servicemen's unfavorable reactions. The first night that he knelt by his bed, they booed and hissed, jeered, mocked, and called him names. But, as he took no notice and calmly

went on with his prayers, the rowdies gradually quieted down. The following night they teased him again, but not so rabidly. Little by little, before the month was over, they left him alone to do as he pleased. Meanwhile, as the young man showed himself always ready to oblige his army buddies by writing letters, looking after the sick, or substituting, there came a change of feelings. He soon became popular and all vied for his friendship. Our Lord never leaves unrewarded His faithful ones who are not ashamed to go to the sacraments and to Holy Mass. It was only fair therefore that He should give the soldier a sign of His protection. War broke out, and Belsoggiorno (for that was our young man's name) marched to the front with his regiment. In the distance, enemy troops looked like so many dark patches over which bayonets glistened in the sun. When Belsoggiorno's unit reached a certain position, the order was given to halt. The enemy had started to advance, but was still far off. Remembering that he had not yet said his daily chaplet in honor of Mary's Seven Sorrows, Belsoggiorno knelt, drawing a torrent of abuse on himself. "It is time to fight now, not to pray, you coward!" some shouted. But he paid no attention. Suddenly there was a scream and a deafening explosion. Enemy batteries had opened fire. The agonizing cries of the wounded and the rattle of dying throats filled the air. Dazed by the shock, Belsoggiorno got up and found himself the only one left unscathed among the dead and the dying.

See, my dear boys, how the Lord protects those who are not afraid of the world's jeers and unashamedly show themselves as true Christians.

6

The last time I spoke to you, my dear boys, I told you how Our Lord protected a soldier who was not ashamed to pray in public. This evening I will say something more on human respect. How many people are afraid to show publicly their loyalty to God! At times they bravely face guns, swords, wild beasts, stormy seas, long and perilous explorations through vast forests and limitless deserts, and yet they quail before a sneer or a derisive smile! At stake is their obedience to God and the Church in most serious matters, such as hearing Mass on Sundays and holy days, abstaining from meat on Fridays and Saturdays, fulfilling their Easter duty, refraining from foul talk, and so forth. Since doing otherwise would compromise one's eternal salvation, isn't it sheer insanity to risk the loss of one's soul because of what some fool might say — a fool who later will laugh at your cowardice? Let us remember what Our Lord said: "Whosoever disowns Me before men, I in turn will disown him before My Father in heaven." [Matt. 10, 33]

Look at St. Paul and imitate him. When he went to Damascus and entered the synagogue, he fearlessly declared his conversion, frankly admitting, "It was I who persecuted the Christians, but now I am a Christian myself. Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the true Son of God." All were taken aback by his profession of faith, and even more by his miracles. The sick were cured at the touch of his hand, or by kissing his garments or anything that belonged to him. Thus God rewarded his generosity in obeying His command. From a tentmaker, he became the great Apostle of the Gentiles. In him were fulfilled Our Savior's words: "Everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge him before My Father in heaven." [Matt. 10, 32]

These talks of Don Bosco were given in the first half of December [1858]. Each talk ended as usual with a fatherly "Good night," to which the boys heartily replied, "Thank you!"

When he came down from the little pulpit, the boys would press around him, each still anxious to hear a personal, confidential word. Calmly and amiably he would oblige.

"Time and again, when I was a boy," writes Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi, "I could sense a gentle reproof or advice in a mere look or handclasp from Don Bosco after the 'Good Night.' If I were sad, he would cheer me with a spiritual thought without my having to say a word about my problem. To all of us he acted with equal kindness. Then, silently and thoughtfully, all would retire to their dormitories happy and content, his last words, 'Good night,' lingering in their hearts. His fatherly good wish and exhortations had indeed prepared them for a good night."

Once the boys were in the dormitory, one of them read aloud from a spiritual book as they prepared for bed. The reading ended with the invocation, *Tu autem, Domine, miserere nobis* [And You, O Lord, have mercy on us], to which not all responded with a *Deo gratias* [Thanks be to God] because some had already fallen asleep. Then the lights were dimmed. In the morning at the sound of the bell, the assistant got the boys up by clapping his hands and saying aloud, *Benedicamus Domino* [Let us bless the Lord], to which they responded with a *Deo gratias* for having preserved them during the night.

Let us now continue with our narrative. The new dining room

in the church basement was ready for use. Since it was quite large, it was decided to make it serve as an auditorium as well by setting up a makeshift stage whenever the need arose. On this stage our amateur actors, Dominic Bongiovanni, [Charles] Gastini, [Charles] Tomatis, Cora, and many others, played their best parts. Dramas, comedies, farces, pantomimes, mimicries, concerts, both vocal and instrumental, well-known compositions of our own John Cagliero, and humorous Piedmontese poems of Joseph Bongiovanni drew, by invitation, the noblest families of Turin.

This basement dining room doubled as an auditorium until 1866. Afterward the study hall itself was used for that purpose. Before long Don Bosco drew up a set of regulations for dramatics.³

³ See Appendix 5. [Editor]

CHAPTER 9

The End of the Year

DON Bosco's zeal in fostering priestly vocations used up nearly all his energies; his thoughts, words, and actions incessantly aimed at this goal. It would be difficult for anyone to envisage the extent of his veneration for the priesthood if a striking incident that occurred during one of these years [1855-1858?] had not brought it fully to light, proving beyond doubt, too, that Don Bosco could see the future of many who came to seek his blessing.

One day Countess D. . . L. . . visited Don Bosco with her four little sons. She begged him to bless them, and then she added, "Please, Father, tell me what their future will be."

"That's a very unusual request," Don Bosco replied. "Only God knows the future."

"Yes, of course," the countess continued. "Still, give me an inkling at least by making a wish."

Playfully then, Don Bosco pointed to each boy in succession, saying, "You will be a great general; you a great statesman; and you, Henry, a famous doctor."

Overjoyed by these happy predictions, the mother heartened her children to look forward to their bright futures, commenting that they would not be the first members of her family to rise to eminent social positions. It was now the fourth boy's turn to hear his future. The mother anxiously waited as Don Bosco placed his right hand on the little boy's head and gazed affectionately upon him.

"And this, my last one?" the countess inquired.

"I wonder if this one's destiny will please you."

"Oh, tell me, Father. After all, this is just in fun."

“Well, this little one will be an excellent priest.”

The lady blanched. She was a practicing Catholic, yet — overpowered by worldly consideration — she pressed her child protectively to her heart as if to protect him from some terrible misfortune and exclaimed, “My son a priest? I’d rather have God take his life!” Grieved and shocked, Don Bosco rose to bring the visit to an end. So beside herself as to be totally unaware of her insult to the priesthood and Don Bosco, the countess muttered, perplexed, “What’s wrong, Father?”

“My lady,” Don Bosco dryly replied, “I’ll have nothing to do with a person who so demeans the most noble and exalted state on earth. And I am certain God will hear your insolent prayer.”

Dismayed by such a firm threat, the countess mumbled an apology, but the visit was quickly ended. The next day, realizing the full impact of her blunder, she returned to the Oratory.

“Please forgive my thoughtlessness,” she apologized. “Try to understand that, should my son become a priest, my family and I will suffer. But I will not oppose God’s will. I bow to it!”

“Countess,” Don Bosco replied, “the trouble is that you despise the greatest gift God could ever grant you and your family. Is it a disgrace to be chosen to His service?”

“I am terribly sorry, Father. Please pray for me.”

“I will, but God took you at your word the moment you spoke.”

The poor woman left more distressed than ever. A few months later, a relative of hers called on Don Bosco to beg him to visit and bless the countess’ child who had taken ill. Don Bosco excused himself. The following day several relatives and friends and then the mother herself came to beseech him because the boy was sinking fast and doctors were still unable to diagnose his illness.

Don Bosco finally yielded. The young boy seized Don Bosco’s hand and kissed it. Then sadly and silently he kept looking from Don Bosco to his mother. It was indeed a heartrending scene. After a heavy silence, the boy gathered his strength and, stretching his wasted hand to his mother, said: “Mamma . . . do you remember . . . there . . . in Don Bosco’s room? . . . It’s you, Mamma . . . The Lord is taking me away . . .”

With a gasp the unhappy mother broke into uncontrolled sobs, exclaiming, “My child, it was only because I love you so much.

Please don't leave me. I need you. Beg Don Bosco to cure you!"

Don Bosco was too moved to speak. Finally, after a few comforting words to the countess, he blessed the boy and left. But God's decree was not revoked.

The Lord's precious gift forfeited by the noble lady's son fell to a poor child of the Oratory. On Ember Saturday, December 18, 1858, the cleric Joseph Rocchietti was ordained a priest, to Don Bosco's great joy. He was the second Oratory boy to be called to God's service.¹

Father Rocchietti, like all his classmates, had often experienced Don Bosco's boundless generosity. He was a destitute orphan. One day, while still a cleric, he asked Don Bosco for a much needed cassock. That very morning Don Bosco himself had received a new cassock; he too needed one. Smilingly, he said to Rocchietti, "Look, here is a brand new cassock just for you. Try it on."

Jubilantly, the cleric took it. On his way to the dormitory, he met John Baptist Anfossi, a fellow student, and told him of Don Bosco's generous gift.

Father Rocchietti was all for Don Bosco and, though in frail health, wanted to remain with him for life. He had a striking resemblance to St. Alphonsus Liguori; he was deeply pious, zealous in preaching, and exemplary in all he did. He said his first Mass on [Sunday] December 19 [1858], and this joyful celebration helped the boys get ready for the Christmas Midnight Mass, which they attended more fervently and devoutly than usual also because they had been deeply impressed by some of Don Bosco's recent words. He had told them that he could not expect to live beyond fifty, but that their prayers could obtain an extension for him.²

From then on, Father Rocchietti celebrated the ten o'clock Sunday Mass, replacing Don Bosco, who now said Mass at five except when Father Rocchietti was not available. The Community Mass was celebrated at seven by Father [Victor] Alasonatti for the boarders and day boys; a great number of them received Holy Communion. The day boys were not allowed to play before this Mass.

Christmas always meant much extra work for Don Bosco in

¹ The first one had been Father Felix Reviglio. *See* Vol. V, pp. 429f. [Editor]

² At this time, Don Bosco was forty-three. [Editor]

sending greetings to his many benefactors and acknowledging a voluminous mail. He did not forget his past pupils, as we can see from a letter of his to the cleric [Dominic] Ruffino, a seminarian at Bra:

Turin, December 28, 1858

My dear Ruffino,

Thank you for your good wishes, and may God reward you a hundred-fold! As you grow in age, endeavor to grow also in the holy fear of God. Be equally solicitous about your study of theology and this holy fear of God.

Viriliter age: non coronabitur nisi qui legitime certaverit, sed singula huius vitae certamina sunt totidem coronae quae nobis a Domino parantur in coelo. Ora pro me. [Be brave and steadfast. One will not be crowned unless he has competed according to the rules; but for each struggle of this life there is a crown prepared in heaven. Pray for me.]

Fr. John Bosco

On the last day of the year, Don Bosco gave the following keepsakes to the Oratory boys gathered in the new dining room for night prayers:

Centuries upon centuries will pass before the end of the world; peoples and nations will succeed one another, but the year 1858 will never return. Time and mankind forever sink into eternity. This is the first thought I want to leave you tonight.

The second concerns the year about to begin. As usual, I wish you a long life, but really I have something better in mind. On such occasions as this, the saints, too, used to exchange best wishes, but theirs were quite different from the world's. They would say: "The grace of God be with you always this year." "May you always do God's will." "The Most Holy Virgin keep you ever under Her protection." "May you increase your merits by good deeds."

Tonight, I too wish to leave you some spiritual keepsakes. To the clerics I say: "Give good example, as befits those who are the light of Christ." To the students: "Receive Holy Communion as often as possible." To the artisans: "Go to the sacraments on Sundays and holy days, since you cannot easily go on weekdays." To all in general: "Make good confessions. Candidly open your heart to your confessor, because,

should the devil get you to conceal a sin, you would indeed be caught in a net of sacrileges, and would be hanging on the brink of eternal damnation. So always make good confessions. Tell all your sins, but be truly sorry and determined to sin no more; otherwise, your confession will be useless and, worse yet, harmful. Rather than blessings, it would draw curses.”

A great advantage of ours that we do not sufficiently appreciate is the Virgin Mary’s protection and the effectiveness of praying to Her. I exhort you to repeat often the beautiful words of the angel, “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” and those composed by the Church, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.” On going to bed at night, always say: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.” In the morning, let your first words be, “Hail, Mary!” You will see how wonderfully effective this invocation is. Let each one do what I suggest, and may the Lord grant you all happiness during this coming year. And now, do not forget to thank God for His many blessings during this past year.

After these words, Don Bosco kept silent for a moment. Then, gazing affectionately on the crowd of boys, he went on: “Let each of you earnestly endeavor to spend the new year in God’s grace, because for one of you this may be the last year of his life. More precisely, one of you boys will go into eternity before the end of the carnival season.”³

As he spoke Don Bosco rested his hand on Michael Magone’s head, since he happened to be nearest to him. Turning his eyes sparkling with angelic purity to Don Bosco, Michael asked, “Is it I, Father?” Don Bosco made no answer.

“Then it’s so,” Magone went on. “I am the one who has to pack up and go. I’ll get ready.”

The boys chuckled, but they did not forget these words. Neither did Magone. Yet he did not lose his usual cheerfulness and carefree ways as he most diligently went about his tasks.

Thus did Don Bosco bring the year 1858 to a close. During this year no one had died at the Oratory. A seventeen-year-old boy — Joseph Morgando of Turin — had indeed passed away on November 24, but at the Cottolengo Hospital.

³ The period of merrymaking, extending from the feast of the Epiphany to Ash Wednesday, reached its peak on the last three days before Lent. [Editor]

CHAPTER 10

Predictions and Fulfillment

THE effect of Don Bosco's words on the Oratory boys that last day of the year was equaled by their esteem for him. Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio, then a student, heard his words and witnessed their fulfillment. His is the following written testimony:

We thought very highly of Don Bosco. For us he was a priest blessed with excellent physical and spiritual talents. We admired his keen intelligence, his quick, retentive memory, his goodness, his physical dexterity and stamina. We knew he was a very learned man, too, but what endeared him most to us was our firm conviction that God had given him many extraordinary gifts and charisms. It is common knowledge — and we have firm reason to believe it — that often indeed Don Bosco had the gift of prophecy.

More than once, at a time when the Oratory's enrollment was considerably large, he publicly told us that within a fixed short period of time — say a month — one of us then in excellent health would die. He announced this in so fatherly, grave, and prudent a manner and with such timely suggestions that the overall effect was wholesome, and each one of us would set about clearing his conscience. Not a bit dimming our noisy cheerfulness, we improved our conduct, studies, and work. The only one to suffer from the prophecy was the prophet himself; he had to sit longer hours hearing confessions made with greater diligence and answering questions.

I have heard that in good time Don Bosco took care to prepare the boy concerned, at first in a roundabout way, then more directly but always very prudently. His predictions invariably came true, strengthening our faith in him.

Let us now come to the memorable prophecy [of Friday, December 31, 1858]. That night, one of the boys — Constantius Berardi, sixteen, from Chiusa of Cuneo — was standing by Don Bosco and heard Magone's question. Somehow he felt he was the one fated to die and began to say so. Quite seriously he went to confession and then wrote to his parents. After asking their pardon for his conduct at home, he bade them farewell because, he said, he was soon to die. Later, he asked and obtained permission to go to the nearby Cottolengo Institute, where he had been a pupil for two years, to say good-bye to Canon [Louis] Anglesio, the rector, and to his friends. He told them frankly of his impending death, fully convinced that he had come to the end of his days. Because of this, all who knew him, both in and out of the Oratory, thought he had become a mental case. Some boys told Don Bosco of Berardi's obsession, but he showed no surprise. He simply murmured, "Hmm," and said no more. Therefore, the suspicion arose that Berardi was indeed the one destined to die. On his part, he kept saying, "I am the one!"

"About a week later," Father John Garino relates, "one morning some of us were crowding around Don Bosco as usual in the dining room while he was sipping his coffee. We were laughing and joking, and eagerly waiting for Don Bosco to speak. I don't know what prompted it, but several boys began asking him how long they would live. I asked him too. Don Bosco took my hand and — attentively studying my palm, as he always did when asked that question — laughingly mentioned a certain number of years. He did the same for all present except my classmate, Michael Magone. Michael did not know what to make of this exception. The other boys too — keen observers of Don Bosco's every word and action — noticed that he had ignored Magone's outstretched hand, and they too formed their own conjectures.

On Sunday, January 16 [1859], the Blessed Sacrament Sodality, to which Magone belonged, held its regular weekly meeting. After the opening prayer, reading, and a short talk with timely suggestions, one of the members went around with a small box containing folded slips of paper on which was written a maxim to be practiced during the week. Everyone drew a slip. On opening his, Magone

surprisingly read: "At the judgment seat, I will be alone with God." Showing it to his companions, he remarked, "Hey, look at this. Our Lord is warning me to get ready!" Then as soon as the meeting was over, he excitedly ran to Don Bosco to show him the slip and tell him that Our Lord was summoning him. Don Bosco told him not to worry and suggested that he be ready, not because of that slip of paper, but because of Our Lord's insistent warnings in the Gospel.

"Yes, but how much time have I left?"

"As long as God wants, Michael."

"But will I live till the end of this year?" he begged, almost in tears.

"Don't worry, Michael. We are in God's hands, and He is a loving Father. He knows how long it is good for us to live. Besides, we need not know the time of our death in order to go to heaven. All we need do is lead a good life."

"Then I am to die very soon," he sadly replied. "That's why you won't tell me."

"I don't think it will be so soon," Don Bosco replied, "but even if it were, would you be afraid to join the Blessed Virgin in heaven?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Magone. He pulled himself together and, once more his cheerful self, went out to play.

This was the only time Don Bosco, in view of this lad's spiritual maturity, gave any youngster a hint of his near death, but the terror it caused the boy — though momentary — was such that Don Bosco resolved never again to give the slightest hint to any boy God considered ripe for eternity.

Don Bosco's words to Magone soon became common knowledge, and Berardi began saying, "It is not my turn to die!" On Monday, Tuesday, and the morning of Wednesday [January 17, 18, and 19, 1859], Magone went about his duties as usual, constantly cheerful and well. On Wednesday afternoon, however, Don Bosco saw him on the balcony, watching the other boys at play instead of joining them — a clear sign that something was wrong. In the evening, Don Bosco asked him what was the matter and Michael told him that it was his old trouble — worms. The doctor found no serious symptom and prescribed the usual remedies. On Friday, Michael

got worse and stayed in bed. When Don Bosco visited him at two in the afternoon, he noticed that the boy's condition had worsened; a wheezing cough aggravated his difficulty in breathing and his spittle was tinged with blood. Don Bosco immediately sent for the doctor. At that moment, Michael's mother arrived.

"Michael," she said, "don't you think you should make your confession while we are waiting for the doctor?"

"Yes, Mom," the boy replied. "I went to confession and Communion yesterday morning, but now I'm getting worse. I'd better make my confession again."

He prepared himself for a few moments, then motioned to Don Bosco that he was ready. When he was through, he said serenely and laughingly to both Don Bosco and his own mother, "I wonder if this confession is like the one I make for the Exercise for a Happy Death or for real!"

"Would you rather get better or go to heaven?" Don Bosco asked him.

"The Lord knows what's best. I'd rather do what He wants!"

"Suppose He left the choice to you?"

"Oh, who would be foolish enough not to take heaven?"

"Would you really like to go to heaven?"

"Sure! With all my heart! I've always prayed so hard for it."

"When do you want to go?"

"Right now, if it is God's will."

"All right, Michael! Let's pray together that God's holy will be ever done in life and death!"

At this moment, the doctor arrived. After examining the patient, he whispered, "It's bad, Father. It's an internal hemorrhage. I doubt that we can stop it."

All standard remedies were tried but in vain. Michael now could hardly breathe. At nine that evening, he asked for Holy Viaticum. Before receiving, he told Don Bosco, "Please, Father, ask my companions to pray for me."

After a quarter of an hour's thanksgiving, his strength seemed suddenly to ebb away. He rallied in a matter of minutes and cheerfully — almost jokingly — said, "You know, that slip of paper last

Sunday was wrong. It said, 'At the judgment seat, I will be alone with God!' It's not so. The Blessed Virgin will be there too. She will help me. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm ready to go. She will take me there Herself!"

At ten o'clock, Michael started sinking. Fearing he might die during the night, Don Bosco appointed Father Augustine Zattini ¹ (he had joined the Oratory staff the previous year), a cleric, and a young infirmarian to watch at Michael's bedside the first half of the night; the second shift was to be taken over by Father [Victor] Alasonatti, prefect of the house, and by another cleric and infirmarian. Meantime, as there was no sign of imminent danger, Don Bosco said to the boy: "Michael, try to rest a little. I am just going to my room for a while. I'll be right back!"

"Please, Father, don't go away!"

"I'll be right back, Michael. I'm only going to my room to say a bit of my breviary."

"But come back soon."

Don Bosco had hardly reached his room when he was quickly summoned; Michael seemed to be slipping fast and entering his agony. Father Zattini was already administering the Anointing of the Sick while the dying boy accompanied the rite, whispering a short invocation after each anointing. He received also the papal blessing and a plenary indulgence. Then he seemed to fall into a light sleep, but soon opened his eyes again. His pulse was very weak, and the hemorrhage was doubtlessly causing him acute pain. Yet he was serene, cheerful, and alert as if in good health. Now and then he devoutly whispered short invocations.

As the clock struck a quarter to eleven, he exclaimed, "Don Bosco, it's now! Help me!"

"Don't worry," Don Bosco replied. "I'll stay with you until you have left for heaven. Now, don't you want to say good-bye to your mother?" (After watching at his bedside, she had retired for a little rest to an adjoining room.)

"No," Michael replied. "It would hurt her too much. Dear Mom, she loves me so!"

¹ See Vol. IV, p. 291. [Editor]

“Don’t you at least want to leave her a message?”

“Yes, tell her to forgive all the trouble I gave her. I am truly sorry. Tell her I love her and not to cry but to keep doing good. Let her know that I’m willing to die, that I’m leaving this world with Jesus and Mary. I’ll wait for her in heaven.”

The bystanders were deeply touched. Overcoming his emotion, Don Bosco tried to fill Michael’s last moments with spiritual thoughts.

“Have you any word for your schoolmates?”

“Yes, tell them always to make good confessions!”

“Michael, of all the things you have done in life, what comforts you most now?”

“The little I’ve done in Mary’s honor! Yes, this is my greatest joy now! O Mary! O Mary! How happy in their last moments are they who have honored You!” After a short pause, he added, “Something bothers me. What shall I do when my soul leaves my body and I am about to enter heaven? What shall I say? Whom should I ask for?”

“If the Blessed Virgin Herself wants to take you to the judgment seat, leave all care to Her. But, before you go, I want to give you a message.”

“Gladly, Father!”

“When you are in heaven, please offer the Blessed Virgin humble and respectful greetings from me and from all of us in this house. Ask Her to bless us, to keep us under Her powerful protection, and to see to it that all who are here now or will be sent by Divine Providence will save their souls.”

“Yes, Father, I’ll give Her your message. What else?”

“That is all for now. Rest a while.”

He seemed quite sleepy. He was still serene and his speech was clear, but as the signs of imminent death became unmistakably evident, the prayers for the dying were started. About halfway, he suddenly opened his eyes as if waking from a deep sleep, and with his usual, peaceful smile said to Don Bosco, “In a moment I shall deliver your message. Tell my companions I’ll be waiting for them in heaven.” He then clasped the crucifix with both hands, kissed it three times, and whispering, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, into your

hands I commend my soul," his lips parted as in a smile, he calmly expired. It was eleven o'clock, Friday evening, January 21, 1859. He was just fourteen.

When the news was broken the next morning, the boys burst into tears. They found comfort in saying to one another, "Michael is already with Dominic Savio in heaven." Many rosaries and the Office for the Dead were said for him, and very many boys went to confession and Communion. All anxiously sought a memento or some object that had belonged to him. Finally, in a public demonstration of everyone's deep love for him, he was given as solemn a funeral as the humble condition of the house would allow. With lighted candles, mournful chants, and vocal and instrumental music, all the boys escorted their favorite friend's body to its final resting place. There, praying for his soul's eternal rest, they bade him a last farewell in the sweet hope of joining him one day in a far better life. He was buried in Row 70, Grave 22, in the northern section of the Turin cemetery, as recorded by the vice-chaplain, Father Fissore. A month later, in recognition of Magone's outstanding virtues, a solemn requiem Mass was celebrated at the Oratory and Father Augustine Zattini delivered a moving, brilliant eulogy. But, lest Michael's funeral set a precedent in contrast with the poverty of the house, Don Bosco and the local pastor agreed that future funerals from the Oratory would be conducted as charity cases.² Some time later, the Oratory received permission to conduct its own funeral services and to take its dead directly to the cemetery; but there was to be no clerical escort.

After these days of sorrow, joy returned to the Oratory with the feast of its patron, St. Francis de Sales, solemnly kept on Sunday, January 30. Mr. Juvenal Delponte agreed to do the honors as "prior"³ of the feast. To him was dedicated a little poem which had been written and printed for the occasion in honor of the Oratory's sainted patron. A copy of the program gives us the festivity's details.⁴ It may seem redundant to record this program

² We are omitting the details. [Editor]

³ An honorary title bestowed on prominent benefactors of the Oratory. They usually responded by treating the boys. [Editor]

⁴ See Appendix 6. [Editor]

among so many others quite similar, but there is a good reason. On this day, the Salesian Society was gathered together under the name of St. Francis de Sales for the first time.⁵ It is our cherished hope that his name will live as our standard and program of action for centuries to come, God and His Holy Mother willing.

Let us now return to Don Bosco's prediction. After Magone's death, Constantius Berardi no longer thought he was the doomed one, but strangely, among the boys there lingered a feeling that before long another lad would die. Four days after Michael's death — on January 25 [1859] — at the "Good Night" Don Bosco told them that Magone was not the boy he had meant in his warning of the last day of the year, and that therefore all should be ready, lest the one concerned be unprepared for death. And he added, "Death will come within a month from now. Shall it be myself or one of you? Let's all be prepared."

Now Berardi's former conviction returned, and again, with an astounding air of certainty, he resumed his refrain, "I'm the one. It's my turn to get ready." He went to Don Bosco and asked him, "Is it I?" Don Bosco did not reply.

The boy felt perfectly well, joined all games, and went about his chores like everybody else. Never before had the health situation been so good at the Oratory. As January ended and nobody got sick, several remarked that Don Bosco would be wrong for once. Still, as the days went by, expectation mounted. On February 7, Berardi played as usual in the after-lunch recreation and then returned to class with the others. A classmate of his — John Garino — who, like everyone else, was anxiously on the alert to see Don Bosco's prediction come true, told us what happened next.

"Berardi — somewhat taller than I — sat next to me at my right. We were busy doing a test, a translation, when about halfway through the period, Berardi turned to me and whispered, 'Look, what's this?' He was pointing to his upper lip where a pimple had formed. 'Do you think it's anything serious?' he went on. 'Don Bosco said one of us is to die this month. After Magone, no one

⁵ A reference to the fact that less than a year before — in March of 1858 — Don Bosco had presented to Pius IX the Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. *See* Vol. V, pp. 576, 594, 635ff. [Editor]

has died. Suppose I'm the one?' Tears welled in his eyes as he said this. Meanwhile, by scratching the pimple, he made it bleed."

Thus ends John Garino's description. After class, Berardi still joined in the games and then went to the study hall as usual. There, sitting next to Paul Albera, he kept complaining that his lip was swelling more and hurting him a lot. During the night he developed a fever that kept him in bed the next morning. Peter Enria ⁶ brought him some consommé, but did not realize the gravity of the case. Don Bosco did and immediately sent for the doctor. A carbuncle had developed in the boy's mouth. He was rushed to St. Maurice Hospital but, in spite of treatments, he died the next day, horribly disfigured. It was February 9 [1859]. As Don Bosco had predicted on January 25, not a month had passed since Magone's death, and, as he had foretold on the last day of the year, this death had occurred before the end of the carnival season. Father Michael Rua is one of two hundred people who witnessed the fulfillment of Don Bosco's two predictions.

During these days, a third death — Father Chiatellino's father — claimed Don Bosco's attention. He had visited the little town of Carignano ⁷ several times, together with a group of his choirboys, and had won the affection of the pastor, Father Joseph Capriolo, and of the other priests and townsfolk. He was well liked too by the family of Senator Count Mola of Larisse. The latter still regretted the fact that in 1844 Don Bosco had been unable to accept tutoring his children ⁸ because Father Cafasso had already appointed him chaplain to Marchioness Barolo's St. Philomena Hospital.⁹ What really endeared Carignano to Don Bosco was his friendship with Father Michelangelo Chiatellino, one of his first co-workers at the Oratory.

When the aged father of this pious priest died on January 23, his son and friends asked Don Bosco to write his epitaph. Don

⁶ Enria, born in 1841, had entered the Oratory in 1854. Later, he became a Salesian coadjutor brother and nursed Don Bosco during several illnesses, including the last one. He died in 1898. [Editor]

⁷ About 13 miles from Turin. [Editor]

⁸ The author's footnote reporting a letter by a fellow priest of Don Bosco recommending him as a tutor has been omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁹ See Vol. II, p. 182. [Editor]

Bosco, wishing to perpetuate the memory of this good man and of his attachment to the Church, readily consented and dictated this epitaph:

Dominic Chiatellino
Model of Christian Virtue
Most Exemplary Father
Eager Patron of Sacred Music
Zealous Upholder of the Splendor of the Liturgy
Generous Toward the Poor Though Not Rich Himself
Unswerving in His Loyalty to the Holy See
Loved by All, Mourned by Relatives and Friends
Died at the Ripe Age of Eighty on January 23, 1859
Let Us Pray for the Repose of His Soul
Let Us Follow His Holy Example

CHAPTER 11

War Clouds over Piedmont

THE last few months of 1858 and the first of 1859 set the stage [in Piedmont] for events that were to deeply affect the Italian people and offer Don Bosco new outlets for his prudent, charitable zeal.

It was persistently rumored that the war, long in preparation, was about to break out. And telltale signs were there. The government had mobilized the troops, replenished the treasury, concluded powerful alliances, and built railroads and highways. Definitely, another attempt was in the offing for driving the Austrians from Lombardy and Veneto.¹

On January 18, [Camillo] Cavour and Alfonso La Marmora² on behalf of Piedmont, and Prince [Eugene] Napoleon and General [Adolphe] Niel on behalf of France, signed a defensive alliance between the two countries. On February 17, 1859, the Piedmontese Senate and the Chamber of Deputies authorized a loan of fifty million lire for national defense.

Meanwhile, thousands of new recruits were being drafted. This would have also been the lot of the clerics Cagliari and Francesca if Don Bosco had not found a way to rescue them. The law of 1854 granted bishops the right to claim exemption from military service for one cleric in every twenty thousand diocesan subjects by presenting a list of such clerics to the government. Cagliari had called in good time at the Turin chancery to remind the officials

¹ We are omitting some details of Italian history that are of minimal interest to our readers. [Editor]

² General Alfonso La Marmora (1804-1878) was Minister of War from 1848 to 1859 with few interruptions. [Editor]

that both Francesia and himself were eligible for exemption, and Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti had assured him that they would be included in the list. However, overburdened with work, Cagliero had neglected to send a written reminder before the deadline for the presentation of such a list. Worse still, both clerics, through forgetfulness and ignorance, had failed to register as clerics of the archdiocese. As a result, their names were not entered into the diocesan directory from which a chancery clerk drew up the list of exemptees.

A month later, orders arrived at the Oratory for Cagliero and Francesia to report for military service within ten days. Don Bosco passed the orders on to the two clerics. Cagliero, greatly astonished, hurried to the chancery, only to be rebuffed for his and Francesia's failure to register as clerics.

"And now," the clerk added, "it's too late to send your names in."

"Why?"

"We have already mailed the exemption list."

"Couldn't you send a supplementary list?"

"No, the quota is complete."

"Couldn't you inquire if other dioceses like Alba, Susa, and Asti have filled their quotas? If they didn't they could add our names."

"It would take too long."

"There's no way out then?"

"Sorry, but that's the way things are."

"Look," Cagliero concluded, "you knew we were clerics. You have our birth and baptismal records; you allowed us to don the clerical habit; you also have our school records of the past five years. If we didn't send you a written memo on our exemption, it was because we didn't think it necessary after we received Canon Vogliotti's formal assurance. It is really strange that you of all people should have forgotten us, when we are listed in all the seminary registers with the other clerics. . . . But it doesn't matter! We shall turn to Don Bosco and he will do something for us."

"Then you won't need us at all. Good luck!"

There was right and wrong on both sides, but God had permitted this to show that His help would not be wanting in any

difficulty. On returning to the Oratory, Cagliero told Don Bosco everything. Seeing him concerned, he added: "Father, if I must, I'll go. Victor Emmanuel will have one more soldier. I will either leave my carcass on the battlefield or come back with shining epaulets, but I do not want you to bother about it."

"But I want to, and just for you!" Don Bosco replied.

He then suggested that Francesca call on Canon Vogliotti and seek his advice. The canon received him very courteously but made it clear that the chancery could do nothing since the exemption list had already been mailed and the deadline had passed that very day. He concluded by saying that although he regretted the unintentional omission of their names, it was now up to them to seek a way out of the situation.

On returning to the Oratory, Francesca met Don Bosco just as he was going out.

"Well?" Don Bosco inquired.

"I got nowhere," replied the cleric.

"Then I'll have to see the Minister of War myself," Don Bosco added.

But before doing so, he turned to God in prayer. From past experience he knew its power in bending the will of the powerful to his wishes. This he continued to do for the rest of his life in similar circumstances.

"If what we seek is good," he used to say, "prayer will obtain it for us even from unsympathetic or hostile persons, because at the proper time God will soften their hearts and dispose them favorably toward us." We have an illustration of this in Holy Scripture. Nehemiah, speaking of the time he had to present a very important petition to Artaxerxes I, wrote, "And I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king. . . . And the king gave me according to the good hand of my God with me." [Esd. 2, 4-8]

Major General of Artillery Leopold Valfré of Bonzo, one of the highest officials at the War Ministry, received Don Bosco very graciously. The latter explained his case and begged him to see if there was any way to exempt his two clerics or at least have them assigned to duty in Turin.

"If we were not in danger of war," the general benignly replied, "I could exempt them with a stroke of the pen, but not now. Any-

way, I promise you that instead of sending your clerics to the front, we shall assign them to office work in the Turin arsenal. I would suggest, though, that you see the Minister of Grace and Justice. He can better advise you, since this is entirely within his province."

Without delay Don Bosco called on the minister, Count John De Foresta, who had often been a thorn in the side of bishops and the Pope. He too received Don Bosco very warmly, said he was pleased to meet him personally, and expressed his admiration and approval of the good he was doing for so many needy youths.

"And now," he added, "what can I do for you?"

Don Bosco, who had expected a very different reception, was agreeably surprised and felt quite at ease.

"Your Excellency," he replied, "I have a serious problem and need your help. Through an oversight, the chancery omitted from its exemption list two clerics whom I have trained as my assistants and who indeed have worked with me the past six or seven years. The list has already been sent to the competent authorities. If these clerics are drafted, I will lose their help in caring for several hundred poor boys. I have been told that it is very difficult at this stage to have them released, but I earnestly beg Your Excellency to help me in this difficult situation."

"Gladly. Well, let's see what can be done." He rang for his aide. "Please ask Count Michael of Castellamonte to come here for a moment," he said.

The count came, and in answer to the minister's inquiries, he replied that the diocesan lists had arrived, and that the one from Turin had entirely filled its quota. The minister reflected a while, then said to Don Bosco, "You have been told that it is impossible to exempt your clerics from military service, but there is a very easy and very legal way out. Just ask the chancery to drop from its list those who could be exempted for reasons other than being seminarians — such as family conditions, poor health, or physical defects. This will work!"

Don Bosco thanked him and went immediately to the chancery. The chancellor, though, on the plea of much urgent work, excused himself from writing to the families of the clerics concerned, and Don Bosco volunteered to do it himself. He got a copy of the list and wrote twenty-one letters — one to each cleric on the list.

It turned out that two could claim exemption as only sons of widowed mothers. He then hastened back to Minister De Foresta and the two clerics were swiftly exempted. It had taken Don Bosco three days to solve this problem — anxious days because Cagliero and Francesia were his two best clerics. Meanwhile Cagliero had to call once more at the chancery to notarize some documents. Having seen thousands of recruits marching to camp, he could not help telling the clerk, "I'm glad things happened as they did. Now I owe thanks to no one but Don Bosco." Cagliero was always keenly sensitive to the repulses and humiliations Don Bosco had to suffer, but the good Father, seeing him sometimes sad or moody on that account, would smilingly cheer him, saying, "Don't take it so hard! A little rough going is good for us. It makes us tougher."

Meanwhile recruiters were being sent to all the Italian States to get volunteers for the Piedmontese army. Many thousands responded — mostly from Lombardy — and were assembled at Cuneo to form a division under the command of General Giuseppe Garibaldi. Other recruiters tried to entice Piedmontese youths not yet subject to the draft with promises of quick promotions, honors, and glory. This too gave Don Bosco problems.

An easy mannered, handsome young man came into the Oratory under the pretext of visiting some pupils from his own town. Calling himself a draft official, he managed to speak secretly and at length with a certain number of older youths and got them to volunteer. A few did, but then Don Bosco became aware of what was going on. With his usual tranquillity, he first carefully weighed his course of action in order to safeguard himself, the Oratory, and the boys; then he sent for the young man. The latter, realizing that Don Bosco was aware of his activities, did not try to hide his intentions but freely and frankly spoke of patriotism, of the war, and of the need for brave and determined young men. He said that the Oratory had many such able-bodied, willing young men and that five had already signed up. He added that he spoke frankly because he knew of Don Bosco's ardent patriotism. Don Bosco let him continue for a good half-hour in order to become thoroughly acquainted with his plans. Emboldened, the young man finally blurted out, "There is no obligation, of course, but if you permit me, I will speak to all the boys assembled together so

as to make it easier for those who wish to join the colors." Here Don Bosco interrupted him: "I sincerely love my country and do not wish to oppose any project for its welfare. But there is one problem. My authority over these boys is limited. I am only their educator. Their parents or guardians entrusted them to me. I must return them to their parents. As regards those five volunteers there is no real problem. I will send them home; they can easily contact you from there and march off to war, if their parents consent."

"That won't do," the young man interjected. "Their parents will refuse or raise difficulties. I have already sent in the boys' names and their serial numbers have been assigned. All I have to do now is to speak to them once more, give them their serial numbers, and everything is settled."

"Let's rather do this," Don Bosco said. "Give me your name and address. I'll send these boys home at once with instructions for their parents to get in touch with you. Thus there will be no need for you to stay here."

"But can't I speak to these boys just once more?"

"Under no conditions! I will immediately have all the boys go to their classrooms and shops. Once they are in, you may leave."

"But you must know that your boys like Garibaldi and are anxious to follow him."

"I too am a friend of Garibaldi. I hope and pray that he will be in God's holy grace at the moment of death."

The bell rang, the boys left the playground, and Don Bosco escorted the intruder to the door, courteously bidding him good-bye. He then gave strict orders that he should not be allowed to enter the house or speak with anyone.

Since this had caused some ferment in the house and much talk about patriotism, war, and volunteering for the army, Don Bosco sent for the five boys. He did not rebuke them but calmly said, "Since you want to join the army, it's clear that you no longer wish to stay here. Your parents entrusted you to me. I'm sending you back to them. I am not opposing your desire. Tell your parents what you intend to do, and then do what they tell you."

"Then we are expelled from the Oratory?" the boys questioned.

"I am not expelling you," Don Bosco replied. "I only want you to go home and talk it over with your parents. Then, if you wish

to return, write to me and I will see what can be done. But don't come back unless you are first notified that you have been accepted. This is absolutely necessary."

If Don Bosco had not been courteous with that official or had he failed to explain that the boys were still subject to parental authority, he could have had serious trouble. That very day the Oratory gate could have been the scene of hostile demonstrations. Instead, once the five boys were gone, the others lost interest and the excitement gradually died out.

CHAPTER 12

A Heartwarming Biography

AT the beginning of 1859, as the Oratory still mourned the edifying death of Michael Magone, the January issue of *Lecture Cattolice* honored the memory of another saintly boy. It was written by Don Bosco and entitled *Life of Dominic Savio, Pupil of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*. In its Preface Don Bosco addressed the Oratory boys as follows:

My dear boys,

You have often asked me to write something about your schoolmate, Dominic Savio, and I have done my best to oblige. This is his biography — brief and simple, just as you like it.

I have had to contend with two difficulties in writing it. The first was the criticism which a writer must face when narrating incidents witnessed by very many people still living. I believe I got around this by carefully limiting myself to what you or I have witnessed and to the statements you have written and signed, most of which I still have in my possession. The second difficulty was the necessity of mentioning myself. Savio lived with us for three years, and unavoidably I shall often have to speak of incidents in which I took part. But I believe I have also overcome this difficulty by acting merely as an historian, whose concern is facts, regardless of personalities. If you should still notice some self-complacency, attribute it to my great affection for our dear Savio and for you all — an affection which leads me to open my heart to you as a father to his beloved sons.

Some may wonder why I have chosen to write of Dominic Savio rather than of other pupils who also have enjoyed a great reputation for virtue. In truth, my dear boys, Divine Providence has sent us genuine

models of virtue — Gabriel Fassio,¹ Louis Rua,² Camillo Gavio,³ John Massaglia,⁴ and others. But none of them is as well known as Savio, whose life was notably a thing of wonder. Besides, if God spares me, I intend to collect material for biographies of these other schoolmates of yours so as to satisfy your desires and mine, and so that you may imitate whatever is suitable to your state of life.

Meanwhile, my dear boys, take advantage of what I shall narrate, and say in your hearts with St. Augustine: *Si ille, cur non ego?* If one of my schoolmates, of my own age, in this very same school, exposed to the same or perhaps greater temptations, could be a true follower of Jesus Christ, why can't I? Remember also that being a true Christian is not just a matter of words. There must be deeds too! So when you come across something to admire, do not be satisfied to say, "Oh, how wonderful!" Say, rather, "I'll try hard to do the same."

May God give you and all the readers of this booklet good health and the grace to profit by it. May the Blessed Virgin, to whom Savio was so devoted, make us all one heart and one soul in loving God, our Creator, who alone deserves to be loved above all things and faithfully served all the days of our life.

Fr. John Bosco

There is no need here to praise this little book, countless copies of which are being read in various languages all over the world with incalculable benefit to youth. One thing we cannot pass up, however, is Don Bosco's view of frequent Communion, as exemplified in his spiritual direction of Dominic Savio. In Chapter 14 we read:

Experience has shown that a youngster's strongest [moral] supports are confession and Communion. By receiving these sacraments frequently, a lad will grow into manhood, and, God willing, into old age, giving all the while an edifying example to all. Let youngsters grasp this, that they may do likewise; let educators remember it, that they may inculcate it in others.

Before coming to the Oratory, Dominic Savio used to go to the sacraments once a month, as is the practice in schools. Then he started going much more often. One day he heard this in a sermon: "Boys, if you

¹ See Vol. IV, p. 276. [Editor]

² *Ibid.*, p. 210. [Editor]

³ See Vol. V, pp. 228f. [Editor]

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 180, 378f. [Editor]

want to keep on the path to heaven, do three things: Go to confession often; receive Communion frequently; choose a confessor you can talk to, whom you will not change without necessity.”

Dominic understood the value of this advice. He chose a confessor and went regularly to him for as long as he stayed at the Oratory. Furthermore, in order that the priest might know him thoroughly, he made a general confession. At first, he went to the sacraments twice a month, then weekly. Later, his confessor, seeing Dominic’s great spiritual progress, advised him to receive Communion three times a week, and, within a year, daily.

This biography — its frontispiece a portrait of the saintly youth painted by Charles Tomatis ⁵ and lithographed by Hummel — demonstrated a heartening fact: Dominic Savio was a milestone in the Oratory’s history. As a flower’s beauty and fragrance show the richness of soil that nurtured it, as a fruit’s goodness and taste evince the wholesomeness of the tree that bore it, so the holiness of Dominic Savio proves beyond doubt the excellence of the school that helped him reach such lofty perfection. For these reasons the evil spirit attempted to discredit this charming biography.

The Oratory boarders had eagerly gotten a copy. It was to be expected that there would be no dearth of critics in such a large institution, particularly since Don Bosco gave his boys reasonable freedom of expression. While respectful, the Oratory boys were frankly outspoken because Don Bosco’s training left no room for timidity, hypocrisy, or flattery. Let this be well noted, because it bears out the important fact that the Oratory boys were not infatuated with Don Bosco, nor did they gullibly believe anything he said. They loved him because he was genuinely good, as they daily observed and verified.

No one doubted that his prediction had been fulfilled in those very days,⁶ and it was equally evident that Don Bosco could not possibly have had such foreknowledge through natural means. Still, at this very time, some did challenge the truth of certain incidents in Don Bosco’s biography of Dominic Savio. Everybody admitted Dominic’s extraordinary virtues, but some had refused to see anything supernatural in certain actions of his because they were

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 484. [Editor]

⁶ *See* Chapter 10. [Editor]

ignorant of circumstances which until then had been discreetly and prudently kept secret. Some boys even intimated that Don Bosco had made up certain incidents so as to present a model boy. Since at least a third of the boarders had not known Dominic Savio, there was danger that opinions of some who had lived with him might bias their minds. Among those who talked rather too freely and irreverently of the biography was a young cleric. The pupils were divided in their opinions, but many of them shunned the critics, not wishing to be involved in arguments.

Just then an incident came to light which seemed to support the faultfinders. In describing how Dominic had been invited to go swimming,⁷ Don Bosco had omitted the fact that the first time Savio had yielded, it was to the pressing insistence of a companion. Now this very same boy, whose last name began with a "Z," was a boarding student at the Oratory. He openly denied that Dominic had refused to go swimming, for he himself had invited him and had gone with him. The fool nearly bragged about it. His assertion came as a shock. The genuine structure of Dominic's virtues erected by Don Bosco seemed to be in danger of collapse. If one episode proved false, others might be too. For a few days Don Bosco said nothing in his own defense, not even privately, though he was quite aware of the talk going on. Finally, one evening after night prayers — which were then said in the dining room — he stood on a chair with a grave look that was seldom seen on his face. Truth was at stake. Calmly, without introduction, he spoke:

When Savio died, I invited his schoolmates to tell me whether, during his three years' stay with us, they had noticed any fault in him or the lack of some virtue. All unanimously agreed that they could find no fault in him, nor could they think of a virtue he did not possess. As for me, all I have written about him I have either seen myself or have heard from persons in this house, now present, and from other reliable sources.

At the start of Don Bosco's talk, some made an attempt to smile, but their grins soon vanished when they saw how gravely the others were listening. Don Bosco went on:

⁷ It must be noted that local circumstances made swimming hazardous and morally objectionable, since it was done in mudholes and creeks and often in the nude. [Editor]

Yet during these days you have heard comments on certain incidents of Dominic's life; among other things I have been accused of telling you a lie. Someone has denied that Savio refused to go swimming. Yes, it's true, he did go swimming. But one thing you must know: Savio was invited on two occasions. He did go the first time, but when he told his mother about it, he was forbidden to do so in the future. Savio wept bitterly at having done wrong and flatly rejected the second invitation.

I decided to write only of this second occasion because the boy who took Savio along the first time and tried to do so again is here among you. I was hoping I had safeguarded his reputation and that he would understand his wrongdoing and be grateful for my silence. Instead he chose to contradict me, to belie my words, and to cast an undeserved slur on Dominic. I want all of you to know, then, that if I narrated only the second episode, it was because I wanted to spare this lad embarrassment and pass over what he should forever feel remorse for — the danger in which he placed himself of betraying a friend. This boy, however, saw fit to reveal himself. If he has to hang his head in shame, it is all his fault. After betraying his friend in life, he resolved to betray him also in death. Once he risked robbing him of his innocence, now of his honor.

The boy thus upbraided was present. His embarrassment was extreme, as all eyes were riveted on him. Seldom did Don Bosco speak in this fashion; the impression it made is indescribable. When he finished, there was a general murmur of approval. From then on, all gossip ceased. In due time, when a reprint was made, Don Bosco added the missing episode with suitable comments.

The February issue of *Letture Cattoliche* — *Life of Pope St. Urban I* — was also authored by Don Bosco. . . . *L'Armonia* reviewed it in a brief article dated February 26 [1859].⁸

With this issue, *Letture Cattoliche* completed its sixth year of publication. The booklet also carried an excerpt from the Lenten circular of the vicar general of Turin, Canon Celestine Fissore, warmly recommending *Letture Cattoliche* to all pastors and curates.⁹

Meanwhile, Don Bosco was busy at work on a new edition of his *Storia d'Italia* [History of Italy]¹⁰ to which he was adding the biographies of several illustrious men, as we gather from the following

⁸ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

¹⁰ See Vol. V, pp. 322-331. [Editor]

letter he received from [Octavius] Cardinal Viale, archbishop of Bologna:

Bologna, February 12, 1859

Very Reverend and dear Father,

I gladly oblige by sending you a biography of Cardinal Mezzofanti ¹¹ which will supply all the information you need. I take this opportunity to call your attention to the contents of a forthcoming book on the life and attainments of this eminent prince of the Church. It is a work done by experts and should deeply interest scholars. I rely on the promise of your prayers. With the greatest esteem, I remain,

Yours devotedly,

Octavius Card. Viale

What Don Bosco had always and really at heart was the publication of the lives of the popes which he regularly narrated so vividly to his boys as to excite their keenest curiosity and interest. As soon as he finished recounting one such life, he would hasten to publish it. Then for a month or so, he would speak on other topics — mostly the Gospels. This lull built up the boys' desire for new episodes of the glorious history of the Church. For example, when he finished narrating the life of Pope St. Urban I, he gave a homily on the Gospel of that Sunday. The cleric John Bonetti took it down [and we shall report it in the Appendix].¹²

¹¹ Giuseppe Cardinal Mezzofanti (1774-1849) was a distinguished linguist. He became chief keeper of the Vatican library in 1833 and cardinal in 1838. [Editor]

¹² See Appendix 7. [Editor]

CHAPTER 13

The Festive Oratories

LENT of 1859 began on March 2¹ and ended on April 24. The flourishing St. Aloysius Festive Oratory was directed by Father Leonard Murialdo² who was using his own money to improve the inadequate, uncomfortable premises and enhance the poor chapel's altar with marble steps and a tabernacle. Frequent reception of the sacraments had brought about a wholesome spiritual climate in which some excellent priestly vocations soon blossomed among the boys. The catechists and assistants, regularly provided by Don Bosco, fully cooperated with Father Murialdo, acknowledging his authority with exemplary submission. Among them — either together or successively — were the clerics Michael Rua, Celestine Durando, Joseph Lazzero, Francis Cerruti, Francis Dalmazzo, Paul Albera, and Angelo Savio. Some laymen too were admirably zealous. We have already mentioned Attorney Cajetan Bellingeri.³ We must now add Count Francis Viancino — later justly honored as the outstanding Catholic layman of Piedmont; Mr. Ernest Murialdo, brother of Father Leonard Murialdo; Marquis [Ludwig] Scampì of Pruney; Count Pensa; and, for some time, Mr. John Baptist Ferrante. All gave of themselves selflessly for the spiritual and moral welfare of needy boys.

¹ An oversight! Lent began on March 9. [Editor]

² Now St. Leonard Murialdo. Born in Turin in 1828 from wealthy parents, he became the priest of the poor, like Don Bosco. In 1873 he founded the Pious Society of St. Joseph to look after poor youths. He was also quite active in awakening Catholics to their rights and duties as citizens. His last efforts were given to further the movement for a Christian democracy in Italy. He was proclaimed a saint by Pope Paul VI on May 3, 1970. [Editor]

³ See Vol. V, p. 424. [Editor]

Their zealous efforts proved all the more fruitful after the opening of the day school ⁴ attended by over a hundred boys — mostly rejects from the public schools — who needed instruction as badly as bread and clothes. The school's beneficial influence did not wane when Father Murialdo left to direct the Artigianelli Institute, but during his tenure at the St. Aloysius Oratory, he not only kept the school flourishing, but also managed to give financial assistance to the pupils' families to keep them from being bribed into attending the [neighboring] Waldensian school. His charity proved marvelously effective. Like Don Bosco and other priests who were afire for the salvation of souls, he carried out St. Paul's suggestion: "It is not the spiritual that comes first, but the physical. . . ." [1 Cor. 15, 46]

The school had excellent teachers. We wish to single out Mr. Formica. Not content with teaching, he helped most successfully in catechizing and supervising the boys on Sundays and holy days. Anxious for their spiritual welfare, he one day sought Don Bosco's advice on the most effective way of inducing boys to go to confession and of convincing them that a good confession was not hard to make. After a few practical suggestions, Don Bosco added, "As for the bigger boys, bring them to me at Valdocco. They may say that they don't go to confession because they don't know how. Just tell them it's the easiest thing and all they need say is 'Yes, no, I don't know!' Don Bosco will say the rest."

Thanks to such zealous teachers, the day school of the St. Aloysius Festive Oratory flourished some twenty years, successfully neutralizing the neighboring Waldensian school in Via dell'Arco, and keeping hundreds — perhaps thousands — of poor lads from being robbed of their faith.

Meantime, so as to keep older lads ever closer to their festive oratory, Father Murialdo started a choir. Rehearsals took place on weekday evenings, directed by Elzario Scala. Soon the boys were proficient enough to sing solemn high Masses. Father Murialdo also decided to start a brass band and, after talking to Don Bosco, graciously submitted some regulations which the latter approved.⁵ Then he bought the instruments, sharing the fairly heavy expense with Attorney [Cajetan] Bellingeri. Furthermore, to guarantee that all

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 513ff. [Editor]

⁵ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

would be orderly, both he and the attorney personally supervised the rehearsals, helped the teacher, and encouraged the pupils. Unfortunately, the band did not measure up to its aim, became more of a nuisance than a help, and had to be dissolved. From then on, Don Bosco would not let his other festive oratories in Turin organize a band, maintaining that the one of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales could very well be available on special occasions. It was only toward the end of his life, that he, weighed down by poor health and constant pressure, reluctantly rescinded his order.

The Guardian Angel Festive Oratory in Borgo Vanchiglia did as well as the St. Aloysius Oratory. Extensive improvements had turned broken-down sheds into spacious, pleasant rooms, one of which served as an auditorium. The plays attracted large crowds of boys to the sacred functions and to catechism. Here, too, all of the personnel came from the Valdocco Oratory; the cleric John Cagliero was one of them.

But the Festive Oratory of St. Francis de Sales always kept the lead in attendance and piety. Its support from the nobility of Turin was gratefully acknowledged by Don Bosco with little gifts or personal, warm thank-you notes much appreciated by the recipients. One such note, sent by Don Bosco to Count Xavier Provana of Collegno, reads: “. . . Here is a blessed crucifix. If God hears my prayer, it will draw abundant blessings and the holy fear of God on its wearer. I wish you, papa, and all the family good health and God’s grace.”

At Valdocco, too, the day grade school conducted by Father Augustine Zattini of Brescia was doing very well. For some two years now, this good priest, a philosophy professor, had adapted himself with admirable patience and humility to the hard task of teaching reading and writing to an oversized class of uncouth, jeering lads who played on his ignorance of the Piedmontese dialect, as he often confidentially admitted to the young Oratory clerics.

Don Bosco still offered his festive oratory boys various enticements, but the outings of former times ⁶ — especially all-day outings — kept becoming very rare and were soon to cease altogether. From the time the Oratory had a regular chapel, he required all to attend the sacred functions, lest the reception of the sacraments

⁶ See Vol. II, pp. 302ff. [Editor]

and the regular catechetical instruction be jeopardized. This is why the boys at the Guardian Angel and St. Aloysius oratories never went out on outings in a group.

Valdocco, though, had a custom which had to be respected — a half-day outing to some church just outside the city limits — a reward which Don Bosco unfailingly gave these boys every year. If it was a morning outing, the boys set off in groups, praying or singing sacred hymns. At the chosen church they had Mass and Communion and were treated to breakfast by Don Bosco. A few donkeys carried the supplies. Afterward, they went home on their own. On afternoon outings, the boys usually took to the hills with a few musical instruments and were treated to a snack on reaching their destination. Sermon and Benediction followed at a nearby church. Later in the evening, they happily returned to the city in high spirits, singing and shouting. On reaching the city limits, though, they would quiet down and, breaking into small groups by neighborhoods, they went back home.

Don Bosco gave the Valdocco Festive Oratory boys this treat two or three times a year, as we were told by boys who went on the walks from 1855 through 1861. The lucky ones were always more than three hundred. He generously supplied all the food, but if boys came from rather well-to-do families, he would ask them to bring their own refreshments or to contribute about twenty *soldi* each to help out the poorer ones. They responded most willingly, feeling they were amply rewarded by the good deed they were performing and the fun they would have with Don Bosco.

Don Bosco used those outings to attract boys to the Valdocco Festive Oratory because he noticed that its attendance — though still large — was steadily declining between the years 1859 and 1870. The reasons were beyond his control. One was that the Oratory boarders kept increasing and practically took up the Church of St. Francis de Sales and most of the available play area; another reason was that irreligious employers forced their young apprentices to work also on Sundays.

Yet, on the whole, youth work went on undiminished. In 1859 a new festive oratory, dedicated to St. Joseph, was opened in Borgo San Salvario through the generosity of Chevalier Charles Ocelletti, who donated a piece of land for a large playground and fitted up

a lovely, spacious chapel. At first the priests of SS. Peter and Paul Church were chaplains, but, starting in 1863, Don Bosco — at the request of that charitable gentleman, an intimate friend of his — solicitously sent first Father [John Baptist] Francesia, then Father John Tamietti and other priests every Sunday morning for confessions, Mass and sermon, while the priests from SS. Peter and Paul handled the afternoon services. Chevalier Ocelletti continued to finance this oratory and untiringly kept on teaching catechism and supervising the boys, while Don Bosco's sons always took charge of the spiritual direction.

We have mentioned that Sunday attendance at the Valdocco Festive Oratory was dwindling, but we must add that it rose again during Lent. Then, the day boys had the whole church for themselves for daily catechism. On Sundays, as many as could find a place would crowd in. It was a wonderful sight, as many prelates declared. One day, Bishop [John Peter] Sola of Nice walked into a catechism class. The sight of such a crowd of boys so moved him that he took over the class himself. Other bishops did the same on similar occasions to the boys' great delight.

As in former times, Don Bosco still kept looking for boys and rarely came home alone, especially on Saturday evenings. He deliberately wended his way where he could more easily find them. In the neighborhood of the Oratory where he was well known, he would walk right into backyards and homes, gently asking mothers, "Any boys for sale?" and requesting them to let their sons go with him. This way he usually managed to gather a good group of boys whom he would take in tow to the Oratory and, after a short preparation, hear their confessions. After sounding out their spiritual needs, he would take care of their spiritual welfare in word and deed.

Don Bosco continued these spiritual sallies of his up to 1864, when the boarders became so many that he had no more time for this apostolate. Yet he never forgot some young apprentices who no longer came to the festive oratory or only put in an occasional appearance. For them, and especially for those who he knew had to live in an unwholesome environment and definitely neglected their spiritual needs, he had an admirable, if not inimitable, approach. On seeing them, he would greet them warmly and spend

some time in friendly conversation. Then, before leaving, he would appeal to their hearts with the plea, "Please don't forget to come and see me. I'll be waiting for you." The young men understood what he was driving at and kept the appointment. Don Bosco was ever ready to hear their confessions, and if they came into the sacristy when a crowd of boarders was waiting for confession, he would take them first.

Don Bosco's spiritual influence over his festive oratory boys also had a beneficial effect on their parents, as we have already described.⁷ He himself narrated the following episode on September 14, 1862 while speaking informally with his pupils after dinner:

About two years ago I went to hear the confession of an ailing young festive oratory boy. He lived with an uncle and aunt who owned and operated a café. They loved him most dearly. After his confession, the young lad, seeing them so sad and worried at the bad turn his sickness had taken, said to them: "I love you so, dear aunt and uncle. Won't you do something for me? You'd make me very happy if you went to confession! Won't you do it for me?"

They so loved their little nephew that his words moved them to tears. "Child," the uncle said, "if this is what you want, I'll do it right away."

Then and there, he and his wife, and even the waiters, knelt, prepared themselves, and made their confessions. We must remark that these people were not overly devout but rather negligent in this regard, as could be expected. After the men were through, it was the woman's turn. I was somewhat perplexed, since I could not hear her confession without some sort of screen between her and myself, as is prescribed. To tell her to come and see me later in our church would never do, because she might change her mind. So I removed the bed curtain and made it into a makeshift screen, while the good lady looked at me questioningly.

"What are you trying to do, Father?"

"I'm trying to put up some sort of screen."

"Don't bother, Father! I can make my confession like everybody else."

"No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because a screen of some kind is prescribed for the confessions of women. That's what I'm trying to set up now."

⁷ See Vol. IV, pp. 41f. [Editor]

"All right, then," she said. "I'll wait." When the curtain was up, she knelt at a little distance from it, I sat on the other side, and she too made her confession.

My dear boys, let us thank the Lord. Sometimes it is quite evident that the grace of God works wonders. Happy those who respond to it! How unfortunate, instead, those who shut their hearts to it, thus risking their only chance. They may die in their sins, as Holy Scripture warns: "You will seek Me and will not find Me . . . and in your sin you will die." [John 7, 34; 8, 21] Thereafter both café owner and employees went to confession regularly, usually coming to the Oratory, otherwise sending word for me to go to them.

Another Oratory boy was instrumental in saving his father's soul. In Piedmont, Protestant propaganda continued its attacks against the Catholic Church, especially through the Italian Religious Tract Society, whose library in Turin circulated 27,124 Italian books and pamphlets and 4,248 in French. The literature came from Paris, Dublin, and London, and from these cities too came large sums of money. The society had also set up a printshop in Turin for their periodical *La Buona Novella* [The Good Tidings] which in two months printed no less than two and a half million calumnious, blasphemous pages. A network of agents spread them far and wide through Piedmont's marketplaces and Waldensian bookstores.

The father of one of the boys attending the festive oratory at Valdocco was one of these agents, selling the publications as a side business. It was not long before the boy's friends came to know of this. Since Don Bosco had clearly explained in his Sunday instructions that such people directly cooperated in evil-doing, they reported the matter to him.

He talked to the boy who, after filling in more details, begged him to try to get his father to give up that business. Don Bosco went to the man's shop. He spoke so amiably and persuasively that the man agreed to get rid of all those publications and sent them to Don Bosco to dispose of them as he saw fit — which he did in a huge bonfire in the middle of the playground amid the boys' cheers. Then in compensation Don Bosco sent the man a corresponding amount of good books — among them, *The Companion of Youth*,

The Well-Instructed Catholic, and many issues of *Letture Cattoliche*. The need for this type of literature was quite apparent to Don Bosco as he zealously kept up this apostolate. The anonymous March issue — well received by the Oratory boys and subscribers — was entitled *The Cross by the Wayside*, a wanderlust tale of a young Tyrolese boy [with moral reflections]. . . . This issue also carried a short notice ⁸ announcing the start of the seventh year of publication and urging support.

While Don Bosco, in his efforts to defend the Church, managed to bring many souls back into her fold, Divine Providence gave his Oratory firmer financial security through Father Joseph Cafasso. Father John Baptist Pagani, superior general of the Institute of Charity, had asked Don Bosco to repay the twenty thousand lire which Father Anthony Rosmini had lent him and part of the overdue interest. Don Bosco stated he was ready to refund the loan; as for the interest, however, he maintained that Father Rosmini, shortly before his death, had given him to understand that the matter was to be dropped. He added, moreover, that the late Father [Charles] Gilardi had not insisted on interest payment because he was aware of the motive his superior had in waiving it. In reply, Father Pagani pointed out his Institute's needs, and Don Bosco agreed to a settlement. On March 11, 1859, through a deed drawn up by the notary Turvano, Don Bosco and Father Cafasso jointly refunded fifteen thousand lire to Father [Peter] Bertetti to repay Father Anthony Rosmini's loan ⁹ to Don Bosco for the purchase of the Pinardi property. The deed stated that the debt was being settled with money owned jointly by Don Bosco and Father Cafasso. A partial payment of five thousand lire had been made a short time previously. The field of the dreams ¹⁰ still remained the property of the Rosminians.

Even after this settlement, there arose some trivial contestation with the business manager of the Institute of Charity, as evidenced by this letter of Don Bosco which also reveals his utter dislike for litigation:

⁸ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁹ See Vol. IV, pp. 87, 95. [Editor]

¹⁰ See Vol. II, pp. 190f, 232f, 268; Vol. IV, p. 87; Vol. V, p. 30. [Editor]

Turin, April 4, 1859

*To Mr. Joseph Zaiotti
c/o The Institute of Charity
Stresa*

Dear Sir:

May the Lord give us the holy virtue of patience! Your letter has troubled me considerably, especially since you threaten legal action to recover a hundred lire, about which an error seems to have been made.

I have had to interrupt my work and give this matter a great deal of time. First I must tell you that I have done business with the Institute of Charity for the past eighteen years with never a trace of suspicion or coldness on either side, so much so that Father Charles Gilardi, of cherished memory, kept books for both the Institute and me, and I always unquestioningly accepted the accounts he submitted. These accounts were definitely closed on July 10, 1857.

You have taken the trouble to dig up a letter of mine (dated February 10, 1855) according to which an error was made. Since Father Gilardi and I used to go over the figures together to avoid causing the least loss to either party, your allegation amounts to saying that both of us acted with our heads in the clouds. Note, too, that though I always notified Father Charles by letter on making payments, these letters were just memos, nothing more. Debits and credits were entered elsewhere.

Now, it seems to me that to search for previous errors after a settlement was fully agreed upon by both parties is to look for trouble with no justification at all. However, though I am fully and firmly convinced that these hundred lire have been included in the final settlement of 1856-57, I beg you to notify the superior in charge of these affairs that I absolutely do not want any litigation. At a mere hint that your superior expects payment, I shall immediately forward the money.

As for the trivial debt of one lira and sixty centesimi for which I had no small change in Turvano's office, I thought I had paid it when I changed a fourteen-and-a-half lire coin. If memory serves me well, I gave you three forty-cent coins, one twenty-cent coin, and two five-cent coins. However, as I did not make a memo of it at the time, and I may be in error, I enclose a money order for this amount.

Now, to make things easier, I beg you not to be concerned about whether I am right or wrong. Just tell me quite plainly if I am to send the hundred lire. If not, do not bother with a reply.

May the Lord give you health and His holy grace and bless your Institute.

Your devoted servant,

Fr. John Bosco

P.S. I beg you to send me the original IOU signed by Frs. Murialdo, Borel, Cafasso, and Bosco. I have looked for it in vain at Turvano's.

CHAPTER 14

Divine Providence

FATHER Cafasso's lavish generosity to the Oratory was inspired not only by his love of God and fellow man, but also by his firm belief that he was cooperating in an enterprise destined to last through the centuries. This is why he wanted to be fully responsible for buying the Pinardi property and thus having the merit of laying the foundations of a work that would one day be worldwide. He not only knew the upright intentions of his disciple and his faithful adherence to the plans of Divine Providence, but he was also certain that Don Bosco would be true to his lofty vocation. Above all, he admired Don Bosco's unwavering belief that God would provide whatever was needed to carry out his vast religious, charitable undertakings.

Lack of funds, difficulties of all sorts, adverse opinions, ill will, vexations, mishaps, impasses — nothing deterred Don Bosco from seeing a project through once he had initiated it. Though pressed by most urgent needs, he never doubted that God would come to his aid. Cheerfully he would say, "God is a good Father. He provides for the birds of the air; most surely He will provide for us too." He thus explained his trust: "God started these projects; I am but His instrument. As such I do not have to worry about supplying the means to further and bring them to a successful end. God will take care of that when and as He shall see fit. My task is just to be docile and pliable in His hands."

Hence, he never worried about the future. Unhesitatingly he would sell any real estate that benefactors might bequeath him, thus enabling him to meet urgent needs or start new undertakings.

Money came in and went out the same day. There was never a surplus because he was continually besieged by creditors. Advisors guided by human prudence alone would often tell him not to jeopardize the Oratory's existence by running into heavy debt, but he would reply unhesitatingly, "This work will not only continue after my death, but it will prosper ever more and spread to every part of the world."¹

"His trust in God and in the Blessed Virgin," Bishop John Cagliero declared, "was incredible. During the thirty-five years I lived by his side, I don't remember having seen him even momentarily worried, downhearted, or uneasy about the debts he had contracted for the daily feeding of his boys."

Don Bosco possessed nothing, absolutely nothing. His treasurer was God, whose agents are good, generous people who look upon money not as an end but as a means of benefiting themselves and their fellow man. Hence Don Bosco prayed that God would send these good angels of the earth to his aid. In his "Good Nights," he would often tell his boys, "Pray, my children, and possibly receive Holy Communion for my intention. I, too, am praying — I assure you — even harder in the face of problems. I need a big favor. Later I will tell you what it is."

A few evenings later, he would say for instance that a rich gentleman had brought him a large sum of money — just what he needed — adding: "The Blessed Virgin did us a very great favor today. Let us thank Her with all our hearts. Continue to pray to Her that the Lord may never abandon us. But woe to us if sin were to come into this house! Then the Lord would no longer help us. So be alert, avoid the devil's snares, and receive the sacraments often."

He had it very much at heart that his boys should pray well. Whenever he could, he said night prayers with the students. At times, when he had reason to delay his supper or stay in the dining room during night prayers,² he would tell some superior to watch or warn certain boys who habitually dozed or chatted instead of praying. At other times he would rush his meal and supervise the

¹ Presently the Salesians of St. John Bosco operate 1,446 institutions in 65 countries. Their membership (21,126) according to the 1970 statistics makes them the third largest order of men in the Catholic Church. [Editor]

² Supper was at eight and night prayers at nine. [Editor]

prayers himself, so much was he concerned for their devout recitation. During prayers he would not allow boys to lean against the wall or try squatting on their heels instead of kneeling. Someone once remarked, "Wouldn't it be better to let the boys say their prayers privately and thus get them used to mental prayer?" His reply was, "Boys are so made that unless they pray together aloud they don't pray at all! Though they may be distracted while praying aloud, the mere fact that they are busy pronouncing the words keeps them from chatting with their companions; moreover, even their mechanical recitation of words serves to keep the devil away."

He also insisted that during night prayers no one should talk or pace the playground and porticoes. He wanted all clerics and priests either to join in the boys' prayers or to go to the church or to their rooms. Any other behavior he considered a scandal to be avoided at all cost.

He demanded strict silence from night prayers till next morning after Mass. He considered this silence absolutely necessary in order that their minds, undistracted, could derive the full benefit of prayer. Once, going from his room to the church for confessions, he came across a group of students on their way to Mass. Noticing that some were talking quite freely and loudly, he called them to order, but one of the lads took no notice, whereupon Don Bosco went up to him and personally punished him. Later he let it be known that he was quite displeased with the assistants for not exacting that silence which he had so often recommended.

This solicitude of his bore abundant fruits. The prayers of the Oratory boys rose in pleasing homage to God's throne and entirely fulfilled Isaiah's words, "My elect shall not labor in vain nor bring forth in trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord. . . . Before they call, I will hear; as they are yet speaking, I will hear." [Isa. 65, 23-24]

On January 20, 1858, Don Bosco was faced with a large debt, but he had no money at all. His creditor had already waited a considerable time and would now brook no further delay. By the twelfth of the month nothing had turned up to give Don Bosco a glimmer of hope. In these straits he called a few boys and told them, "Today I need a special favor from Our Lord. While I'm in town, I want

you to take turns before the Blessed Sacrament and pray for my intention until my return." The boys complied.

As Don Bosco was walking near the Vincentians' church, a stranger greeted him and asked, "Don Bosco, do you happen to need money?"

"Do I! I am in dire necessity."

"Then take this!" And he handed him an envelope containing several one-thousand-lire bills.

Don Bosco hesitated in astonishment, doubting the man's sanity or seriousness.

"Why do you give me this money?"

"Just take it and use it for your boys."

"Very well, many thanks! May Our Lord reward you! Do you want a receipt?"

"No."

Don Bosco took the money. "At least tell me your name," he begged.

"It's not necessary," the stranger concluded. "The donor wants to remain anonymous. He asks only for prayers. The money is yours to do with as you please." And he quickly walked away. Obviously, this was an intervention of Divine Providence. Don Bosco immediately paid his creditor.

Bishop John Cagliero related the following incident:

One day in 1859, Don Bosco came into the dining room at noon wearing hat and cloak.

"Well, Don Bosco," we said, "aren't you going to eat with us today?"

"Today I can't," he replied. Then, turning to Father Alasonatti, the prefect, to the cleric Rua, to myself and others, he added, "From after dinner³ to three o'clock, take turns with some of the most devout and fervent boys and spend some time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. If I get the favor we need, I'll tell you about it tonight." We carried out his instructions.

Toward evening, Don Bosco returned, as undisturbed and calm as when he had gone out. He answered our importune questions, saying, "Today was the deadline to pay ten thousand lire to the Paravia Press. If I failed to do so, both the printer and the Oratory would have suf-

³ In Italy, the main meal was — and in most cases still is — at noon. [Editor]

ferred serious consequences. There were also other urgent debts long overdue whose payment could no longer be delayed. These too totaled another ten thousand lire. I went downtown with trust in Divine Providence but with no place to go. When I reached Our Lady of Consolation Church, I walked in and begged the Most Blessed Virgin to come to my aid. Then I left and walked the streets till two o'clock when I found myself near St. Thomas Church in an alley leading into Via dell'Arsenale. Here, a well-dressed gentleman came up to me and asked, "You are Don Bosco, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"What a coincidence," he went on. "I was just on my way to Valdocco to bring you this little package from my master."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know!" he replied. I opened it and found it full of government bonds.

"Who is your master?"

"I am not at liberty to tell. Please excuse me." So saying, he left. I immediately went to Paravia's. There I made an accurate count of the bonds; they totaled ten thousand lire — just what I needed to print *Letture Cattoliche* and to meet other very pressing debts. "Oh, my children," Don Bosco continued, "how great is Divine Providence! How generous God is to us. How much He loves us! Let us always be grateful and good. Let us love Him and never offend Him. In turn He will always provide for our needs."

As he spoke, his face beamed with unusual radiance; his voice sounded richer, more affectionate, not so much for joy and wonder at what had taken place, as for gratitude and love of God. We, too, were filled with his sentiments and admired him ever more.

Other similarly marvelous interventions of Divine Providence happened many times to benefit the Oratory and other houses of our congregation. [Such is the witness of Bishop Cagliari.]

In 1860, on a Saturday morning or perhaps a feast day eve, the baker came to Don Bosco at about eleven and told him that he would stop all deliveries unless he was immediately paid for long-overdue arrears. As it happened, there was just enough bread on hand for dinner. Soothing words and promises proved totally ineffective. After dinner, Don Bosco asked for his hat and overcoat. At half past one, the clerics [John] Turchi, [John Baptist] Anfossi, John Garino, and others were chatting in the porticoes near the

stairs leading to the basement dining room. Don Bosco approached them. "Please do me a favor," he said. "Go to church at once and pray before the Blessed Sacrament for my intention for some twenty minutes. Take turns, two at a time, till you must go to your classes. I am desperately in need of help today."

Unquestioningly, the clerics obliged. On Don Bosco's return, they were teaching. As John Turchi told us, "That evening I was anxious to know how things had turned out but — as usual on Saturdays and the eve of feasts — Don Bosco was busy hearing confessions and had not even come to supper. So I asked Father Alasonatti if he knew anything. 'Yes,' he replied. 'Everything turned out well. Don Bosco will tell you all.'"

The next day, at the "Good Night," Don Bosco spoke as follows:

I want to thank you for your prayers for me yesterday. I owed a large sum to Mr. Magra, our baker, who had made it very clear to me that he wasn't going to deliver any more bread unless we paid him immediately. I had no money and did not know where to find it. While you were praying in church, I roamed the town wondering where to turn for help. Then I heard somebody calling. I turned. A man was hurrying up to me.

"Oh, Don Bosco" he said. "Imagine meeting you here! You saved me a walk. I was just going to the Oratory to look for you. My master is sick and wants to see you."

I went with him. His master had been bedridden for some time. He received me warmly, inquired of the Oratory, and after further conversation handed me an envelope. There was enough money in it to pay the baker, and I did so the same day.

On another evening, Don Bosco told the boys who had been praying for him:

I was in town again looking for money. I knew of a rich spinster who lived beyond the Holy Martyrs Church and was totally opposed to charity. Since I was in dire need, I called on Father Bruno, her pastor, to ask if he had any objection to my visiting his parishioner for help.

"Not at all!" he replied. "I doubt you will get anything out of her. I have tried several times myself but never got even a *centesimo*."

I called on her, and — would you believe it? — she felt pity for us

and gave me ten thousand lire. When I later told the pastor of it, he almost collapsed! He just couldn't believe it!

About the year 1862, Don Bosco owed partial payments to a contractor and various suppliers of his workshops. Since the boys were in class, he asked the cook — [Joseph] Gaia — and other devout persons in the house to go to church and say the rosary for his intention. Then he went out in search of help. A short distance from the Oratory, as he was walking down the boulevard bordering the asylum, a man approached him and handed him a sealed envelope, saying, "This is for your work!" Without another word, he walked away. Don Bosco opened it and found seven thousand lire. With a hearty "thank you" to Divine Providence, he joyfully returned to the Oratory.

But as often as Don Bosco went out in quest of Providence — and sometimes oftener — that same Providence came to him unsolicited. What follows we ourselves heard from Bishop [John] Cagliero, Father [Angelo] Savio, [Peter] Enria, and Don Bosco himself:

In 1861, the same baker — Mr. Magra — again threatened to stop deliveries unless Don Bosco paid him an overdue twelve thousand lire. As usual in dealing with creditors, Don Bosco sent him word to continue deliveries and not to worry because Divine Providence would not go bankrupt. The baker relented, but then called on Don Bosco for at least a partial payment. There was no money at all in the house. It was the morning of a feast day, and Don Bosco was in the sacristy hearing the confessions of a large crowd of boys. The baker stalked in and told the sacristan he just had to speak to Don Bosco. The sacristan tried to stall him, but the man pushed through the crowd of boys and began telling Don Bosco he wanted to be paid because he needed money urgently. Don Bosco calmly looked at him and said: "Kindly wait a few minutes till I'm through with confessions."

"I can't wait," the baker replied. "I want my money now!"

Don Bosco ignored him and went on with the boys' confessions. At a loss for what to do, the baker stepped aside and then went out to pace the porticoes. On finishing his confessions, Don Bosco uttered a prayer for this emergency. At that very moment, a stranger walked in, handed him a sealed envelope, and courteously bowed and left. Don

Bosco stuck the envelope into his breviary, said Mass, and then went to the dining room for breakfast, accompanied by Father Angelo Savio and some visitors. Father Savio reminded him that the baker was still waiting, but Don Bosco calmly replied that there was nothing he could do because he had no money. Just then the morning mail came in. Immediately Don Bosco remembered the envelope he had received in the sacristy and had stuck into his breviary. He opened it and found a substantial sum of money, which he immediately gave to Father Savio for the baker. On meeting him shortly afterward, Don Bosco remarked, "Do you see, sir? Providence is generous and came to our help. You have a partial payment and will soon receive the balance. Thanks be to the Madonna!"

Father Angelo Savio, who managed the Oratory finances, narrated these two other instances:

Once, a creditor, after an angry outburst for not having been paid, was about to storm out of Don Bosco's room threatening legal proceedings, when a benefactor walked in and handed Don Bosco three thousand lire — the exact amount he owed.

On another occasion, I needed money to pay the building contractor. I went to Don Bosco, but he had none either. As he was telling me to return later, Count [Frederick] Callori, if I am not mistaken, arrived and gave Don Bosco a large sum of money that marvelously met the emergency.

These episodes demonstrate both the efficacy of prayer and the admirable charity of generous people. They reveal, too, untold efforts, hardships, and preoccupations which Don Bosco bore almost jokingly. One day he wrote to his old pupil, Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi: "My dear Canon, I am crushed by debts. Please take up a collection for me or I'll go bankrupt." Toward the end of Don Bosco's life, the same canon brought him a small donation. On that occasion, Don Bosco remarked: "So far, this year's expenses amount to four million lire, but — thanks be to God — they are all paid. Small offerings combine to make large sums. I need people to help me as you are doing — even with small donations."

The small donations that did come to him were from the poor and the lowly, but they were so numerous as to surpass by far the

large donations of the wealthy. Holy Scripture says, "A needy man is merciful." Truthfully, the small but heroic acts of charity of these humble messengers of Divine Providence ran into the millions. We shall mention but two instances.

One day Don Bosco had to meet a deadline of three hundred lire, but he had no idea where to get the money. That very day, an elderly man came into the Oratory playground and, spotting Don Bosco, went up to him. "I am a retired government employee," he said. "I have some savings and I want to use them for my soul's good." He handed Don Bosco a purse.

"But what about yourself in case you get sick?" Don Bosco inquired.

"Divine Providence will care for me too," he replied. "I want to send good deeds ahead of me before I leave this world. If I get sick, some hospital will take care of me. Good-bye, Father; pray for me." And he left. The purse contained three hundred lire.

Another time, a lady of some seventy-five years came to the Oratory, asking to speak to Don Bosco. He thought she had come for a recommendation to city authorities or to some wealthy person.

"No!" she replied to his inquiry. "I came for something else."

"All right!" Don Bosco replied. And taking her aside, he invited her to sit. She went on: "I am a poor old woman. I have worked all my life. I had an only son but now he is dead. There is nothing for me to look forward to in this life. I have no other heirs. Before dying, my son told me to give my savings to charity! Here they are — one hundred lire — all my wealth after fifty years of work. I want you to have them. I still have a small sum for medical expenses and fifteen lire for my funeral. I'll take to bed tonight and all will be over in a few days."

"I accept your offering most gratefully," Don Bosco replied, "but I will not use this money till after your death. If you need it, come anytime. It is still yours."

"No!" the good woman said. "I have gained some merit with this alms. Use the money. If I should be in need, I'll ask you for alms, and by giving it to me, you too will gain merit. Will you come to see me when I'm sick?"

"Certainly!" Don Bosco replied.

Next day, Don Bosco, still deeply touched by her genuine, simple charity, meant to visit her, but could not remember her address. Two days later, though, another woman came to call him. Don Bosco went with her immediately. On entering the room he instantly recognized the old woman. Smilingly she gestured that she needed nothing.

“It can’t be!” Don Bosco exclaimed. “You must need something, or you would not have sent for me.”

“Well, yes,” she replied. “I need the Last Sacraments.” She received them most devoutly and then peacefully passed away.

How truly wonderful is charity. Every day of his life Don Bosco had reason to exclaim, “How good is the Lord! He knew our need and inspired good-hearted people to come to our aid!” It truly was a fulfillment of the promise contained in Psalm 33: “Fear the Lord, you His holy ones, for naught is lacking to those who fear Him. The great grow poor and hungry; but those who seek the Lord want for no good thing.” [Ps. 33, 10-11]

CHAPTER 15

A New Sodality at the Oratory

MOST powerful incentives at the Oratory were the St. Aloysius, Immaculate Conception, and Blessed Sacrament sodalities. Don Bosco often attended their meetings to let the members hear his persuasive, most welcome words. In turn, the sodality secretaries did their best to jot them down as faithfully as possible. Their minutes gradually became a treasury of maxims, examples, counsels, and exhortations for future members. Unfortunately these minutes have not reached us, notwithstanding diligent search. Various factors account for their loss: lack of a permanent meeting room due to building alterations; the habit of passing the minutes from hand to hand; the death of some secretaries who kept them in their possession and whose books or manuscripts were either discarded or lost; the understandable eagerness of some who, leaving the Oratory, took them along as souvenirs of their boyhood and of Don Bosco; and, finally, the change of occupation or house on the part of those who kept these records. We have found only the guidelines of two of Don Bosco's conferences to the Blessed Sacrament Sodality in 1859. As always, his main purpose was his boys' religious instruction as he sought to strengthen the foundation of their faith. Our readers will appreciate our endeavor to safeguard for posterity the thoughts Don Bosco expressed in these talks.¹

But while stirring up the fervor of the Blessed Sacrament Sodality members, he was also aware that the existing sodalities did not sufficiently meet the needs of all the Oratory boys. For the

¹ See Appendix 8. [Editor]

more fervent boarders, there was the Immaculate Conception Sodality² which offered them the opportunity to practice the spiritual works of mercy. To them Don Bosco had fondly proposed as a model St. John the Evangelist, whose purity and zeal had merited his being chosen as the guardian of Mary Most Holy.

For his catechists, both day and resident, there was the affiliated chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society,³ whose ceaseless charity Don Bosco so well described to the members. The Blessed Sacrament and the Knights of the Altar sodalities⁴ were made up entirely of resident students. The St. Aloysius Sodality⁵ was really meant for the rest of the pupils, both day and resident, but somehow few artisans attended its meetings. This was due to various reasons: the preponderance of students, conflicting timetables, wise reluctance on the part of superiors to curtail the artisans' recreation periods on Sundays and holy days in order to give them time to attend the meetings, the diversity of inclinations and education, and the lack of rapport between artisans and students.

Don Bosco therefore decided to found a sodality exclusively for the artisans as an outlet for the more zealous among them. Their patron was to be St. Joseph, model of good, diligent Christian workers. Don Bosco felt sure that, by attending the meetings and listening to exhortations suited to their condition, his beloved artisans would be spurred to piety and devotion. . . .

The power of Don Bosco's words stemmed from his example. He dearly loved St. Joseph and showed it all his life, as we have heard from his most outstanding pupils throughout the years. He had chosen St. Joseph as a patron saint of the Oratory, had placed the artisans under his protection, and had also urged the students to pray to him for success in their exams. He personally called upon him in his needs and exhorted others to do the same. At the "Good Nights," he frequently spoke of St. Joseph's powerful intercession, solemnized the feast of his patronage on the third Sunday after Easter, and prepared the pupils for it with fervent exhortations.

Singly, or in groups, the boys honored St. Joseph, especially in

² See Vol. V, pp. 312-318. [Editor]

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 306-311. [Editor]

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 499f, 517ff. [Editor]

⁵ See Vol. III, pp. 147ff; Vol. IV, pp. 208ff. [Editor]

March — the month dedicated to him. Though no one had to take part in these devotions, nearly all did, so effectively had Don Bosco endeared this Saint to them. Furthermore, on erecting new churches Don Bosco always dedicated an altar to him. He rejoiced when [in December 1870] Pope Pius IX declared St. Joseph patron of the universal Church; then, in 1871, he ordered that March 19 should be solemnized in all Salesian houses by both students and artisans and that all should abstain from work, though at that time the feast of St. Joseph was no longer a holy day in Piedmont. Another and earlier evidence of his veneration for St. Joseph was provided by Don Bosco in 1859 when he enhanced *The Companion of Youth* with several devotions in honor of the Saint, such as a chaplet in memory of his seven joys and sorrows, a prayer for acquiring purity, a prayer for a happy death, and a few sacred hymns. Finally, he made an addition to Part 3, Chapter V of the Regulations for the Festive Oratory as follows: "On each of the seven Sundays before the feast of St. Joseph, a plenary indulgence may be gained by those who go to confession and Communion. The boys should be reminded in good time and encouraged to avail themselves of such a privilege." Not satisfied with this, he asked Silvio Pellico's⁶ sister, Josephine, to translate a French booklet entitled *The Seven Sundays of St. Joseph*, which he published to popularize this devotion.⁷

The veneration he professed to this Saint was naturally a factor in his plans to establish the St. Joseph Sodality. This became feasible when the cleric John Bonetti, drawn by his love for Don Bosco and the remembrance of the charming family life once enjoyed with him, returned to the Oratory and was entrusted with the care of the artisans. He had spent one year studying philosophy in the diocesan seminary. Knowing Don Bosco's intentions for a sodality for the artisans, he sought and obtained his permission to establish one. When he announced his plans, the boys responded enthusiastically. The enrollment took place on a Sunday, probably March 20 [1859], and was solemnized both in and out of church.

⁶ Silvio Pellico (1789-1854) is mostly known for his book *Le Mie Prigioni* — the account of his prison sufferings during the Italian Risorgimento. [Editor]

⁷ A letter by this lady on this and other matters has been omitted in this edition. [Editor]

From then on, the St. Joseph Sodality enjoyed a steady, vigorous life. John Bonetti himself wrote its regulations. Inspired and corrected by Don Bosco, they were revised in the course of time, but the spirit remained the same.⁸ The officers' duties were as follows: The president had to summon the meetings, look after the members' religious instruction, and prudently do his utmost to promote the sodality's best spiritual and material progress. The vice-president was to substitute for the president at meetings and assist him when necessary. The secretary's duties were to call the roll, record the topic and outline of the talks given as well as the minutes of the entire meeting, and keep an up-to-date list of members and applicants. The consultors and monitors were to see that the sodality regulations were kept.

For prestige it ranked as high as the St. Aloysius Sodality and its honorary membership included the main superiors of the Oratory. Whereas membership in the Immaculate Conception, Blessed Sacrament, and Knights of the Altar sodalities merely required that the applicant be accepted, admission to the St. Joseph Sodality was made more solemn with the public recitation of a special formula.⁹

The beneficial results of this sodality will be seen in the course of our narration, but they were foreseeable even then, judging by the good conduct of the great majority of artisans. The sodality became so well known that it drew a surprising number of requests for information from Piedmont, from other parts of Italy, and even from foreign countries.

We shall now report one more item that belongs to this year — a letter of Don Bosco to the founder of a charitable institution who had asked him for one of his artisans:

Turin, April 3, 1859

My friend in the Lord,

The unsettled political situation made me somewhat delay this reply. I will say this: If you plan to carry out your project, I'll send you one of my boys — not, indeed, a famous shoemaker, but one who knows

⁸ See Appendix 9. [Editor]

⁹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

his trade. I am confident his conduct will be good, unless he changes radically. I shall have a copy made of the regulations of our house for you. As regards a festive oratory, we had better talk matters over together. Should you come to Turin, call at the Oratory and spend a Sunday with us; you will then see for yourself how we go about it, *in nomine Domini*. When something has materialized, let me know. God willing, I will pay you a visit. Should you prefer a young tailor, I have one available.

My respects to fearless Father Fenoglio. To both of you, great courage in the Lord. Find me a million subscribers to *Letture Cattoliche*. Pray for me and for my poor children.

Your humble servant,

Fr. John Bosco

We will now close this chapter with an observation. The vivifying element of the St. Joseph Sodality — as of the others — was the frequent reception of Holy Communion, but the formation, growth, and bond of affection which united their members must be credited to the zeal and good example of the young clerics. Nearly every week, Don Bosco gathered them into his room for a private conference to imbue them with his ideas and offer them ways and means to lead a pure life. In speaking of St. Francis de Sales, he would often extol the Saint's amiability, purity, and heroic self-sacrifice in spending himself for the salvation of souls even at the cost of his life.

Don Bosco himself had formed these clerics, lavishing the most tender care on them from their early boyhood. On their part they responded just as generously. It could not have been otherwise, for he never admitted among his clerics nor sent to the diocesan seminaries any but those youths who gave firm hope of success. These he helped in every way to achieve their holy goals, as we can see in this letter of his to Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti, rector of the diocesan seminary and diocesan provicar:

Oratory, April 6, 1859

Very Reverend and dear Rector,

The cleric Alasia, of Sommariva, a seminarian at Chieri, writes to tell me that board and tuition fees are being demanded of him.

He went to the seminary on the understanding that he would be accepted on a gratis basis, as Your Reverence had led me to hope. I beg you to help him; having no means of his own, he will otherwise be forced to leave. The cleric [John] Bonetti was admitted gratis last year, and Your Reverence had given me to understand that when I took Bonetti back to the Oratory, you would transfer this privilege to Alasia.

Fully trusting in your goodness, I am,

Most respectfully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

From another letter to the same canon we see how unhesitatingly Don Bosco excluded from the clerical state those whose conduct was not up to par.

Oratory, March 15, 1859

Very Reverend and dear Rector,

I am rather embarrassed to give you information about . . . I will tell you *coram Domino* what I personally know. He did well in his studies, but his conduct was mediocre. Furthermore, he had to be dismissed for reasons better left unsaid among Christians. While with us he finished his rhetoric. It is possible that during the two years since he left the Oratory his conduct may have improved and that he may now deserve a good recommendation.

I hope this information will suffice. I can furnish further particulars, if necessary.

Your servant,

Fr. John Bosco

P.S. When this young man presented himself for his test, prior to donning the clerical habit, I refused him a certificate of good conduct, but he secured one from his pastor.

CHAPTER 16

A Thorough Education

WE read in Sirach [Sir. 20, 12] that the wise man's speech endears him to others and enables him to draw and bend his hearers to his will.

Such was Don Bosco. Amiability was a trait he strove to cultivate in his co-workers by urging them to communicate with one another in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the whole community. To this noble end, he multiplied occasions for speaking. This he did not only for himself, but for the other superiors and for several local and saintly priests imbued with his spirit whom he invited to the Oratory. They substituted for him when he was absent or otherwise occupied, echoed his words, recalled his maxims, and endeavored to have his wishes carried out.

Besides Sunday homilies, the stories of the popes' lives, the "Good Nights," the sodality conferences, the weekly reading of marks to the students, and the explanation of the rules of the house, Don Bosco sought other occasions to speak to the boys on matters pertinent to their civil and religious education. These things should not be forgotten, and we shall treat of them now since they may not fit so well elsewhere in our narration.

We shall mention first his catechetical instructions. Now and then for at least twenty years — from 1846 to 1866 — he used to gather his clerics and the older, more promising boys in the sacristy in order to coach them on the way to teach catechism more fruitfully to their companions, both day and resident. He often commented on the festive oratory regulations and made practical suggestions — for example, that they should teach standing in

order to have a better view of the boys and more easily command their attention. He insisted too that catechism answers be commented upon very briefly without excursions into explanations beyond their pupils' capacity.

Father Angelo Savio¹ and John Villa² spoke to us about the good results of these meetings, adding that Don Bosco himself enjoyed spending several hours a week narrating bible stories to the evening school pupils. He also liked to quote Holy Scripture, thus deepening his boys' knowledge of things they had already heard in sermons by the talented priests of the Convitto Ecclesiastico,³ whom Father Cafasso sent to the Oratory every Sunday.

The boarders too, divided into groups, had their Sunday catechism lessons in church, and Don Bosco had moreover prescribed that each week they should memorize a chapter of the catechism. This memory assignment was due on Sunday evening for the artisans and during the week for the students. The latter were not to take final examinations unless they had first passed their catechism tests. This was to accustom them to give more importance to the study of religion than to other subjects.

He also directed that philosophy and theology students were to memorize ten verses of the New Testament each week [in Latin] and recite them in the dining room on Thursday⁴ morning at breakfast. This custom began in 1853. When, that first morning, Don Bosco came into the dining room, all the clerics had the Vulgate opened at the beginning of St. Matthew's Gospel, believing he would start there. Instead, after the usual prayer, Don Bosco said: "Take St. Matthew, Chapter 16, Verse 18: *Et ego dico tibi quia tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam, et portae inferi non praevalent adversus eam. Et tibi dabo claves regni coelorum, et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum et in coelis et quodcumque solveris super terram, erit solutum et in coelis.* [And I say unto you that you are Peter, and upon this

¹ Savio began attending the Oratory in 1850, became a Salesian in 1859, and filled important positions in the Salesian Society. [Editor]

² Villa began attending the Oratory in 1855 and continued frequenting it till his death in 1870. [Editor]

³ An ecclesiastical college specializing in pastoral theology. Don Bosco began attending it right after his ordination. It was here that he started his work for boys. See Vol. II, pp. 31ff, 54-61. [Editor]

⁴ A regular school holiday. [Editor]

rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.] Then, after briefly commenting on the Roman Pontiff's authority, he assigned the first ten verses of St. Matthew's Gospel for the following week. For years he himself sat in on this recitation, tersely but admirably commenting on the text and concluding with some maxim that would foster divine love and serve as a norm of conduct. The clerics so loved these sessions that they eagerly looked forward to Thursdays.

Toward 1857, since the boys' confessions kept him busy till late in the morning, Don Bosco delegated this task, first to the cleric Michael Rua, then in 1863 to Dominic Ruffino,⁵ and subsequently to others. But at times he joined or presided at these gatherings. The practice of memorizing and reciting extracts from the New Testament — later commonly referred to as "Testamentino" — also gave him an opportunity to suggest tips on the importance and manner of preaching the Word of God. He insisted on simplicity and clearness in order to reach an audience. He used to repeat that the salvation of souls should be the only aim of the preacher. For this reason, he once made a peculiar remark heard by Francis Cerruti⁶ and others. The clerics were poking fun at pompous 16th-century eloquence. Don Bosco let them have their say, and then remarked. "But, suppose that style and those far-fetched illustrations were necessary in that century to gain the people's attention and benefit their souls, would you consider it laughable? In that case I should think it would have been wrong to do otherwise."

On another occasion, he touched on the need to prepare a

⁵ Ruffino had begun corresponding with Don Bosco in 1856 while a diocesan seminarian at Giaveno. In 1857 at Don Bosco's invitation he spent part of the summer at the Oratory. (*See* Vol. V, pp. 470f.) He joined Don Bosco permanently in 1859 and had the foresight to start on his own a diligent record of what Don Bosco said or did. Ordained a priest in 1863, he continued his chronicle till October 1864, when Don Bosco sent him to Lanzo near Turin to open and direct that Salesian school. He died prematurely the following year. [Editor]

⁶ Cerruti had been at the Oratory since 1856 when he was twelve. In 1859 he decided to join Don Bosco, was ordained a priest in 1866, and filled important positions in the Salesian Society. He died in 1917 at the age of 73. [Editor]

sermon before venturing onto the pulpit, and he spiced his talk with funny episodes to show how poor a figure a priest cuts if he neglects this strict duty. We were present when he narrated this episode:

There was a priest well known for his easygoing ways. Let's portray him by just describing his manner of preaching. He would start off with a standard topic — the Ten Commandments — eyes closed, hands resting on the pulpit. "Mind you," he would say, "I shall be brief, very brief. The Gospel of this Sunday . . . (Now, you ladies, I know you like to gab, but hold your tongues at least during the sermon . . .) As I was saying, today's Gospel is about the multiplication of loaves. A moral we could draw is that you should go to confession. Before doing so, of course, you should examine yourselves on the First Commandment. (Sexton, please take the candle extinguisher and use it on that unruly lass down there.) From the First Commandment let us pass on to the Second . . . (You altar boys, can't you ever sit still?) and to the Third and the other commandments." And he went on and on, simply enumerating the commandments. He had promised to be brief, and indeed he was, for he never stayed in the pulpit more than ten minutes. When the congregation thought he was about to start his sermon, he was through. Now, what do you think of such sacred eloquence? What fruits can it bear? Nothing but irritation, laughter, or sleep! The same results can be expected of any priest who, for some reason or other, attempts to preach without preparation. The faithful will suffer grave spiritual harm, and he will bear tremendous responsibility before God. If priests realized the importance of this duty, they would reap an abundant harvest. We read in the Book of Proverbs: "It is the part of man to prepare the soul [that is, himself, by study, meditation, and prayer]; and of the Lord to govern the tongue [by His grace]." [Prov. 16, 1]

Another aspect of priestly formation that Don Bosco had close to his heart was the teaching of sacred ceremonies. He started these lessons himself, and later they were taken over by Father John Baptist Bertagna.⁷ About the year 1857, Father Gherardi, an assistant priest at Santa Maria, willingly assumed the task since

⁷ Father Bertagna was a renowned professor of moral theology at the Convitto Ecclesiastico in Turin and was later consecrated auxiliary bishop in the same city. [Editor]

the Oratory clerics had been assigned to his parish and contributed their services on solemn feasts. He had some leisure time and spent it teaching the Oratory boarders to serve Mass, though there were already others appointed to train them in this most noble service. Don Bosco, in fact, required of all his pupils that they should know how to serve Mass and to serve it well. The clerics were very fond of both Father Bertagna and Father Gherardi for their friendliness and competence. Several old-timers recalled to us that when either of them appeared at the Oratory gate, the boys would run to him in a warm welcome, respectfully kissing his hand.

Father Gherardi was succeeded by Father Joseph Rocchetti — our own schoolmate — who carried on till 1862, when ill health compelled him to leave the Oratory. There followed, then, Father John Cagliero, Father Joseph Bongiovanni, and others.

Don Bosco also started weekly conferences to the students on Wednesday evenings to instruct them in their religious duties. He spoke to the boys himself except when prevented by other engagements; in those cases fellow priests from town substituted for him. For example, in 1856-57 Father Casassa, a saintly, elderly priest who was the spiritual director of the Sisters of St. Anne, gave conferences on sin, the virtues, and the sacraments, sometimes in the study hall, more often in the side chapel of St. Aloysius [in the Church of St. Francis de Sales]. In the latter case, he always vested in surplice and stole. His moral conferences were eagerly looked forward to by the boys and never went beyond half an hour. Father Casassa also gave the Sunday evening sermons till 1863, taking turns with Father [John] Borel⁸ and Canon Charles Anthony Borsarelli.

In 1857-58, to help the students understand the Latin sacred hymns, Don Bosco asked Father Matthew Picco⁹ to give them a conference every Thursday, to which the students of the Cottolengo Institute were also invited.

In 1859, Father [Augustine] Zattini, of Brescia, then an aspirant to the Salesian Society, was put in charge of this conference. On

⁸ See Vol. I, pp. 341f, and consult the index of Vol. II. [Editor]

⁹ Father Picco conducted a private school of humanities and rhetoric in Turin. [Editor]

Wednesdays, or after the Sunday second Mass,¹⁰ he explained the Psalm *Introibo* and all the altar boys' prayers and responses, so that they would thoroughly understand their role at Mass.

From 1860 through 1863, the Wednesday conference was carried on by Father Borel in a large, L-shaped room, made up of the present infirmary [1907] and of the section below Don Bosco's room. Father Borel, in surplice and stole, used to sit at the junction of the two wings with the students at his left and the clerics on his right. His conferences were a reasoned presentation of the Catholic faith. One year he spoke on the virtue of faith with such clarity that all were able to follow him. His theme had been "Faith without works is dead" [Jas. 3, 26] and "Without faith it is impossible to please God" [Heb. 11, 6]. Years later, Father John Garino — a boy at that time — told us that it was a real treat to listen to him speak on faith.

Father Borel was succeeded by Father Joseph Bongiovanni, who for a few years held his conferences in the boys' study hall. This custom was later discontinued.

Finally, worthy of mention are the weekly classes on good manners held on Thursday morning or occasionally on Sunday before noon in the study hall. This task was entrusted to the prefect of the house; the first one to take it was Father [Victor] Alasonatti in 1855. This sort of lecture rounded out the Christian education of boys who, coming mainly from farms or workshops, really needed to learn proper public deportment. The rules of good breeding given to the boys were drawn from the Bible. There one can find most opportune advice on correct table manners, when to sit and when to stand, how to act with superiors, fraternize with equals, converse with distinguished people, relax, and, in short, how to conduct oneself in different circumstances. One's manners reveal his heart and give a clue to his personality. The Holy Spirit says in Holy Scripture: "One can tell a man by his appearance; a wise man is known as such when first met. A man's attire, his laughter, and his gait proclaim him for what he is." [Sir. 19, 25-26]

¹⁰ On Sundays and holy days the Oratory boys attended two Masses; the second Mass was either sung or marked by the recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. [Editor]

Don Bosco wished his pupils to make a good impression and win friendship and esteem by their deportment, courtesy, candor, and modesty. Occasionally he substituted for the prefect, but then too he taught good manners more by example than by words. He was the picture of a perfect gentleman. He exercised self-control in every gesture and word and never gave offense by his appearance or speech. He treated all most respectfully, as St. Paul teaches us: "Honor to whom honor is due." The nobility who visited him, or on whom he called, observed him and wondered where he had learned his refined manners. "Don Bosco is a most accomplished gentleman," they would remark. Father Paul Albera heard this comment very often in France too. This was one of the reasons — a secondary one, to be sure — why noble families were eager to host him in their palatial homes. Nor did Don Bosco show less regard to the poor. He never entered their homes without doffing his hat. He was also charmingly courteous with his pupils. "I would like to entrust you with this matter. What do you say?" "Would you do me a favor and deliver this message for me?" "Would you let me give you a bit of advice?" "Can you help me with this work?" His manners were totally free from affectation because they stemmed from the charity of Jesus Christ which welled up in his heart, as befitted God's priest. The boys took him as their pattern, and in turn he never failed to admonish or correct them opportunely in public and in private.

Don Bosco saw that good upbringing provides the climate for the blossoming of many virtues. Therefore, prudent educator that he was, he pointed out to his pupils the time to talk and the time to keep quiet. He urged them to show annoyance at the coarse, conceited, exaggerated, or rude manners of others. He urged them not to tell others whatever evil they might have heard of them, to turn a deaf ear to caustic quips, and not to press their own opinions stubbornly even with their equals. He warned them not to set themselves up as an example by saying, for instance, "I would have acted otherwise," when someone else's conduct had not really been blameworthy; never to contradict; to listen even interestedly, without betraying annoyance, at the retelling of the same episode, particularly if the speaker happened to be elderly; not to keep silent in a conversation with friends; not to interrupt a speaker or

answer questions not put to them, and, when replying, to moderate their answer by such expressions as: "I should think . . . It seems to me . . . etc." He also exhorted them not to be uncompromising in giving their opinion except in matters of faith, and not to shout each other down when differences of opinion arose, but to wait one's turn to speak.

When a boy needed a reminder, Don Bosco had a way of his own of giving it. If, for instance, one made a grammatical error in speaking, he frowned on making fun of him. Instead, he tried to say something containing the same word, but in its correct usage.

One day he was expressing an opinion to several of his more experienced young clerics about certain measures to be taken. One of them immediately pooh-poohed his suggestion as most untimely and utterly unfeasible. Unruffled, Don Bosco simply asked "What is hyperbole?" All laughed, and Don Bosco said no more. Perhaps he meant to tell the cocky objector that his views might be better appreciated if he stuck to rhetoric. It was a puzzling question, but a very gracious one to avoid mortifying him for so thoughtless an objection.

When someone erred in matters of history or science, he would just smile his disapproval, saying: "You are a teacher in Israel and do not know these things?" [John 3, 10] He exhorted all to think twice before speaking, reminding them of the scriptural warning, "Fools' thoughts are in their mouths; wise men's words are in their hearts." [Sir. 21, 26] He showed them the need of such reflection in order to obtain what one desires, to avoid blundering, betraying secrets, making enemies, creating troubles for oneself, and offending God. He did not fail to comment on certain thoughtless people, inclined to suspicions, who, if not curbed, easily break into fits of fury, insult those by whom they imagine themselves to have been slighted, attribute bad intentions to others, and believe themselves always in the right. "Such people," he would say, "alienate their friends, become hateful to society, and end by being a common laughingstock. How often one meets with such ill-bred persons, who would not make themselves so ridiculous if they took pains to control their tongues, let their tempers cool, and, better yet, silently overlook real or imaginary slights!"¹¹

¹¹ We are omitting a trifling incident. [Editor]

Besides propriety in speech, Don Bosco expected good manners of his boys. Himself a model of Christian dignity and composure, he detested coarse play or any game that required putting one's hands on another, as well as every trait of unbecoming familiarity, such as walking arm in arm, hand in hand, etc. He considered it a breach of good manners and asked his assistants to see to it that his wishes on this score were perfectly carried out. This point too he illustrated with a humorous anecdote:

When I was a schoolboy in Castelnuovo, I disliked the game of leapfrog. Not only did I refuse to play but I chided those who did. Now it once happened that while waiting for the teacher — Father [Nicholas] Moglia — I was stooping over my desk arranging my books, when suddenly a classmate jumped on my shoulders, then a second and a third. I said nothing as they jumped, but then, seizing the legs of the topmost boy, I pressed them tightly against the sides of those under him and, straightening up, I walked out of the classroom with this unusual burden on my back. I went as far as the church square and back. My classmates followed in astonishment, shouting, whistling, and clapping, while the three poor fellows on my back groaned and begged to be let off, promising never again to jump me. I ignored their cries and calmly reentered the classroom, where Father Moglia was now awaiting his pupils. Someone had told him what had happened, but when he saw that living tower stalk into the classroom, he burst into such heartfelt laughter that he could hardly tell me to let them go. By now the boys' legs were so cramped that they could not stand. So I deposited them one by one on their desks. "How did you like the game?" I asked. They never tried it again.

When joining in recreation with his boys, Don Bosco marked their mannerisms and gave each the advice needed. He would say to one: "Stand up straight. Do not stoop like a hunchback." To another: "Do not sink your head between your shoulders like that. You look like an owl!" "Don't swing your arms so awkwardly as if you didn't know what to do with them." "Take your hands out of your pockets. One would think you are giving yourself airs."

He often corrected some thoughtless breach of manners with a nod, beck, or glance unperceived by others. If, for instance, one spat on the ground within sight of visitors — or, worse yet, indoors

— he gave a hint by putting his handkerchief to his mouth. He would do the same if someone coughed, sneezed, or yawned audibly. If he saw one leaving the table with smeared lips or cheeks, he would go through the motions of wiping his own lips with a significant nod. To those who had stains on their clothes, he would smilingly point them out with the tip of his finger. Usually that was enough.

Canon [Michael] Sorasio told us how Don Bosco once went to Caramagna for the clerical investiture of his pupil [Bartholomew] Fusero. While conversing with the local clergy in the sacristy, Don Bosco noticed that Fusero was resting his elbow on the vesting table and supporting his head on the palm of his hand. Unobtrusively, he grasped Fusero's arm and moved it so courteously that the canon — then a lay person — could not help admiring such finesse. He never forgot it.

One notable lesson in good manners among the many Don Bosco taught his sons was brought to our attention by Joseph Reano. It was April 28, 1858. Don Bosco had instructed the boys always to doff their caps when greeting distinguished visitors, especially priests, and to be very courteous, particularly with people who asked to see the superior of the house. In these cases, the boys were to accompany the visitors to the superior's room, cap in hand, politely answering their questions. He then went on to tell of an experience he had had on February 18 of that same year when he had called on a family. He was received so coldly that, though not offended, he felt somewhat mortified. This led him to think how the Oratory's benefactors would feel if they were received in like manner and what the consequences would be. He concluded by pointing out that if a visitor called on a family and a mere child came to the door to inform the caller that regretfully the father was out, such courtesy would be very gratifying and would enhance the family's good name. We shall add that around these years [1859-1861] Don Bosco sketched a three-act comedy which aimed at correcting the most common breaches of good manners. We were able to find only an outline among his papers.¹²

Don Bosco's lessons in good manners served as valuable norms

¹² Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

of conduct in public for those who cared to profit by them. A distinguished lawyer — an Oratory past pupil — and many others too, declared that by remembering Don Bosco's rules of good breeding they were able to hold their place in society and win the reputation of being accomplished gentlemen.

Let us conclude this chapter with a question: Could Don Bosco have done more for his boys' education? Fittingly we can apply to him the eulogy uttered by St. John Chrysostom: *Omni certe pictori, omni certe statuario, coeterisque huius modi, omnibus excellentiorem hunc duco, qui iuvenum animos fingere non ignoret.* [I do not hesitate to rank above any painter, above any sculptor, and above any artist, him who knows how to form the minds of the young.]

CHAPTER 17

War Against Austria

WE must now shift our attention from the Oratory's peaceful conferences to rumors of war. Toward the end of March [1859] the Piedmontese army — eighty thousand strong — was positioned along the border from Alessandria to the Ticino River, while the National Guard manned bastions and fortified positions. In the public squares of various towns, volunteers for the Garibaldi militia kept drilling, as the worried populace looked on, awaiting developments in anxious silence. Turin was deluged with inflammatory pamphlets and newspapers, and war demonstrations were the order of the day. The government itself feigned peace while goading Austria to strike the first blow and make it appear that Piedmont had been forced into self-defense. Everything was ready, including military billets and hospitals.

Among the buildings commandeered by the army was the Convitto Ecclesiastico. On dismissing his pupils, Father Cafasso had recommended, "Do not meddle with politics. A priest is to concern himself with the Gospel and the practice of charity. You will find war fever everywhere; politics and war are standard topics. Be prudent. When asked your opinion on the situation, simply answer, 'I have no opinion to offer. My duty is to pray.' If you are asked for whom you are praying, reply that you are praying that everything may go well and that everything may end well. Thus you will not get involved in controversy." The same advice Don Bosco gave his clerics. He did not want them to concern themselves with politics. Nevertheless, the war fever which had taken hold of youth threatened the survival of the Lenten catechism classes. We have this report from Peter Enria:

In 1859 — as formerly in 1848-49 — an intense war fever gripped Turin's youth. Nearly every Sunday they massed by the hundreds in the meadows on the city outskirts and fought sham battles which, more often than not, became the real thing with rocks flying on both sides, as I witnessed several times. One Sunday afternoon, Don Bosco entered the church to start the catechism class, but to his surprise found only the boarders there. "Where are the others?" he asked. Nobody knew. He went into Via della Giardiniera — to the site later occupied by the Church of Mary Help of Christians — and saw a crowd of more than three hundred boys, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, battling each other with rocks. At that sight, Don Bosco marched right into the fray. I was watching from a distance and feared for his safety, but he was not hit. I am convinced that Our Lady shielded him with Her mantle. He advanced some fifty feet. As soon as the boys recognized him, they held back their rocks. Amiably he motioned them closer and then gently persuaded them to go with him to church. No one tried to run off. When all were in, he began the catechism lesson as if nothing had happened.

All this turmoil did not affect the publication of *Letture Catto-liche*. The April issue, entitled *Edifying Stories* . . . also carried recommendations of two bishops for the spread of this periodical. Another bishop — Andrew Charvaz of Genoa, relentless foe of the Waldensians — had also recommended this publication in his pastoral letter of February 19, 1859. The same had been done by Bishop Thomas Ghilardi of Mondovì and Bishop Clement Manzini of Cuneo, the latter on February 15, 1859.¹

The May issue, *The Life of Rose Cordone*, by Father Joseph Frassinetti, prior of the Church of St. Sabina in Genoa, proved that all Christians can reach perfection and union with God, even without charisms, long prayers, and harsh penances, as this saintly girl did before her death in Genoa on November 26, 1858.

The June issue — anonymous — was entitled *The Shrine of Bassa*. Its frontispiece carried the Latin verse, *Tot tibi sunt dotes, Virgo, quot sidera coeli*. [Thy perfections, O Virgin, are as numerous as the stars of heaven.] This shrine is located in the hills of

¹ Short extracts from the pastoral letters of the bishops of Genoa, Mondovì, and Cuneo have been omitted in this edition. [Editor]

Rubiana in Piedmont. Like all others, it proclaims Mary's goodness in granting the requests of Her suppliants.

While Don Bosco was busily proofreading these booklets that dealt with the simplest and most peaceful Christian virtues as a welcome relief from the violent passions then stirring the masses, he was greatly comforted by evidences of Dominic Savio's loving, heavenly protection of his former schoolmates. One night in April [1859] he read to the gathered community a letter from an alumnus, Matthew Galleano. At the beginning of that month, after two days of an atrocious toothache and headache, he had decided to have recourse to Dominic Savio. He recited an "Our Father" in his honor, and as he came to the words "but deliver us from evil," the pains and swelling instantly ceased. One of the boys present at the reading of this letter was Charles De Matteis. For several weeks he too had been tormented by a toothache which no medicine could alleviate. Encouraged by his companion's happy experience, he asked Don Bosco, "Shall I too pray to Dominic Savio?"

"Why not?" Don Bosco replied. "This evening say one Our Father and Hail Mary in his honor, and trust in him."

That night, kneeling at his bedside, Charles recited those prayers and got into bed. Immediately he fell into a sound sleep, whereas on previous nights he had not been able to rest at all. When the bell awakened him the next morning, he was entirely cured. Toothaches never bothered him again.

Another boy, Hyacinth Mazzucco, had been suffering from sore eyes for about a month and faced the prospect of having to leave the Oratory unless he got better. On Wednesday of Holy Week, April 20 [1859], he asked Don Bosco, "Shall I pray to Dominic Savio too? He has cured others who never even knew him. I was his classmate. He'll surely help me, especially since I have to prepare the Altar of Repose for tomorrow."

"Surely," Don Bosco replied. "Say an Our Father and a Hail Mary in his honor. Then trust in him. Tomorrow do your work and offer it to God."

That evening Mazzucco recited those prayers. The next morning he felt much better, and by Holy Saturday was completely cured. These heavenly favors of his beloved Dominic were a great lift for

Don Bosco and eased his heartaches at the lack of response in some boys. From these heavenly interventions too he got a sense of security, notwithstanding the troubles and anxieties of the impending war, as we gather from a letter of his to Father John Baptist Torchio, pastor of San Martino Alfieri (Asti):

Turin, April 22, 1859

Dear Reverend Father,

It's Easter again, and I must settle my debts to put my conscience in order. I owe you several letters especially concerning the boy B . . .

To be very frank, I must admit I have not done what you asked because the conduct of this lad to whom I have always borne special affection has consistently been a question mark. He has steadily been so mediocre in his scholastic and religious duties that I don't see how I can possibly give him the recommendation which his father — a wonderful man — you and I myself desire. This is why I could not oblige.

As for Saglietti, I deeply regret I cannot accept him just now. Why? Because the government has had our house checked out as a likely military billet. This means that at any moment I may get notice to pack up and leave. The present political situation is grave and most alarming.

If you ever come to Turin, do not fail to pay me a visit. At all events, I assure you I shall always do my best to please you. Pray for me and my poor boys.

Your devoted servant and friend,

Fr. John Bosco

This letter mentions a government inspection. It took place at the beginning of April. Two agents checked out the premises as to their adaptability for barracks or for use as a military hospital. Don Bosco received them courteously and showed them around. As they were about to leave he said, "I would appreciate it if you would convey an opinion and request of mine to your superiors. When one's country is in need or in danger, every loyal citizen must do all he can. Don Bosco too is ready to do his utmost. I did so six years ago² and will do so now, if war breaks out. At the same time, I

² See Vol. V, pp. 55ff, 74ff. [Editor]

must point out that this house is now sheltering some three hundred of the poorest, most forsaken boys. I beg the government to spare me the sorrow of having to cast them adrift again into the streets. I believe Turin has plenty of public buildings far more suitable for barracks or hospitals than this house. As you see, it lacks many comforts and its stairs and corridors are far too narrow." (In building it, Don Bosco had anticipated this possibility.³)

We do not know what the two inspectors reported, but the Oratory was not disturbed. On the other hand, in those trying times Don Bosco provided a far better service. The abrupt drafting of men who had been permanently demobilized, and of others who had been granted deferments at the time of the Crimean War, threw the countryfolk into consternation, because most of the draftees were married; then, too, they had to leave in midspring at the height of the planting season. Many families were left helpless, and many a mother with a houseful of children was plunged into misery — so much so that relief committees had to be formed in the main cities to provide for the neediest families. What did Don Bosco do? Notwithstanding the economic straits brought on by the war and soaring food prices, he accepted several boys whose fathers were in the service.

The first rumble of war came on April 23, 1859. On that day, Austria, annoyed by the intrigues of the Piedmontese government, sent an ultimatum demanding the disarming and disbanding of volunteers within three days. It was flatly refused . . . ⁴ On April 30, the over-two-hundred-thousand-strong Austrian army, commanded by General Francis Giulay, crossed the Ticino, seized Novara, and pushed on to the fertile plains bounded by the Ticino, the Po, and the Sesia . . .

On May 2, the Austrians occupied Vercelli . . . and on May 3 pushed forward to Tortona. They had three corps: one between Casale and Alessandria, another on both banks of the Po, and a third at Vercelli, where they were apparently grouping to march on Turin. In the meantime, by sea and by land, 180,000 French soldiers were pouring into Italy via Genoa, Nice, Moncenisio, and

³ See Vol. IV, p. 328. [Editor]

⁴ Here and there we shall omit details about this war. [Editor]

Monginevro in order to join forces with the Piedmontese army . . .

In the capital, it was deeply feared that the Austrians would soon be within its walls. The Oratory boys too were worried, but Don Bosco reassured them. "Do not be afraid," he said. "Even if Turin falls, the Oratory will be defended by the holy martyrs Solutor, Adventor, and Octavius and will suffer no harm." He had a deep devotion to these Saints who had suffered martyrdom within the Oratory grounds,⁵ and so strong was his trust that in those very days he was busy preparing a lottery, as if the country were at peace. He needed money to feed his boys.

Accordingly in April he met with the committee that had made such a success of the lottery of 1857⁶ under the chairmanship of Count Charles Cays of Giletta, and made plans with them. Then, after obtaining a city license, he procured and numbered the prizes, had all the tickets written by hand and stamped with the Oratory seal, and saw to the printing of two circulars to be sent to friends and likely sympathizers in April and in May.⁷ Each circular had an insert listing the prizes and carried the following message: "For the convenience of the public, donations for tickets may be given to any committee member." Their names followed.

The lottery was a huge success and fully met Don Bosco's expectations. The drawing took place as scheduled, winners were notified, and the prizes were delivered with a thank-you note from Don Bosco.⁸ By this means Don Bosco provided food for his boys, at least for a while.

In the meantime he was also capturing their imagination with the description of the lovely and stupendous future that Divine Providence had in store for the Oratory. While still a young cleric, John Baptist Anfossi declared to us:

I distinctly remember that one day, while I was close to Don Bosco in the playground, he pointed to the spot where the Church of Mary Help of Christians now stands, and said, "A great church will rise there." He lifted his eyes upward as if it were there already within

⁵ See Vol. II, pp. 233f, 268. [Editor]

⁶ See Vol. V, pp. 398f. [Editor]

⁷ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁸ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

his gaze, then went on, "It will have a huge dome, and great solemnities will be celebrated in it." At this time, not a word had ever even been spoken about a church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. In those days we could not help feeling greatly astonished by these words, especially because we knew the serious financial straits of our Father who often could not even pay for our bread. Nevertheless, one day, in a light vein, he invited the cleric [Charles] Ghivarello — who at the time knew nothing about architecture — to make a rough draft of the future church. Don Bosco thought it too small and made him sketch a much larger one, which later was shown to architect [Anthony] Spezia.

In these very days too, by his priestly blessing, Don Bosco won a victory which caused a good deal of fun among the boys. "Too bad that Don Bosco isn't a general!" they remarked. "He would rout all enemies!" Joseph Reano described this incident in writing to Father John Bonetti:

One day an old woman who rented and tilled a vegetable garden close to the Oratory came to see Don Bosco. She was very upset.

"Father," she said, "caterpillars are crawling all over my garden and eating everything up."

"What can I do, my good woman?" Don Bosco replied.

"I want you to chase them away. They are ruining me. Give them a blessing and make them all die."

"Why do you want those poor things to die?" Don Bosco replied smilingly. "I will bless them and send them where they can do no harm."

Next morning [Joseph] Buzzetti and I went to a small lot flanking the Church of St. Francis de Sales and belonging to the Oratory. It was enclosed by a ten-foot-high wall. To our astonishment caterpillars covered the whole wall, as well as beams and heaps of stones and bricks lying on the ground and stunted trees. The old woman's garden was entirely rid of them.

CHAPTER 18

Assistance to War Prisoners

AFTER the momentary scare of an Austrian invasion of their city, the Turinese went wild with joy at the arrival of French battalions. But Don Bosco appeared quite disturbed by the news that French troops kept pouring into Italy in preparation for an attack against Austria. He often exclaimed, "These men will eventually march against the Pope. This war is just a ruse to dispossess the Pope and block him off from any kind of help."

Meanwhile the Austrians were about to attack Ivrea but, on learning of the arrival of French troops, retreated to safer positions on May 9 [1859]¹ . . . Then, on May 19, General Giulay, the Austrian commander, abandoned Vercelli and transferred his headquarters to Mortara . . .

Everything pointed to a most bitter and bloody war. Victor Emmanuel II, realizing that death could strike at any moment, wrote to the Pope on May 25 [1859], requesting absolution from church censures. Pius IX obliged but warned that it would be invalid unless he sincerely resolved to do his utmost to right the wrong he had done to the Church and cause her no further harm . . .

By now the whole French army was poised between Vercelli and Novara . . . General Giulay, realizing the threat to Milan, immediately moved his troops to the left bank of the Ticino, massing them at Magenta. The Allies pursued him across the river at two points and on June 4 engaged him in a fierce, long battle that ended with French victory. Austria suffered ten thousand casualties between dead and wounded, and seven thousand were taken prisoner;

¹ Here and there we shall omit details about this war. [Editor]

France's toll was four thousand dead and wounded, and one thousand prisoners . . .

The wounded who could be moved had been hospitalized in various towns of Piedmont. Turin's hospitals were full, and the patients were given the best of medical and religious care by the zealous Sisters of Charity. The Convitto Ecclesiastico, where Father Cafasso still resided with the permission of the military authorities, was filled with Austrian casualties. On his visits, Don Bosco would linger in the courtyard, on the stairs, and along the corridors to comfort the Austrian patients he met. They were a motley crowd of Hungarians, Poles, and Tyrolese, but most of them knew enough Latin to communicate with Don Bosco.

He had greater contact, however, with the French soldiers stationed in town, and soon the Oratory became somewhat of a meeting place for them, especially the wounded. One of the older Oratory pupils who was reasonably fluent in French met some of them one day, told them about Don Bosco, and led them to the Oratory. Don Bosco received them very warmly and, after a cordial conversation, invited them to return freely to the Oratory and bring their friends along. He told them that there they would find all they needed for writing home and that they were welcome to borrow French books from the Oratory library. He added that, if they were interested, he would appoint someone to teach them Italian and arithmetic and that since it was still Easter time, French-speaking confessors would be on hand so that they could make their Easter duty if they had not yet done so. Such a gracious reception won those good Frenchmen's enthusiasm for Don Bosco. Back in their barracks they gave a glowing account of their Oratory visit and made their fellow soldiers keenly anxious to go and see for themselves. Before long, French servicemen began wending their way to Valdocco to enjoy the company of Don Bosco and his pupils. Several hundred of them also approached the sacraments so devoutly as to leave no doubt of their deeply religious upbringing.

Extremely pleased, Don Bosco now and then invited some of them to stay for dinner. It was a pleasant sight to see them fraternize with the young clerics and priests, both groups trying to speak each other's tongue. The contrast between the guests' red panta-

loons and the black soutanes of their hosts enhanced the scene. Some officers were on such familiar terms with all that they looked like members of the community. After a while, so many French servicemen became personally acquainted with Don Bosco that rarely could he walk the streets without being hailed or escorted on his way by some of them.

Father John Turchi told us that one day a group of them greeted Don Bosco with a loud "Viva l'Italia." He thanked them and amiably invited them to the Oratory, where he treated them to refreshments so cordially as to win their hearts. On another occasion he was on his way to visit a sick person at Collegno, a small town about four miles from Turin. As he got to the Rivoli Road he met about a dozen Algerian riflemen, some of whom were convalescent, others slightly wounded in arms or hands. Since they were going for a walk, they asked if they could go part of the way with him. He readily consented. They chatted away on a wide range of topics as they strolled under the shade of ancient elms lining the road. Before they knew it, they were at Collegno. The Algerians wanted to turn back but Don Bosco said, "Since you are off duty, why not wait for me and walk me back? It won't take me long . . ." Unexpectedly, though, his visit lasted longer than he thought; it was noon when he left the patient.

"I am sorry to be so late," he said to the soldiers, "but now it's noon and you must be hungry. Besides, you are convalescing and can't walk back on an empty stomach. Let me treat you — not to a binge, as you'd say, but to a good dinner." And so he took them to an inn and gave them an enjoyable time. Back in the barracks, they told their story. The following day their officer with typical French courtesy called on Don Bosco to thank him profusely.

In addition, Don Bosco had the cleric Celestine Durando solicit donations from many priests and prominent laymen toward the purchase of a wide assortment of wholesome French books. He brought them himself to the soldiers or had the Sisters of Charity distribute them in the hospitals. He also provided German religious books for the Austrian soldiers at the Convitto Ecclesiastico.

For these and other reasons, the French soldiers stationed in Turin became so attached to the Oratory that when they had to

leave, they flocked there to say their grateful and moving good-byes to Don Bosco and their teachers. Later, several of them kept up a correspondence with Don Bosco and others, especially Michael Rua, their arithmetic teacher . . .

Meanwhile, prayers were continually being offered at the Oratory for Pius IX, the king, the army, and peace. The daily routine was enlivened by joyful celebrations that were, and still are, characteristic of the Oratory. Inspired by love and gratitude, these celebrations were marked by the devout reception of the sacraments which were their starting point and crowning end. On these occasions — and they were quite frequent — the playgrounds resounded with song, music, applause, and shouts of joy. Poetry too greatly helped make these celebrations more memorable. The name days of superiors, the public thanks to the “priors” on the Oratory’s patronal feasts, the commemoration of dormitory patron saints,² outings to some parish church on the occasion of some religious celebration — all these events aroused and inspired budding poets. We still have hundreds of poems which we gathered as cherished souvenirs of happy days — some quite primitive, others truly elegant; through all beats a warm heart.

The most celebrated of all non-religious festivities was always Don Bosco’s name day. A sort of ornate throne for him to sit upon, the playground illumination, the presentation of charming gifts, a new song especially written and set to music, and prose and poetry in different languages set this day above all others. We shall have plentiful opportunity to speak of the boys’ enthusiasm when we narrate subsequent years’ events.

On a lesser scale, teachers’ name days were held privately by each class. Since each teacher was looked upon as Don Bosco’s representative, these occasions too were very joyful. A bouquet, some small gift, a few sweets, and one or two recitations in verse and prose brought everybody closer together. On that occasion a festive cloth graced the teacher’s or craftsman’s desk; sometimes Don Bosco would add dignity by attending. The day usually began with a class general Communion and closed in the afternoon with a half-holiday and a picnic. Later, abuses cancelled the holiday and

² Each dormitory was named after a saint. [Editor]

picnic. On that day the teacher had the occasion to win over a hitherto unresponsive pupil, to clear up a misunderstanding, or to encourage a boy by a promise to help him. This custom was also a splendid opportunity for the teacher to forgive and put at ease those who feared the unpleasant consequences of their misdeeds at the end of the school year. On that day, the pupils, less guarded in their talk, unwittingly disclosed — and thus rid themselves of — their apprehensions, hurt feelings, and jealousies; even some acts of misconduct came to light which would have remained hidden and caused disorders or, possibly, spiritual harm.

Don Bosco's aim in permitting these demonstrations of affection and gratitude was always the boys' eternal welfare. This was evident in the way the boys expressed themselves in word or in writing, in their promises, and in the teacher's reply to the boys' greetings. He never failed to recommend to his pupils that they go to confession, and he lovingly coaxed them to return to God's grace, if necessary. He would quite outspokenly point out that if anyone had formerly concealed a mortal sin through shame, he should confess it that day, so that Jesus might be consoled by all of them. He would tell them that the mere thought that even one of his pupils was at enmity with God and merited His anger was enough to mar the sweetest of joys. The pupils thus understood that a good confession was the gift he would appreciate most. God only knows how much good the teacher's words did. From available evidence we can say, too, that this promoted priestly vocations. The boys were deeply impressed, and before the day was over several would confide to their teacher how happy they had been that day.

In those days the classroom was somewhat of a shrine. Then, as now, Our Lady's statue, flanked by candles and flowers, stood on a little altar just below the crucifix. Every Saturday, at the end of the last period,³ the boys recited Our Lady's litany; daily, during the month of May, they said a short prayer in common. All Her feasts were briefly announced by the teacher on the preceding day with an exhortation to receive the sacraments; the same was done on the eve of other principal liturgical feasts, for it was well known that Don

³ Classes were held on Saturdays because of a midweek holiday on Thursday.
[Editor]

Bosco did not consider a religious feast properly celebrated without the reception of the sacraments.

From our remarks one can easily realize that order and diligence were hallmarks of both classrooms and workshops, for the latter also followed these customs. Love of God and happiness go hand in hand. Understandably, therefore, at the close of the school year, though glad to return to their parents, the students were sorry to part from their teachers.

CHAPTER 19

A Lost Sheep

AT the end of the 1858-59 school year, the Oratory's young clerics took their exams in philosophy and theology at the Turin archdiocesan seminary. The grades they received then and thereafter are recorded in our archives and testify to their diligence.

On the evening of June 23 [1859], eve of the feast of St John the Baptist — Don Bosco's name day — a musical-literary entertainment was held in his honor, but before the day was over, the first reports of a savage battle turned joy into grief. On that day, the Austrians, resuming the offensive, crossed to the right bank of the Mincio and fortified Solferino and San Martino.¹ Simultaneously both French and Piedmontese crossed the Chiese River. The next day, a relentless battle, involving 274,000 men, raged for fourteen hours. Fortune seemed to favor the Allies, who had been able to hold the commanding heights, when a violent storm suddenly broke out. Wind, rain, hail, lightning, and thunder silenced the roar of seven hundred canons and wrapped the carnage of the battlefield in an eerie darkness. The historian Cesare Cantù lists casualties on both sides at nearly 40,000 soldiers — some 13,000 of them Austrians — 1,500 officers, and three field marshals.

At the Oratory, prayers and Communion for the suffering souls in purgatory and the celebration of the feast of St. Aloysius Gonzaga on June 29, somewhat tempered the general sorrow and buoyed the lads' spirits. Mr. Juvenal Delponte [a benefactor] agreed to be "prior" of the feast. A poem in honor of the Saint, dedicated to Mr. Delponte by its author, Joseph Bongiovanni, shows the young cleric's remarkable literary gifts.

¹ Two small towns on the hills to the south of Lake Garda in Lombardy. [Editor]

Meanwhile, countless families mourned their dead or feared for the survivors because it seemed the war would continue. The Allies had crossed the Mincio too, but formidable fortresses now blocked their way and only a long siege would break them down. A second battle, as savage as that at Solferino, was shaping up near Verona, and French warships were entering the Adriatic to join units of the Piedmontese fleet at Antivari for an attack on Venice on July 10.

Amid general trepidation, Don Bosco predicted peace. For the following information we are indebted to Sister Philomena Cravosio, daughter of Countess [Felicity] Cravosio, who wrote:

During the 1859 war raging in Lombardy, my mother had a son and a brother in the army. The latter had been wounded. Heartbroken and fearful of their fate, she asked me to go to Don Bosco with her. To our surprise Don Bosco received us in the dining room. Supper had just ended, and priests and clerics were still around him, while at the rear of the room a few boys — some seated on a table, others on a rough bench — rehearsed a song, scores in hand. Now and then some little fellow would go up to Don Bosco, whisper into his ear, and in the same fashion get the good Father's reply. After greeting us, Don Bosco made us sit by him and made small talk, now and then glancing knowingly at my mother. After all the priests had excused themselves, Don Bosco said to her: "Countess, I know what you want to tell me. Cheer up!" Then, lowering his voice, he added, "This very night peace will be made."

"Impossible!" my mother replied. "You are only saying this to console me. There is nothing to support your statement."

Next morning, however, at about seven, as my mother and I were crossing Via Garibaldi — then Via Dora Grossa — on our way to Mass, we heard the news vendors shouting: "Peace at Villafranca! Napoleon, Victor Emmanuel, and Francis II meet in night session!"

After Mass we hastened to the Oratory and found Don Bosco in the playground. He came to us and said: "Let us thank God." He then took us to the chapel where we remained briefly in prayer.

What had happened? Countess Cravosio had called on Don Bosco on July 6 at about 8 P.M. Napoleon was then at his headquarters in Villafranca. Shocked by Solferino's terrible carnage and disturbed by news from Germany that several powers were ready

to aid Austria, he sent for General [Emile Felix] Fleury that same night at about 9 o'clock and instructed him to deliver a letter to the Austrian emperor requesting an armistice. The general arrived at Verona at about 10:30, and the emperor was roused. Surprised and impressed by Napoleon's letter and the general's further clarifications, he accepted Napoleon's terms. On July 11, both emperors met at Villafranca and formally signed a peace treaty . . .

But neither war nor peace slowed Don Bosco's pace. In June he had the Paravia Press print 2,500 copies of a second edition of his *Storia d'Italia*,² with a few additions. It is noteworthy that in this book he described the origin of the Pope's temporal power, defended his rights to such power, and showed its advantages. He sent complimentary copies to many distinguished laymen and ecclesiastics, among them Turin's mayor.³ About the middle of July he was quite busy with the pupils' final examinations, awarding of prizes, scholastic reports, and departures for home. At the beginning of the same month, with the help of young Caesar Chiala,⁴ he had published another issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, an anonymous tale entitled *The Triumph of Innocence* . . . The August issue, *The Lives of the Holy Pontiffs SS. Pontian, Anterus, and Fabian*, was authored by Don Bosco himself . . .

After proofreading it, Don Bosco went to St. Ignatius' Shrine for his annual spiritual retreat. There he was to find a lost sheep of his — a lad he had been seeking several years. This boy, Francis D . . . was a bright secondary school student frequenting the festive oratory at Valdocco. His religious and wealthy parents had brought him up in the holy fear of God. The youngster had no secrets from Don Bosco. On his part, the latter seconded the teachings of the boy's parents by frequently urging Francis to be obedient to them. On returning home from the festive oratory, the lad enjoyed telling them what Don Bosco had said and done. Since his name was ever on the boy's lips, the parents expected him to benefit greatly from this holy friendship.

Francis was a very avid, inquisitive reader. One day a school-

² See Vol. V, pp. 322-331. [Editor]

³ A letter of thanks from the mayor has been omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁴ As a boy he had frequented the Valdocco Festive Oratory. See Vol. V, p. 521. [Editor]

mate loaned him a novel which, though not immoral, so fired his imagination that he lost himself in such readings. Gradually his piety and studies waned and so did his interest in the festive oratory. His father noticed the change and soon found its cause. He reprimanded him, took away the novels, and threatened severe punishment if he did not obey. The boy, unbalanced by such reading, proud and fearful, ran away. Wandering the Superga hills in fear of being caught, he stopped at a farmhouse. The farmers were resting and enjoying a snack in the shade of a large tree in front of the house. Exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, he watched them for a time with envy. Personal pride and dire need fought within him, but he finally went over and asked for food. Surprised at seeing a well-dressed city lad beg for food, they questioned him. He made up a clever little story that his parents had died after a series of business reverses, leaving him penniless, and that he had left the city in shame in order to be far away from his friends and family. The farmers were moved to pity. After giving him food, one of them asked, "What will you do for a living? You'll have to get a job."

"Will you give me one? I'm willing to stay here."

"You don't seem cut out for farm work."

"Try me," Francis replied.

"All right; take this flail and let's see what you can do."

Francis took off his coat and began threshing wheat. He was not used to manual work, but he toiled so eagerly that, out of pity, the farmers said, "All right, stay with us. You will have food and a place to sleep in the hayloft. How is that?" Francis stayed there two weeks, doing all he was told, but pestering those good people to find work for him in some other farm farther from Turin. They consented and sent him to relatives at Sciolze,⁵ where Francis worked hard, resolutely swallowing his pride. Senseless shame and fear kept him from returning home. Meanwhile, his heartbroken father, a former judge, after searching for him in vain, finally called on Don Bosco. Though shocked by the news, Don Bosco assured him that Our Lady would protect his son and bring him back; he also promised to have the Oratory boys pray for him.

⁵ A very small town near Turin. [Editor]

Two years later, Don Bosco happened to be in the parish of Sciolze for a sermon and was hosted by Count Roasenda, a benefactor of the Oratory. During his stay, the count took him to visit his large model farm in that area. In the course of the visit they both sat down in a delightful spot overlooking a scenic view. After a while, the count excused himself briefly to check a newly erected shed. Don Bosco stayed on and noticed a youth piling manure in a meadow further down the slope. He looked strong-limbed and sun-tanned; his hair was short-cropped, except for a long, thick cowlick falling over his forehead. The more Don Bosco looked at him, the more that face seemed familiar. Suddenly the young man raised his eyes, startled, but continued working, keeping his face carefully turned away from Don Bosco. When the latter rose for a closer look, the youth abruptly hurried out of sight. It suddenly dawned on Don Bosco that it might be Francis.

At this point, the farm manager came up, and Don Bosco immediately inquired about the boy. He was told that he was a hard-working, obedient, good lad recommended by one of the manager's relatives, and that his name was Joseph. The manager knew nothing else about him because he had not thought to inquire further. Suspecting that the lad had changed his name, Don Bosco said, "I'd be quite obliged if you would tactfully find out his real name and how long ago he left home." Francis, hidden behind vines, was watching them. Guessing the nature of their conversation, he decided to leave at once. He went up to the house, changed his clothes, and took whatever money he had saved.

A little later, as the count's carriage rounded a curve down the hill, the young man came tearing down the slope. The horse reared, the count leaped to seize its bit, and Don Bosco, alighting, tried to grasp the youth by the arm as he bounded across the road shouting, "Leave me alone!" He soon disappeared into a clump of trees in a gully.

A year had passed since this incident and Don Bosco was now on retreat at St. Ignatius'. One day after dinner, as he was strolling on the terrace before the church chatting with a group of men, mostly young adults, he neared the railing and casually looked down on the usual line of beggars seeking food at the kitchen door.

To his surprise he immediately spotted Francis in their midst. Bare-footed and coatless, the youth was holding a bowl. Don Bosco withdrew quickly to the other end of the terrace to avoid detection and then said to those around him, "Gentlemen, will you help me do a good deed?"

"Of course!"

"Good! Form two groups and, a few at a time, go halfway down the road — some on the left, some on the right — as though taking a stroll. Then turn around and come up again, keeping close enough to form a chain. If a lad in shirtsleeves darts down the road, grab him and bring him to me."

When they reached their position and started uphill, Don Bosco went to the railing and called down, "Francis!" One look was enough to send the lad scooting down the hill, only to be caught by a dozen arms. Offering little resistance, he was taken to Don Bosco.

"This time, Francis, you won't run away from me," Don Bosco said, taking his hand. "Stay with me. You won't be sorry." He then brought him to his room where he gently questioned him while some food was being prepared for him. After fleeing from Sciolze the lad had gone into hiding in some mountain valley, earning his living successively as a shepherd, farmhand, houseboy in a rectory, and common vagrant. It had been an adventurous life fortunately spent with God-fearing people. In the beginning Francis had not realized the wrong he was doing; later, as he calmed down, he became fully aware of the enormity of his mistake. Nevertheless, the thought of his indignant father invincibly deterred him from returning home; he could not even bear to think of it. The remembrance of his mother and sister distressed him and he prayed and cried, but he never dared to tell anyone his secret. Now he was very happy to have fallen into such good hands.

Don Bosco promised to reconcile him to his father but meanwhile asked him to make his peace with God by a good confession. The young man readily agreed. Don Bosco then explained the matter to the procurator of the Convitto Ecclesiastico — Father [Joseph] Begliati (who also managed the retreat house) — and had a room assigned to the lad. The following day Father Begliati got

him suitable clothing from Turin. At the end of the retreat Don Bosco took Francis with him to the Oratory and hastened to contact his distressed parents. After preparing them briefly for the unexpected, joyful reunion, he said: "Let us thank God that Francis has been found!"

A moment of stunned silence was followed by a delirium of joy and a flood of questions. Don Bosco answered briefly and then, seeing the father's pensive mood, added: "I'll give you your son back, but only on the condition that there be no scolding. Let bygones be bygones. Take him back as though he had never left. Otherwise," he added with a smile, "I won't even let you see him."

The father agreed. Don Bosco invited the family to the Oratory the next morning. It was a long-awaited moment! Francis' mother and sister were the first to enter Don Bosco's room. As soon as the mother saw her son silently weeping by Don Bosco, she felt faint, and both she and her daughter sat down, bursting into tears. Moments later, the father came in, rather formal but deeply moved. He too sat down in silence. Francis stood still. Don Bosco let them compose themselves and, when he saw them more at ease, he said: "Let us bless Our Lady. She has brought your son back. Francis begs forgiveness for the sorrow he has caused you."

Then, taking the boy by the hand, he led him to his father's ready arms. "And now, my dear friends," Don Bosco concluded, "take him home. I am sure that from now on you'll be proud of him."

And so it was. Francis resumed his studies. Talented as he was, in a few years he made up the time he had lost, received a doctorate in law, and finally rose to one of the highest positions in government. Don Bosco himself told us this episode which shows how certain novels, though not immoral, can unduly fire the imagination and emotions of the young. This is the reason why Don Bosco strictly demanded that his boys should submit to their superior every book they brought or received from home.

We know that he also counseled many other middle-class or noble youths of Turin to seek the approval of upright and competent persons before reading books coming into their hands. Such caution was indeed necessary then, when careless and, occasionally,

irreligious teachers had no qualms in recommending unsuitable reading. For this reason, frequently some youths in Turin submitted their books to Don Bosco. We see one such instance in the following letter to the son of Countess Bosco of Ruffino:

Turin, August 11, 1859

My dear Octavius,

I am returning your books which I had somebody examine briefly. Strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong in them; they are not on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. Still, certain passages could be morally harmful to youngsters. Hence, while you may read them, be careful; should they disturb you, either interrupt your reading or skip those passages.

I could not see your messenger right away because I had many people waiting to speak to me. God keep you healthy and in His grace! Please remember me to your mother and sister. Pray for me too.

Your friend,

Fr. John Bosco

CHAPTER 20

A Cherished Yearly Event

WE read in Sirach, "The views of a prudent man are sought in an assembly, and his words are considered with care." [Sir. 21, 17] One day in August [1859] Don Bosco boarded a train for Cambiano where he had been asked to preach, but on reaching Trofarello he had to get off and walk the rest of the way, since the movement of troops and supplies between Turin and Alessandria had curtailed all civilian traffic. It was raining and he had no umbrella. A deputy — Thomas Villa — had been on the same train and was himself going to Cambiano. He rented a carriage and overtook Don Bosco as the latter plodded along, his cloak the only protection from the rain. Sorry for the priest, the deputy offered him a ride that was gratefully accepted. Don Bosco's reserved, courteous manners deeply impressed the gentleman. When they got to their destination and the deputy learned that Don Bosco planned to return to Turin the same day, he suggested that they meet at a convenient place and hour and again ride together. Don Bosco most appreciatively agreed and was punctual in keeping the appointment. As they rode along they both introduced themselves, and from then on kept up a cordial relationship, as the deputy himself disclosed to Father Michael Rua.

The same experience befell anyone who had the good fortune of meeting Don Bosco. Catholic families in Turin held him very dear because they recognized him as a man of God and daily became ever more convinced that he was endowed with charisms.

Ever since he had begun taking resident boys into the Oratory ¹

¹ See Vol. III, pp. 141ff. [Editor]

[1847], Don Bosco would periodically visit the pious, generous Cravosio family. The countess and her two daughters, noted for their charity, interested themselves particularly in mending the Oratory boys' linen. We have already mentioned in the preceding chapter that one of these two noble ladies [Rose Cravosio, who later became a Dominican nun and took the name Philomena] testified to Don Bosco's prediction about the peace of Villafranca. The same young lady — now Sister Philomena Cravosio — also wrote to tell Father Michael Rua the following episode:

On August 30, 1859 — the feast of St. Rose of Lima and my name day — my mother gave me, among other things, a lovely statuette of Mary Immaculate; then, at nine that morning, she took me to visit Don Bosco. He promised to have dinner with us at six and kept his word. During the meal he spoke briefly to me, kindly wishing me good health. After dinner I asked him to bless the statuette which I had placed on a corner shelf in my room and to pray for a special grace I needed but did not disclose — the grace of following my religious vocation. Don Bosco joined his hands and silently traced the Sign of the Cross over the statue. After a few moments in prayer, hands still joined, he gazed intently at the statue and said, "Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin, bless and console little Rose whom I see clothed in white."

"But, Don Bosco," I interrupted, "I am not dressed in white. I don't like white dresses. (I was then nineteen.) They're for little girls." (Inwardly I felt disinclined to join the Dominican Order because of its white habit.) But Don Bosco repeated, "Yes, little Rose clothed in white!" Later, as he had coffee with my father, he repeated the same words in prophetic tones.

Two years later, on August 16, 1861, I entered the Dominican Convent at Mondovì-Carassone. The Immaculate Virgin had thus granted my wish and answered Don Bosco's prayer. His words had been truly prophetic.

But there is more. I had been at Mondovì a few years and all went well until the devil stirred up trouble in our dear community and made us lose quite a number of pupils. In this sad plight, our good mother superior — Mother Manfredini — suggested that I send Don Bosco a small donation and ask him to make a novena that our community would regain its former success. As was his wont, Don

Bosco replied in a few days to thank us and offer advice and encouragement. Not long after, over twenty pupils applied for admission, order was smoothly reestablished, and our community regained its calm, joy, and religious fervor.

These, Father Rua, are my reminiscences of Don Bosco, exactly as I remember them.

Sister Philomena Cravosio

Don Bosco also foretold the future to another noble young lady whose identity we shall disclose in due time. Feeling herself called to the religious life, and knowing that her parents had no objections, she consulted Don Bosco.

“Yes,” he replied, “you will become a religious, but only after a long wait and events you cannot foresee now.”

And so it was. Before long, her sister died, leaving an infant. To give that baby a mother’s care, the young lady married her sister’s husband. Later, when he died of cholera, she zealously and selflessly looked after her stepson’s moral and intellectual education and prudently administered his large inheritance. Once he was well settled in life, she entered a religious order.

Toward the end of August [1859] Don Bosco hastened the printing of the September issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled *The Valley of Almeria* — an anonymous, adventurous tale of a family which went through numerous trials and separations before being marvelously reunited through God’s goodness.

The October issue, *Frequent Communion, Key to Heaven*, was a condensation of a French work of Father Antoine Favre by a Capuchin, Father Charles Philip of Poirino . . .

But while Don Bosco provided spiritual food for the faithful at large, he lacked material food for his own boys. Father John Bonetti writes:

The war left many a fatherless child, and soon the Oratory also felt its effects. Almost daily we saw new boys arrive and beds get closer and closer to make room for them. Don Bosco’s expenses mounted and soon he found himself in serious straits. Though he trusted fully in Divine Providence, he did not neglect the means which

prudence suggested, and so, through Count [Louis] Cibrario, he petitioned Victor Emmanuel II for a subsidy for his boys. On August 31, 1859, the count notified Don Bosco that the king had granted him the sum of 250 lire. A few months later, on January 12, 1860, Minister of the Interior Urbano Rattazzi made him another grant of 200 lire.² These subsidies were certainly insufficient, but, considering that the nation was at war, they were by no means negligible. At least they showed that the king and his cabinet recognized the usefulness of Don Bosco's work and thus spurred private citizens to come to his aid.

Meantime, the ever growing number of boarders forced Don Bosco to erect a one-story building in the narrow playground on the north side of the Oratory to provide three large classrooms. It was built off the boundary wall, parallel to the site of the former Pinardi chapel. In line with it and to the right of the carriage way that went through the center of the building housing the boarders, he also erected a large laundry and woodshed. These buildings did service till 1873.

As construction was nearing completion, preparations were being made for the annual excursion to Becchi. The boys were overjoyed because Don Bosco had announced that this year's trip would be more exciting than usual. Something special was afoot. The bandmaster was teaching new marches, symphonies, and selections he himself had composed; he was also adapting a score for a Mass, Vespers, and several *Tantum Ergos* without organ accompaniment. The choir again and again rehearsed sacred and non-sacred music; others practiced new plays, comedies, farces, and pantomimes for two or three repeat performances in the same village, while still others busily packed stage props and costumes for the actors to carry along. But these activities did not disrupt summer classes.

Don Bosco left for Becchi [on or about September 22, 1859] with John Garino, Louis Chiapale,³ and a few others. Father Michelangelo Chiatellino preached the novena of Our Lady of the

² The official notifications of both subsidies have been omitted in this edition. [Editor]

³ Chiapale made his triennial vows on May 14, 1862 but later joined the diocesan clergy. [Editor]

Rosary and Don Bosco heard confessions. It was a mission for all the area's hamlets. On Saturday, October 1, the Oratory band and choir and a few other boys set out for Becchi, each lad carrying a change of linen and a lunch of bread, cheese, and fruit for the road. Near Buttigliera, the father of Thomas Chiuso, a resident student at the Oratory and, later, canon of the cathedral of Turin,⁴ treated the group to a refreshing salad from his own vegetable garden. In the cool of the evening they reached Becchi, where Don Bosco's brother, Joseph, had prepared supper for them. The next day, Sunday, October 2, they solemnized the feast of the Holy Rosary.

On Monday the hikes began. They were unique in that they lasted ten, twenty, and more days as the boys trekked from village to village along a preestablished route. Before going into particulars, we shall give you a brief general idea. Overnight stops were selected weeks beforehand. Usually, friendly pastors or notable benefactors offered food and lodging and eagerly awaited the boys' arrival. When the time came, about a hundred boys would set out under the supervision of a few clerics, cheering the villagers with their singing, music, and plays and giving them an example of piety. These were the boys whom Don Bosco especially wanted to reward with this cherished diversion. These hikes also gave his boys an outlet for the novelty and distraction which young people need so badly. They gave them, too, plenty of food for their imagination before, during, and after the event. Of course, endless planning and supervision demanded painful sacrifices of Don Bosco.

Occasionally — when villages were too far apart — the boys felt hungry and tired; at times they would be caught in a downpour. Then, Divine Providence always came to their aid; generous people, especially pastors and chaplains, opened their homes to them.

Those hikes were unforgettable. All along the line, some boys would break into song, others would sound bugle calls like the double-step of the "bersaglieri,"⁵ while, further ahead, a drummer would steadily beat out a marching rhythm, occasionally giving his

⁴ As secretary of Archbishop Lawrence Gastaldi of Turin, Thomas Chiuso played an active part in a long, painful controversy involving the archbishop and Don Bosco, as will be seen in subsequent volumes. [Editor]

⁵ A special swift corps of the Piedmontese army. [Editor]

bass drum a pound that would send cows and sheep scurrying about the meadows in bewilderment. Don Bosco and some young clerics would usually bring up the rear of the line with those boys who were carrying stage properties.

Drawing information from Casalis' ⁶ church history books and monographs on local history, Don Bosco had plenty of stories to tell his fellow hikers, while on the road or at stopovers, about every town and village they passed through — their rulers and heroes, their monuments, their curios in art or nature. The boys never tired of listening to him, and villagers marveled at his store of knowledge of their own native town which even the best read of them did not know.

When Don Bosco could not entertain the boys, Charles Tomatis ⁷ would take over. He was the star of all farces, the life of the party, the hero of all adventures. Don Bosco could not stand gaunt, gloomy faces or secret whisperings, and therefore he thoroughly enjoyed this happy young man's antics. Tomatis fully seconded Don Bosco's desires and kept the boys in stitches from morning to night. But his pranks were not the only laughs, as one hilarious incident after another added to the fun . . .

On approaching a village, the first column would stop and all would silently line up several abreast behind the band. Then they would enter solemnly, as both pastor and mayor would step forward to welcome them. Canon John Baptist Anfossi has left us this account:

I can never forget those adventurous hikes that brought wonder, cheer, and edification everywhere we went. With hundreds of other boys I too witnessed the renown that Don Bosco had achieved as a result of his holiness, because for several years — from 1854 to 1860 — at his personal invitation, I accompanied him on his treks over the hills of Monferrato.⁸ He always entered those villages in triumph. Pastors — and mayors in most cases — were on hand to welcome him.

⁶ A renowned geographical, historical, statistical, and commercial dictionary of over twenty volumes compiled by Goffredo Casalis. [Editor]

⁷ A young artist whom Don Bosco had first met in 1847. *See* Vol. III, pp. 118f. [Editor]

⁸ A hilly region of Piedmont renowned for its vineyards. [Editor]

Villagers stared out of windows or doorways, others trooped after the boys, men left their fields to see Don Bosco, and mothers brought their little ones to receive his blessing. Indeed it was a sight to remind one of the enthusiastic crowds who greeted Our Lord.

It was Don Bosco's custom, on arriving at a village, to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. The church would soon fill with people whom Don Bosco would warmly exhort to receive the sacraments. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament would then follow, with the Oratory choirboys singing the *Tantum Ergo* in polyphony.

Usually the pastor or a well-to-do villager invited Don Bosco and his young clerics to dinner or supper. The boys too had plenty to eat, but whether their meals were lavish or mediocre, depending on their hosts' means, they always displayed the most genuine cheerfulness.

On rare occasions, the boys slept in regular beds in private homes, at other times on cotton or straw mattresses, but more often than not on straw or benches in ground-floor rooms or sheds. In these cases, as it was almost impossible to go to sleep at once, Charles Tomatis would resort to antics. Since he could imitate animal sounds, he soon made the place resemble Noah's Ark. On one occasion, for example, sleeping quarters were in the hayloft of a castle whose main gate was guarded by a mastiff. Tomatis waited till there was perfect quiet and then he began to imitate the plaintive bay of a dog. The mastiff barked back. Tomatis kept this up at short intervals and soon drove the animal into a fit. The gate-keeper hushed the dog several times, but when this proved ineffective, he came out, muttering, "What's wrong with you tonight?" Tomatis, of course, pretended to be asleep. The dog quieted down and the man went back to bed. Some fifteen minutes or so later the game started again. The keeper put up with it for nearly an hour, but then he once more jumped out of bed, shouting, "Shut up, you brute! Let me sleep." It was useless, of course, because Tomatis kept baiting the dog in muffled tones. Losing his patience, the keeper pelted the poor animal with rocks. The comedy went on till midnight, while the boys tried to repress their giggles lest they give the trick away.

Another time [Charles] Gastini⁹ shared a small room with another lad, while Tomatis and some older boys slept in an adjoining larger room. They all made believe they were sleeping, waiting for a chance to play a practical joke they had planned for some time. Presently Gastini got up and went out for a breath of air. Up jumped Tomatis. He went into the next room, woke up Gastini's roommate, and with his help carried the two beds and a small table to the adjoining room, leaving only some chairs in the center. It was pitch dark. Gastini came back, stumbled against the chairs, and muttered something to himself. He felt about for his bed, but it was not there. Doubting it was his room, he groped in vain for his companion. Finally, he struck a match but could not recognize the room. Meantime, bewildered as he was, he kept mumbling. Hiding behind the closed door of their room, his friends could hardly stifle their laughter. Getting wise to their joke, Gastini began pounding on their door. Finally, giving up, he went for a stroll under the stars.

Every morning, the irrepressible Tomatis would begin the day's fun by comically looking for the legs he claimed he had lost on the previous day's hike. He also used to put on an act with the host which first had the latter puzzled and then in stitches. Don Bosco went along with the comedy because it kept his boys wholesomely occupied. Yet all this cheerfulness did not detract from piety. In every village, the day after the boys' arrival became a solemn religious feast day as people flocked to the sacraments and attended the Mass beautifully sung by the Oratory choir and the congregation. Don Bosco usually heard confessions till late at night.

After dinner, the band would honor the mayor and other notables by serenading their homes. Toward evening the villagers would swarm to the church again for Don Bosco's sermon, singing of the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The day would end with a moral play and selections of vocal and instrumental music. The program was such as might grace a city stage. Thanks to the rare gifts of [Dominic] Bongiovanni, [Charles] Gastini, [Charles] Tomatis, and others, the better edu-

⁹ One of the Oratory's pioneers. He entered the Oratory at the age of eleven in 1848 at Don Bosco's invitation. *See* Vol. III, pp. 243ff. [Editor]

cated of the spectators were more than satisfied, but for the populace the star was Tomatis. His repertoire of mimicry was unique and threw the audience into fits of laughter. One day, for instance, he came on stage wearing a large stovepipe hat and began declaiming a speech. He was punctuating his rhetoric with frequent jerks of his head when suddenly his hat sank down to his shoulders. The crowd roared at his faked attempts to get it off. Gastini ostensibly ran to his help, but in reality to add to the comedy. It was a hit! "Clowning," some will say. Yes, clowning it was, but it delighted the villagers and left most pleasing memories.

When the time came to go to another village, all the boys would assemble to say good-bye to their host. One of them would thank him on behalf of all for the kindness shown them for God's love by reading a short address and a few verses expressly composed by Don Bosco, who would then conclude somewhat like this: "I promise you, your parishioners, and your dear ones a special remembrance in my Holy Mass tomorrow. The boys will recite the rosary with me to wish you every blessing from God. I am grateful for all you have done for us. Please remember to pray for us all. We shall never forget you and all you have done to make this a delightful day."

The host, always deeply moved, would thank Don Bosco for his visit and then address the boys in such words as, "May the Lord give you a safe journey and success in your studies and work. He has shown you His love by giving you Don Bosco as a guide. Show your appreciation by responding to his care." And there was one who applied to Don Bosco the words of Hiram, king of Tyre, to Solomon: "Because the Lord has loved His people, therefore He has made you king over them." [2 Par. 2, 11]

Don Bosco was ever mindful of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Proverbs: "He that makes presents shall purchase victory and honors, and carries away the hearts of those with whom he deals." [Prov. 22, 9] Before leaving he generously tipped those who had rendered him service, though his tip was often declined; sometimes he would leave it in an envelope on the bedside table. If his generous host was a man of scanty means, he would graciously find a tactful way to make it up to him. Once one of his

priests stopped at a rectory with twenty boys and the pastor generously treated all to dinner. "How did *you* repay his hospitality?" Don Bosco asked.

"How?"

"Yes! That priest is poor. You should have slipped a hundred lire bill into an envelope and asked him to say a Mass for you and your boys. Remember it for the future. In some cases we must be generous. I shall make up for your oversight." Poor as he was, when the occasion called for it Don Bosco was as generous as a king.

After leaving a village, the boys would take to the road again till their next stopover. If it was rather far, they would either halt at an intermediate village or briefly detour to a pastor who had invited them for a snack. The villagers would all turn out, wondering where so many boys came from.

"Who are they?"

"They are Garibaldini!"¹⁰ someone would answer.

"Impossible! They have priests with them!"¹¹

"They must be students of some boarding school."

"Of course not! Can't you see they have a band?"¹²

"Maybe they're bandits!" And the talk would end in laughter.

After this general description, let us give a day-by-day account of an adventurous excursion. On Monday, October 3, 1859, at ten in the morning, Don Bosco left Becchi with his boys and, passing through Capriglio and Montafia, went on to Maretto — his first stopover — where the pastor, a dear friend, Father John Ciattino, welcomed him by ringing the church bells. After a short religious service, the boys entertained the people by staging a comedy for them. The next morning, Tuesday, they sang Maestro Madonno's polyphonic requiem Mass for deceased parishioners; many people received Holy Communion. Then Don Bosco blessed the new banner of the flourishing St. Aloysius Sodality. After dinner they set

¹⁰ Volunteers under Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) during the wars for Italian independence. [Editor]

¹¹ Garibaldi was notoriously anticlerical, though he held Don Bosco and his work in high regard and did not hesitate to champion his cause. *See* Vol. XI, pp. 121, 304f. [Editor]

¹² Boys' choirs and bands were a novelty in those days in Piedmont. [Editor]

off for Villa San Secondo, passing through Cortandone and Montechiaro. At Cortandone the pastor, Father Natale Vergano, treated them to a generous lunch. Late that evening, led by the band, they entered Villa San Secondo in triumph. They were greeted with open arms by the pastor, Father Matthew Barbero, a good friend of Don Bosco. A scholarly, devout priest, he later became canon of the Asti cathedral where he did great good. The pastor and the Perucatti and Bosco families generously hosted the whole group.

Don Bosco spent the following day, October 5, with Father Barbero who was anxious to enjoy his company and show him how much he appreciated his visit. On his part Don Bosco planned to make Villa San Secondo his base of operations, so to speak, for the next ten days. Father Barbero had invited him mainly because of the forthcoming feast of Our Lady of Grace on October 8. Services were scheduled in a chapel in the village center, and neighboring villages were to take part in fulfillment of a solemn vow made to thank God for deliverance from cholera. For the zealous pastor, however, the coming feast was also a thorn in his side because, despite his efforts to the contrary, a public dance had been organized for that day and his opposition had earned him only slanderous gossip. He lost no time in telling Don Bosco of the matter. "Leave it to me," Don Bosco replied. Without arousing the least suspicion concerning that dance, he told some boys to set up a makeshift stage in the large courtyard of the Perucatti family. Gastini, Buzzetti, Tomatis, and Enria immediately got busy and readied it on time. Concurrently, Don Bosco organized a series of hikes to neighboring villages. On October 6, accepting the invitation of the parents of a dear pupil of his, he took his boys to Corsione, where, to archeologists' regret, a part of the ancient castle was being dismantled. After dinner they all hiked to Cossombrato to visit Count Pelletta and see the old castle whose massive walls and battlements towered against the sky. Here too the pastor, Father Secundus Gribaudo, welcomed them warmly. At sunset they returned to Villa San Secondo.

On Friday, October 7, at the invitation of Count Pallio, they walked to Rinco in the diocese of Casale. It was a strenuous trek because of a heavy thunderstorm which lasted through the morning.

The hikers arrived at Rinco splattered with mud and drenched to the skin. Worse still, the butler understandably would not let them inside the castle in that condition. As it was still raining, they sought shelter, some in a stable, some in a shed, others under the thick foliage of ancient trees. Shortly afterward, they lunched on polenta and stockfish, but the nasty weather made everything unpleasant. The band played as the count dined with Don Bosco, who, no doubt, felt ill at ease at his boys' discomfort.

The following day, Saturday, October 8, feast of Our Lady of Grace, Don Bosco heard confessions through the morning for the boys and the villagers. One or two Masses were being said in the parish church, but the solemn high Mass was to be celebrated at the little shrine in the center of town. A large awning had been set up over the shrine's entrance to shield the people from the sun, and a platform had been erected in the square for the choir. At ten the Oratory boys took their places and sang the Mass to the people's great delight. The municipal council attended in a body.

After Vespers, procession, and Benediction, the band played selections in the square. During the concert the word went around that a play was shortly to be given in the large courtyard of the Perucatti family. It was enough to send everybody scurrying there. The band soon followed. Meantime, in the village square, a small orchestra vainly tried to attract people to the dance. The whole village was at the Perucatti's enjoying the delightful comedy and skits presented by Don Bosco's boys and the splendid selections of a renowned violinist who had come in from Turin to please Don Bosco.

The dance committee, seeing that nobody seemed to care, decided to join the crowd at the play. They were angry at Don Bosco for drawing away their potential customers and tried to speak with him but could not because he had remained at the rectory to attend to urgent correspondence.

The following day, Sunday, feast of the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the boys received Holy Communion and enhanced all the services with music. After Vespers, Don Bosco preached some forty-five minutes. That evening he treated the villagers to another theatrical performance — an encore of the

previous program at their request — to which he invited the owners of the neighboring estates and their families.

The dance committee had hoped to recoup their losses that night and could not stomach a second failure. They therefore called on Don Bosco to demand compensation. Don Bosco received them courteously and listened to their complaints. “Did you see our play?” he asked.

“Yes, there was nothing else to do.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yes. We stayed to the very end.”

“Well, then, how can you complain? Aren’t people free to go where they please? Look, I did not go to your dance, and I’m asking nothing of you. You came to the play and did not pay for it. On what grounds can you demand compensation?” They had to admit he was right, and left in a huff.

The next day Don Bosco took his lads to Alfiano, where two old friends were waiting for him — the pastor, Father Joseph Pelato,¹³ and his curate. They were brothers and also the uncles of the young cleric Capra at the Oratory. The festivities that marked his visits wherever he went were repeated here too.

On Tuesday, October 11, the boys hiked to Frinco, which Don Bosco and his boys had visited several times in previous years. Father Secundus Penna, the pastor, gave them a very hearty welcome. His church, dedicated to Mary’s nativity, resounded that day with melodies those simple, hard-working peasants had never before heard. The group toured the ancient castle overlooking the town, a lasting memory of glories and misfortunes, sieges and battles.

Wednesday, the 12th, saw Don Bosco and his boys at Corsione a second time. The pastor, Father John Baptist Roggero, had heard that the group was staying a week at Villa San Secondo and wanted Don Bosco and his lads to spend a whole day with him for a first-class treat. Don Bosco could not refuse.

Thursday, October 13, their last day at Villa San Secondo, the boys sang at a solemn high Mass for deceased parishioners and then were treated to a sumptuous dinner, attended by all the neighboring

¹³ See Vol. I, p. 335. [Editor]

pastors. Afterward, preceded by the band and cheered by villagers, they left for Becchi, escorted part of the way by the pastor. Their march took them through Pica, a very ancient village whose castle, noted for its spacious halls, had been restored in 1600. They got there at four that afternoon. Chevalier [Mark] Gonella — a relative of Don Bosco's old benefactor at Chieri — treated them to a substantial repast. Then they resumed their march, accompanied for a distance by the pastor, Father Bartholomew Varino, who wished to speak to Don Bosco. Night surprised them at some distance from Becchi. In the light of a full moon, they trudged through vineyards and woods, singing and playing music. Their hike was leisurely and pleasant. James Costamagna ¹⁴ was toting the bass drum on his back; behind him Don Bosco kept beating it loud and long with his fist. It must have hurt after a while, but perhaps he was doing it to keep the boys from getting lost in the maze of trails or perhaps he meant the noise to be a warning to someone.

When they finally got to Becchi very late that night and the role was called, one boy — Lawrence Boccallo — was missing. In his eagerness to arrive first, he had gone ahead and lost his way. Only after walking a long distance did he realize his mistake. He tried to find his bearings, but it was too dark and there was no sign of life anywhere. He wandered over hill and dale till finally the next morning, around eight o'clock, as the boys were about to have breakfast, he arrived at Becchi half-dead from want of sleep. Shouts and applause greeted him but he went straight to bed.

The boys' last hike was to Dominic Savio's tomb at Mondonio. They were convinced that their former companion's intercession had obtained signal favors for them from God. Father Dominic Grassi, the pastor, took them to the little grave. To their gratification they found it suitably marked with an engraved marble slab — a token of gratitude from a Genoese gentleman. He had read Don Bosco's biography of Dominic and, amazed by the lad's virtues,

¹⁴ Born in 1846, Costamagna entered the Oratory at the age of twelve. He became a Salesian in 1867 and a priest in 1868. He led the third group of Salesian missionaries to Argentina in 1877, opened the first Salesian house in Talca, Chile in 1887, and was consecrated bishop and appointed first Vicar Apostolic of Mendez and Gualaguiza in Ecuador in 1895. He died at Bernal (Argentina) on September 9, 1921. [Editor]

had invoked him in a grave situation and received help. On this same day [Friday, October 14] the two Perucatti brothers came from Villa San Secondo to join the Oratory boys. They too had been witnesses of Don Bosco's excursion to their native place that year.

On Saturday, October 15,¹⁵ at ten in the morning, Don Bosco and his boys left for Turin. They stopped briefly at Buttigliera d'Asti to pay their respects to benefactors and to the pastor, Father Joseph Vaccarino; then they moved on to Chieri for another short stop. Finally toward evening they reached the Oratory, where Don Bosco was expected for confessions.

Shortly after their return, the cleric Dominic Ruffino, a theology student in the Bra seminary, took up his permanent residence at the Oratory.

¹⁵ The date erroneously given in the original is "Saturday, October 16." An oversight! [Editor]

CHAPTER 21

A Delicate Mission

SHORTLY after returning to Turin, Don Bosco received a visit from an emissary of Pius IX. Well acquainted with Don Bosco's loyalty and devotion, the Pope wanted to entrust him with a delicate mission. The emissary handed Don Bosco two letters: one — most confidential — for King Victor Emmanuel II; the other — in the Pope's own hand — for Don Bosco. He was to find some way to deliver the Holy Father's letter to the king, either personally or through a trustworthy messenger. If he succeeded he was to inform the Pope of it; if not, the letter to the king was to be returned to Rome. At this time Victor Emmanuel II was at Courmayeur in the Aosta Valley.

After much thought, Don Bosco wrote to the king's private secretary — Chevalier Aghemo, then in town — for an appointment. Most obligingly the latter called personally at the Oratory without delay. Don Bosco said to him: "I must deliver to the king a letter from a very important person. Is it difficult?"

"Not at all!"

"Isn't there some danger that it may not reach him?"

"Be assured he will have it."

"I haven't the least idea as to its contents, nor do I wish to know. I only ask you kindly to give me a receipt to the effect that I entrusted it to you, so that I may prove that I have discharged my task."

"Gladly!"

"One more thing: I have some urgent matters to attend to. It will take me a few hours. Could you return this evening?"

“No trouble at all.”

The letter was probably in safekeeping elsewhere. Toward evening Don Bosco handed it to Chevalier Aghemo, who saw to its delivery. The king's reply was then brought to Turin by Father Robert Murialdo, court chaplain, and duly forwarded to Rome by Don Bosco. The Pope had not considered it safe to entrust his letter (which, perhaps, was the weighty document of September 29) to Father Stellardi, whom Victor Emmanuel had sent to Rome as his emissary. This ecclesiastic was imprudent in speech, and — more loyal to the court than to the Church — sought Caesar's interests more eagerly than those of God. The king's reply was certainly not one to console the afflicted Pontiff.

In Turin, meanwhile, the war's end enabled the two chambers to resume hostilities against the Church by curtailing the constitutional rights of priests. On October 23, 1859, a law was passed barring a great part of the clergy from municipal and provincial councils. It declared ineligible priests entrusted with the care of souls, vicars, and all cathedral or collegiate canons. On March 20, 1865, it was made even more stringent. At about the same time, Don Bosco realized that he too was a target of the anticlericals. They knew how unshakably loyal he was to the Pope; *Letture Cattoliche* made this quite evident. Hence, they secretly decided to start their hostilities against him and his work by disparaging his *Storia d'Italia* [History of Italy].¹ On October 18, 1859 an article of *La Gazzetta del Popolo* laid the basis of a painful persecution that afflicted Don Bosco the following year. The caustic, venomous article was a *de facto* intimation to civil authorities [to ban Don Bosco's *Storia d'Italia* from all public schools].² This is not surprising since *La Gazzetta del Popolo* — the official anticlerical mouthpiece — waxed violent against anyone it disagreed with. Its very many articles against Don Bosco in later years were always punctuated with taunts, insults, and lies; it recognized nothing good in him and did not even have the decency of announcing his death. And this very paper which consistently falsified ancient and modern history to vent its hatred of religion had the impudence to accuse

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 322-331. [Editor]

² See Appendix 10. [Editor]

Don Bosco of having deliberately distorted certain incidents of Italian history.³ A quite different opinion in the matter was expressed in *L'Armonia*⁴ by a distinguished scholar — Niccolò Tommaseo,⁵ a liberal then in exile. This illustrious author wrote remarkably well of Don Bosco and thought so highly of him that whenever he came to Turin, he never failed to call on him, sometimes for advice.

Even ahead of Tommaseo, *Civiltà Cattolica* had made gratifying comments on Don Bosco's *Storia d'Italia*.⁶

Totally undisturbed by the insults of *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, Don Bosco kept up writing. The November issue of *Lecture Cattoliche* was an anonymous story entitled *Augustine, or The Triumph of Religion . . .*; however, the December issue — *The Persecution of Decius and the Pontificate of St. Cornelius I, Pope* — was authored by Don Bosco . . .

Meanwhile, during October and November four Oratory boys — Francis Cerruti,⁷ Charles Ghivarello,⁸ Francis Provera,⁹ and Joseph Lazzero¹⁰ had donned the clerical habit.

³ We shall omit these incidents because they are of minimal interest to our readers. [Editor]

⁴ See Appendix 11. [Editor]

⁵ Born in Dalmatia in 1802, Tommaseo became Minister of Education in Venice in 1848. The following year, during Daniele Manin's insurrection, he fled to Corfù; finally in 1861 he settled at Florence. He authored several dictionaries, as well as writings on moral and political philosophy, literary criticism, poetry, biography, and history. [Editor]

⁶ See Appendix 12. [Editor]

⁷ See Chapter 16, footnote 6. [Editor]

⁸ Ghivarello entered the Oratory at the age of twenty and received the clerical habit from Don Bosco the following year. Both he and Francis Cerruti were schoolmates of Dominic Savio. Ordained a priest in 1864, he filled important positions in the Salesian Society. He died in 1913. [Editor]

⁹ Provera entered the Oratory in 1858 at the age of twenty-two, made his triennial vows in the Salesian Society in 1862, was ordained a priest in 1864, and filled administrative and teaching posts. He died in 1874. [Editor]

¹⁰ A fellow townsman of Francis Provera, Lazzero too entered the Oratory as a young adult in 1857. In 1862 he made his triennial vows, was ordained a priest in 1865, and made his perpetual profession in 1870. He was entrusted tasks by Don Bosco and his successor. He died in 1910. [Editor]

CHAPTER 22

Kind Firmness

AT the beginning of the school year 1859-60, the Oratory had some twenty clerics belonging to the archdiocese of Turin. With their help Don Bosco was finally realizing a long-cherished goal — a secondary school on the premises, so that he would no longer need to send his boys to town to the private schools of the distinguished and obliging Father [Matthew] Picco and Professor [Joseph] Bonzanino.¹ The cleric Celestine Durando taught Latin I to ninety-six pupils; Secundus Pettiva, Latin II; John Turchi, Latin III; and John Baptist Francesia, Latin IV and V. In the course of years other clerics took over this noble challenge. They too — when ready for their tasks — formed the minds and hearts of swarms of boys on whom rested the hopes of the Church and of the future Salesian Congregation. Thus Don Bosco saw himself reborn and multiplied in these young clerics who had imbibed and made their own his deep spirit of piety and sacrifice whose worth was well known to St. Teresa. She rated work higher than prayer without work. “Spiritual progress is not made through much thinking but, rather, through much loving,” she used to say. “And if you ask how one can acquire this loving, I would reply, ‘Make up your mind to work and suffer for God, and really mean it by doing it whenever the occasion presents itself, especially when you must carry out acts of obedience.’”

[Let us now resume our narration.] At this time of year, the Oratory again swarmed with pupils, both old and new. Among the latter was a fourteen-year-old lad named Dominic Parigi, whose

¹ See Vol. IV, pp. 204, 464f; Vol. V, pp. 175f, 257. [Editor]

admission as a student had not followed routine procedure. In October [1859], attracted by Don Bosco's fame, he set out on his own for the Oratory. Don Bosco saw in the boy's features the reflection of a pure, innocent soul.

"Who are you, son?"

"Dominic Parigi from Chieri."

"And what can I do for you?"

"Keep me here."

"But you are not registered."

"Does that matter? Can't you register me now?"

"Look, let's do things the right way. Go back and ask your parents to return with you. Then we'll talk things over, and everything will be settled."

"No, I'm not going back."

"Then write a letter."

"Not I! You write it, please, Father."

Don Bosco was stumped for a moment. Then, smiling at the youngster's candor, he said, "All right, Dominic. I'll write."

The boy stayed and completed his Latin studies; afterward he entered the diocesan seminary, became a priest, and died in 1899 as pastor of San Francesco al Campo.

Another noteworthy new pupil was a thirteen-year-old Jewish lad named Jarach. He was not the first one of that faith because Don Bosco had already interested himself in the conversion and Baptism of several other Israelites. Jarach's father was a learned rabbi of Ivrea who for several years had been a convert to the Catholic faith. Bishop [Louis] Moreno of Ivrea had appointed him to the seminary staff as professor of Hebrew and Sacred Scripture — a post he held to his death. The bishop had also befriended a daughter of the former rabbi; she too became a convert and, later, a religious.

Lastly, we shall mention a young man — Joseph Rossi, about twenty-four, from Gambarana Lomellina. He arrived at the Oratory on October 20 [1859], led there through the reading of Don Bosco's [prayerbook] *The Companion of Youth*.² Rossi wrote: "When I first found myself face to face with Don Bosco, I was

² See Vol. II, pp. 6-18. [Editor]

highly impressed by his fatherliness and affability and immediately felt a filial affection for him." From then on, Rossi became a worthy colleague of Joseph Buzzetti and loyally helped Don Bosco in the material management of the Oratory which at this time housed three hundred boys. The esteem which the Oratory enjoyed everywhere is obvious from a letter of Don Bosco to Baron Feliciano Ricci [des Ferres] of Cuneo, and a second to another prominent layman.³

Once the school routine had set in, Don Bosco's first important gesture was to send Pope Pius IX a token of the warm affection of all the Oratory boys and of their heartfelt sympathy for the grief caused him by insurrections, irreligion, loose morals, and the persecution of the clergy in Romagna and other former Papal States. On November 9 [1859], he wrote to the Pope for himself and his pupils, sympathizing with him for harm done to the Church and still being committed against her, but also acquainting him with the all-out efforts of loyal Catholics in Turin to counteract the flood of evil. In conclusion, he promised his pupils' unceasing prayers for God's assistance in these trying circumstances. All the Oratory boys signed the letter, and it was then forwarded through trustworthy messengers.

But during those days — Dominic Ruffino asserted — Don Bosco seemed unduly worried. He spoke of a dream in which he had seen a tall man wandering about town, lightly touching people on the face with two fingers. They would instantly turn black and drop dead. Could it perhaps symbolize a *moral* epidemic?

Meanwhile, as usual, Don Bosco continued to give a short talk to the community after night prayers. A dear old friend of ours — then a pupil — recalled the following:

One of the first "Good Nights" I heard from Don Bosco in 1859 was on the frequent reception of the sacraments — a practice not yet generally taken up by the boys after their recent summer vacations. He narrated a dream in which he seemed to be standing near the Oratory main entrance while the boys returned from home. As they walked past him he could see the state of their souls before God. A stranger also

³ See Appendix 13. [Editor]

walked in with them holding a small box. He mingled with the boys, and when the time came for confessions, he opened it and, taking out a little marmot, started to give a puppet show of sorts. Rather than go to the church, the boys crowded around him to enjoy the fun, while he slowly withdrew into a corner of the playground farthest from the church. Then, without naming anyone, Don Bosco proceeded to describe the spiritual condition of many boys. He also spoke of the devil's efforts and snares to distract and discourage them from confession. His portrayal of the little marmot's tricks provoked many a laugh, but it also made the boys reflect seriously on their spiritual condition — all the more so when later he told private inquirers things they thought nobody could ever come to know.

This dream was instrumental in inducing most of the boys to go to confession much more often and, generally, once a week; naturally, reception of Holy Communion became very frequent.

I also remember once, as Don Bosco was talking of bodily health and of the important need of caring for it, the cleric Joseph Bongiovanni asked permission to speak. On being given leave, he said: "What are we to do, then, to enjoy good health and live a long life?"

Don Bosco replied, "I will give you a secret, or rather a prescription. While serving as a reply to the cleric Bongiovanni, it will also greatly benefit you all. To enjoy good health and live a long life you need four things: 1. A clear conscience when you go to bed at night, that is, no fear of eternity. 2. Moderation in eating. 3. An active life. 4. Good companions, that is, fleeing from those who are corrupt. He then briefly explained these four points.

As we can see, Don Bosco's "Good Nights" wisely governed the Oratory. During 1859, a certain Joseph Zarega, a native of Liguria employed at the Turin arsenal, was a frequent, welcome visitor at the Oratory. He marveled at Don Bosco's easy sway over so many youths and, though but a mechanic — and a good one at that — planned to return to Genoa and look after young apprentices. He desired to become a priest, too. As a matter of fact, he did become one and died as a zealous, devout pastor. On one of his visits to the Oratory, he asked Don Bosco what qualifications the director of a boys' boarding school or hospice should have.

"A director," Don Bosco replied, "needs most of all to enjoy the full trust of his pupils. To achieve this, it is necessary that: 1. He

be esteemed a saint. 2. He be considered knowledgeable, especially in those things that interest pupils. When at a loss for the correct answer to a question, he should say, 'I haven't the time to answer you now, but I'll do so tomorrow.' Meanwhile, he should look up the subject. 3. Pupils realize that they are being loved."

Don Bosco's wondrous power over his boys stemmed from the fact that he possessed their hearts. A word of his could fill them with the greatest joy, just as the mere hint of a reproach could cast them into the deepest sadness. We shall glean a few instances among the many we have witnessed. One evening, the boys, still a little restless from their summer vacation, kept whispering for a few moments during the very short interval between night prayers and the "Good Night." Don Bosco, standing on a raised platform, waited a while; then with studied calm he exclaimed: "I want you to know I am not at all pleased with you." He then sent them to bed and would not allow them to kiss his hand, as was the custom. This was a punishment the boys feared the most because it was more keenly felt than any other the good Father could have inflicted on them.

From that memorable night on, Don Bosco had only to appear and silence was so perfect you could have heard a feather drop. The bell, which had hitherto struggled to make itself heard, became totally unnecessary because the boys feared the mere thought of another such punishment.

One time, Don Bosco, wishing to send a few complimentary rhymes to a kind benefactress on her name day, asked one of the pupils to compose some. Night came and the verses were not ready. Unwilling to go to bed without kissing Don Bosco's hand, the boy was hoping Don Bosco had forgotten about them. Somewhat uneasy, but nonchalantly, he approached Don Bosco.

"What about those verses?" Don Bosco asked him.

"I . . ."

"Next time I'll know whom to ask."

These words so upset the poor lad that Don Bosco had a hard time trying to cheer him up. This he did whenever he noticed that someone took his words too hard, in order to dispel any bitterness from his heart.

An entirely different episode leads us to the same conclusion. Knowing the need of some young clerics, Don Bosco had ordered that coffee with milk, rather than black coffee, was to be served to them on fast days. The cook, a rather odd man — such is life — set the table with small cups and served so little milk that there was not enough to go around. The clerics asked for more, but the cook brusquely replied that they should be satisfied with what they had been served. They then went to the one in charge, informing him that this was a concession to them made by Don Bosco. But he replied that he knew nothing about it. The clerics therefore decided to see Don Bosco. Three of them went up to his room. Two remained outside, close to the door so as to hear what was going on inside, while one went in to air their complaint. He spoiled the whole case, however, when, though intending his words for the cook, he concluded by telling Don Bosco: “After all, you know, Father, there is still some polenta for us at home!”

Hearing this thrust, the two clerics outside quickly made themselves scarce. Deeply wounded and perplexed, Don Bosco looked at the speaker with wet eyes and said not a word. Feeling very cheap, the young cleric apologized and slipped away.

How often a simple kindly look of Don Bosco calmed sudden — and at times justified — bursts of impatience! He knew how to bear with shortcomings, how to forgive and forget. This is why, even though tempers might momentarily flare, affection for him never suffered a bit. It would seem that to such circumstances as these the words of Holy Scripture can be applied: “One who jabs the eye brings tears; he who pierces the heart bares its feelings. . . . Should you draw a sword against a friend, despair not, it can be undone. Should you speak sharply to a friend, fear not, you can be reconciled. But a contemptuous insult, a confidence broken, or a treacherous attack will drive away any friend.” [Sir. 22, 19. 21-22].

Don Bosco hastened to tell the cook to carry out his orders without ridiculous economies. What always uplifted and solaced the clerics was their knowing that Don Bosco loved them as a father. He was so good-hearted that he simply could not refuse anyone a favor. Yet, fearing abuses and determined not to let

them creep in, he discouraged having recourse to him for dispensations in material affairs and directed them to the prefect. He would thus be able to grant what was requested more freely but indirectly. He knew, though, how to anticipate reasonable requests. If, for instance, he noticed during mealtime that the common fare was not adequate to the needs of some clerics, he would whisper a word to the prefect to have other food served them. He did likewise in similar needs, striking a responsive chord in the hearts of clerics and boys alike.

“One could see,” writes Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio, “that what was uppermost in Don Bosco’s dealings with us was the glory of God and our own spiritual and temporal welfare, which he strove to attain with a poise, amiability, and prudence all his own, free of all exaggeration.” There was nothing bossy or weak in his manner of acting. He seemed incapable of anger. He promptly squelched its first stirrings and, controlling himself, would amiably smile. He could, though — and this too is charity — firmly carry out what justice, morality, and discipline required. To state otherwise would be falsifying Don Bosco’s character. Bishop [John] Cagliero wrote: “While I was yet a cleric, a simple, innocent lad who was helping me in the sacristy fell victim to scandal by an adult. On learning of it, Don Bosco felt extremely grieved and upset and cried in my presence. Then, without delay, his fatherly heart went to the victim to repair the scandal. But with equal firmness he had the guilty one immediately dismissed.”

Likewise, he did not readily condone breaches of discipline. A cleric named Marcello always arrived late at the daily May devotions, though he had to supervise a group of boys. Don Bosco did not fail to admonish him for this and other failings. Again, while it was this cleric’s duty every Sunday to help out at the Guardian Angel Oratory in Borgo Vanchiglia, he took it upon himself to bring along some boys, orders to the contrary notwithstanding. For this too he was admonished in vain. Now, it happened that one Sunday that oratory was holding a special celebration, and again the cleric took along several boys without Don Bosco’s or Father Alasonatti’s permission. Then and there,

Don Bosco decided it was time he put a stop to a public disorder and end a bad example which others might imitate. Accordingly, that evening after prayers, he told all the community of the grave disobedience of whoever had taken boys out of the house without permission. Then, continuing in Piedmontese dialect — quite an unusual thing at the “Good Night” — in a hurt tone, he publicly asked each of those boys: “Where were you this morning?”

“At the Guardian Angel Oratory.”

“Who took you there?”

“The cleric Marcello!”

In the profound silence, coming at brief intervals, the repeated questions and answers became a refrain.

After the last boy had answered, Don Bosco expressed his keen displeasure curtly but calmly. Present at this scene — among others — was Paul Albera [future second successor of Don Bosco].

With like firmness he required obedience to his orders and duly punished those who stubbornly tried to transgress them.

Among the numerous and well-trained members of the brass band there was at this time a good organist who, while boarding at the Oratory as a guest, earned good money with his piano lessons in town. He was a good fellow, but rather flighty and independent. The pupils palled around with him, and now and then seemed receptive to opinions of his not conducive to submission to superiors. This led to some slight breaches of discipline which a warning from Don Bosco seemed to have remedied. Don Bosco, however, did not relax his vigilance.

For some years now, on the feast of St. Cecilia, Don Bosco had, for special reasons, allowed the band to hold a picnic at some place designated by himself, if the feast fell on a weekday. This year [1859] he announced that the picnic would be discontinued. The young bandsmen at first made no fuss over it. Later, stirred up by some of the senior members who promised to obtain Don Bosco’s permission — and perhaps also counting on impunity — half of them decided to hold a celebration anyway. They agreed to have a dinner outside the Oratory two or three weeks before the feast of St. Cecilia, lest Don Bosco get wind of their plans

and foil them. Accordingly, toward the end of October, they went to a nearby inn. Buzzetti alone — invited at the last moment — refused to join them and reported the matter to Don Bosco.

Not the least put out, Don Bosco immediately dissolved the band and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the instruments. He then told him to draw up a list of new recruits. The next morning he sent for the young rebels one by one and reprimanded them for forcing him to be severe. He gave them a word of spiritual advice and, without further ado, sent them away — some to their parents or benefactors, others to prospective employers.

A letter of his to Baron Feliciano Ricci [des Ferres] at Cuneo gave his reasons for the severe step he had taken:

Turin, November 3, 1859

My dear Baron,

I was delighted to receive your welcome letter charitably recommending the lad Rossi. I must tell you that this hapless boy — among other things — was one of several who, notwithstanding my prohibition, left the premises to dine at a disreputable place — a low-grade inn. I sent for them during and after the dinner, because it grieved me to have to take grave measures against a score of misguided youths. Only four acquiesced and apologized; the rest became even more impudent. After dinner, they roamed about town, returned to the same place for supper, and finally came back to the Oratory, half-drunk, at a very late hour. Rossi was one of them. As I had threatened them with expulsion more than once before if they persisted in disobedience, I was regretfully compelled to take action.

Nevertheless, in view of your letter, I will keep Rossi here a few more days and hopefully try to find him some work in town. As regards the other boy, I'll have a talk with you, or write later, after all the boys — a large number — have settled down.

I thank you wholeheartedly for your generous donation and assure you I will pray the Lord to bless you and your family.

Your devoted servant,

Fr. John Bosco

One of these misguided young men — a good factotum — was forgiven. The evening of that day, after Don Bosco had spoken to the boys, the cleric Michael Rua asked him, "Please, Father, may I plead a cause which I have much at heart?"

"What is it?"

"Peter E. . . . has been expelled. The punishment given to those who disobeyed is fair, but Peter, young and inexperienced, let himself be fooled by his companions. They assured him they had your permission. He acted in good faith. I apologize for him and ask your forgiveness."

Lowering his head in shame, the young man was standing there among his companions. "He should not have taken his companions' word," Don Bosco replied. "He had heard my orders clearly. He knew I do not usually change a decision. The reason you gave me does not excuse him. Nevertheless, since it is you who plead for him, I will give him another chance."

At about this time Don Bosco petitioned General [Alexander] La Marmora — then Minister of War — for surplus military clothing for his boys.⁴ The appeal was successful, though we do not know in what measure.

⁴ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

CHAPTER 23

In Mary's Honor

AN education law still in force [in 1859] required institutions run by religious congregations to conform to State requirements as regards examinations, fees, teachers' qualifications, and government inspection. Although the Oratory did not yet formally fall into that category and [John Francis] Muratori, superintendent of education, had not yet taken steps in its regard, Don Bosco was somewhat concerned for a future that seemed far from rosy.¹ Nevertheless he felt confident of the protection of the Blessed Virgin and the intercession of Dominic Savio. Of the latter's effectiveness he received striking evidence just about this time.

In March, 1859, an Oratory student, Edward Donato, had been forced to interrupt his studies because of serious eye trouble that had bothered him for the past eighteen months. The best treatment then available and a return to his native air had both proved ineffectual and the lad was forced to spend all his time in a darkened room. About the end of October, however, there seemed to be some slight improvement and he returned to the Oratory. Unfortunately, his condition soon was as bad as ever, and he often went to Don Bosco for comfort in his pain. The good Father's words uplifted him physically and spiritually, helped him to bear his cross with resignation, and gave him some hope of a cure before long.

One evening [Monday, November 28, 1859] while his companions were at singing practice in their classrooms, Edward sat worried and sad in the superiors' dining room, his face buried in

¹We are here omitting some scholastic legislation without detriment to the continuity of narration. [Editor]

his hands, his elbows resting on the end of the table where Don Bosco was sitting at supper. Finishing his meal, the good Father went very softly up to him and, tapping him on the shoulder, said: "It's time we did something about your trouble. Let's get hold of Dominic Savio and make him obtain your cure from God." Speechless, the boy stared at Don Bosco. "Yes, Edward," the latter went on, "we must do something. Tomorrow we begin the Immaculate Conception novena. Pray to Dominic Savio every day to intercede for you and get you this great favor. Keep in God's grace so as to be able to receive Holy Communion every morning, and then, at night before going to bed, say, 'Dominic Savio, pray for me,' and recite a Hail Mary." The boy promised. Don Bosco concluded: "I will remember you every morning in my Mass. Who knows? This time Dominic Savio will have to cure you!"

The very day he began the novena, the lad felt a little better. This spurred him to continue with greater fervor. Within a few days his eyes were completely healed. Meanwhile, Don Bosco kept exhorting his boys to make the novena well. There were no special church services, but everyone strove to honor the Blessed Virgin in his own way. Every evening after night prayers, Don Bosco suggested an act of virtue for the next day to be offered as a nosegay to the Mother of God. Five of his "Good Nights" were jotted down by Father John Bonetti and are here given with their respective dates:

November 29

One more day, my dear children, and this month too will be over — the first full month of this school year!² How quickly it has slipped away! So will the other months. As each goes by, let us try to live so as to be able to say, "There goes another month I must account for to God. I did my best; I did not waste it. My conscience is at ease."

During the past month you've had a chance to find out how you stand in your studies. Now you have a pretty good idea of how much or how little you know, who is ahead and who is lagging, and what you should do to forge ahead. Put your heart into it, therefore, all the more so since we are making the novena in honor of Mary Immaculate, Our Heavenly Mother who loves us immeasurably more than all earthly

² The school year began sometime in October. [Editor]

mothers put together. She tenderly loves all Christians, but She has always shown a very special affection for the Oratory boys. Thousands of instances, even extraordinary ones, can be told to prove this. But even aside from that, there is no doubt that She particularly loves those who honor Her. *Ego diligentes me diligo*. I love those who love Me. By your good conduct show that you are Her true children and place your studies under Her protection. Strive to make this novena well for this purpose.

But how can we honor Mary these days so as to merit Her protection? I shall not insist on frequent reception of the sacraments. You already know that Don Bosco has nothing more at heart than this. But I will suggest two particular things to each of you in Mary's honor: First, put your whole heart into this novena; second, prepare a bouquet of flowers for Her feast day. How? By picking a flower each day. But where, when no flowers are blooming in this cold winter? From the garden of your hearts. What sort of flowers? Some little act of virtue to be practiced every day in honor of Mary Immaculate. Let each one take this to heart, so that on the dawn of this great feast there will be as many bouquets as boys, and each bouquet will have a flower for every day of this novena. You may be sure that Our Lady will be quite pleased with your gift.

November 30

Tomorrow's nosegay will be: I shall give a companion some good advice. There are countless occasions for this act of charity. How much harm could be prevented and how much good done, if those who are negligent, dissatisfied, too outspoken, or quarrelsome had a companion at their side to whisper a good word. How often an exhortation to visit the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady, to go to confession, or to do some good reading is the beginning of a lad's eternal salvation! And let all accept the good advice gracefully. After all, good advice is not so plentiful, and we should consider ourselves lucky to get it. I would be delighted and forever grateful if any of you should give me good advice.

But now I will give you a bit of advice myself, both general and particular. My general advice is: *Ad quid venisti?* What did you come here for? When St. Bernard left home to enter a monastery and lead a holy life, he wrote everywhere he had to pass: *Bernarde, ad quid venisti?* Bernard, what did you come here for? This thought always spurred him on anew in moments of despondency and temptation. "I came to earn heaven," he would say to himself. "Up, then, and onward!"

This, my dear children, is also my advice to you. On the corner of a book or pad write: *Ad quid venisti?* and then think and ask yourselves: "What am I in this world for?" To love and serve God, and so win heaven. If you act otherwise, you are off your path. You came to the Oratory to study, to grow in knowledge and piety, to find out what God wants you to do. If you don't do this, you're wasting your time.

December 1

Tomorrow's nosegay will be: "I will make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament."

If a well-known and trustworthy person were to go to a public square and tell all the idlers loitering there that on a certain hill they would find a gold mine and could take all they wanted, do you think anyone would shrug his shoulders and say he did not care? They'd all be dashing there as fast as they could!

Well, now, doesn't the tabernacle hold the most precious treasure ever to be found on earth or in heaven? Unfortunately, there are many who cannot see it because they are blind. Yet, our faith unerringly tells us that endless riches are to be found there. People sweat and toil to make money, and yet in the tabernacle dwells the Lord of the universe. He will grant you what you ask, if you really need it. Do you need health? Memory? Intelligence? Do you need strength to carry your cross, help to overcome temptations? Is your family threatened by misfortune, afflicted by sickness, in need of a particular favor? On whom do your family possessions depend? Who controls wind and rain, storms and seasons? Isn't Our Lord Jesus Christ Lord and Master of all? Go to Him then. Ask and it shall be given you; knock and it shall be opened to you! Jesus longs to grant you favors, especially those you need for your soul.

A saint once saw the Infant Jesus on the altar holding the front of His tunic apron-like and overflowing with precious pearls. He looked sad.

"Why so sad, my Lord?" the saint asked.

"Because nobody cares for My favors," Jesus replied. "I don't know anyone to give them to!"

December 2

Tonight's nosegay is very important: "I will try to put great trust in my superiors." We superiors do not want to be feared; we wish to be loved and trusted. What better thing could a house like ours have than confidence in superiors? This alone could transform the Oratory into an

earthly paradise and make everybody happy. Don Bosco is here only and entirely for your spiritual and temporal good. If he desires anything from you, he tells you at once; likewise, if you desire anything of him, do not keep it shut up in your heart; go and tell him. Then everything will be well and you will all be satisfied. If some food does not agree with you, or if you need another blanket or warm clothing, come and tell me, and I will do all I can within our modest means to provide what is reasonable. Perhaps someone does not feel well, or has problems in studies, or has had a run-in with a teacher or assistant, or feels he has been wronged. I am here to remedy all this. Don't be afraid. Whatever you will tell me will remain within me, and I shall use it only for your own good. But for heaven's sake, don't keep passing complaints among yourselves. Instead of grumbling or criticizing, come and tell me what bothers you. We wish to satisfy your reasonable desires and thus remove all source of friction. What I said does not refer only to material things, but also, and principally, to spiritual things. Sometimes the devil throws you into the dumps and you are down and out. Maybe it's homesickness or a suspicion that you are out of favor with your superiors; perhaps you fear that some fault of yours may be found out and punished; you may feel downhearted because your companions slight you, or because you have problems in studies. Well, do you wish to get rid of your blues? Come to me, and we will find a way.

What I recommend most earnestly is not to lose heart when you are tempted. Do you wish to succeed? The best way is to reveal your temptation to your spiritual director immediately. The devil loves darkness. He always operates in the dark because he knows that if he is discovered he is beaten. Once a lad was violently tempted. He did all he could to resist, but the temptation became so violent that he began to fear he would not be able to hold out much longer. He chanced to come across his superior who at a glance guessed his trouble. Calling the boy aside, the superior asked, "What's the matter? Is the devil bothering you?"

The boy was thunderstruck. "How did you guess?" he stammered. That did it. The temptation vanished immediately.

December 3

Yesterday I spoke about trusting your superiors in general, and then briefly mentioned the confidence you should give to your confessor. This suggests tomorrow's nosegay: Full and absolute sincerity in confession.

Do not be afraid, my sons, to reveal your shortcomings and faults to your confessor. Being good does not mean never committing faults.

Indeed no, because all of us are liable to do just that. Being good consists in having the sincere good will to correct ourselves. When we confess a fault — even a grave one — seeing our good will, the confessor will not be shocked. Rather, he will rejoice at the penitent's sincerity and determination to overcome the devil, to regain God's grace, and to become better.

My dear children, let nothing undermine your confidence in him, not even shame for your sins. We all know we are weak. After all, you don't go to confession to tell your miracles! And the confessor surely doesn't think that you are impeccable. You'd laugh if he did!

Don't fear that the confessor may reveal what you tell him. The seal of confession is most strict and dreadful. He would be worthy of hell if he revealed the least sin. Don't fear that he may later recall what you have confessed. When confession is over, it is his duty to forget about it.

Our Lord has permitted all sorts of crimes; He allowed Judas to betray Him, Peter to deny Him, and priests to leave the Church, but He has never permitted even one confessor to reveal the least sin heard in confession.

Cheer up, then, my dear sons; let us not give the devil a chance to laugh at us. Make good confessions; tell everything.

Someone may ask: "What if one has held back a big sin in past confessions? What is he to do?" Look! If, on buttoning up my cassock in the morning, by chance I miss one button and then hitch my cassock up one side, what must I do to set it straight? I must undo all the buttons up to the one that was missed. Likewise, he who has to straighten out past confessions must go back all the way to that confession where a sin was kept back. Then all will be made right. The catechism tells you: "From the last good confession to the present one."

Courage, then, my children! With one word you can escape hell and win heaven. It takes so little! The confessor will help you. You know we are friends, and that I desire only one thing — your souls' salvation.

While at the Oratory all vied with one another in honoring Our Lady, Don Bosco was fulfilling a most noble duty. On November 10, 1859, the peace treaty of Villafranca and Verona ³ was ratified in Zurich, but Don Bosco at once sensed that this was only a temporary settlement. Everything pointed to the fact that the Legations would never be restored to the Pope, and that his

³ See Chapter 19. [Editor]

honorary presidency over the Italian States was but an eyewash and a mockery. He knew that the Pontiff's letters to Napoleon III and Victor Emmanuel II — beseeching, advising, and protesting — were being ignored, while paid agitators continued stirring up trouble throughout Umbria and Marche. Garibaldi was in Bologna ready for action. Moreover, attempts were being made to bribe even the papal garrisons while arms, money, and subversive literature were being poured in great quantities into those regions.

The liberal press was all out to smear the papal government, accusing it, among other things, of having shamefully imprisoned Roman volunteers who had taken part in the war of independence, whereas the truth was that Pius IX had generously helped the neediest of them.

It was likewise evident that the rebels' ultimate end was to destroy the spiritual power of the Pope as they had many a time proclaimed — though not always so openly — in their press. . . .

It was under such circumstances that Don Bosco, notwithstanding the prohibition made to him and his promise of some years back,⁴ wrote to the king to save him from the abyss into which he was about to plunge or, rather, be pushed by the schemers around him. Don Bosco was obeying a command from on high to carry out a mission similar to that of Jeremiah to the princes of Judah. He confided to Michael Rua and to a few other trusted co-workers the gist of the communication he felt bound to send to the king in order to dissuade him from a new war which was about to break out against the Papal States.

The letter, of which no copy seemingly remains, began: *Dicit Dominus: Regi nostro, vita brevis*. . . . [Thus says the Lord: O King, short shall your life be. . . .] It threatened new misfortunes for the House of Savoy if war against the Church was not stopped and exhorted the king to ward off the storm that had been whipped up against the Pope. The letter was concise, stern, and upsetting.

The sovereign was deeply perturbed at this message which, however, proved ineffective. Once the shock was over, preparations for the wretched enterprise continued. Events were pressing,

⁴ See Vol. V, pp. 157ff. See also pp. 112-118. [Editor]

and the king no longer had the courage, means, or will to resist the revolution.

Meanwhile, the king had shown Don Bosco's letter to his ministers, among them Urbano Rattazzi. In turn they disclosed its contents to others, so that soon Don Bosco's message made the rounds of all the departments and became public knowledge. Rumors had it that Don Bosco had threatened the king's death. On the contrary, when Don Bosco had acquainted Rua and others with the contents of his letter, he had commented that *vita brevis* could have other meanings besides its obviously literal one.

In 1875, Baron [Charles Hyacinth] Bianco of Barbania — loyal to the House of Savoy like all Piedmontese noblemen — told us personally: "I held in my own hands Don Bosco's letter to the king; with my own eyes I read those words: *Regi nostro, vita brevis*; and from that moment I watched the turn of events. . . ."

Subsequent events that are now history, which we shall narrate in these memoirs, will enable the reader to evaluate those enigmatic words of Don Bosco. At the same time they will further prove Don Bosco's sincere affection for his king and the House of Savoy.

CHAPTER 24

Birth of the Salesian Society

WE have already said ¹ that Don Bosco had expressed his intention of founding a religious congregation to a small nucleus of priests, clerics, and boys whom he looked upon as the Oratory's mainstay and his trusty co-workers. Some had experimentally taken the three vows for a year, others had made a simple promise to continue helping him, but all attended the special conferences he called to preserve their own personal good spirit and that of the house.

We must remark here that these conferences were not deliberative in the participants' regard. Don Bosco called the meetings to brief them on his aims and plans so that they would be clear to all. By this means he imbued them all — and so profoundly — with his ideas that thereafter it was enough to say to any one of the priests "Don Bosco said this" or "Don Bosco wants that" for such a one to give immediate and willing assent and compliance. This was the governing principle he desired for all future conferences in [Salesian] houses: *not* many people deliberating on matters that by rule are within the competence of the superior, but one only — the director — doing the thinking and the briefing, with the others then carrying out his directives.

At these meetings Don Bosco often mentioned important undertakings they could accomplish if banded into a society. "But we are so few," someone would object.

"I will answer that objection," he replied, "by quoting St. Vincent de Paul. 'It is in grave necessities,' he said, 'that we show

¹ See Vol. IV, pp. 294ff; Vol. V, pp. 7ff, 137f, 452ff, 457f. [Editor]

our true trust in God.' Believe me, three people can do more than ten if God gives a hand; and God always does when He puts us in demanding situations that exceed our strength."

"But we are so poor!" was another objection.

"Poverty is our asset!" Don Bosco would reply. "It is God's blessing. And we should ask the Lord to keep us in voluntary poverty. Did not Our Lord begin His life in a manger and end it on the Cross? The wealthy seek leisure, which in turn generates a comfortable life of idleness. The spirit of sacrifice then vanishes. Read church history, and you will find countless instances when wealth proved the ruination of entire religious communities. They suffered the saddest misfortunes when they failed to abide by their original poverty. On the contrary, those who kept themselves poor flourished wonderfully. The poor man leans on God and has recourse to Him; on His part, I assure you, God always provides all one needs, whether little or great. Contrariwise, one who lives in plenty easily forgets God. And don't you think it is a blessing to be in need of prayer? As of today, have we ever lacked what we needed? Do not be afraid! Whatever we need for ourselves or our boys will never be wanting."

In November Don Bosco summed up his thoughts on the difficulties felt by some people on leaving their homes:

Abraham dwelt in Hur, a city of Chaldea. God had chosen him to start His merciful plan for the redemption of mankind. God appeared to him and said: "Leave your country, your kinsfolk, your father's house, your possessions and friends, and come to the land which I will show you. I will make a great nation of you. I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be blessed." God might have asked Abraham just to keep somewhat aloof from the doings of the world, from the affairs of an idolatrous country. But no! God expected him to be obedient, to leave his country promptly and undertake a long, perilous journey for His sake. This was the condition put to the holy patriarch to attain the promised glory. And Abraham did not hesitate. He set out at once, not knowing whither, to the land which God would show him. And he remained obedient, even to the point of being ready to sacrifice his only son. What glory this brought him! "By My own self I have sworn," said the Lord, "I will bless and multiply your poster-

ity as the stars in the heavens, the sands on the seashore, and the dust of the earth. Only he who can count the grains of dust on the earth will be able to count your descendants. They shall overcome their enemies; in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My word." God found Abraham ready to leave all for His sake. In reward, He made him lord of a new kingdom and took him into His confidence, revealing to him the most hidden mysteries of Divine Justice and Mercy.

Thus Don Bosco illustrated the necessity and advantages of following God's call at the cost of any sacrifice, even of family ties and affections, as Our Savior said: "Everyone that has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children or lands for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting." [Matt. 19, 29]. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me." [Matt. 10, 37].

On another occasion, dwelling on the same subject, he gave these reasons why a priest or religious should exercise his ministry away from his native place:

When the time came to begin their exalted mission, almost all the prophets left their childhood town or village. As God's messengers they journeyed to far-off places where they were welcome to preach His Word. They knew that in their own native places they would be rejected or, often, even persecuted, imprisoned, or beaten, and that if they managed to escape a cruel death, they would have to end their days in the desert. Indeed, it was not in their own country that Elias and Eliseus raised the dead, multiplied oil and wine, and wrought other wonders.

Our Blessed Savior Himself, after momentarily winning popular admiration in the synagogue of His own neighbors in Nazareth, soon found Himself the object of their indignation. "What," they cried, "is not this the son of Joseph, the carpenter? Does He now presume to teach us?" Then, doubting His miracles, they shouted: "Whatever things we have heard done in Capharnaum, do here also in Your own country." But Jesus replied: "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country." Then his fellow citizens refused to hear Him any longer; they pushed Him out of synagogue and town to the top of the hill where

Nazareth stood, in order to cast Him over a precipice. Miraculously Our Lord prevented them from laying hands on Him and, passing through their midst, went His way to Capharnaum, never to visit Nazareth again. According to some commentators, He used to stay in the house of Peter, or of Lazarus, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea; according to others, He stayed in the homes of other charitable people, but He never again returned to His own house in Nazareth.

Our Savior meant to teach a lesson to His disciples and to us, too. To be sure, envy, jealousy, malice, hurt feelings, interfamily squabbles, conflict of interests, political differences, nay, even a sincere zeal for the good of souls and of the Church, almost invariably — and often formidably — work against a religious, no matter how saintly he may be, if he stays in his native place.

Supposing such a one was not always exemplary in his youth? It is quite certain then that, humanly speaking, he will not be able to do much good there. We all know that during boyhood, all, even good boys, commit faults, at times even serious ones. Chances are that they may be spread about by those who know of them.

Someone, for instance, may have quarreled rather violently, have drunk to excess, or gone with bad companions. Someone else may have indulged in improper conversation or gone to swim in the river with no regard to decency; he may have raided an orchard or stolen money at home, and so on. Now he may be a great preacher. But let him go and preach in his native place on some sin or other, and there will always be someone to say: "You did the very same thing yourself! You did this or that with me, you said this and that." And these comments, even if not malicious, once aired about, impair the effectiveness of even a good sermon; at times, they completely destroy it. Such gossip is often of trifles, mere boyish pranks; but once publicized, it can be devastating.

Once a pious, eloquent, and learned priest was preaching a mission in his native parish. I happened to be there in the company of several distinguished persons when the conversation turned on him.

"As a boy he was quite a bully," one of them remarked, "and I thrashed him soundly."

"Really? What happened?" all asked.

"He insulted me, and I struck him twice. His parents then came over to argue with mine. I waited for him in the outskirts of the village and beat him again. Oh, yes, when he was young he was quite a brat! Of course, he has changed, but then . . ." and he stopped at that.

I did not like his remarks and said to myself, "I am more and more convinced that no prophet is accepted in his town!"

After pointing out the very serious dangers that even a good but weak cleric can meet in his native place, Don Bosco went on: "Where is one to go then, if he wants to leave his native place? How can he earn a living? Where can he find help and safe guidance?" He then enumerated the spiritual and temporal needs of a diocesan priest, and concluded by showing how a religious congregation would be a haven for one who has a priestly or religious vocation and who wants to persevere. There he could find peace and security and all he needs for his eternal and temporal welfare.

On December 8, the Oratory solemnly celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception. That evening Don Bosco announced at the "Good Night" that the next day he would hold a special conference in his room after the boys had retired to bed. Those concerned — priests, clerics, and laymen who shared Don Bosco's work at the Oratory and enjoyed his intimacy — understood that they were invited to attend and sensed that this meeting was to be an important one. Accordingly, they met the following night, Friday, December 9, 1859.

The meeting opened with the usual invocation to the Holy Spirit and a prayer to Mary Most Holy for enlightenment and assistance. Then Don Bosco, after summing up what he had said in previous conferences, proceeded to describe the nature and loftiness of a religious congregation, the everlasting honor accruing to a person entirely consecrated to God, the ease with which he could save his soul, the inestimable store of merits he could gain through obedience, and the imperishable glory and the twofold crown awaiting him in paradise. Then, visibly moved, he declared that the time had come to start that congregation which he had long been planning and for which he had been mainly working. He disclosed that Pius IX had praised his resolve and encouraged him to go ahead and that, in fact, this congregation already existed through the observance of the traditional Oratory rules, even though they were not binding in conscience,

and that the large majority of them already belonged to it at least in spirit, and a few by promise or temporary vows.

He added that only those would be accepted into this congregation who, after mature reflection, intended to vow chastity, poverty, and obedience in due time. He concluded by saying that the moment had come for all who had heard his conferences to state whether or not they wished to join this pious Society which would be named — or would continue to be named — after St. Francis de Sales. Those who did not want to belong to it should make it clear by no longer attending the conferences. He was giving them all a week's time to reflect and meditate on this important decision with God. The closing prayer was then said, and the meeting broke up in profound silence.

Once downstairs in the playground, more than one whispered: "Don Bosco wants to make monks of us all!" The cleric [John] Cagliero, undecided, paced up and down the portico for a long time, various thoughts crossing his mind. Finally, turning to a companion, he exclaimed: "I am determined — and always have been — never to leave Don Bosco. Monk or not, it's all the same to me!" Later he wrote a note to Don Bosco declaring that he deferred completely to his advice and decision. Don Bosco, meeting him afterward, smilingly said to him, "Come. This is your life!"

The conference whose attendance meant adherence to the pious Society was held on December 18, 1859. Only two stayed away. What happened at this meeting is well described in the official records of the proceedings preserved in our archives and here transcribed:

In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. In the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine, on the eighteenth day of December, in this Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, the following met in Don Bosco's room at nine o'clock in the evening: Don Bosco; Father Victor Alasonatti; Deacon Angelo Savio; Subdeacon Michael Rua; the clerics: John Cagliero, John Baptist Francesia, Francis Provera, Charles Ghivarello, Joseph Lazzero, John Bonetti, John [Baptist] Anfossi, Louis Marcellino, Francis Cerruti, Celestine Durando, Secundus Pettiva, Anthony Rovetto, and Joseph Bongiovanni; and the lay mem-

ber, Louis Chiapale — all unanimously determined to promote and maintain the true charity that is needed in the work of the festive oratories for abandoned youth, nowadays exposed to so many dangers and in many ways led astray and plunged into iniquity and ungodliness, to the great detriment of society.

The above-mentioned participants decided therefore to band themselves into a Society or congregation which, while aiming at the sanctification of each member by mutual assistance, would strive to promote God's glory and the salvation of souls, especially of those in greater need of instruction and formation. After unanimous endorsement of these goals and after a short prayer and invocation of the Holy Spirit, the participants proceeded to the election of officers of the said Society or other future ones [connected with it], if it will so please God.

Accordingly, they unanimously begged the founder and promoter [of this Society] to accept the office of Rector Major as entirely becoming him. He accepted with the proviso of the right to choose the Prefect, to which all agreed. Thereupon he declared that the writer of these minutes should continue to hold the office of Prefect, which he has filled in the house up to the present.

The manner of electing the other officers was next considered. It was agreed that voting by secret ballot would be the speediest way to form a chapter consisting of a Spiritual Director, an Economer, and three Consultors, besides the Rector Major and Prefect.

The writer of these minutes, officially appointed as Secretary, solemnly declares that he has faithfully discharged the duty entrusted to him by the assembly to record the votes as cast and that the results are as follows:

The subdeacon Michael Rua was unanimously elected to the office of Spiritual Director, and he formally accepted. The deacon Angelo Savio was likewise elected to the office of Economer and he too accepted. The meeting then proceeded to choose three Consultors. The first one elected was the cleric John Cagliero; the second, the cleric John Bonetti. The third balloting ended in a tie between the clerics Charles Ghivarello and Francis Provera, and an additional balloting resulted in the choice of Charles Ghivarello. Thus the body of officers of our Society was definitely established.

The proceedings, as here described, were read to the assembly and approved as written. It was then resolved that this original record should be signed and preserved.

As proof of the authenticity of this document, the Rector Major and the writer, as Secretary of this meeting, append their signatures hereto.

Fr. John Bosco, *Rector Major*
Fr. Victor Alasonatti, *Prefect*

Thus was constituted the first chapter — later called the “Superior Chapter” [of the Salesian Society]. All the participants at this meeting became charter members. Those who had decided not to join the Salesian Society were given full liberty to follow their vocations. They continued to enjoy the benefactions of the Oratory, completed their studies, became priests, and always remained Don Bosco’s friends.

In the course of our narrative, we shall mention the meetings of the Superior Chapter only up to the year 1865 to avoid dwelling too much on it. We will, during this six-year period, mention not only those who joined the Salesian Society and persevered in it till death, but also those who, after a time, no longer bound to it, felt themselves called by God to work in other fields. We owe these latter an honorable mention because, before withdrawing, they labored long and hard at Don Bosco’s side, teaching and educating his boys, and now, as Salesian co-operators, they still glory in having served under the glorious banner of St. Francis de Sales.

Our narrative will closely follow the growth and expansion of the Salesian family which truly is — as must be acknowledged — the work of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. As our story unfolds, we shall see how marvelous were Don Bosco’s courage and constancy in carrying on — in spite of persecutions, sorrows, and disappointments — the mission which the Blessed Virgin had entrusted to him.

CHAPTER 25

Adverse Criticism

DON Bosco was on excellent terms with the Turin diocesan authorities. The vicars general [Canon Philip] Ravina and [Canon Celestine] Fissore¹ constantly supported him, and he was warmly befriended by Canon [Joseph] Zappata. Most priests too were well disposed toward him. As for himself, Don Bosco felt tranquil and secure in all he did because he had Father Joseph Cafasso's full approval. This is not to say that he enjoyed everyone's favor. He had some critics among influential priests who were both pious and learned. The opposition, varying in strength and dating from 1844 to 1883, exemplified an old saying: "If a priest is bad, he is punished; if he is good, he is supported; if he is a saint, he is opposed." This comes as no surprise. A saint reveals himself in the extraordinary things he does. Until he is well known, prudence requires caution in judging him. Moreover, since he is somehow set above the rest, he occasionally seems to depart from established patterns, with the result that his course of action is looked upon as ostentatious and reprehensible. Then, of course, in a small measure at least, envy and jealousy enter too.

The first criticism leveled at Don Bosco was that he was too easy in granting Holy Communion to youngsters. That he promoted frequent Communion is quite true. He always recommended it to the festive oratory boys and he was the first to introduce it on a daily basis into a boys' boarding school. This was disapproved by several diocesan priests in Turin and by seminary rectors inas-

¹ Archbishop Louis Fransoni was in exile in Lyons since 1850. See Vol. IV, p. 76. [Editor]

much as Jansenism² was still strong in some ecclesiastical quarters. Don Bosco followed Father Cafasso, whose master was St. Alphonsus. That his thinking was truly orthodox is evidenced by the teachings of the Church from the Council of Trent to the latest pronouncement of Pius X. However, he wasted no time in fruitless debates. His replies to opponents were brief and to the point. To the objection "Who can possibly consider himself worthy of daily Communion when St. Aloysius himself went but once a week?" Don Bosco replied: "Find me someone as perfect and fervent as St. Aloysius and I agree that weekly Communion may be enough for him. Since the Saint spent three days in preparation and three in thanksgiving, one Communion in between sufficed to keep him fervent all week long." To one who quoted St. Francis de Sales as neither praising nor disapproving of daily Communion, he simply remarked, "Then why do you disapprove? Do as the Saint did."

These critics, however, failed to notice with what care Don Bosco fostered his boys' worthy reception of the Eucharist. Though he believed that mortal sin was the sole real obstacle to Holy Communion, he did not allow daily Communion to those who were attached to venial sin. He also suggested a limit to frequent confession, exhorting priests, clerics, and pupils to go *ordinarily* but once a week and to keep a steady confessor. Yet, especially when speaking to boys, he would add, "Rather than make a sacrilegious confession and Communion, change your confessor each time." His troublesome advisers, however, did not stop their efforts to make him change his policy. Canon John Baptist Anfossi wrote us about one of them:

One evening in late autumn — I can't remember the exact year but it must have been 1858 or 1859 — a well-known, influential priest called at the Oratory. He was the gruff type that sends youngsters scurrying away. A constant failure in his work for want of proper spirit, he held that charitable institutions should not be set up without government approval and support — a view not shared by Don Bosco, who always

² A heresy that takes its name from Cornelis Jansen (1585-1638), bishop of Ypres. Jansenism erred on the side of pessimism and harshness. Among other things, it was against reception of Holy Communion and was very severe in exacting sorrow in confession. [Editor]

and only sought the Church's approval and the blessing of the Pope! I happened to see this priest walk into the Oratory playground at a time when no one was around, since the boys were at study or in their shops. I went over to him and, when he asked to see Don Bosco, I took him to the little parlor on the second floor near Father Alasonatti's office and then went to look for Don Bosco.

I waited till their conversation was over and then accompanied the visitor to the exit and returned to Don Bosco.

"Do you know why that priest came?" he asked.

"I have no idea!"

"He came to reprimand me for urging the boys to receive the sacraments very often. According to him, they should go to the sacraments only on the principal feasts of the year, or else they would become hypocrites! I told him that the religious education I gave to our boys produced excellent and consoling results and that such was the teaching of the greatest saints, but he would not give in. So I stood up and asked him to discuss his views with Father Cafasso."

I am quite sure he never did go to Father Cafasso. The irony is that this priest was one of those who accused Don Bosco of rejecting prudent advice.

This was not the only criticism leveled by these self-styled advisors against Don Bosco. They ignored the fact that for years the Oratory had been and still was for many clerics a substitute for the diocesan seminary still under military occupation.³ They did not know that the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales mainly aimed at fostering priestly vocations. They did not understand the importance of a work destined to provide priests for the dioceses of Piedmont and of other parts of Italy and even for other countries.⁴ Consequently they looked somewhat frostily on Don Bosco's work for the academic education of young clerics and boys. He should have stuck to the young apprentices, they thought. In their enlightenment, they considered him unqualified to train seminarians. Their pique intensified when Don Bosco, badly in need of secondary school teachers, was forced by circumstances to keep a few of his own clerics from taking regular theology courses in the seminary. Although he had mentioned the problem to the vicar general, the

³ See Vol. III, pp. 428f. [Editor]

⁴ See Vol. V, pp. 264ff. [Editor]

chancery sent him a notice that read more like a reprimand, as if he were trying to circumvent explicit diocesan directives in this matter.

Don Bosco was confronted by the dilemma of either making do with his own personnel — that is, his young clerics — since he could find no outside teachers, or of being resigned to abandon his undertaking rather than expand and strengthen it, as he was firmly determined to do. The chancery, after hearing his reasons, finally granted the requested dispensation. Don Bosco himself earnestly and insistently recommended that his young clerics follow diligently the prescribed seminary syllabus and regularly sent them there for their examinations. Moreover, he did not leave them to their own devices but saw to it that on Sundays and holidays Canon [Augustus] Berta coached them at his own residence. As for his other clerics not engaged in teaching at the Oratory, he had every one of them without exception abide by the diocesan regulations year after year.

Another criticism was that Don Bosco's young clerics, engaged in various absorbing tasks, could not possibly do justice to their theology courses.

"I can testify," wrote Canon Dominic Bongiovanni, "that the Oratory clerics gave consistent proof of untiring application to their studies and that many excelled their fellow seminarians and earned doctorates in theology." The seminary records bear witness to this statement.

Also among the clergy were some who alleged out of jealousy and distrust that Don Bosco kept the most gifted clerics for himself, to the detriment of the archdiocese. They simply refused to see that, while it was only fair for Don Bosco to keep those on whom he could best count, they in turn became his instruments to train hundreds of others who, but for Don Bosco's help, could never have pursued their priestly studies, thus depriving the Church of badly needed laborers. It would have been too much to expect these critics to grasp this fact; they saw but the present. In view of this, they considered it an act of charity to entice those few clerics away from Don Bosco whom he had brought up and trained at such great cost in effort and money. They lured them with promises of

free board and tuition in the seminary, future well-paying benefices, and brilliant ecclesiastical careers. In these efforts they were abetted by the clerics' parents and often succeeded in their intent, thus bringing Don Bosco bitter disappointment.⁵ If the Oratory did not fold up, it was all due to Our Lady's assistance.

In that year, 1859, a new problem arose in connection with the help the Oratory was supplying for cathedral services. Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti, seminary rector and diocesan provicar, sent for Don Bosco and asked him to continue rendering those religious services. Don Bosco thought it over a few days and answered in these terms:

Turin, November 12, 1859

Very Reverend and dear Rector,

Over and over I have tried to find some way of freeing a few clerics for the cathedral services as you requested, but the hour of their absence from here coincides with the time of religious services in the various oratories to which they are all assigned. Since I have no other help, these clerics of mine are busy from morning to night, weekdays and Sundays, teaching catechism and supervising youngsters in church and outside, at this and the other oratories at Borgo Vanchiglia and Porta Nuova. I have kept only those I strictly need, but if special solemnities require more clerics at the cathedral, I shall willingly do my best to let you have them. Incidentally, Canon [Louis] Anglesio has quite a few clerics not as hard pressed as ours. Would it not be a good idea to ask him?

Father Gaude has asked the cleric [John] Molino to help out at St. Philip Neri Church. But we too have church services and other activities and I can't spare him. I therefore beg that you kindly leave him free.

I am enclosing the good conduct certificates of our clerics for their summer vacations. May I remind you about an imprimatur for the *Life of St. Cornelius*?

Gratefully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

These controversies, though always courteous and friendly,

⁵ See Vol. IV, pp. 343ff. [Editor]

prompted some people who did not know the facts to accuse Don Bosco of trying to gain the upper hand in the diocese and of maneuvering for independence from his superiors. Notwithstanding his right intentions, Don Bosco occasionally seemed to give substance to these criticisms. Since his congregation was not yet approved, the chancery reluctantly tolerated certain measures that, after all, were necessary to preserve its incipient life. On the other hand, Don Bosco — in carrying out the Pope's and his own archbishop's suggestions — could not but use the means he needed to attain his ends. Misunderstandings were bound to arise. Occasionally the chancery refused him certain permissions. On one such occasion, without mentioning his mission and plans, Don Bosco remarked, "Look, Reverend Fathers, I ask nothing for myself. I am serving the diocese and receive no salary. I work solely for the good of souls. All I ask is to be let alone to work for God's glory."

On hearing anyone misconstrue his intentions as acting from a desire to be independent, he would retaliate, "Examine my undertakings and my writings, and you will find the spirit that moves me; check my public life and all I do. If you find anything reprehensible, point it out, and I shall be grateful to you and do my very best to correct it. But please be specific."

Lastly, there were some who showed amazement at a decision of his and criticized him for it, though it later proved most wise. It was evident to him that in spite of the Casati Education Bill,⁶ politicians would every year become more hostile to freedom of education and would raise grave obstacles to bar religious and priests from teaching even literary or scientific subjects in public and private schools. "We must face facts," Don Bosco used to say. "Times are bad and will not soon change. Within a few years we shall be forced either to have certified teachers or to close down our schools."

For this reason, he had already assigned several young clerics to prepare for government examinations. To this end he also engaged the services of a good instructor for regular summer courses;

⁶ It recognized both public and private schools and exempted the latter from State jurisdiction except in matters of health, public morals, and respect to the authorities of the State. [Editor]

as a result, several clerics did excellently in the exams. He likewise prepared several of his best pupils for college degrees and doctorates. He was the first — and at that time the only religious superior — to take this important step and register his clerics at the University of Turin for courses in literature, philosophy, and mathematics, as Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi, one of those clerics, so declared to us. Nor did Don Bosco excuse them from their annual theology examinations.

Thus Don Bosco made it clear that the clergy had to arm themselves with legal requirements in order to counteract secularistic and anticlerical educators effectively. Thus, besides nurturing many priestly vocations, he also publicly showed his appreciation of a serious education. Then, too, by this means he prepared the way for the expansion of his congregation to areas outside of Turin. Any other course of action would have impaired its very existence as a teaching religious congregation.

In taking this courageous step Don Bosco had acted in agreement with the diocesan vicar general, as Father Rua testified, but not all priests, even very pious ones, approved. Some bishops openly opposed this policy, condemning Don Bosco, as it were, for submitting to unjust government pretensions. They themselves did not permit their clerics to take such examinations. Later though, when they saw the spiritual harm resulting from their refusal, they realized how prudently Don Bosco had acted in the interest of the Church by exhorting them to yield to necessity. They eventually listened to his warning that education would otherwise be taken away from the clergy, and soon followed his example. Religious superiors also had at first shown surprise at his suggestion to have certified teachers of their own orders, but later they too had to admit its necessity. Thus, thanks to Don Bosco, many diocesan priests and seminarians were certified to teach in primary and secondary schools.

To this end Don Bosco had not spared fatigue, money, or sorrow. The hardships he endured for this cause are altogether incredible, but each obstacle he encountered strengthened him. Yet, at the beginning, he had to hear himself accused of imprudence because university studies presented some real dangers to young

seminarians and priests. In fact, Professor Thomas Vallauri one day said to Father Francesca: "Does Don Bosco still plan to send his clerics to the University? Tell him for me that the moral climate there is pestilential!"

Don Bosco, however, was sure that his clerics had a sound Christian formation and constantly forearmed them with advice. "Do you want to resist the devil's temptations?" he would say. "Love the Church, revere the Holy Father, receive the sacraments often, frequently visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, be very devoted to the Blessed Virgin, offer Her your heart, and you will be able to overcome all battles and all worldly allurements. When it is a question of doing good and rejecting or combating error, trust Jesus and Mary, and you will be ready to tread human respect underfoot and even suffer martyrdom." In his enlightened prudence he left it as his policy and testament to continue preparing certified teachers from the ranks of his clerics and priests.

In this chapter we have expounded the main criticisms directed at Don Bosco for several years and the reasons which justified his conduct. True, his critics could not then foresee and weigh his good intentions and gratifying results, but they could not be ignorant of his constancy — heroic at times — in working for the welfare of youth. Again, they could find imperfections in his undertakings such as are ever present in human endeavors — imperfections which he himself deprecated and strove to correct as effectively as possible. But they were wrong in not heeding the Holy Spirit's injunction in the Book of Proverbs, "Lie not in wait, nor seek after wickedness in the house of the just man, nor spoil his rest." [Prov. 24, 15] On the contrary, they often sent the exiled Archbishop Fransoni reports that were unfavorable to Don Bosco.

Once, when Canon Nasi visited him at Lyons, the archbishop asked, "When all is said and done, is Don Bosco doing good or harm?" The canon, a sincere friend of the Oratory, gave the archbishop the real facts. He was very pleased and gladly took the first opportunity to prove his satisfaction. A three-priest commission went to Lyons to report to him on diocesan affairs. While there, the three priests considered it their duty to lay before the archbishop various accusations against Don Bosco. Among other things,

they asserted that he was planning to found a seminary of his own and have boys and clerics residing at the Oratory, in order to provide personnel for his institutions to the detriment of diocesan seminaries and to no little slight of episcopal rights. The priests intended to put enough pressure on the kindly prelate to induce him to write to Don Bosco to abandon any such plan, perhaps even hinting at the possible closing of the Oratory boarding school section.

The archbishop, however, knowing Don Bosco's intentions, let the canons have their say and then tersely replied, "I have made confidential inquiries and have found nothing to substantiate your complaints. On the contrary, I have learned that much good is being done at the Oratory. So do not hinder or place obstacles in the way of one who is doing what I cannot do myself in Turin."

We shall close with a comment by Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio: "I think I can state that the enemies and adversaries of Don Bosco, of his name, and of his works were and are the enemies of good. I remember quite well that if righteous people happened to disagree with him on some detail or found some deficiencies in his undertakings, they nevertheless agreed with him in their substance. Especially in the earlier times of the Oratory it did happen that some prominent ecclesiastics suspected his intentions and even fought him. But, as far as I know, when these people came to know the real facts, they changed their minds and in nearly all cases became his friends and benefactors."

CHAPTER 26

Fatherly Exhortations

OUR narration has now brought us to December 1859 and the Christmas novena, a splendid occasion Don Bosco highly prized to have his children cherish that ineffable mystery.

He gave only seven “Good Nights” inasmuch as on two evenings he was kept busy in the confessional till very late. A young cleric noted the salient points of these talks, including the one he gave on the last night of the year.¹ We present them here prefaced with a quotation from the Canticle of Canticles: “Thy lips are as a scarlet lace, and thy speech sweet” [Cant. 4, 3] — the aptest illustration of the spiritual affection and unction that flowed from Don Bosco’s lips, tinged every morning by the Blood of Christ.

December 15

My dear boys, tomorrow we begin the Christmas novena. There is a story about a man who was very devoted to the Infant Jesus. While going through a forest one winter day, he heard a child’s whimper. Following the sound, he came upon a very beautiful child in tears. “My dear one,” he exclaimed, “what happened? Why are you here alone?”

“Nobody cares for me,” the child replied tearfully. With that, he vanished. The man understood then it was the Infant Jesus Himself lamenting man’s ingratitude and coldness.

I have told you this story that we may all do our best not to give Jesus cause to complain of us too. Let us get set to make this novena well. Every morning, besides Holy Mass, we will have the chanting of the prophecies, followed by a short talk and Benediction.

I suggest two things to make this novena well:

1. Often think of the Infant Jesus and His love for you. He proved it

¹ See Chapter 27. [Editor]

by dying on the Cross. In the morning, rise promptly at the sound of the bell and, if you feel the cold, think of Jesus shivering in the manger. During the day study your lessons diligently, do your homework, and pay attention to your teachers for the love of Jesus. Remind yourselves that Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men. Above all, take care not to do anything to displease Him.

2. Visit Him often in the Blessed Sacrament. We envy the shepherds who went to the grotto of Bethlehem to see Him, kissed His little hand, and offered Him their gifts. "Lucky shepherds!" we exclaim. And yet there is no reason to envy them, for their fortune is ours too. The same Jesus they visited in the grotto is in our tabernacle. The only difference is that the shepherds saw Him with the eyes of the body, whereas we see Him with the eyes of faith. Nothing will please Him more than our frequent visits to Him. How? First, by receiving Him often in Holy Communion — a custom that has always been eagerly and fervently observed at the Oratory especially during this novena. I hope it will be the same this year. Second, by slipping into church during the day, even for only a minute, even for only a "Glory Be." Have I made myself clear?

Two things, then, we shall do to make this novena well. What are they? Can you tell me? Let us often think of the Infant Jesus; let us visit Him by receiving Him in Holy Communion and frequently calling on Him in the tabernacle.

December 16

I am pleased to see that your marks for diligence in the study hall are good. This proves that you are really studying. From this I draw two conclusions: first, that you will give a good account of yourselves; and second, that you are good boys. I'm sure that this year you will do so well that not only will you pass your final exams with flying colors but each of you will also win a prize. "That's impossible," you will say. "Prizes are given only to a few; otherwise Don Bosco would go broke." But I tell you that prizes will be given to all who deserve them. Should all deserve them, all shall have them. At the close of this school year we will invite your parents and friends, pastors and mayors. What an honor for those who studied well! But even assuming that not all will have top marks, would it not be a rich reward in itself to be able to say: "I did my best. God is pleased with me, my parents are happy with my conduct, my heart is happy, and I have enriched my mind with useful knowledge"?

I also said that good marks show that you are good, and so it is, because piety is the most effective spur to study. That means that our novena is fruitful, and that the Divine Infant has already inflamed you with the desire to do good. Keep it up! Let this fire last not only one week but the whole year. Those who were rated "Excellent" should continue; those who did not quite make it should take heart and say to themselves: "If this or that boy did it, why can't I too? I will! No more lagging behind for me!"

If you realized how lucky you are to have an opportunity for study, you would do your utmost never to waste a minute. How many elderly people often sigh and lament, "Oh, if I could start all over again! How I would make up for the years I foolishly wasted in my youth. How carefully I would treasure them now. If I had used them wisely, I would now have a good education and a fine position." Then, too, as death draws near, they regret the merits they omitted to gain. There are lots of boys your age who would study day and night if they had the chance! Thousands of boys who really mean well are trying to get in, but are turned away for want of room. You, instead, have been the favorites of Divine Providence. If any of you would rather idle away their time than study — despite many sacrifices of parents and superiors who are exerting themselves to the utmost, despite their companions' repeated good examples — what a strict account they will have to render to God for wasting all these precious moments! Our Lord will demand an account of even a minute wasted. Think, then, how he will fare who wastes half-hours and hours at a time, even whole study periods! Courage then, my children! Keep on the good path you have entered. But do not forget that to be successful in your studies you must begin *ab alto*, from on high. Before you start studying, devoutly recite the *Actiones* as St. Aloysius, [Louis] Comollo, and Dominic Savio were wont to do.

December 17

Since we have the custom of handing in every evening whatever was found during the day, no matter how small, there should be no reason for thinking that someone may forget himself to the point of keeping what is not his. Nevertheless, as the devil is very cunning and may deceive someone in this matter, I want to remind you that stealing is the most dishonorable of vices. One who has been found to be a thief will never clear himself of that ugly blot. "That fellow is a thief!" his companions will say when they will be back home. "That fellow is a thief!" the townsfolk will repeat. He will be shunned by all. Yet, what

is more frightful is the judgment of the Holy Spirit: *Fures regnum Dei non possidebunt*. [Thieves will never enter heaven.] How much dirt can you bear in your eye? Not even a mote of dust! So too with heaven. The least thing belonging to others can bar you from there. If one were to die with but one stolen needle on his conscience, it would be enough to keep him out of paradise. True, a needle is a small matter, but he would have to pay very dearly for it in purgatory. St. Augustine says: *Non remittitur peccatum nisi restituatur ablatum*. Merely confessing a sin of theft will not obtain forgiveness until one has restored the ill-gotten goods, if the matter is grave and he can make restitution. If he cannot at the time, he should at least have a sincere and serious will to do so as soon as possible. And remember, many small things can little by little become a grave matter; a few coins today, a necktie tomorrow; a book, a writing tablet, or some other thing can in a short time build up a serious account at God's tribunal. Therefore, if we do not wish to risk ruining our reputation or burdening our conscience, let us be on our guard never to touch anything not belonging to us. We should look upon other people's property as live fire. If a spark falls upon us, we hasten to brush it off. So if we find anything, no matter how trivial — a sheet of paper, a nib, a pencil — let us leave it alone. If you need anything at any moment, ask your companions kindly to lend it to you. Besides, your superiors are around and will provide whatever you need.

December 18

If any one of you were to be called a porter, a bootblack, or a coolie, you would feel offended, and rightly so. And yet, while some boys would take offense at being put into such classes, they feel no embarrassment at all in acting like those people and using vulgar, distasteful expressions. So, if you wish to be thought well bred, don't use them. I do not mean by this to belittle common laborers. They are men like ourselves, and we must overlook their coarse manners because they are uneducated and their work is not uplifting. But you, who know better and are engaged in nobler tasks, should avoid coarse, vulgar language and show your education in your conduct. I exhort you, watch your language. You will reply, "It's no sin to say those words." True, and it's no sin to be a bootblack, either. Why aren't you one then? Some smarter boy might retort, "We may not and must not do anything sinful, but there is no harm in doing or saying anything that is not a sin." Tell me, would your parents approve your

vulgar language? They would feel highly embarrassed at such grossness! Some time ago I happened to hear one of you using vulgar language while a visitor was passing by, possibly an important person. What impression did he receive of the Oratory boys? Recall my advice and practice it.

Someone else may still insist, "Don Bosco is right, but I have an old habit. I try not to say those words, but when I am off guard they slip out." I understand, but meanwhile sincerely resolve never to say those words deliberately. Then watch yourself, especially when those words are more apt to escape you. The assistants will correct you if you fail; on your part, gracefully accept their corrections. Ask your own companions also to warn you when you slip, and you will see that little by little you will master and correct this habit. Do it in honor of the Infant Jesus.

December 19

Don Bosco often exhorts you to be obedient. Tonight, though, I shall speak only of obedience to the confessor. When a superior speaks to you, he does so in the name of Our Lord, and you should obey him as you would Our Lord. This is even truer of the confessor who, more particularly, acts and speaks in God's name. You must therefore give his words great importance and take them as truly coming from God. To understand how much Our Lord appreciates obedience to one's confessor, listen to this:

St. Teresa of Avila was favored by God with visions, but her confessor, believing them to be naught but clever tricks of the devil, commanded her to spit at them. Sure enough, Our Lord appeared to her. She first apologized for what she was going to do and then carried out her confessor's orders. Would you believe it? Our Lord highly praised what had seemed contempt but was actually an act of virtue.

If you make good confessions, there is hardly any danger that your confessor will make a mistake; but even if he did err in commanding something of you, you will never do wrong in obeying him. Do not be content with listening to his suggestions in the confessional. Call them to mind, even afterward, and say, "This is his suggestion. I'll do my best!" Remember those suggestions again as you examine your conscience at night prayers. Check whether or not you have carried them out. If there isn't enough time for a thorough examination, make one when you go to bed, and resolve to be more faithful to your promise if you have failed. Again, on going to church for Mass or for a visit to the

Blessed Sacrament, say to Jesus, "For Your sake, dear Jesus, I will do what my confessor suggests."

If you follow this advice of mine, you will surely make great strides along the path of virtue.

December 20

The usual snare with which the devil catches the young is to fill them with shame when they are about to confess their sins. When he pushes them to commit sin, he removes all shame as if there were nothing wrong with it, but when they are going to confession he returns that shame magnified and tries to convince them that the priest will be shocked by their sins and will no longer think well of them. Thus the devil tries to drive souls to the brink of eternal damnation. Oh, how many lads does Satan steal from God — sometimes forever — by this trick!

But you, my children, keep in mind that the confessor is never shocked by any sin we may commit, even if the one who confesses it is a holy person. The priest knows that human weakness is great and that an unguarded moment may be fatal. He therefore sympathizes with the penitent. When a boy is sick, his mother loves him even more. Sin is a sickness. If a mother should lose her son, how glad she would be if she could restore him to life! Sin is the soul's death. How happy a confessor is to be able to recall it to life! Remember then, my dear children, that, far from being shocked by your sins, the priest rejoices over your conversion, is moved by your confidence in him, and loves and esteems you even more than before. Our Lord says that the angels in heaven rejoice more over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just who need no repentance. It is the same with your confessor. But I will tell you more, my children. Do not be afraid to approach your confessor even outside of confession. Once confession is over, he thinks no more of it and just forgets it. This is my own daily experience. Besides, if he should remember it, it would only increase his joy and love for you because he could say to himself: "It is I who saved this child, and one day I'll be able to present him pure and holy to God in heaven. Moreover, this child is a guarantee too of my own salvation, for he will be grateful to me and will pray for me."

Therefore, dear children, would you not be blessed at the hour of death to have with you a confessor who knows you thoroughly and can care for your soul with a word or two?

As regards the esteem of a confessor for his penitent, I am going to

tell you two episodes from the life of St. Francis de Sales. One day a man confessed all the sins of his youth to this Saint. As the good bishop was lovingly giving him the necessary advice, the man said, "No doubt, Father, pity moves you to speak to me this way, but deep in your heart you must despise me."

"I should be very guilty," St. Francis replied, "if after such a good confession I still thought you a sinner. Quite the contrary! I now see you whiter than snow, like Naaman when he came out from Jordan cleansed from his leprosy. I love you as my own son since, by my ministry, I have given your soul a new birth to supernatural life. My esteem for you equals my affection, because from a vessel of ignominy you have become one of honor and sanctity. How dear your heart is to me, now that it is really full of God's love."

On another occasion, when a woman who had confessed many grievous sins asked almost the same question, he replied, "I now look upon you as a saint."

"But your conscience must tell you the contrary," she insisted.

"No," he said. "I say the truth. Before you came to confession, I knew that many unsavory things were said about you and I grieved because they were an offense to God and hurt your reputation. But now I have an answer for those who may speak ill of you. I can say you are a saint, and it will be the truth."

"But, Father, the past cannot be erased."

"It surely can. If men should judge you as the Pharisee judged Mary Magdalene after her conversion, you will have Jesus and your conscience to defend you."

"But, Father, what do you think of my past?"

"Nothing, I assure you. How can you expect me to think about what no longer exists before God? I will think only of praising God and rejoicing over your conversion. Yes, I will rejoice with the angels of heaven over your change of heart." As the Saint's eyes shone with tears, the penitent observed, "Doubtless you weep over my abominable life."

"Nay, I weep for joy at your resurrection to a life of grace."

Have you understood now, my children? Still, if notwithstanding all these reasons you do not feel brave enough to open your heart completely to your ordinary confessor, rather than commit a sacrilege, go to another.

December 23

During the Christmas holidays I want you to be happy. We will ask

Father Prefect to give the kitchen staff the necessary orders. Are you glad? I will see to your bodily comforts, but I want you to help me in providing comforts for your souls, too. The Divine Infant was born at this time, and desires to be born again every year in your hearts. He is waiting for something special from you. The novena sermons have told us how much He has done for us. Notice that He did it not only for us in general, but for each of us in particular. Many Fathers of the Church in fact tell us that Our Lord would have become man and died on the Cross even if there had been only one person to be saved! This means that what He suffered for all, He would have suffered for each one too. Therefore, every one of us can truly say, "This Child was born and died just for me; He has suffered so much for me. How shall I show Him my gratitude?" This lovable Child wants something from us, a special gift. What will you give Him? I will suggest two things: 1. A good confession and Communion with a promise of being always faithful to Him. 2. If you have not yet done so, write your parents a nice letter, without asking for food or sweets. Your parents will send you what they know you like. Instead, like good Christian children, offer them Christmas greetings, tell them you pray for them, thank them for their sacrifices for you, ask their pardon if you have at times been disrespectful, and promise you will always be obedient. Also send them my greetings and good wishes for Christmas and the New Year. Thus your letter will greatly console them and will also please Jesus very much, because you will be keeping His commandment to honor your father and mother. Of course, do not forget your benefactors and your pastor. Let them see that you are good-hearted, grateful, and well-mannered. And now, to all of you, my Christmas greetings!

CHAPTER 27

Fatherly Exhortations (Continued)

AT his Christmas Midnight Mass, Don Bosco remembered all his benefactors — among them Count Charles Cays,¹ one of the most outstanding, for whom Don Bosco obtained a dearly sought favor.

On the left bank of the Dora Riparia, on the mid-slope of Mount Asinaro, at the foot of which stands the town of Caselette and Count Cays' castle, a shrine had been erected in ancient times in honor of SS. Abachum and Audifax and their parents, Marius and Martha, noble Persians and martyrs.² The shrine had been restored and enlarged in 1817, and again in 1851 and 1855 at the expense of the queens of the House of Savoy and of the people. In 1856, fifteen little wayside chapels with paintings of the Way of the Cross and of the mysteries of the rosary had been erected along the road leading to the shrine. These holy martyrs had worked wonders, especially in favor of fever-stricken people.

Count Cays had asked Don Bosco on behalf of the townsfolk of Caselette to obtain a plenary indulgence from the Pope for those who would visit the shrine on the feast of these Saints, January 19, starting from first Vespers. Pius IX granted the favor

¹ Born in Turin on November 24, 1813, Count Cays attended the local Jesuit secondary school and later obtained his doctorate in law at the University of Turin. He married and had two children, but became a widower at the age of 32. From 1857 to 1860 he was a deputy in the Piedmontese Parliament and courageously defended the Church's rights against the anticlericals. In 1877 he became a Salesian; ordained a priest a year later, he continued to render invaluable assistance to Don Bosco. He died at the Oratory on October 4, 1882 at the age of 69, as he himself had predicted. [Editor]

² They met their martyrdom in Rome during Emperor Marcus Aurelius Claudius' persecution (268-270). Marius and his sons were beheaded and Martha was drowned. [Editor]

under the usual conditions and had a rescript³ — dated December 20, 1859 — forwarded to Don Bosco. Its promulgation was authorized on December 29 by Canon Celestine Fissore, vicar general.

That same evening Don Bosco spoke as follows after night prayers:

Dear boys, we shall never see this year again. The past will never return. If we have used our time well, it will be credited to our glory forever; if wasted, it shall be charged to our everlasting shame. What has been done can never be undone, but let us at least try to make it up a little by using these two remaining days well. Let us make the best of them by correcting some fault or practicing some virtue so that we can at least say: "During 1859 I got rid of one defect and practiced one virtue." Thomas a Kempis says in the *Imitation of Christ*: "We would quickly become saints if we only corrected one fault and practiced one virtue every year."

This suggestion introduced his talk on the last day of the year. He spoke to the whole house as follows:

My dear boys, you know how much I love you in the Lord and how I have given myself completely to your temporal and spiritual welfare. Whatever bit of knowledge and experience I have gained, whatever I am or have, my prayers and labors, my health and my very life, all of it I wish to use in your service. You can always count on me at any time and for anything, especially in matters of the soul. As far as I am concerned, I give you my whole self as a New Year's gift — a meager gift, perhaps, but a total one.

Now let us come to the keepsakes for the New Year. To all as a group I say: Make the Sign of the Cross well; do not gape about while serving Mass; keep silence in the dormitory; do not make deals without permission; do not read bad books, and if in doubt, check with a superior.

I hope you will carry out my suggestions. I'm sure you will, and I want you to end the year in perfect love and holy joy. Hence, I forgive any fault you may have committed, and I want you to do the same for each other, so that the new year may dawn with no trace of ill feelings

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

or gloom. If any boy is still under punishment in the dining room, I revoke the punishment. I am ready to blot out all your failings and promise never to charge you with them again; they are completely forgotten. I want you to do the same among yourselves. It wouldn't do to forgive today and then throw the offense back into your companion's face ten or fifteen days later. It wouldn't be fair. To forgive means to forget once and for all.

Now, let us come to particular keepsakes. I exhort the students to use earthly knowledge as a stepping stone to heavenly things — virtue and its practice.

To the artisans I say that since they have little time to look after their spiritual needs during the week, they should do so at least on Sundays and holy days by hearing Mass well, by paying attention to their religious instruction, and by devoutly attending Benediction. They should also try to receive the sacraments on Sundays and principal feasts of the year.

I wish to remind the clerics that they are wholly dedicated to God's service and, therefore, must no longer be concerned with earthly matters. Let all their efforts aim at God's greater glory and the salvation of souls. Hence, my dear clerics, I urge you all to help each other save your souls by good example and advice. Consider yourselves fortunate if you can prevent just one venial sin. Pass good books on to your companions, urge them to obey, and alert your superiors if you find a wolf in the flock. In conclusion, remember the saying of a great Saint [St. Augustine]: *Divinorum divinissimum est cooperari in salutem animarum!* Of all things divine, the most divine of all is to cooperate in the salvation of souls.

To the priests, though but a few, I recommend that they strive to be inflamed with a burning zeal for souls.

And for myself? I shall say (*and here Don Bosco sounded deeply moved*) that as 1859 is about to fade into the past, I feel weighed down with another year. We have now one year less to live. How unfortunate we would be if we squandered it. I feel the burden of responsibility grow heavier as the days pass, for I shall have to give God a strict account of each of your souls. I am doing all I can for you, but you must help me, my dear children.

Let us therefore promise God that we will spend the rest of our lives loving and serving Him. Let us also thank Him for the many benefits He has bestowed on us, including the grace of seeing a new year — a favor He has not granted to all. I no longer see in our midst Magone,

Berardi, Capra, Rosato, Odetti, and others. Where are they? In eternity, gone to give God an account of their lives. I urge you to keep your conscience clear because Our Lord may summon you to His tribunal this year.

Those of you who through fear or shame do not dare tell their sins to their ordinary confessor, I recommend to go to another, but not to fail to put their conscience in order.

It is a foregone conclusion that next year at this time not all of us shall be here. Let us then recite a *Pater* for all who shall die during the coming year and for those who have died during the year about to end.

The Oratory necrology recorded the day of death of each of the dear departed ones of 1859: Charles Rosato of Turin, at the Cottolengo Hospital on May 23 at the age of 43; Francis Capra of Centallo, at SS. Maurice and Lazarus Hospital in June, at the age of 16; John Zucca of Cavour, at home on August 15, at the age of 26; Bartholomew Odetti of Vigone, at the Cottolengo Hospital on September 26, at the age of 18.⁴

After reciting a *Pater*, *Ave*, and *Requiem* with the boys kneeling around him, Don Bosco stepped down from the little stand and, as was his custom, began to give a personal keepsake to each of his children for the new year. It was a word of advice couched in clear, concise, and striking terms, suited to individual needs and so appropriate as to leave an indelible impression on the boy. A very remarkable phenomenon indeed this was, when we realize that Don Bosco's personal keepsakes went to some three hundred boys.

On their part, the boys too gave Don Bosco a New Year's gift in the form of personal notes. These would manifest some need or secret of theirs, request advice, offer an explanation, acquaint him with some disorder, or even go so far as respectfully offer him a piece of advice. If naught else, the boys promised to do better in the future, to study or work more diligently, and to pray for him.

The cleric John Bonetti entered the following in his chronicle: "I gave Don Bosco my keepsake. As in previous years, on the evening of December 31, 1859, he whispered his keepsake to me in these few words: 'Be humble; work hard.'"

⁴ As regards Michael Magone and Constantius Berardi, see Chapter 10. [Editor]

CHAPTER 28

Don Bosco's Almanac

DON Bosco's almanac — *Il Galantuomo*¹ — came off the press toward the end of 1859. Its curious Preface contained, among other things, predictions to be fulfilled in 1860 and subsequent years. They were preceded by a detailed account of *Galantuomo's* adventures carefully worded in a blend of the serious and comical so as to play down the prophetic tone of the predictions and avoid nettling government officials who might chance upon the almanac. In that event, Don Bosco hoped they would make little of such a publication and, at most, pooh-pooh it and its author while its readers and friends would still benefit by it. But all his precautions proved inadequate. The almanac immediately created quite a stir for some time — not just among the populace but in government circles as well. The Preface² read:

Il Galantuomo to His Friends

First of all, my dear friends, let me explain some changes in this almanac. You have noticed that the title is no longer *National Almanac* but *Lombard and Piedmontese Almanac*. That's to make it clear that, like all good citizens, I too approve of the union of Lombardy and Piedmont . . . This year I will say nothing of fairs and markets because I have no idea when and where they will be held in our new States. To avoid blundering, I'll just keep quiet about them. But I can assure you that what I am going to say is far more important. It may make you cry; it may make you laugh. After citing my military exploits, I shall play historian and will describe the past; then I shall play politician and

¹ See Vol. IV, p. 449; Vol. V, pp. 87f, 181-188, 393f. [Editor]

² We shall give only an extract, since the military and political events it mentions hold but little interest for our readers. [Editor]

talk about the present; finally, I shall play prophet and foretell the future . . .

I am afraid we shall be at war again this coming year. I base my prediction on what my mother used to say: "War is God's scourge on men because of their sins." And people keep sinning. When I was in the army I found many good soldiers who trusted in Our Blessed Lord, but there were quite a few to spout evil about religion, the Pope, bishops, and priests. I heard them blaspheme in French, Italian, and Piedmontese while fighting, when wounded, and even when dying.

On my return home I thought I would find our churches crowded with people thanking God for the war's end. Instead I found many malcontents — hopeless fools — who seemed to prefer war to peace. What shocked me most was all the blaspheming and cursing that went on everywhere; it was worse than in the army. Add to this the desecration of Sunday by unnecessary work. Priests preach, but people don't want to listen; priests wait in the confessionals, but too many don't care and seldom go to confession. Quite a few never go at all; some even poke fun at those who do.

Fools, indeed! Do you really believe you can mock God and get away with it? Do you think He gave His Commandments on Mount Sinai in jest? No! He wants us to obey them. The one who observes them, He shall bless and reward in this life and in the life to come; anyone who despised them, He will punish on earth and condemn forever to unquenchable fire with the demons in hell. Willy-nilly, that is where all those who despise God's Commandments shall inexorably go.

Forgive this burst of anger, friends. When I talk about religion I get steamed up, and I can hardly control the fire burning within me and forcing me to speak.

Now I shall mention other punishments which I fear the year will heap upon us. We shall have another war which, though less gory than last year's, will plunge a still greater number of souls into hell. We shall have two terrible epidemics; I won't name them, but you will see their frightful effects. Two important figures will disappear from the political scene of this world. Parents will be upset no end by their children's insubordination and will weep and lament over the grief and discord they will cause. They will seek a remedy for this ill but find only poison. The one true remedy, Christian living, they themselves have rejected. Wine will be cheaper, but bread will cost more. A town will be laid waste by an earthquake and others will be scourged by frost, hail, and drought.

I should say more but dare not. I must repeat, though, that these impending evils are grave and will start this very year. There is only one way to keep them away or soften their impact: by leading a Christian life and avoiding sin.

These are my presentiments. You will say: "You're getting old, *Galantuomo*; and so you are forever afraid, even when you have no reason."

"True," I say. "I am old and am easily scared. But don't forget that old folks' fear is based on experience, and experience is a great teacher."

Still, I heartily hope my predictions will go astray and that next year — if I'm still around — you will tell me I was a false prophet. Then I'll gladly excuse myself by saying that my prophecies are for almanacs only.

The Preface was followed by a few charming stories. One, entitled "A Wounded Veteran's Homecoming," described the bravery of Piedmontese troops elated at the presence of their king, and the deep emotion of Victor Emmanuel II on his visit to the battlefield the following day.

Il Galantuomo came to the attention of the police and caused some apprehension in government circles, since very secret preparations were afoot for a new invasion of the Papal States and the annexation of the kingdom of Naples to Piedmont in the coming year. *Il Galantuomo's* musings were sufficiently veiled for the common people, but clear as noonday to the schemers. Fearing spies in their midst, they wanted to know what had moved Don Bosco to write as he did. Accordingly he was summoned to the Ministry of the Interior. An official received him and, after courteously remarking that he considered Don Bosco's recent letter to the king somewhat disrespectful, he brought up the subject of *Galantuomo's* predictions.

"Are you the writer?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Why do you write things that cause unrest among the people? What do you know about the future? Why do you pose as a prophet?"

"Please remember that I am only writing for an almanac."

"But where do you get the news you so confidently give out?"

“Have I said anything untrue?”

“No! That’s why I’m curious to know what your source is. You must have access to confidential information.”

“I hardly know what to answer. Nobody has ever passed on State secrets to me. I do not think I did wrong in writing as I did.”

“That’s not the point. You must have something to base your predictions upon. In any event, you should have steered clear of these things.”

“I wish I had known your feelings on the matter. I am certainly not one to trouble authorities. Besides, I am sure that no one will be jeopardized.”

“Of course not. Surely, you don’t expect me to believe that you know the future!”

“Think what you please.”

“Well, I sent for you to tell you it is not wise — in fact, it is risky — to meddle in things that may cause concern to the government.”

“You will excuse me, but I see no reason for concern. Either the government believes me to be a prophet or not. If it does, then let it provide for the State’s welfare. If not, let it ignore me.”

The official smiled at this conclusion and, urging Don Bosco to be more cautious in the future, courteously dismissed him.

CHAPTER 29

The Preventive System in Action

AS we have now reached 1860 in our narrative, it is time that we dwelt on Don Bosco's many-sided holy endeavors to impart a sound Christian education to his ever increasing number of pupils. We have already said much about his zeal, but more is yet to be said about his inexhaustible, inventive charity.

On occasion many people asked him to explain his system in training youngsters so successfully in Christian principles. His reply would simply be: "The Preventive System. Charity!"¹ Urged to elaborate and to suggest ways and means to apply it, he would add, "Instill the holy fear of God."

"But the fear of God is only the beginning of wisdom," the rector of the seminary at Montpellier wrote to him in 1886. "Kindly tell me more of your method so that I can better help my seminarians." While reading this letter to his council members, Don Bosco commented: "They ask me to expound on my system, and I myself don't know what it is! I have always gone along without a system, just as the Lord inspired me and circumstances required."

We must remark, however, that he did have a system all his own. It might be summed up in these few words: "Charity, fear of God, confidence in the superior, frequent confession and Communion, ample opportunity of going to confession." As we have seen and shall see further, God was always at his side, but this special assistance, somewhat the basis of his system, was not something others could count upon as their due. Still, in the

¹ See Vol. IV, pp. 379-385. [Editor]

use of all ordinary, human means he can easily be imitated by any spiritual director who is aware of his grave obligation of saving souls.

Don Bosco used to say: "A priest's every word must always be the salt of eternal life. Anyone approaching a priest must always take back with him some eternal truth, something to benefit his soul." He himself faithfully abided by this principle with everyone, even with strangers, and he did so all the more lovingly and effectively with his own pupils. They were his precious charges entrusted to him by God Himself. When speaking of them, he would say with a heart overflowing with joy: "God has sent us, is sending us, and will send us many boys! Let us take good care of them. How many others He will direct to us if we carefully correspond to His favors! Let us zealously and unselfishly give ourselves to their education and salvation."

When a new boy would come up to his room, Don Bosco's first words were about his soul and its eternal salvation. His fatherliness and his calm, constant smile won the lad's heart and inspired respect and confidence. To cheer him and dispel any trace of homesickness, he would start somewhat like this: "I am glad to see you! You came here willingly, didn't you? What's your name? Where are you from?" The boy would reply accordingly.

"How are you?"

"Fine, Father."

"Do you have any brothers?"

"Yes, Father."

"What about your pastor?"

"He wishes to be remembered to you."

"Do you like to eat? Are you good at that?"

"Oh, yes, Father."

After breaking the ice, Don Bosco would go on at once to the things that really mattered. Becoming somewhat more serious, yet always smiling — a trait all his own — he would lower his voice and confidentially say, "Now let's talk of what really matters. I want to be your friend. What do you say? I want to help you save your soul. How are you doing spiritually? Were you a good boy at home? Will you try to be better here? Have you gone

to confession yet? Did you make good confessions at home? You will open your heart to me, won't you? We must go to heaven together! Do you understand what I want of you? I hope you will pay me another visit. Then we'll have a confidential talk, just the two of us. You'll like what I tell you."

The boy would smile, nod, answer a word or two, or perhaps would lower his eyes and blush, depending on Don Bosco's questions which neither were importunate nor demanded an answer. Meanwhile, Don Bosco would scrutinize him with a practiced eye and estimate his character, intelligence, and heart.

To one showing a keen mind he sometimes would say:

"Will you give me the key?"

"What key? To my trunk?"

"The key to your heart," Don Bosco would reply with affable dignity. And the boy would say: "Oh, certainly, Father! Right now! In fact, you have it already!"

Thus, gently but strongly, Don Bosco won the boy's heart and with a masterly touch drew from it, as from a tuneful harp, sweet notes of holy resolutions.

Often parents would present a boy to Don Bosco. He would welcome them cordially, but after they had withdrawn he would say to the lad: "I really want to be your friend. Do you know what I mean?"

"That you will look after me?"

"Not quite!"

"That you will give me good advice?"

"Not exactly that either!"

"That you will teach me?" While the boy still tried to guess, Don Bosco would say, "I mean that your superiors and I will do all we can for you and never harm you. Do you understand?"

"Not really!"

"I mean we will do all the good we can for your soul." And then he would briefly explain what that implied.

Sometimes he would meet a newly arrived pupil in the playground. After the usual questions and light talk he would say, "I want you to be a good friend of mine. Do you know what that means?"

"That I must be obedient?"

"Vaguely, yes. Being Don Bosco's friend means helping him."

"To do what?"

"To save your soul. That's all! The rest matters little. Do you know what it means to help me save your soul?"

"That I must be good?"

"Something more to the point."

"I don't understand."

"It means that you must promptly and diligently do all I'll ask you to do for the good of your soul."

Generally the boys were so struck by these words, so flabbergasted, that they could hardly find their way out of his room, or take their leave from him if they were in the playground. They would then withdraw to a quiet corner and mull over his words. Some understood everything, others only half, still others little or nothing; yet even these could not help but muse over them. Generally this sort of introduction to Oratory life made them resolve to do their very best to meet his expectations.

When Don Bosco showed up in the playground the oldtimers would immediately crowd around him while the newcomers would trail behind, because they either were still too shy or did not dare make their way through the crowd. Don Bosco would notice them and call them over. When they were close to him he would confidentially whisper to one or the other, "Be good and we shall be friends." "Don Bosco likes you and wants to help you save your soul." "The Lord has sent you here to keep getting better." "Our Lady is waiting for you to give Her your heart." "Our Lord wants you to be another St. Aloysius."

Don Bosco has assured us that boys react favorably to this approach, gladly open their hearts, begin at once to do well, become friends with the superior, and are completely won over because they trust him. Telling them at once and clearly what one desires of them for the good of their souls is the quickest way to win their hearts. In Don Bosco's experience, very few did not respond to this approach. He used to say that if, at a boy's arrival, the superior did not show concern for his eternal salvation, if he shied away from prudently broaching matters of conscience, or

did not speak frankly of the boy's soul, limiting himself to vague roundabout recommendations to be good and give a good account of himself, then his words would be ineffective and accomplish nothing. The superior would not win a pupil's affection and would find it hard to make up for this first false step of his.

"A boy," Don Bosco often said, "more than we realize it, wants someone to broach the subject of his eternal welfare. This is how he comes to know who sincerely loves him. Therefore, show him your concern for his eternal salvation."

Don Bosco used this approach to invite boys to confession because the soul's welfare is strictly linked with it. They understood that he would most willingly help them if they wanted to avail themselves of his priestly ministry. But even in this he used supreme tact and moderation, for confidence must be won, not extorted. He prudently doled out advice as needed, to make it acceptable rather than importune.

When he saw that a boy did not care to take this first step of confession, he smoothed the way for him by asking: "When will you be ready for a general confession of your future life?"

"Of my future life?" the boy would laugh. "I can't do that!"

"Right, my lad! Then together let's make it of your past life. And don't you worry! If you get stuck, Don Bosco will help you."

Sometimes he would assign dependable companions to befriend new boys, give them good advice, and gently coax them to go with them to confession at a certain time. By such holy resourcefulness he returned or kept God's grace in them and gradually shaped them into models of virtue and Christian perfection.

He was deeply concerned if he ever saw newly arrived pupils standing aloof and gloomy in a corner. Fearing the devil's wiles, he would call them over and start a friendly conversation. Then he would solicitously introduce them to one or another of the best pupils, telling the latter to take his new friend in tow and keep him happy. He did not rest until he had won them over to their new life and got them used to their duties, especially their religious practices.

It is clear enough from the above that the first thing Don Bosco required of a new boy was his moral reform. The first step to it

was a good confession. Indeed, Don Bosco was a master at moral reform; the admirable power of his counsels is well known to all. In addition, he was a model of Christian, fatherly kindness. Canon Hyacinth Ballesio wrote in his *Vita intima di Don Giovanni Bosco* [The Innermost Life of Don Bosco]: "In his dealings with us he was friendly and affable, avoiding a formalism and a rigorism which erect a wall between superior and subject. His authority inspired respect, confidence, and love. Our hearts went out to him with intimate, joyful, and total abandon. We all wanted to go to him for confession. For countless years he devoted sixteen to twenty hours a week to this holy but fatiguing apostolate in addition to his many other absorbing occupations. This was a mode of operation more unique than rare between superior and dependents, a system proper to saints — and only to saints — that enables an educator to discover his pupils' temperament, wield it prudently, and unlock its hidden energies."

Furthermore, confession was a step to Holy Communion, whose very frequent reception is a must for the moral wholesomeness of any educational institution. In response to Don Bosco's endless exhortations, a large number of boys went to Communion daily; a larger number yet went several times a week, and nearly all received on Sundays. The less fervent received every other week or at least once a month. Don Bosco saw to it that there would be frequent and regular occasions for the boys to receive the Eucharist worthily.

We shall mention a few such occasions for which they were suitably prepared. The Exercise for a Happy Death, held on the first Thursday of every month, was nearly always preceded by Don Bosco's announcement of a forthcoming death at the Oratory. Don Bosco would reveal the exact time and occasionally even the circumstances of that death, as well as sometimes the initials of the one concerned. He read those poignant prayers himself, kneeling at the altar. All the more important novenas of Our Lady were devoutly made. He was seriously concerned with the Immaculate Conception and Christmas novenas especially. "Remember," he used to say, "that the year's success depends mostly on the fervor of these two novenas." A daily visit to the Blessed

Sacrament was entirely optional. The boys' deportment in church was such as to stir the coldest hearts to piety. One boy posed as a model for the St. Aloysius statue adorning one of the altars in the Festive Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Then there were other aids to piety: various sodalities — wellsprings of charity and gardens of virtues — and edifying reading in the dining room and dormitories. The books chosen to be read in the dormitories were, at Don Bosco's order, biographies of saintly youths. Other practices of piety included the Stations of the Cross on Fridays of Lent, a triduum of sermons at the opening of the school year, a similar triduum preparatory to Easter, and an annual five-day spiritual retreat.

To promote the goodness and the overall well-being of the Oratory and to prevent evil, Don Bosco used other means too which we might label "rational" — suggested by his keen mind and long experience with community life. He would expound them in conferences to the superiors of the house, often remarking, "If you want your words to impress your boys, you must at all times erase your own ego. Boys can see through you. If they spot jealousy, envy, or pride in a superior, or a preoccupation to out-shine others, that superior's influence is done for. Lack of humility always undermines unity; a superior's selfishness can spell ruin for a resident school. If we seek only the glory of God, we shall continue to enjoy the golden days of the Oratory, but if we are after our own glory, then discontent, division, and disorder will be upon us. Let the confreres be one with their superior, and let the superior be of one heart with all his dependents, without selfish, ulterior motives."

He therefore urged superiors to be tactful in speaking to confreres and dependents. "When giving orders," he often said, "put it this way: 'Could you oblige?' 'Would you do me a favor?' 'Could you do this for me?' 'Would you object to doing this?' Never use a tone of command. Never say: 'I want.' Likewise, never demand what is physically or spiritually harmful or above a subject's capacity."

To teachers he would say: "Always be the first to enter your classroom and the last to leave it." "Take special care of backward

pupils." "Do not let your pupils' behavior during recreation period affect their scholastic rating." "Never send negligent pupils out of the classroom. Be patient with their light-mindedness." "On the eve of a feast, announce it very briefly at the end of the last period and exhort them to go to Holy Communion. Great is a teacher's influence on his pupils if they love him." "Never read the conduct marks on Saturday,² lest they irritate those who fared poorly and keep them from going to confession. On Sundays, let the reading of a chapter of the regulations substitute for the fifteen-minute free reading period customary at the end of each evening study session. This will help them persevere in the good resolutions made that morning."

To the assistants he gave this advice: "Supervise your boys constantly and everywhere; make it just about impossible for them to do wrong. Be more alert in the evening after supper, so as to prevent the smallest disorder." "On Saturday evenings and on the eve of solemnities, see that the boys do not loiter about the stairs, corridors, or playgrounds in leaving the study hall or shops under the pretext of going to confession. See that they all take along *The Companion of Youth* for proper preparation and thanksgiving after confession."

To all superiors he used to suggest: "Never strike boys for any reason at all." "Never tolerate immorality, blasphemy, or stealing. As soon as a boy is known to impair the morals of others, have him taken to the prefect and promptly dismissed." "For lesser faults, take a youngster's light-mindedness into consideration. For instance, it is rare to find boys who never tell lies, or who on occasion will not steal trifles or eatables." "Do not reprimand or correct when you are angry or upset, lest your pupils attribute it to anger, but wait, even a few days if necessary, until you have calmed down." "Likewise, when you must correct, reprimand, or warn a pupil, always try to do it in private and when he is not upset or angry. Wait till he is calm and at ease. Then tell him what you must, but end up with an encouraging word — for example, that from now on you want to be his friend and you will help him all you can."

² The day when most boys went to confession. [Editor]

And he would add: "Be quick to forgive — and do so wholeheartedly — whenever a pupil shows he is sorry. In this case forget everything. Never say 'You will pay for this' to one who may have disobeyed, answered back, or lacked respect. That would be very un-Christian." "Do not punish slight faults severely. If a boy believes himself unjustly punished, he will not easily forget, and may even entertain a desire for revenge; failing that, he will at least curse the teacher or assistant. There are frightful instances of such long-nourished hatreds." "When punishment is unavoidable, take your pupil aside and show him his wrong as well as your regret to have to punish him." "Never punish a whole class or dormitory. Try to single out the culprits, and if necessary have them sent away; but never lump together the good and the bad — the latter are always only a few — lest all be made to suffer for them. At the same time encourage the guilty ones who show good will and give them a chance to straighten themselves out."

Don Bosco also gave his co-workers two very wise pointers for discovering — and dismissing from the Oratory — undesirable pupils:

In order to find out from the very start of the year which boys are morally dangerous, I am wont to classify them into two categories: those who are morally corrupt and those who habitually try to circumvent the school rules. As to the first, I will say something which, incredible as it may seem, is still a fact. Let us suppose that there is but one corrupt boy among five hundred in a boarding school. A new boy arrives — he, too, morally corrupt. These youngsters come from different towns, provinces, even states; they are not in the same grade or dormitory and have never known or seen each other before. Yet by the second day, at times even on the same day, after only a few hours, you will see them together at recreation. An evil instinct would seem to make them gravitate to those who are tainted with the same pitch, and a devilish magnet seems to draw them into friendship. The saying "Birds of a feather flock together" makes it quite easy to ferret out scabby sheep before they become dangerous wolves.

The second category of boys, too, must not be allowed to stay. If a youngster seems good but is thoughtless, easily absents himself from where he should be, or often roams around the playgrounds, stairs,

balconies, nooks, or out-of-the-way places by himself, always be on your guard. Do not be fooled if he looks shy, withdrawn, light-minded, or naive. He either is putting on an act or unfailingly he will soon meet someone who will corrupt him. Take my word for it, boys in these two categories are very dangerous.

However, Don Bosco did not limit himself to norms; he himself took on most of the work for the good order of the house. He required that teachers and assistants give him a list of the pupils' weekly and monthly marks for diligence and conduct. There were as many lists as teachers, assistants, and craftsmasters, and each list was signed by the respective superior. The earliest lists in our archives are those of 1857-58 and carry marginal observations. Besides these reports Don Bosco required others as well. He also wanted weekly scholastic reports of the day students from the Cottolengo Institute and of the clerics. These latter were supervised by one of their own classmates.

Whenever he had to leave Turin for a few weeks, he would soon enough seek detailed information about his boys at the Oratory. We have in our archives the conduct marks of the pupils of Latin II, of the boys in all seven dormitories, and of the members of the St. Aloysius Sodality. The young cleric whom Don Bosco had asked to forward these lists added this note:

[No date]

Beloved Father in Jesus Christ,

I would have many things to say, if you consider that I have yet had no occasion to speak to you privately since my return from the summer vacation. But it would not do to write what I have in mind to tell you. For the present I am glad to oblige by sending you this list of my pupils — your very dear children. As you will see, things have so far been proceeding very satisfactorily with but few exceptions. Were I to say that I am not somewhat downcast and heavy-hearted, I would be telling a lie. But, thank God, this is tempered by the thought that you are working for the salvation of our brothers, and through your zealous toil you will win souls to God.

Enough now. Do come back soon. I want you, and everyone asks for you, desires you, longs for you. We can't wait to see our most loving

Father again in our midst. I firmly hope that you will always remember me and all your children whom you love more than yourself. My classmates and brothers and myself send you heartfelt greetings.

Obediently and devotedly yours in J.C.,

Francis Vaschetti

This letter bears testimony to the teachers' and assistants' affection for Don Bosco and to their keen sense of duty. It was their custom to add a few lines of their own as a postscript to the lists of the boys' conduct marks. We shall report a few of these remarks expressing their devotedness and desire to please him. A young cleric wrote: "Moved by filial obedience and affection for your goodness, I beg you again to tell me my shortcomings and faults." Another wrote: "Our most exemplary [Michael] Rua and our alert Danussi are charged to admonish me of my faults; the former especially is supposed to watch me and keep a score on me." A third added: "After you have read this list, with your permission, I will come and speak to you."

Don Bosco often called in assistants and teachers, the catechist, and the prefect to discuss privately what they had noticed in the house. This frequent exchange of ideas and observations, while encouraging those who had to be with the boys always, kept the superiors well acquainted with everything.

The pupils, on the other hand, aware that Don Bosco checked their grades and that the study hall marks for application were handed to him every Sunday, gave them great importance. Ten (excellent) was the most common mark; nine (almost excellent) drew tears from those who received it; eight (good) and especially seven (fair) were considered so low as to warrant dismissal. We must say that these marks were given with a certain rigor, in accordance with the policy that those who were maintained by charity should deserve it. When a boy's grades were low, Don Bosco would check them against his application mark in the study hall and sometimes found that his teacher and the study hall assistant differed in their opinion of the student. For this reason, Bishop John Cagliero assured us, Don Bosco did not immediately pass judgment, but sought the cause which was sometimes beyond

the pupil's control. For example, a boy might be blamed for being almost continually distracted in the study hall; another for barely spending an hour on his school work and then whiling away the rest of the time reading or amusing himself with trifles; a third for never finishing his homework; a fourth for neglecting his lessons. Don Bosco would call these boys to his room, one at a time on different days, give them a few pages to memorize or a little composition to write, and then he would test their knowledge. Thus he would find that one was quite slow in learning, another was very light-minded though blessed with a prodigious memory, while a third had a rather poor memory but made up for it with sound judgment. To each he would give practical advice for using his time profitably. Then he would tell the study hall assistant that when he noticed a distracted or sleepy pupil, he should approach him and kindly ask if he was having a problem with his lesson or homework and offer to help. In this manner some pupils who at first seemed unfit for studies succeeded surprisingly well.

At the Oratory very few students ever deserved a reprimand. No one will ever be able to visualize their desire for study. At mealtimes they kept their books open by their side; at playtime they would shorten their games to go over their lessons; in the dormitory they would seek a place near the lamp in order to prolong their study. Superiors had to restrain them continually lest they injure their health.

As for possible cases of boys cleverly masking their malice, Don Bosco surprisingly managed to discover them — to the moral benefit of the house — through the conduct register and the assistants' reports. Besides the official conduct register, he kept a private one with the names of all the pupils. Anytime he received an unfavorable report about a pupil or heard of even a slight fault of a kind to alert a prudent educator or of a serious suspicion about his conduct, he would place a secret checkmark by his name according to his offense. Occasionally, a name would have ten or fifteen such checkmarks within a month — at times, all of the same kind. Now and then, Don Bosco would carefully peruse the register. Only about ten percent of the pupils would have several

checkmarks beside their names. He would then turn his attention to these, looking more minutely into their conduct, placing them under special supervision, observing the friends they associated with, having them questioned, or questioning them himself. As a result, it was hardly ever possible for the devil to conceal his tricks and his friends. Don Bosco often recommended this method to directors, assuring them that he had found it very helpful and almost infallible in its findings.

Basing himself on this register, sometime in June he took steps to ensure the Oratory's moral welfare for the following school year by drawing up a list of those to be dismissed and handing it to the prefect for execution. In our archives we have one such list, dated May 15, 1859. We must remember that during that year there were acts of insubordination traceable to war fever. And yet, to the Oratory's great credit, only fifteen out of three hundred pupils were listed for dismissal; of these four were marked "doubtful."

Don Bosco also noted in this private register the students who were to discontinue their schooling and take up a trade or craft, the artisans who deserved to be given a chance at studies, and those pupils who were to be taken back conditionally after the summer vacation.

As we have said, the soul was the first thing Don Bosco spoke of to new pupils upon their arrival; we must add that it was also the last when they left. "The number of pupils that Don Bosco sheltered, cared for, and educated at the Oratory alone," Bishop John Cagliero asserts, "was about fifteen thousand; a far greater number of day boys he taught and catechized in the festive oratories of Turin. All received the benefit of his fatherly, priestly blessing."

Don Bosco showed a most tender charity toward all, not only toward the good ones who, after completing their studies or learning a trade, returned home; not only toward the day boys who came to take leave of him when going away from Turin; but also toward those who had not responded to his care and some, too, who had not met his expectations. All these he either welcomed or sent for when they were about to leave and with fatherly benevolence suggested what was best for their state in life. After blessing them, he would exhort them to return often to the Oratory and to keep

themselves as virtuous and worthy sons of Don Bosco — in short, to save their souls.

He never forgot them. On learning at times that some were in financial straits, he aided them himself with fatherly solicitude or got them help from charitable persons. Once a former pupil, a shoemaker then in the army, came to see him. His family was very poor. "Did you get any money from home?" Don Bosco asked. On receiving a negative reply, he pressed some money into his hand. "Take this," he said, "and don't tell anybody. If you are in need, don't be ashamed to come to me." How many such instances might be recorded!

With these kindhearted gestures, he kept his hold on their hearts in order to direct them to God. For them he was ever the good Father who had gladdened their boyhood. Hence, when meeting them after many years, he could frankly greet them with the same word they had heard in parting: "Your soul!"

"Well! You were a good boy once, weren't you?"

"I couldn't say."

"How about now?"

"Well, Father, you know how life is in the world."

"Do you go to confession?" Or: "When will you come and see me again?" And he would whisper a word in his ear according to the reply he received.

Don Bosco exhorted his directors to do the same with their former pupils when coming across them or when they returned to visit their alma mater. By way of example he suggested that they should ask in a friendly way: "Have you made your Easter duty?" or "Is it long since you have been to confession?" But he urged them to be straightforward, with no roundabout questions, such as: "I should like to ask you . . ." "If you will allow me . . ." "Please don't be offended if I ask you . . ." "None of that," he would say. "Be honest and immediately pass on to other things. This method is effective; anything else will fail. But you might add: 'My, am I nosy!' or some such similar expression."

CHAPTER 30

Holy Expedients

BISHOP [John Baptist] Bertagna¹ emphatically declared: "Don Bosco's charity suggested so many holy expedients to win souls to God that it would be tedious to mention them all and the patience they demanded. Their number and worth surpass praise." We shall further illustrate some we have already described and add others that will pleasantly delight our readers.

Don Bosco's first expedient was the regular practice of his own slogan, *Servite Domino in laetitia!* [Serve the Lord joyfully!] Orationary life was a blend of a reverent fear of God with untiring zest for work and study, all animated by holy cheerfulness. This admirable combination put almost everyone into an environment of joy, enthusiasm, and indescribable delight. Those who have not seen it can hardly imagine how noisy, carefree, and happy the boys were at their games, crisscrossing every square foot of the playground. Don Bosco — prime mover of that hustle and bustle — rejoiced no end. Knowing how he liked to join their games and conversations whenever he had time, the youngsters would often gaze up at his window and hope that he would come out on the balcony. If he did, a joyful shout greeted him from every corner of the playground, and a rush of lads met him at the foot of the stairs to welcome him by kissing his hand.

Few people in this world, we are convinced, have had such power of attraction over boys and have known how to use it for their own good, as Don Bosco did. To his children he was amia-

¹ Former professor of moral and pastoral theology at the Convitto Ecclesiastico in Turin and auxiliary bishop in the same city. [Editor]

bility itself. Quite appropriately Bishop John Cagliero and the Oratory clerics and boys used to say, "Our Lord's goodness shone in him."

If Don Bosco met a gloomy, downhearted boy, he would say "Cheer up!" and his lips gave the words a magic of their own to dispel his sadness, lift his spirits, and give him strength to face his responsibilities.

"How do you feel?" he would ask another lad. If needed, he would inquire further and then have him receive the necessary care. In winter, if he thought some youngster was not warmly clothed, he would feel his sleeves and say, "Lad, you need warmer clothes. And how about your bed? Do you have enough blankets?" He would then send him to the person in charge of those needs. This he did for all, even for youngsters who had parents to care for them.

He made every lad know that he had his interests at heart. He would inquire after his parents, family, pastor, former teachers, and neighbors. He would tell the boy to remember him in his letters to this or that person, especially his parents. Knowing the history of many towns and villages in Piedmont and other states, he would delight a youngster by telling him glorious events of his native place and make him feel good by praising his parish church, its belfry, or whatever else he held dear. The lad brightened at such pleasant memories and was grateful for such goodness shown by his superior.

But at playtime these chats were very short because Don Bosco realized that boys generally do not like to stand around. He too preferred to see them actively playing. That is why he did not set up benches in the playground and did not like to see students playing games of concentration, such as cards, checkers, and chess. "The mind needs a rest," he would say.

A wise educator, he forestalled such pastimes by urging boys to join active games, and he often participated himself. Occasionally he would challenge all to a sprint race or suggest *barra rotta*.² If he spotted a boy on a team whose dubious conduct made him steer clear of his superiors, he would join the opposite team and mentally mark that boy for capture. Once the game was on, the players

² A sort of cops-and-robbers game. [Editor]

would warm up and dash in all directions, while Don Bosco, eyeing his quarry, would head straight for him and corner him. Then, as all cheered, he would whisper a few words to his prisoner and capture his heart.

Occasionally, if he did not feel up to such strenuous exercise, he would line the boys up in double file and march at their head, clapping his hands, stamping his feet, and shouting a refrain they would take up with a deafening roar. The long human snake would wind its way through playground and porticoes, stairs and corridors, and back into the playground. Finally, happy and tired, the boys were called by the bell to their chores after having unwittingly patrolled the grounds!

Another favorite game of his — especially in 1859-60 — was to line the boys up in single file and lead them helter-skelter across the playground, each boy stepping into the footprints of the one before him. On their way they all clapped hands rhythmically with Don Bosco. When he shouted “Halt,” all stopped short. An on-looker could never see any plan in this, but some alert boys would quickly dash to the balcony and look down on the sight. The long chain had spelled out *Viva Pio Nono!* [Long live Pius IX!] In those years of threat and assault against the Pope in his own states, it was too risky to acclaim the Pope, and so Don Bosco made up for it by emblazoning his name across the playground with his youngsters. At other times he led his boys in twists and turns to form the words *Viva Maria! Viva San Luigi!* [Long live Our Lady! Long live St. Aloysius!] The game was played again at times during 1861, but one day, as he was being eagerly awaited to start, he kept pacing the portico with boys milling about him and finally retired to his room. The game was never mentioned again. As Father Paul Albera suggested, the game was perhaps too much of a strain for him.

When Don Bosco did not join his boys' games, he kept the youngsters busy by chatting with them. His conversations sparkled with witty remarks, wholesome sayings, and amusing anecdotes. We will begin by quoting some of his sayings to priests, clerics, or youngsters who swarmed about him in the dining room or met him as he walked through the house. Since they kept nothing from him,

to a worried one he would often say: "Take St. Teresa's advice: 'Let nothing upset you!'" To another depressed physically or spiritually, he would remark: "This won't last forever." To someone irritated by companions' teasing he would suggest: "Remember what St. Paul says: 'Overcome evil with good. Bear one another's burdens!'"

He would encourage those who had problems with their studies or duties, saying: "As the donkey ambles along, the load adjusts itself" — meaning that difficulties are overcome by action. All knew that this was his style. He did not wait for difficulties to vanish.

To one who recalled a lamentable incident that had once troubled Don Bosco, he wryly commented: "My mother used to tell me that nowhere else is there as much trouble as in this world!"

Occasionally the conversation turned to the hazards of successful military exploits, to the dangers of arduous discoveries, or to painstaking scientific findings or technological inventions made in spite of rivalry and injustice. Then to the question "What about your own undertakings? What have you got to say?" he would reply with his usual smile and comic solemnity: "The world belongs to those who capture it! The bold get what they want! *Audaces fortuna iuvat!*" If the talk touched on wonders, success, glory, fame, or wealth, he would comment: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone!" Those who kept near Don Bosco always gained practical wisdom.

He often had fun reciting poetry while pacing the playground. "*Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*" [Times change and we with them], he would say, and then would further comment on the passing of time with quotations from Italian and Latin poets . . . Hoping to teach his boys not to be fooled by appearances in judging others' happiness, he would often quote Metastasio . . . At times he would amuse pupils by using their names to improvise rhymes. To a good-hearted but flighty lad named Francis he sang some surprising lines on the happiness that both the boy and he would enjoy in heaven . . . Then he laughed and caused all the others to burst into laughter.

Sometimes, to turn to lighter topics, or to break up an exagger-

ated, unpleasant, unkindly, or unfair story, he would quote from Virgil or Tibullus . . . pointing out how the verses imitated natural sounds. This delighted the upper class Latin students who were then studying those authors and could not help admiring Don Bosco's memory. Don Bosco also used to ask them to translate easy-looking Latin sentences that contained an equivocal word, as, for example, "Non est peccatum occidere patrem *suum*."³

Now and then he would ask students to recite selections from the Italian classics, especially from Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and he would start off with a few stanzas or maybe a whole canto. He seemed to know the entire work by heart. He loved this immortal poem, and on his autumn trips [to Becchi] or his visits to Salesian houses — especially from 1874 to 1882 — he always took it along to relax his mind.

The very rules of Latin grammar, set to rhyme in a new method then popular,⁴ he skillfully turned into a pastime, in spite of their intricacy, especially for the third year students. He would repeat the rhymes, explain them, and have the boys say them. It was a double benefit to them since they had to memorize the lines as part of their school work. Thus, even play time was pleasantly turned into learning, and the boys eagerly put it to good use because they knew that Don Bosco would later test them.

Often he would ask a young cleric, "Do you know algebra?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then explain this: A+B—C."

Stumped, the young man would stammer in reply, and then give up.

"Well now," Don Bosco would go on, "here is what it means: A stands for *Allegro* [Cheerful], B for *Buono* [Good], C for *Cattivo* [Bad]. So always be cheerful and good but never bad."

Or he might say, "Remember the three 'S's.'"

"Which three?"

"*Sanità* [Health], *Studio* [Knowledge], *Santità* [Sanctity]." And to another: "Don't forget: *Salve, Salvando, Salvati*." [Hail, by saving others, save yourself!]

³ We are omitting other examples. [Editor]

⁴ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

Once a group of boys — among them some young artisans — asked him the secret of always having pocket money. “Well,” he replied, “do as Gianduia ⁵ did. When you have eight *soldi*, spend only four. When all you have is four, spend two.” He had other chuckles on this popular puppet . . . His humor was spiced with wholesome advice. To one complaining of slight ailments, Don Bosco would say: “Pythagoras had a remedy for all those troubles — diet, spring water, and exercise.” At other times, Don Bosco prescribed rest, cheerfulness, and diet.

His pleasantries were varied, and sometimes puzzling. “You look green!” he would say to a boy. “Are you sick?”

“No, Father. I’m fine!”

“But you *are* green.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think it over. You’ll catch on!”

The boy would withdraw, rack his brain to grasp the enigma, consult friends, and then return to Don Bosco.

“I’ve got it! You mean I am a fruitless tree. Right?”

“That’s it!” Don Bosco would smile in reply.

“Well, I’ll do something about it!” the boy would reply. “From now on I’ll be a good tree.”

A few days later he would ask Don Bosco, “Father, am I still green?”

“You look much better now, but there is still room for improvement.”

“Right, Father, but you watch. I’ll do better.”

“Good!” Don Bosco would conclude. “I always knew you had it in you.”

At times he would beckon a lad whom he hoped to attract to his Society. Then he would look at him and say: “*Est caput plectendum*” or “*Caput amputandum!*” The lad who had already caught the gist of Latin [“Your head must be bent” or “Your head must be chopped off”] would just nod and smile.

To another he would say: “You know, I’d like to roast you!” or “You are not well done yet” — meaning that he wished him to lead a more virtuous life and to love God more fervently. To a lad he

⁵ A popular puppet of the Piedmontese theater. [Editor]

had seen daydreaming during a sermon he would say, "You have a toothache, haven't you?"

"No, Father!"

"I thought you did." He would then say that he meant the boy did not relish the food of God's word and did not profit by it. When he said to someone, "Poor lad, you have a headache," he meant childish tantrums and disobedience. Another familiar expression of his was, "When are you going to start working miracles?" Such questions he would abruptly ask anyone he saw lost in thought, staring into space, or whispering in a group.

One day he met a boy who had not been to the sacraments for months. "My friend," he asked, "will you dine with me tomorrow?" To an affirmative reply, he added, "But mind you" (alluding to Holy Communion), "tomorrow I dine at seven thirty in the morning."

It was heartwarming to see him hold the attention of a vast crowd of boys while he reviewed them one by one with his glance. For each he had a word. He would say to one, "How are you?" To another, "Are you good?" To a third who had just joined the group, "Are you really a little angel?" He suited his action to the word by making a pair of horns with his index and little finger, while the boys laughed and did the same over the boy's head.

To a little fellow who said nothing but just rested his head against his arm, he would jokingly say: "Now you keep quiet!" He would playfully threaten another with, "You little rascal!" To other boys he would say, "We must be friends, real friends! Tell me, are you really my friend?" To someone else he would drop a hint about his soul and vocation, asking, "When shall we have a long talk together?"

Sometimes he would give a boy a bit of advice, then suddenly turn to another and ask: "Did you understand?" Now and then a pupil would come up to kiss his hand, and, grasping the boy's hand, he would say, "Go and play," while still talking to the others. After a while he would turn to his little prisoner: "What are you waiting for? Why don't you go?"

"You won't let me."

Don Bosco would smile and retain his hold on him as he kept

talking. Then again, "Are you still here? Why don't you go?" The boy would smile, and Don Bosco would finally let him go.

This approach was especially good for youngsters who seemed to shy away from him. If someone looked disgruntled and sullen, he would suddenly ask, "What did you say?"

"Me? Nothing, Father!"

"Oh, I thought you said something." A surprise approach like this was enough to banish the boy's gloom. All these remarks and tricks of his generally ended with a confidential word that soon came to be called "*la parola nell'orecchio*" — a word in the ear — which we have already often mentioned in our narration. It was almost an echo of God's word, "living, effective, and more piercing than any two-edged sword, reaching even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints also, and of marrow, and a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart." [Heb. 4, 12] Thus, zealously and prudently governing the house by counsel, keeping in touch with everything, maintaining personal contact with each pupil, and knowing each by name and character, Don Bosco was able to give them advice that was always timely, pleasing, and irresistible.

The effectiveness of his "word in the ear" was also due to the fact that many times it concerned secrets only the boy could know and, often, future events concerning him that were eventually fully verified. This is why the pupils gave the utmost importance to this holy expedient and habit of his; its wonderful spiritual effects we may infer, but never adequately know.

Frequently, Don Bosco would say to one boy or another, "Shall I tell you something?" Or the boy himself would say, "Father, tell me something." And Don Bosco, placing his hand over his head and stooping to the boy's ear, would screen his mouth with his other hand and whisper a word or two. The boys' reactions were something to see. One would smile, another turn serious, a third blush to the roots of the hair. One boy would cry, another nod affirmatively, a third shake his head. Some other lad would walk off to a quiet spot and pace up and down alone; another would shout "Thanks" and dash off to play; a third one would immediately take time to visit the Blessed Sacrament. Some other boy might stand as in a daze, unable to leave his side; another might

screen his mouth with his hand and give an answer or ask a question. Don Bosco's "word in the ear" took only a moment but, like a fiery dart, it pierced the heart, no longer to be removed. Now it was a bit of advice, now an observation, an encouragement, or even a reprimand. Don Bosco never scolded harshly, much less publicly. He let no one feel he thought little of any pupil; even those who knew they deserved no consideration were sure Don Bosco would never shame them. In all his life — except in cases of public scandal — Don Bosco never embarrassed anyone. Hence, nearly all his boys trusted him and relied fully on him. Far from demeaning them, his friendly correction did them good and produced lasting results. Holy Scripture says: "Like a golden earring or a necklace of fine gold is a wise reprover to an obedient ear." [Prov. 25, 12]

We shall give a few samples of Don Bosco's "word in the ear":

"Would you do a little something for Our Lady — for example, study your lessons better?"

"Jesus is waiting for you in church."

"Why not keep your hands to yourself?"

"Have you made a good confession?"

"Why don't you go to Communion more often?"

"Ah, those friends of yours!"

"Courage! Call on Mary, and She will help you."

"If you could only see your soul's condition!"

"Keep up your good work! Our Lady is pleased with you!"

"Remember, God sees you."

"Death but not sin!"

"Try to be good, and we will be together in paradise."

"Make a good confession and you will be really happy!"

"Those who commit sin are enemies of their own soul."

"Say five Our Fathers to the wounds of Jesus that no one who dies today may be eternally lost."

"Help me save your soul."

"Cheer up! One day we shall be together with Our Lord."

"Be obedient, and you will become a saint."

"Ask Our Lady for grace not to fall into mortal sin."

"Can you sleep tranquilly tonight?"

An experienced eye occasionally noticed their immediate effects:

reception of the sacraments, more intense concentration in prayer, greater diligence in duties, sincere efforts to overcome jealousy, fits of anger, and rude or annoying manners. Some boys too, whom we could name, became so fervent as to try extraordinary penances, forcing Don Bosco to step in and moderate them.

Those who received Don Bosco's "word in the ear," however, were the first to realize its effectiveness. A former pupil — a venerable old priest — writes: "A strange thing repeatedly happened to me when I was a boy at the Oratory. Seeing me worried during recreation, Don Bosco would whisper in my ear such timely advice that I was instantly relieved of importunate thoughts, even of temptations which could have overcome me. Unconsciously, I again felt at peace, and all was well. This Don Bosco did not only with me but with everyone else, even after night prayers, since no one would think of going to bed without first wishing him good night and kissing his hand."

Here we must note that Don Bosco's persuasive gentleness was responsible for a charming and truly unique sight that could be seen even beyond 1860: with the greatest candor the boys would open their hearts to him whenever they met him, even on the playground. If something bothered their conscience, they would not go to bed without telling him about it. They did not mind waiting. They would stand at his door and knock lightly until he let them in. They simply could not rest through the night with sin on their souls. Of course, not all his pupils were on such filial terms with Don Bosco. There were the notable exceptions, but even in these cases his "word in the ear" was effective, often reaching them unexpectedly. For example, noticing a boy in a hot argument with schoolmates, Don Bosco would call him and say, "I need your help for a good job." When asked what it was, he would whisper: "A good spring cleaning, so you can make friends with God and win Our Lady's protection."

Some lad might be wildly dashing across the playground, lost in a game, when Don Bosco would suddenly stop him and ask, "How are you?"

"Fine!"

"How about your soul?"

At this unexpected twist, the lad would become uneasy, lower his eyes, and mumble some excuse.

"If you were to die tomorrow, tonight, or even now, would you be ready?"

"Not really."

"Then will you come to confession?"

"Tomorrow morning." Generally he kept his word.

At times, a sly youngster would go to any length to steer clear of Don Bosco because he knew he could not look him straight in the eye. Don Bosco would trail him. When the lad thought he was quite safe chatting with schoolmates, suddenly two hands would cover his eyes and firmly hold his head rigidly in place. Thinking it was a companion, the boy would guess names, become impatient, and then yell, "Let go," adding perhaps a colorful word, a nasty epithet, and even a kick or two. As the hands released their grip, the boy would quickly turn around. "Oh, Don Bosco," he would cry out in dismay. Embarrassed beyond words, he would stand there petrified, head down, red as a beet. Finally, he would take Don Bosco's hand to kiss it, and the latter would whisper, "Why do you shy away from me?"

"I don't, Father!"

"Shall we be friends, then?" And as Don Bosco spoke into his ear, the boy would nod in agreement.

Again, whenever Don Bosco got home from a trip, the boys would run to him with wild enthusiasm and press close to him, but two or three would always stand apart — an unmistakable sign that they had something to hide. In the course of many years, there were never more than two or three such boys each year — a consoling proof that things were going well at the Oratory. Don Bosco, of course, would take special notice of them. Seeing them apart, trying to hide behind the crowd, Don Bosco would excite everybody's curiosity by saying, "I've brought presents for some of you. Guess who?" The best pupils would be named, but Don Bosco, pointing to the two or three at the crowd's edge, would exclaim, "I want to give them to these boys." Of course all were highly surprised, but none as much as those two or three youngsters. They could not believe their ears and stood speechless until Don Bosco

called them by name, one by one, and their companions made way for them. They had been caught! A kind word was whispered in their ear, and before the day was over, or at the latest by the next morning, they had gone to confession.

We will conclude this topic with a statement of Bishop John Cagliero: "Often this "word in the ear" was a fervent, heartfelt invocation. Those of us who were close to him were inflamed with love for God and for him who loved us so much in the Lord. His favorite refrain — whispered or loudly proclaimed in countless sermons, conferences, or confessions — was: 'All for God and His glory!' This indeed was his sole, lifelong, ardent desire."

So fully had God granted Don Bosco efficacy of speech ⁶ that his glance, tone, and gestures were as effective as his words. His eyes, most of all, forcefully transmitted the thoughts of his mind and heart. His measured, calm, serene glance irresistibly won over another's mind and at the same time communicated his own. Often a word or a smile took on the import of a question, an answer, an invitation, or a whole conversation.

Father Dominic Belmonte ⁷ has assured us that not only did he hear of this wonderful phenomenon from many witnesses, but that he experienced it himself when a young cleric and a priest. "Many times," he wrote, "Don Bosco looked at a boy in such a way as to communicate his thoughts without uttering a word. The boy himself was surprised to find he had grasped Don Bosco's meaning. At times this mysterious exchange concerned matters entirely beyond anything they had spoken of, seen, or done. Don Bosco's look might be a question not concerning the person himself, or it might be an order, advice, or a suggestion to do with school, playtime, or anything at all."

Don Bosco would often follow a boy all through the playground or porticoes with his glance while conversing with a group of youngsters. Then, abruptly, the boy would meet Don Bosco's

⁶ See Vol. I, p. 386. [Editor]

⁷ Father Belmonte entered the Oratory in 1860 at the age of seventeen. After becoming a Salesian, he was assigned by Don Bosco to the house of Mirabello, the first Salesian foundation outside of Turin. He was later ordained a priest and filled very important positions in the Salesian Society. He died at the Oratory in 1901. [Editor]

glance, grasp its message, and run up to ask what he wanted. And Don Bosco would stoop and whisper into his ear.

Not infrequently, shielding his eyes with his hand as if bothered by the light, Don Bosco would stare at one or two of the boys about him. Pierced by his glance, those concerned hushed, sensing that Don Bosco had divined some secret of theirs. And indeed he had! On their faces he could detect telltale signs of guilt and regret. A slight nod of his amply sufficed to convey his message: Confession! All that remained was to set the time.

Don Bosco used the same intent look if someone made him an insincere promise or lied. His stare would then clearly express doubt, reprimand, or refusal; it would be but a prelude of advice to follow.

By chance, too, some boy might pass through the sacristy while Don Bosco was hearing confessions. Though in need of confession, he might have no such thought; still, a kindly gaze from Don Bosco, and that lad — charmed as a nightingale by a serpent — would stop short, hesitate, step to the door, then return and kneel for his turn at confession. A power of love had drawn him to Don Bosco, dispelled his unwillingness, and filled his heart with filial trust. We learned this from close friends of ours who experienced such helpful influence.

If a boy was overly curious about others' words and actions or about improper jokes or conversations, Don Bosco would gently bend the boy's earlobe as if to seal the ear. If another boy was too free with his eyes, Don Bosco would playfully brush his hand over the boy's eyes to close them; at other times he would press a boy's lips between thumb and forefinger to let him know he should not grumble. He went through these motions with rare tact and without a word, but his looks spoke most eloquently and unforgettably.

Oh, the power of Don Bosco's gaze! Late one night, a pupil could not fall asleep. He tossed restlessly about, sighed, groaned, and now and then chewed on the sheets. The boy next to him awoke. "What's wrong?" he asked. His only reply was a moan.

"What's bothering you?" he insisted.

"Oh, leave me alone!" the other groaned. "Don Bosco looked at me!"

“What’s so bad about that?”

“It’s the way he looked. I know what he wants!”

“You could be wrong. Forget it! Go to sleep and don’t wake the whole place up!”

The next morning he asked Don Bosco if he had meant anything special by looking at that boy.

“Tell him to ask his conscience!” Don Bosco replied.

The result was that the boy went to confession — and no longer had trouble falling asleep.

To make his suggestions more memorable, Don Bosco accompanied his gaze with playful gestures. For example, to urge someone to persevere in goodness, he would, with a certain formality softened by his indefinable half-smile, carry out a certain ritual of his own with this formula: “Faith, hope, charity, good works, friendliness.” As he said “faith” and then “hope,” he would successively brush the boy’s cheeks with his fingertips; the words “charity” and “good works” were accompanied by a light touch on the chin and the nose; as he said “friendliness” he tapped the right cheek slightly harder. The boys loved this more than any gift; it was a spur to goodness, as they unanimously attested.

Don Bosco also had a mysterious answer for a cleric or a student who asked him how he could know the future and guess so many secrets.

“I’ll tell you,” he would reply. “The key to everything is *Otis, Botis, Pia, Tutis*. Do you know what that means?”

“No, Father!”

“Pay attention. It’s Greek.” And slowly he would repeat: “*O-tis, Bo-tis, Pi-a, Tu-tis*. Is it clear now?”

“No!”

“I know those words are hard to understand. That’s why I never reveal their meaning. No one knows it and no one ever will because it would not be wise for me to reveal it. It is the big secret to all my wonders. With this magic formula I can read consciences and solve any mystery. Let’s see how smart you are. See if you can make something out of it!” He would then repeat the four words while placing his forefinger successively on the questioner’s forehead, nose, chin, and chest, ending with an unexpected little tap on

the cheek. The boy or cleric would laugh and, while kissing Don Bosco's hand, still insist, "But, Father, at least translate those words."

"I could, but you still wouldn't understand." And then playfully he would add in Piedmontese dialect, "When they give you a beating, take it like a man!" This conclusion would set them all laughing heartily.

Wonderful were the effects of Don Bosco's little tap on the cheek. On noticing a gloomy boy, Don Bosco would call him over, ask what bothered him, and then tell him that St. Philip Neri regarded gloominess as the eighth capital sin. After brightening him, he would dismiss him with a light tap on the cheek and a "Cheer up, my boy!" The lad would immediately regain his usual peace. This ability of Don Bosco to restore cheerfulness was so well known to his pupils that when their spirits were dampened, they would run to him for one of his reassuring smiles.

Sometimes a boy in a group around Don Bosco would be paying no attention at all to what was being said and done, as if he were on the moon; suddenly a light tap on the cheek from Don Bosco would arouse him.

"What's that for, Father?" he would say.

And Don Bosco would reply, "I am doing what St. Philip Neri did. I'm not slapping you; I'm slapping the devil tempting you."

"We were convinced," Bishop Cagliero remarks, "that Don Bosco knew that lad was under some temptation."

The boys were convinced too that Don Bosco's little taps would toughen them against the devil. Often, at a youngster's request, he would lightly tap him and jokingly say, "The devil will not bother you anymore today." Some boys would ask for several taps at a time, and Don Bosco would playfully satisfy them, saying, "The devil will leave you alone for the next six months."

One day a lad asked him for as many taps as he needed to be free from temptation for life, but Don Bosco smilingly replied: "I cannot make you immune for more than six months." Then, somewhat more gravely, he continued, "I once knew a boy who, despite prayers, penances, and good will, could not keep his passions under control. Well, he finally succeeded with the help of a daily tap from Don Bosco."

It was a common sight also to see troubled youngsters approach Don Bosco in a crowd and without a word turn a cheek to him for a little tap. As soon as Don Bosco obliged, they would run back to their play, happy and content.

In 1861, a pupil asked Don Bosco for a keepsake before leaving on his Easter vacation. Don Bosco gave him a slight tap and said: "Go without fear; the devil will bother you no more." On his return to the Oratory the boy stated that the tap had been very effective and that he would get one anytime he had to go home.

We shall conclude with a letter recalling these pleasantries of Don Bosco's — if one may call them such:

[No date]

Dear Father,

Would that I were always Don Bosco's son not just in word but in deed as well! Under this glorious banner, battles end in victory. The last tap you gave me left an indelible mark on my face, and when I think of it I blush and seem to feel the imprint of your dear fingers on my cheek. Send me more such taps please, Father, I eagerly await them.

I love Don Bosco more than all the world. Do you believe me? Really, I do. If a harsh memory or bad thought ever enters my mind, I instantly get rid of it by thinking of my dear Don Bosco.

Dear Father, I'm all yours, ready to do what you ask of me. I give you all I am. Take me as your lowliest servant and never cross me off the book of your spiritual sons.

Cleric Joseph Pittaluga

CHAPTER 31

Holy Expedients (Continued)

THE Apostle St. James says of Abraham that “faith worked along with his works.” [Jas. 2, 22] We can say as much of Don Bosco, for in his case, too, faith permeated his every word and deed on behalf of youth. He did not spare himself and God lavished charisms on him. Opinions will vary concerning certain means Don Bosco used in his apostolate, but we can always say that “the weak things of the world has God chosen that He may confound the strong.” [1 Cor. 1, 27] And by “the strong” we mean the spirits of darkness. We shall continue to dwell on Don Bosco’s holy expedients. Guileless as his heart, they quite effectively repelled, as far as possible, his children’s spiritual enemy. Love conquers all, especially if its sole inspiration is faith. Above all love conquers the heart.

At the Oratory, all could see for themselves that Don Bosco, tired and ill, kept talking to his children from morning to night, even when his throat was parched and his spittle became tinged with blood. Thus he stayed close to his boys who saw in him another proof of his vast love for them. Admittedly, the preceding chapter was lengthy in describing the physical and moral hardships Don Bosco endured for his boys’ sake, but truth and the purpose of these memoirs demanded it. We shall resume our narration.

Don Bosco was often seen pacing the porticoes with a hundred boys and clerics swarming about him, some striding at his side or behind him, the majority walking backward so as to face him and better hear his words. His conversation was bright, sparked with stories, incidents, and episodes of the Oratory’s early years.

“I often had to admit,” Father Michael Rua declared, “as also

did many of my companions, that a conversation with Don Bosco was as fruitful as a spiritual retreat, or even more so. When he was through talking with us, he enjoyed giving us books and pamphlets he had written. On particular occasions, he selected those booklets of his that refuted Protestant errors in order to safeguard us from their deceitful distortions.”

In summer, on feast days and Sundays, when the evening recreation was longer than usual and the boys were too tired for active games, Don Bosco would sit on the ground against the building. The boys would immediately run over and squat with him in a semicircle of seven or eight rows of happy faces, all turned toward him. This scene was duplicated countless times between 1850 and 1866 and even later. A distinguished lawyer thus described his reaction to such a sight: “Those boys were living images of a most sincere, modest, and blissful innocence. Their eyes — wide-open windows of their souls — had nothing to hide since no indecent thought tainted their minds. With candor they gazed on people who came to them and unknowingly made them share the serenity that ever ruled their innocent hearts. In turn, they too absorbed the charm of Don Bosco’s looks.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Father Emil Sacco, a former pupil of Don Bosco and the pastor of St. Stephen’s Church at Pallanza, when in 1888 he wrote to Father Michael Rua as follows: “Oh, how virtuous and holy was our dear Don Bosco! I can still see him smiling at me, hear his soothing words, and gaze with wonder at his amiable countenance as it reflected his soul’s beauty.”

Don Bosco reserved his most amusing stories for these open-air sittings. He might narrate his own version of Count Gasparo Gozzi’s¹ dialogue between an inkpot and a lamp, or create new ones, such as between his pen and inkpot, between a cobbler and a boot which refused to be mended on Sunday but insisted on being done on Monday, or between himself and his desk lamp refusing to give light and siding with the Protestants. Sometimes he would recite humorous sonnets. One, composed during his seminary years and never forgotten, concerned his pocketknife blade, as Father

¹ Gasparo Gozzi (1715-1786), an Italian writer, founded and edited *Gazzetta Veneta* and *Osservatore Veneto* on the model of the English *Spectator*. [Editor]

John Garino declared after hearing Don Bosco recite it himself at Valsalice.²

Now and then Don Bosco would tell tall tales to baffle the imagination, describing the famous giant Gargantua and his incredible adventures, death, and burial. Thousands of people worked at digging a very deep, mile-long grave but could not cover him completely. "To this very day," Don Bosco would exclaim, "his nose can still be seen sticking out of the ground!"

"Really?" all would ask.

"Yes! You too can see it. It's Mount Blanc."

His lively description and frequent dialogues lent credibility to these tales that grew in interest with the odd questions of the young listeners. Fifty years later, Father [John Baptist] Piano³ and several other former pupils still delightfully entertained their friends with these tall tales of Don Bosco's.

But the story hour was not always story telling. Far from it! To enthuse his children with evangelical fervor, he often told them about the Catholic foreign missions of Asia, Africa, and America, which he always thought of with keenest interest. He frequently spoke of the missionaries' heroic struggles, their glorious undertakings, their conversions, and the ordeals they endured for Our Lord's sake. On these summer evenings, though, he preferred to talk of unusual amusing incidents he had read in publications of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith or other papers. Often the bell interrupted his story telling, leaving his young listeners anxious with curiosity, hardly able to wait for the next evening or the one after it, since, at times, pressing work or fatigue kept Don Bosco from resuming his narration. Yet, in such a case he would not altogether disappoint his eagerly waiting little friends. He would go among them, resourcefully finding some simple but effective way to while away the time, such as intoning a religious song which the boys immediately picked up or improvising a game that did not require exercise.

On many occasions the boys begged him to tell them how long they would live. Don Bosco graciously agreed, with the understand-

² A Salesian college on the hills in the outskirts of Turin. [Editor]

³ A former Oratory pupil and diocesan pastor. *See* Vol. V, p. 145. [Editor]

ing that it was only in fun. Here we must remark that the boys' training at the Oratory left no place for even the slightest superstitious belief. In the course of forty-three years we came to know thousands of Oratory boys, and in each case we could not help but admire their simple, guileless faith. Before predicting their life span, Don Bosco would ask them to stretch out their hands palms upward; then he would proceed to study the lines on them. Those lines in the center resembling a capital "M" cued him into pointing out the reminder that all human beings are mortal. Then he would ask, "How old are you?" The replies would vary — twelve, seventeen, fourteen, twenty-one. Don Bosco would pause for a few moments, take on a mysterious air, and say to this or that boy: "Before you're thirty . . ." or "When you're thirty-five . . ." or "If you manage to reach forty . . . Who knows? . . . We shall see . . . Something will happen."

Meanwhile he would examine those lines with studied seriousness and with enigmatic, comic gestures that were interspersed with humorous pleasantries and seasoned with a spiritual thought. He would then say: "Now listen carefully. You are fifteen, right? Then figure this out: fifteen plus ten, minus seven, plus three, plus twelve, minus nineteen. What's the total?" In this strain he would continue his horoscopes, thoroughly confusing them with numbers. Predictably, one boy could not remember all Don Bosco had said, another had missed a number and insisted upon having it repeated, a third wanted paper and pencil to jot it down. Some brighter pupil would manage to figure out the total and would want Don Bosco to corroborate it, receiving for a reply only "but," "if," "we shall see," "if you'll stay good," or similar phrases that undid every calculation.

He ended with a hearty laugh and most joined in, though a few looked irked or pensive. Not all were willing to believe it was all in jest and stubbornly persisted in believing that Don Bosco was trying to conceal a God-given power to see into the future. Hence they noted every word he said in their regard, all the more eagerly so because, as we can personally attest, these predictions proved true more than once. Be that as it may, everyone without exception esteemed Don Bosco as a saint, with the result that even the indifferent or skeptical retained his words so indelibly in their minds

that forty or fifty years later, as their life span seemed ended according to Don Bosco's prediction, they seriously prepared for death. For several — priests included — it proved a great blessing.

Don Bosco entertained his pupils in other ways too, as we heard from Joseph Brosio. For example, having some little present to give away and not caring to raffle it or make it a prize of some sort, he would find a curious or humorous way to dispose of it. He often came into the playground with fruits, pastries, or sweets, then and there proposing to give the goodies to anyone whose handspan was longer than his own. All agreed. Don Bosco had very small hands, and so, when spans were measured, many boys won prizes amid jokes, quips, and laughter. There were also consolation prizes. At other times the contest was for spans shorter than Don Bosco's.

These holy expedients had other aims too. For example, he would place a boy's hand, palm upward, on his own left palm and strike it with his right. If a resounding smack was heard, he would say, "Good! We are getting along fine!" A muffled sound would elicit the remark, "Hm, we aren't getting along too well!" At a flat sound he would smilingly shake his head and sigh, "Ah, it can't be helped! We just aren't getting along!"

Many times these last words were only in jest, but in most cases they were meant to be a clear, needed hint to a boy who might be vain, negligent, or of doubtful morality.

Of course Don Bosco produced the sound he wanted in smacking the boy's hand, and his words, "We just aren't getting along!" accompanied by a friendly smile, always produced the desired effect — a grimace, a blush, or lowered eyes. If, instead, he said, "We are getting along fine!" a boy was overjoyed.

We shall mention another talent of his. We have said in preceding volumes ⁴ that several times a year on Sundays or holy days he used to treat the boys to intriguing conjuring tricks and that the last time he did this was in 1864. However, for some time yet, he kept up his sleight-of-hand performances and other attractions. We recall a day when a gentleman came into the dining room right after dinner to see Don Bosco. They conversed for a while and then came out into the porticoes. As usual, the boys flocked to Don

⁴ See Vol. I, pp. 257ff; Vol. III, p. 94. [Editor]

Bosco who invited them to step back a little and squat in a semi-circle before him. After sending for a stool for his visitor, Don Bosco too sat on the stone pavement and asked the gentleman to lend him his cane for a few minutes. Then he gave a smooth juggling performance, making the cane travel from his fingers to his nose, as his boys gawked in astonishment, unable to get over it for some time.

These and other tricks, however, did not keep him from watching over his whole flock. Good shepherd that he was, he knew his sheep very well. When he noticed certain cliques in recreation and had reason to fear grumbling or improper talk, he would call someone from the group and say, "Here is the key to my room. Please get me this book. It's on the shelf." The boy would dash upstairs but occasionally could not find the book. As he searched for it, the recreation period would end, and Don Bosco, thanking the lad, would send him to his classroom.

Again, he might send a boy to ask the doorkeeper if an expected visitor had arrived, someone else to look for a companion under the pretext that he wanted to speak to him, a third to see if the prefect was in his office, a fourth and a fifth to deliver a letter or ask a teacher for the results of tests given to the pupils. Don Bosco was very ingenious with pretexts of this sort which set so many boys in motion, and they in turn were delighted to do him a favor, blissfully unaware of his real intentions.

His prudence was admirable. A distrustful superior unfailingly causes unrest, irritates the indifferent, demoralizes the good, and loses their affection. Aware of this, on certain evenings Don Bosco would line up in single file the boys who swarmed around him; then, standing at their head, he would bid them play "follow the leader." He would clap his hands, hop on one foot, walk with a stoop or with arms aloft, snap his fingers, or bend his knees. As they tried to keep up with him, some boys would sprawl all over the ground, to the glee of others who were watching. Finally, all would join the line, following Don Bosco around pillars and into hidden corners and dark, deserted areas. Thus singing, laughing, and gesticulating, he made sure that nothing untoward was taking place.

Likewise his vigilance was not limited to the Oratory limits. He often went with his boys on their weekly walks to see if there was anything to correct. He did not permit them to disband, shop, or visit relatives. Once in 1856, on returning to the Oratory with all the boys from Borgo Crocetta — then off city limits — as they were walking in groups through the meadows, Don Bosco noticed that some of them — not the best ones — broke off from the main body and went their own way. To call them back would have been to say he did not trust them. Therefore, he bided his time, but when he reached the army parade grounds — quite deserted at that hour — he shouted to all to follow him and raced all the way to the first houses at the city limits. There, as was customary, all again formed ranks and returned to the Oratory.

It was also Don Bosco's habit to tell his young clerics of the breaches of discipline he had noticed and the remedial measures he had taken. He gave them suitable norms and advice too. Moreover, he kept devising new ways to win over his pupils' hearts. He longed to keep an unchallenged influence over them, so as to help them grow in virtue and Christian perfection. To this end, every Sunday he invited to his dinner table the pupils who had earned the best conduct marks — first the students by grade, then the artisans by shop. Thus, about three times a year, every grade and workshop was privileged to dine with the superiors. When dinner was over, the boys would linger with Don Bosco and be treated to pastries. Occasionally, as a reward or mark of confidence, he would invite one or another of the best boys to go for a walk with him about town, so as to talk freely with him about his vocation. On Holy Thursday, he himself performed the Washing of Feet with thirteen of the best pupils, whom he afterward invited to supper — a treat they very highly appreciated.

Moreover, every Sunday, to show his esteem for altar boys, he invited the two boys who had served Community Mass during the week to eat at the clerics' table regardless of conduct or application marks. They were not presented to Don Bosco at meal's end, but the privilege they had already received was a great incentive to merit other signs of special affection. Moreover, having seen for

themselves Don Bosco's edifying spirit of self-denial, they could not help but be impressed by his eminent virtue.

Another endearing trait possessed by Don Bosco was that despite his many grave occupations, he was always ready to receive with fatherly affection those boys who sought a private talk with him. Moreover, he wanted them to be on very familiar terms with him, and he never complained of an occasional indiscretion. Everyone went to him willingly and open-heartedly because he never showed surprise or impatience or passed hasty judgments, but was unalterably calm and self-possessed. No wonder he exercised such sway over even the most reluctant. He left all free to ask questions, to complain, and to defend or excuse themselves. Once, when one of his priests asked why he put up with all this, he, minimizing his virtuous patience, jokingly replied, "Do you know who is really smart? One who acts like a simple, good-natured fellow. I do just that! I let everybody have his say, I listen carefully to both sides of the story, take everything into account, and when I have all the facts, I decide."

When pupils came to Don Bosco, they never overlooked their good manners or neglected to show respect to their superior. Don Bosco was punctiliously neat in his person and required his boys to keep the same standard. Knowing that Don Bosco would check their clothes and shoes and send them back to clean up if necessary, the boys carefully saw to all that in advance. He received them with the same respect he showed distinguished visitors, asking them to sit on the sofa while he sat at his desk and listened very attentively as if what they told him was most important. At times he would stand and pace the room with them. When the interview was over, he would show them to the door, open it for them, and send them off, saying, "We shall always be friends, right?" The boys left full of joy.

His discretion and wisdom in counseling cannot be adequately described. Once acted upon, his advice produced gratifying, beneficial results. How many vocations were born in that little room! How many good boys became better, thanks to those interviews! One day he said to a good lad, "I want to make a deal with you!"

"What kind?"

“I’ll tell you later!”

After curiously waiting a whole week, the boy went to confession to Don Bosco.

“What deal do you want me to make with you?” he asked.

“Tell me,” Don Bosco replied, “would you be willing to stay for good with Don Bosco at the Oratory?”

“Sure!” the boy replied, not quite grasping the extent of Don Bosco’s proposal.

“Well, then, go and tell Father Rua that I want to make a deal with you.”

On receiving the message, Father Rua did not immediately catch on, but he then took the youngster to a conference Don Bosco was giving to the Salesians. The youth was present also at other conferences, joined the Salesian Society, and is now a zealous Salesian priest.

When necessary, Don Bosco did not fail to correct charitably, but if he feared the admonition would be badly received, he would contrive to bring together the transgressor and a good companion of his — at times forewarning the latter of what to expect. Don Bosco would chide the good boy in the presence of the one at fault, forcing the latter to hear what was intended for him, even if then and there he did not catch on. The intended result would not be long in coming. Mulling over what he had heard, the transgressor could not help but realize that he had done wrong. Repentant, he would go to Don Bosco, apologize, and promise to do better.

A humorous scene would at times take place. The pupil who served as scapegoat might momentarily forget Don Bosco’s real intention in correcting him and, though quite embarrassed, would remain silent out of respect for his superior. Later, though, he would try to justify himself to Don Bosco, and the latter would cut him short, saying, “You did not catch on!” This dispelled the lad’s worries and at the same time hinted that a little humility on his part would have been desirable.

Don Bosco was also very tactful in comforting those who had suffered family misfortune, those in poor health, the angry ones, those who were tormented by scruples, and those who wanted to leave because of alleged wrongs or dissatisfaction. Once they were

in his room, he soothed them with a fatherly smile and a look that went straight to the heart. Making them laugh with a witty remark, whose timeliness he alone could set, he would ask them to sit down and unburden themselves. In most cases, his advice and counsel brought them real comfort. If some matters depended on others, he would say, "Go to so and so and tell him that I said this and that." Or else: "Tell so and so to see me about it, and don't worry. I won't forget you. Just be my friend and everything will be set right." With others he would end the interview by giving them a holy picture, a medal, a book, or a crucifix, or even fruit. Occasionally, in a gesture of confidence, he would ask the boy to give a message to a superior or companion. Thus peace was restored to individual hearts and to the whole house. To preserve this peace he had one Hail Mary added morning and evening to the Community prayers.

Father Julius Costantino, who succeeded Father [Leonard] Muri-
aldo as director of the Artigianelli Institute, said years ago to some Salesians: "You are very fortunate! You have a treasure in your house that is not to be found elsewhere in Turin, or even in other religious communities — Don Bosco's room. Whoever enters it disconsolate comes out beaming with joy." Thousands of us can testify to that! A few times, however, Don Bosco's solicitous efforts in these private conversations did not fully succeed. In such cases he tried another tack, which he styled "The Three Walks." When, for instance, he found a pronounced grudge or resentment between two older pupils, and reconciliation seemed hard to come by, he would ask one of them to take a walk with him. This friendly act soothed the young man's feelings and made it easier for him to tell Don Bosco the wrong he believed was done to him. On another day Don Bosco would invite the other youth for a similar walk and listened to his side of the story. Meanwhile, of course, he amiably tried to break down their prejudices without hurting their feelings. Finally he would ask both of them to go somewhere with him. They were not too happy about it but, hardly daring to refuse, they went along silently, with misgivings. Don Bosco would soon strike up a conversation and lead them to speak their minds and clear their misunderstandings. By the time they were walking back to the Oratory, they were friends again.

We must mention a few more stratagems of his. Not satisfied with oral confidential suggestions, he very often used to jot them down on slips of paper which he gave out on very many occasions. His suggestions and advice were always quite timely, as the following few samples show:

“Whatever you do, say or think, let it be for your soul’s good.”

“Willingly suffer a bit for God who suffered so much for you.”

“In your work and sorrow never forget we have a great reward stored up for us in heaven.”

“Let us help each other save our souls.”

“There can be no virtue without obedience.”

“One who associates with the good will go to heaven with them.”

“At death’s hour you will regret having wasted so much time to your soul’s detriment.”

“One who abuses God’s mercy to offend Him does not deserve it.”

“If you lose your soul, you lose everything.”

“What harm has Our Lord done to you to deserve such bad treatment from you?”

“Keep ready! One who is not ready for a good death today runs the risk of dying a bad one.”

“Guard your eyes so that one day you may deserve to gaze upon the Blessed Virgin Mary in heaven.”

There were hundreds upon hundreds of other such sayings not handed to us because they were too confidential. Several times, in fact, he wrote a private note to each boy in the house when their number neared a thousand. Still not satisfied, on various occasions he wrote very charming letters to his boys and clerics — to the latter usually in Latin — interwoven with quotations from the Gospels, the Fathers of the Church, or the *Imitation of Christ*. Every year, while on retreat at St. Ignatius’ Shrine at Lanzo, though very busy with confessions, he still found time to write many letters to his sons at the Oratory. “I still treasure several of Don Bosco’s letters,” a revered old priest and former pupil declared, “and I can assure you that they best suited my spiritual needs. Though Don Bosco was far away, his advice was as good as if he were present.”

He also found time for letter writing whenever he was out of

town for a few weeks. He once wrote to a priest at the Oratory guessing all his thoughts and comforting him. The priest was quite astounded by the letter's timeliness and more astonished still when Don Bosco, on his return, said, "I wrote to you to cheer you up because I saw you in your room looking very sad and dejected."

Father Dominic Bongiovanni testified in writing to other such instances. "Don Bosco," he stated, "often wrote to the Oratory about things that had happened there which he could not possibly have known except in a supernatural manner. These letters clearly show that very frequently he paid his children invisible visits."

He was quite prompt too in answering their letters, forwarded to him wherever he was, even though they might seem trivial. In actuality, he urged them to write. When, during their summer vacation, they kept in touch with him and told him how they were spending their time, he would reply and recommend to one a little more studying, to another more play and rest, to a third faithfulness to the advice given to him before going home. He would also inquire of pupils or clerics from very poor families whether they needed anything, and urged them to let him know candidly as soon as they reached home.

The boys' habit of writing to Don Bosco also gave him the idea of trying a new means to make ever more certain of their perseverance in virtue. As a loving father cherishing their confidence for his own information and their advantage, he asked them to write him little notes on special occasions. Some complied by jotting down their resolutions to practice a suitable virtue or to avoid some pet fault. There was no obligation at all to write such notes, and no pressure was ever exercised; there was complete and absolute freedom in the matter. In turn, Don Bosco promised strict secrecy. Many pupils did candidly tell him their resolutions. As this required will power, serious thinking, and a mental review of their past and present, these little notes became an effective spur to spiritual reform. Those slips were handed to Don Bosco personally, folded and sealed. Later on, he would opportunely remind the boys of their resolutions, encourage them to be faithful, and gently admonish them if they had failed to keep them.

How keen he was to possess their hearts so as to give them to

God! About the end of 1861, he expressed a desire to receive a little note from each of them. All complied. A few days later, at the "Good Night," he remarked: "I have read your little notes. I found in them beautiful sentiments and promises of prayers and good conduct; but in none of them did I find what I desired most. And yet we have here a boy whose name should have given you a cue. Isn't Canon Marengo's nephew here, and isn't his name 'Do'? [Italian for 'I give'] What I expected from all of you was: 'Don Bosco, *I give* you the key to my heart.'"

He was firmly convinced that confidence in one's superior was a powerful remedy against one's passions and a safeguard from moral pitfalls, and that every act of confidence was a great victory over the devil.

An excellent pupil was quite attracted to a schoolmate. Though it was an honorable attraction, he felt uneasy, yet he said nothing to Don Bosco for several months. Finally, as the attraction increased, he was quite worried and told Don Bosco about it. "I was aware of it," Don Bosco replied, "and I too felt uneasy for you. But now that you have opened your heart, I am no longer concerned."

To win this confidence from most of his boys, Don Bosco, besides guarding their secrets most jealously, did not shirk from bearing patiently and cheerfully to a heroic degree, for God's sake, noise, indiscretion, outbursts of liveliness, a wide range of temperament, physical or mental deficiencies, and shortcomings which were the result of rude, coarse upbringing.

Still on the subject of these "little notes," we will remark that Don Bosco very carefully kept the most important as future reminders to their writers. How many times some youths, forgetting their promises to God and about to take a false step, were unexpectedly faced with their own notes gently rebuking them for their faithlessness. Years after leaving the Oratory, under the pressure of daily cares or loose, sinful living, some boys would entirely forget the Oratory. How often, when they least expected it, they would get in the mail their own little notes that eloquently reminded them of the years they had lived in God's grace and effectively spurred them to return to the right path.

Only a few such "little notes" were found at Don Bosco's death in his desk drawer. They had been written on solemn occasions by boys who, as laymen or priests, became models of Christian living. All others notes had been destroyed by the good Father. We will now present a few notes for the readers' edification. The first one shows Don Bosco's special care of those fortunate boys about to make their First Holy Communion:

Souvenirs Given by My Beloved Don Bosco on the Occasion
of My First Holy Communion

Favors To Be Asked

1. To die in God's grace.
1. To receive the Last Sacraments.
3. Modesty and horror of the contrary vice.

Promises to Jesus on Coming into My Heart

1. To go to confession once a month and even more often as my confessor advises.
2. Diligently to sanctify Sundays and holy days.

Things To Remember

1. Shun bad companions.
2. Avoid idleness.
3. Above all, obey my parents.

John Roggero

The next note, charmingly candid, was written by a student in the upper Latin courses:

September 18, 1857

With the help of the Blessed Virgin and my confessor's advice I shall try to abide by these maxims:

"Either penance in this life or no chance for penance hereafter."

"Either a short penance now or an eternal one later."

After seriously reflecting on these truths, I intend to do penance for my sins, as follows:

1. As far as I am allowed, I will not sleep more than six hours, possibly even less, and as uncomfortably as I can stand it.

2. In honor of Our Lady, I will fast every Saturday, on all prescribed vigils, and every day in Lent. When something I like is served, I will offer it to Our Lady by passing it up completely or at least partially. When I eat something tasty I will remember the bitter gall Our Lord had to drink.

3. Every day I will visit the Blessed Sacrament and recite the *Recordare, Piissima Virgo*. Morning and night I will kiss my crucifix and say my usual prayers. I will make the Exercise for a Happy Death every month and will receive the sacraments once a week or even daily, as my confessor advises.

4. I will be careful not to hurt my companions, and I will try to make up for the scandal I have given in the past.

5. I will not waste time in the study hall; as far as possible, I shall do some studying also during recreation.

6. I will choose a special patron saint for each month: St. Francis de Sales for January, Pope St. Gregory for February, St. Joseph for March, St. Mark for April.

A third note was as follows:

I, James R . . . , promise with the help of God and of Our Lady to observe these resolutions, starting from the Feast of All Saints — my seventeenth birthday — when hopefully I will don the clerical habit.

1. I will daily ask God for the grace to die rather than commit another mortal sin.

2. I consecrate myself entirely to Him and completely commend myself to my superiors; I will take their smallest commands as coming from Him.

3. I will carry out all spiritual and temporal duties as perfectly as possible.

4. I will strive to practice my faith fearlessly and to give good example always.

5. I will go to confession once a week and to Holy Communion more frequently.

6. I will daily visit the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady.

7. Every Saturday I will practice some mortification in Our Lady's honor.

8. I will celebrate Her feasts with special devotion and prepare for them with some fasting.

9. Every day I will pray for my parents and relatives, superiors and benefactors.

10. If I shall be privileged to become a priest, I will work very zealously for the salvation of souls, and will proclaim to all the glories of Mary to whom I especially owe my life's change for the better.

11. I will daily pray to Our Lord for final perseverance. *Omnia possum in Eo qui me confortat.* [I can do all things in Him who strengthens me — Phil. 4, 13.]

When I shall die and be judged, I'll know whether I have kept these resolutions.

The last note is by a young cleric. After specific promises to observe the Salesian Society's rules faithfully, he added:

1. I shall choose a private monitor and ask him to watch me closely and tell me of my shortcomings.

2. Before starting my school assignments I will read a chapter from the biographies of Louis Comollo, Dominic Savio, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, or some other saintly youth in order to imitate their virtues. When I finish reading these books, I'll start them all over again.

We can hardly remain unmoved if we try to visualize those sterling youths in the act of setting down in writing a course of action that would determine their eternal happiness, as we have good reason to hope. We can see their youthful faces wrapped in thought, their eyes upraised in search of the right phrase. How enchanting their candor in entrusting to Don Bosco the paper that contained their hearts' secrets. God bless you, dear youths, and may He one day return your "little notes" as titles to eternal glory!

And now we may ask: "What did Don Bosco achieve by these holy expedients?" Canon Hyacinth Ballesio gives us the answer in his funeral oration on Don Bosco's innermost life:

Don Bosco governed his Oratory — our Oratory too — with the holy fear of God and with his love and good example. You may call it a theocratic government. We call it government by persuasion and love as befits human dignity. And how wonderful were its results! Hundreds of boys eagerly and diligently fulfilled their duties. A great many of them

were not only good, but excellent, genuine models of piety, diligence, amiability, and self-denial. They led by their shining, friendly example. They would not deliberately commit even a venial sin for all the world. Their piety was so deep-rooted and sincere as to be truly extraordinary. How inspiring to see them in church wholly absorbed in prayer as in heavenly ecstasy. How often noblemen brought their children to the Oratory so that they could learn from the sons of the common people unwittingly ennobled by their love of God. These boys were most dear to Don Bosco. Imbued with his spirit, they helped him powerfully and exercised a deep, saving influence over their companions. At the Oratory there flourished indeed purity, simplicity, and Christian joy — the very same lofty virtues that made so charming the early times of St. Dominic, St. Francis of Assisi, and their disciples.

CHAPTER 32

Holy Expedients (Continued)

DON Bosco's holy expedients described in the two previous chapters, blessed by God, were aimed solely at the salvation of souls. Always vivid in his mind were the immutability of Divine Justice, the unquenchable fire of hell, the frightful, unfathomable eternity of the damned, the undying remorse of sinners, and their long-invoked but never to be attained death to end their pains. He contemplated, too, Our Divine Crucified Redeemer bathed in blood as He died for sinners' salvation. The sacrament of Penance he saw as a fruit of Christ's passion and the instrument of His infinite mercy to facilitate the conversion of those who would otherwise be lost. He also realized that God pours His graces more plentifully on the worst sinners — as was the case with St. Augustine and others — as long as they do not willfully resist Him.

Steeped in such thoughts, he feared for the possible unhappy lot of so many young people. He foresaw that their spiritual battles might often end in sad defeat. Knowing the marvelous priestly power he had to forgive sin, he was convinced that many would reach salvation only through him. Moreover, he passionately loved to win souls for Jesus Christ. For these reasons, utterly heedless of human considerations, Don Bosco kept inviting many to the healing grace of confession in season and out of season.

With this in mind, our readers will thoroughly understand the reasons behind the many incidents we shall narrate. They will realize too that God not only approved Don Bosco's methods in saving souls, but wondrously seconded his burning zeal.

In the Book of Proverbs we read: "As the faces of those who

look therein shine in the water, so the hearts of men are laid open to the wise." [Prov. 27, 19] In Don Bosco's case, his wisdom opened to him an even greater field of vision. Knowing the past and the future of many youths, he used his knowledge to guide them or to forewarn them of the dangers to come. To support this statement we shall quote several witnesses, starting with Father John Turchi, Lit.D., a shrewd, prudent man and severe critic:¹

What I am about to say may sound superstitious or fanatical, and perhaps someone will label me superficial and overly gullible. I don't mind. As a matter of fact, I too am puzzled and do not know what to say of certain things I saw in Don Bosco. Yet, can we argue against facts? They will not be talked out of existence. What must be done is to verify their authenticity through unimpeachable sources. Once that has been established, if we cannot grasp their *raison d'être*, we can only ascribe it to our inability. What has really happened cannot be denied. With this preamble, I pass on to the facts.

During the ten years I have already spent at the Oratory, I have countless times heard Don Bosco say: "Bring me a boy I have never known or met before; after a look at his face, I will tell him all the sins he committed since his early years."

Occasionally he would say, "Many times — especially on solemn feasts and spiritual retreats — while hearing confessions, I see boys' consciences wide open before me like a book. Fortunate indeed are those boys who follow my advice, particularly when given in the sacrament of Penance. But at other times I see nothing. This phenomenon occurs intermittently for longer or shorter periods." It came — we believe — whenever the good of souls required it.

Generally Don Bosco toned down the impression his words would leave by trying to make it appear that there was nothing supernatural about this gift. He would smile and say, "When I hear confessions at night I prefer to have the lamp so placed that I can see the boys' faces; in daytime I like to have them face me; it speeds the confessions."

It is obvious then that Don Bosco saw his pupils' consciences as in

¹ Father Turchi was a pupil and later a teacher at the Oratory, where he said his first Mass on May 26, 1861. Years later, during Don Bosco's process of beatification, he gave very important written testimony to the Prefect of the Congregation of Rites concerning relations between Archbishop Lawrence Gastaldi of Turin and Don Bosco (*Memorie Biografiche di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Vol. XIX, pp. 403-412). [Editor]

a mirror. Of this I am most certain because I have witnessed it hundreds of times. The boys used to call this "reading the countenance." I make no pronouncement on the matter. I merely state what I and all the Oratory boys know.

Thus reads the witness of Father Turchi. So deeply convinced were the boys that Don Bosco could see in their consciences not only external sins but even innermost thoughts, that nearly all wanted to go to confession to him. "With him we are surer to make good confessions and Communions," they claimed. "If we forget any sin, he will surely recall it to us." It is a fact that his confessional was always crowded with boys.

One day, a zealous, prudent religious, seeing the crowd of young penitents, remarked to Don Bosco that he should not hear his own pupils' confessions because fear or shame might easily cause them to conceal some sin. "If I let them!" Don Bosco candidly replied. This was the sincere conviction of all the pupils too, who repeatedly declared, "It's no use keeping sins from Don Bosco; he knows them anyway."

In fact, to this day there are scores of people who declare that Don Bosco often told them all their sins in confession clearly and distinctly as if reading them from a book, and that he called their attention to sins they had forgotten or were ashamed to confess. He would say, for instance, "And what about this sin or that? Have you forgotten?" The most remarkable thing is that in revealing a sin to a boy — as if further to convince him he knew all about it — Don Bosco would tell him where and when, the number of times, and even the boy's age when he sinned. He never erred, as many of our friends told us, and as many schoolmates of Bishop John Cagliero confided to him. All were dumbfounded to see their innermost secrets revealed.

That is not all. The Father Turchi quoted above goes on to say, "Many a boy told me, 'When I went to confession to Don Bosco, he asked, 'Will you tell your sins or do you want me to do it?' I let him do it, and he told them all. I just had to agree to what he said. He even told me, precisely, things I had entirely forgotten.'"

Needless to say, such a way of hearing confessions was a great boon to all youngsters who wanted to make a general confession but had trouble unraveling their consciences. They just went to Don Bosco and said, "Please, Father, tell me my sins." Then briefly, neatly, and unerringly, Don Bosco told them the story of their lives. All they had to do was to say yes.

When bothered by temptation or spiritual troubles that left them ill at ease, they would approach Don Bosco after night prayers and stand before him silently in order to draw his attention. If he returned their gaze and said nothing, they went tranquilly to bed, certain of being in the state of grace. They also went to him during the day. With a gesture of his hand, a nod, a look, or a word, he would assure them all was right, thus banishing all their anxieties. Their worried looks gave way to happy smiles just as clouds are swept away by sunshine. For example, there was a scrupulous cleric who was always undecided about going to Communion, fearing he might commit a sacrilege. One evening he was waiting his turn with a crowd of pupils near Don Bosco's confessional in the apse of St. Francis de Sales Church at the Oratory. The church was in semidarkness. With only one lamp burning it was difficult for Don Bosco to make out the faces of even those kneeling close by. The cleric was ill at ease, his anguish fast becoming unbearable, when the thought struck him: "If Don Bosco could see my soul's condition and tell me to be at ease and receive Communion tomorrow without going to confession, how happy I'd be! It would be a sure sign that my conscience is in order; I would banish my scruples and be completely rid of them." Hardly had the thought passed when he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He stood up. As if in answer, Don Bosco kindly whispered into his ear, "Don't worry. Go to Communion. No need of confession." The cleric obeyed and from that day on was never troubled by scruples again.

Such wonders, however, did not take place only in 1861. Don Bosco's whole life was filled with them. Father Joachim Berto [Don Bosco's secretary for over twenty years] has left us the following deposition:

Several times I have seen worried boys waiting for hours to make

their confession to Don Bosco. Now and then he would call one or another and whisper, "You may go to Holy Communion." Since we all knew from experience that Don Bosco had charisms, at a word or nod from him we obeyed unquestioningly. Thus he also succeeded in ridding many youngsters of scruples. Later in the day, upon meeting these boys, he would further put them at ease, whispering in their ear: "This morning I sent you to Communion without confession because I saw that your soul was in order." Or, "The things you wanted to confess were not sins."

I have personally witnessed these incidents several times and have heard accounts of numerous other instances from companions whose names I am not free to disclose.

At this point someone may ask whether all at the Oratory were convinced of Don Bosco's charism. Did anyone ever doubt it? Our answer is: Doubting Thomases and critics who take a less favorable view of their neighbors' words and deeds could not be wanting in such a large house as the Oratory; yearly a sizable percentage of pupils were newcomers, many ranging from sixteen to twenty, who knew Don Bosco only by name. In the testimony given previously, Father John Turchi answered the question as follows:

There were many who did laugh at Don Bosco's "countenance reading," and I know too that finally they had to yield to the eloquence of facts. I shall limit myself to only a few examples.

In the Oratory's early years a boy from Biella whose name began with "R" was accepted as a student. As soon as he reached Turin, he went to confession at *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation]. Then he went to the Oratory where Father Alasonatti, the prefect, received him warmly and later introduced him to Don Bosco who was surrounded by a group of boys. Don Bosco had never met the lad before. He and his boys were talking about discernment of hearts, and the lads were recalling instances of Don Bosco's surprising revelations. The newcomer listened to it all and then abruptly blurted out, "Father, I dare you to read my sins. You can even tell them out loud if you wish."

"Come closer," Don Bosco replied. He gazed at the boy's forehead and then whispered into his ear. The lad turned a deep red. Don Bosco looked at him once more and again whispered what perhaps were more

details about the boy's past life. At this he broke into tears, exclaiming, "It's not fair! You're the priest who heard my confession at *La Consolata* this morning!"

"He's not!" his companions chorused. "Don Bosco has been here all day. How could he know if you had gone to confession? You are all wrong! You don't know Don Bosco yet. This happens all the time." At this the boy relaxed, and from then on had the greatest trust in Don Bosco. I was present at this scene and so was Michael Rua [then a young cleric]. He can testify to its truth.

A like surprise befell a pupil from around Buttigliera,² Caesar B . . . , about thirteen years old, whose home Don Bosco had visited on several occasions. That day, shortly after the beginning of the school year, a number of boys — among them Francis Cerruti, Michael Rua, John Cagliero (then a young cleric) and I — were crowding around Don Bosco, asking for spiritual tips and especially requesting him to admonish us more pointedly about our spiritual needs. Meantime, Caesar B . . . , having repeatedly heard from schoolmates that Don Bosco could read consciences, came up to him and boldly dared him, saying, "Father, you'll never be able to read my conscience!"

Don Bosco, who was seated, drew the boy close and then whispered for some time into his ear in the presence of us all. When he was through, the lad, deeply moved, faced us and said with admirable candor, "He can surely do it! He told me something I have never breathed to anyone — not even in confession." Then he went away, promising to go to confession soon.

On another day, while several of us were with him as usual in the dining room after breakfast, he smilingly told us he knew our innermost thoughts. With us was a student, whose name I prefer not to say, who lived in town and often visited the Oratory. On hearing this he blurted out in a tone of near contempt for what he considered impossible, "Well, then, tell me my thoughts." Don Bosco called him closer and whispered to him. We never found out what he said, but the boy looked distressed and dared not say another word. I saw this myself.

Two years ago a fellow seminarian of mine, a theology student, spent a few days with a fine gentleman in a little town about ten miles from Turin. On his return, he went to Don Bosco for confession. Afterward he came to me and said, "I must tell you something really funny. In that little town I went to confession to the pastor because I was ashamed to have to mention a certain sin to Don Bosco when I came back. Then,

² A village not far from Don Bosco's birthplace. [Editor]

a few days ago, I went as usual to confession to Don Bosco. Afterward, he said to me, 'Look, I know quite well what you did.' (And he mentioned my sin)."

"I still can't get over it," my friend continued. "I have now learned to my own regret that when one slips up badly it's no use going to confession to anyone else. Don Bosco knows it anyway!"

Thus reads the witness of Father John Turchi, one among many who testified to this extraordinary gift of Don Bosco. The next deposition is by Father John Garino: ³

One winter morning of 1858 or 1859, a good number of us gathered around Don Bosco while he was having his coffee. Some of us sat on the long table at the end of which Don Bosco was sitting; others stood at his side or behind him. We were laughing and joking quite freely, yet with respect, as loving children would with their father. Among other things, someone remarked that Don Bosco could see the future, predict one's death, and so on. I also remember that on this occasion Don Bosco did whisper to several of those present some of their innermost secrets to their great amazement. At Don Bosco's right and near him sat a certain Evaristus C . . . , a rather bright boy, but not too exemplary. While this was going on, he laughed at what was being said with obvious light contempt. At one point he burst out, "Father, I don't believe you can see secret things. Tell me, if you can . . ." — and he egged Don Bosco on to reveal a secret of his. Don Bosco took him at his word. Immediately he leaned toward him and whispered. The lad blushed, said not a word, became pensive, and never again dared say that Don Bosco did not see or know the secrets of the heart.

We also have the testimony of Peter Enria.⁴ He declared:

A companion of mine confided to me that once he fell into a grave

³ Father Garino was born in 1845 and entered the Oratory in 1857; a few years later, in 1862, he took triennial vows in the Salesian Society. Ordained a priest in 1869, he distinguished himself as a Latin and Greek scholar and a fervent religious. He died in 1908. [Editor]

⁴ Peter Enria was born in 1841 and entered the Oratory in 1854. He was first assigned to learn a trade, but three years later he was transferred to the procurator's office. For many years he was the *factotum* of the house. In 1878 he took the Salesian vows as a coadjutor brother. Very dear to Don Bosco, he nursed him during his last illness. [Editor]

sin, and because of it he studiously kept out of Don Bosco's sight. One day, though, he chanced to meet Don Bosco who in a fatherly manner said to him, "You are afraid to come near me because you have committed a sin!" And he told him what it was. It was such that no one could possibly have known of it. Bewildered and repentant, my companion begged Don Bosco to hear his confession and turned over a new leaf. [I also remember that] on several occasions during the evening recreation Don Bosco used to approach one pupil or another and whisper into his ear. Later, after night prayers, those lads would go to the sacristy or to Don Bosco's room to make their confessions before going to bed.

This extraordinary, heavenly gift of discerning certain boys' spiritual condition never failed Don Bosco throughout his life, nor did he hesitate to remind his pupils of it now and then. One evening in 1869, speaking after night prayers to the whole community of over nine hundred people — of whom at least one hundred were mature, educated men — he said: "God has given me the gift of spotting hypocrites. When they come near me, I experience a sickening, unbearable nausea. They notice it and sense that I see through them, so they steer clear of me." Facts bore this out.

One morning in 1870, as Don Bosco came out of the church, many boys ran to him. Though several other priests had helped him with confessions, he was quite exhausted by the crowd of his own penitents. Still he amiably chatted with those around him. At one point he turned to a boy and, running his right index finger lightly across the youngster's forehead, said smilingly, "This morning you did not wash your face."

"I did, Father," the boy protested. But Don Bosco still smiling, insisted, "No-o-o, you didn't!" stressing the "o." He then whispered something into his ear. The boy hung his head pensively. Don Bosco had told him that he had not been to confession and he sorely needed it. We came to know of this incident from Father Augustine Parigi⁵ [then a pupil] who was present.

⁵ In 1867, when Parigi was about eleven, Don Bosco predicted to him that he would live to see Father Joseph Cottolengo declared "Blessed." This will be seen in Vol. VIII of these memoirs. Father Cottolengo was beatified in 1917. [Editor]

We ourselves witnessed this following incident. During the yearly spiritual retreat at the Oratory in 1870, one of the older boys — a rather forward youth whose conduct was not particularly good — before going to confession kept bragging that Don Bosco would never be able to read his sins.

“Try him out,” several boys told him.

“I will,” he replied. “All these things about Don Bosco are just fairy tales.”

And in that mood he laughingly went to church and knelt by Don Bosco for his confession which was fairly long. His companions waited for him. When he staggered out of church, hair disheveled and eyes bloodshot, his friends ran to him.

“Well?” they asked.

“Leave me alone!”

“What did he say?”

“Just leave me alone!”

“Is it all fairy tales?”

“Fairy tales? He told me everything, even what I had completely forgotten! Now leave me alone!” And he withdrew to the porticoes, pacing up and down and muttering to himself: “He told me everything, everything!”

Later on, whenever someone belittled this charism of Don Bosco, he would immediately protest, saying, “Don’t say that! I know better!”

We could go on with many more examples, but since they are linked with very important events, we shall narrate them in their proper place.

Just to give one more instance before closing this topic, we shall repeat what we ourselves heard Don Bosco say one evening of 1871 in the dining room. The boys had left and only Father Rua and other superiors remained. The conversation turned to widespread moral evils that ruined so many youths. After listening to their opinions, Don Bosco said: “The main trouble with certain evils is how to spot them in order to be able to cure them. Fortunately, Our Lord is extremely merciful to our boys. When I am with them, even if only one indulges in sins of impurity, I immedi-

ately know it because of the unbearable stench he emits. And if he comes near and I can see his face, I am certain to be right.”

This is why some boys kept their distance from him. If they had to go near him for some reason or other, while respectfully doffing their caps, they still tried to shield their foreheads with them or with their hair, as if that were enough to hide their consciences. This happened especially at the beginning of the school year, when the pupils, back from their summer vacation, had not yet cleared their account with God. At this time, if Don Bosco came into the playground, scores of them scattered like startled birds, leaving around him only the good ones, who fortunately were many. Those who fled made no secret of it. “Don Bosco reads our sins on our foreheads,” they said. It would happen at times that after night prayers, some boy would maneuver behind his companions in order to hide from Don Bosco. When asked the reason, he would reply, ill at ease, “Because Don Bosco reads my sins in my eyes.”

On his part, Don Bosco flung his holy nets about to catch them, and once he got to speak to these boys, victory was assured. He prudently warned them of their secret faults with such veiled phrases as, “You need to settle your accounts with God.” If he noticed a look of sadness on someone, he would say, “Son, if you want peace, you must first rid your heart of the devil.”

“I know of a boy,” Father [John] Bonetti told us, “who had committed a secret sin and was quite sure no one knew of it. Well, one evening, as he passed by Don Bosco, the latter called him and whispered, ‘What would happen to you if you were to die tonight?’ That boy spent a sleepless night, and the next morning he hastened to confession. Often during recreation Don Bosco would call a pupil and suggest that he confess this or that sin, turn over a new leaf, and cooperate with God’s mercy. His advice always proved most timely.”

When he sometimes could not contact certain pupils, he used other means to rouse them from their spiritual sloth. One was to place a little note under their pillow. Its effect was indescribable. In one case, he had for some time been quite solicitous about a

pupil who stubbornly resisted such fatherly efforts on his behalf. One night he found a note on his bed. It was in Don Bosco's own hand and bore his signature. It read, "Where would you go if you should unfortunately die tonight?"

The boy was stunned. For a while he stood by his bed, wrought and shaken. Finally he ran to Don Bosco's room and knocked. It was ten o'clock. "Please hear my confession," the boy gasped when Don Bosco came to the door and warmly received him. Afterward the boy returned to bed full of joy. The next morning, as soon as he got up, he himself told a fellow student, John Baptist Piano, that he had really been in need of a good confession and that Don Bosco knew all his sins to the smallest details. He added that he had seldom slept so well.

Another time, a boy, while turning the sheet over the blankets before getting into bed, felt a slip of paper between his fingers. "What's this?" he asked aloud. "My lucky numbers?"

Curious, he stepped to the middle of the dormitory under the lamp. The paper was blank except for his own name written twice and followed by an exclamation point. The handwriting was Don Bosco's. "What does it mean?" he muttered, thinking hard for a few minutes. He then went back to his bed, put on his coat, and hurried to confession. We can infer, therefore, that Don Bosco — knowing that some boy was in mortal sin — could not bear the thought that he should fall asleep at enmity with God and run the risk of dying in that condition.

Father Michael Rua knows of other boys who found notes under their pillows, such as, "What if you should die tonight?" Or, "Where would your soul go if you should die tonight? To heaven, do you think?" Other notes had this message, "Would you be tranquil if death surprised you tonight?" With these and similar warnings he induced them to put themselves immediately in God's grace.

"Someone may remark," Bishop John Cagliero declared, anticipating an objection, "that Don Bosco might have been tipped off about his pupils' faults by his young assistants. But I answer that in the early years of the Oratory — that is, for ten or more years — those in charge of supervision were not regularly present. And I can state too, without hesitation, that the recipients of Don Bosco's

warnings were convinced that he could never have known their failings except by supernatural revelation. Hence we must conclude that the same spirit which illumined Don Bosco during the earlier years guided him also in all the years that followed.”

We will also add that Don Bosco’s charismatic knowledge was not limited to sins, doubts, and scruples. In many cases he could also read other thoughts or troubles. Often he would give a pupil advice to allay concern caused by worries or by scholastic or family difficulties. At other times he would dispel secret discontent stemming from excessive timidity, jealousy, grudge, or diffidence. On occasion he would suddenly give a piece of advice that perfectly fitted someone who had not said a word about his difficulty but who yearned for help.

Don Bosco also used this intuition of his to aid youths in making up their minds when they seemed to have a priestly vocation. To many who became Salesians — and are now happy as such — he said quite frankly: “If you want to save your soul, just stay where you are. God calls you to this way of life.” Even outsiders benefited by this gift of Don Bosco. “Many persons,” Father Rua declared to us, “have told me how Don Bosco had pinpointed the cause of certain troubles of theirs and comforted them even before they had a chance to speak.”

It is best to end this topic now, as the depositions of Bishop John Cagliero, Father John Baptist Piano, Canon Hyacinth Balesio, Joseph Buzzetti, John Villa, and many, many others would draw it beyond limits. One more incident and we shall close this chapter.

Once Don Bosco was discussing ways and means to publicize certain undertakings of his with a group of his priests and clerics. Among the listeners was a more than forty-year-old coadjutor⁶ who held Don Bosco in deepest veneration. Yet at this particular moment, without giving an inkling of what was in his mind, he thought to himself, “Humbug!”

When Don Bosco finished speaking, all withdrew except the coadjutor. Don Bosco turned to him smilingly and asked, “Humbug, is it?”

⁶ A lay Salesian. [Editor]

“But . . .”

“Oh, you are quite right!” And very amiably he passed on to other confidential matters of importance.

Numerous other instances of mind-reading happened. Once, someone remarked in his presence that nothing of what was going on escaped Don Bosco’s notice, though his eyes were cast down. His reply was: “I see better without looking!”

Indeed, he did see with the eyes of the spirit illumined by prayer!

CHAPTER 33

Young Converts

THE dawn of the new year — 1860 — brought Don Bosco new undertakings with their attendant joys and sorrows. The anonymous January issue of *Letture Cattoliche* — *The Hour of Grace* or *The Last Hours of a Man Condemned to Death* — carried an Appendix in which Don Bosco gave wholesome advice that seemed related to *Galantuomo's* predictions of December 1859: ¹

AN EASY AND MOST EFFECTIVE SAFEGUARD FROM PRESENT AND FUTURE EVILS

Exhortation to All Christians

Calamities have long afflicted us, and we have reason to fear even worse to come. We all sigh and groan, and many wax angry and complain bitterly. Yet, only a few know the true cause of our troubles and strive to remove it. Let it be very clear that sin causes all evils, all unhappiness. When man dares to offend and outrage God, God punishes him. Reason and faith tell us this. Only a fool could doubt it.

Do we really want to rid ourselves of present ills and ward off threatening ones? Let us remove their cause — sin. Let us make our peace with God, appease His anger, and satisfy His justice. The most merciful and loving God gave us His Son to be our easy, sure means of reconciliation; to this end Our Lord shed His blood. All we need do is to take advantage of it through the sacrament of Penance. Faith tells us so. The faithful of all ages believed it and most effectively availed themselves of this means. Let us not be like wretched sinners who, rather than make their peace with God, keep offending and provoking Him so that He is

¹ See Chapter 28. [Editor]

forced to inflict greater punishments which eventually will climax in the endless, frightful punishments of hell!

As Christians, can we be indifferent to the loss of so many brothers? Can we allow God's anger to be further provoked and His punishments — including temporal ones — to fall heavier upon them and us? Let us rather seek His mercy, ease His anger, and expiate our sins. Let us revive our faith.

In addition, Don Bosco kept enkindling greater love for Jesus Christ and promoting attendance at Holy Mass. At this time, he was very gratified by a brief of Pius IX replying to a letter he had written to the Pope — also on behalf of his boys — at the beginning of November. On January 7, 1860, Pius IX showed his appreciation for this token of filial reverence and staunch fidelity in a gracious brief that will permanently witness his kindness toward the Oratory. Don Bosco translated it at once into Italian and read it to his boys to have them share in his comfort. The Latin text of the brief was also published in the Catholic weekly *L'Armonia*,² which shortly afterward also launched an appeal for contributions to "Peter's Pence." It was a successful drive, netting three hundred thousand lire in a little over a year. Duchess [Laval] Montmorency had suggested and initiated the project. Don Bosco was among the first donors and was soon followed by many others, as in response to the call: "Let those who are for the Lord join with us." [Cf. Ex. 32, 26] The anticlericals were irked no end and made the appeal their target of frequent invective. They even campaigned fruitlessly for a law to forbid appeals for religious causes.

Attachment of loyal Catholics and of Don Bosco to the Pope showed itself also in an intense love for stray sheep. We find evidence of this in the January 24 issue of *L'Armonia* in an article entitled "Baptism of a Young Jewish Boy":

Four months ago two young brothers were baptized at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Born in London in the Anglican faith, they were eventually led by Divine Providence to this Oratory, where, together with bodily food, they also found the bread of eternal life. At the same Oratory, on Sunday, January 15, a young Jew of Ivrea, son of the

² Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

scholarly Rabbi Jarach — a devout convert for the past twelve years — was baptized. The boy had always wanted to follow his father's example, but could not get his mother's consent. As he grew older, his desire and insistence grew. Finally, at fourteen, he was taken by his father to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco.³ With his previous knowledge of Catholicism and additional instruction, he was soon ready for Baptism and Confirmation. Bishop [Louis] Moreno of Ivrea, a close friend of the Jarach family, with fatherly goodness came to the Oratory to say the ten o'clock Mass and reap the fruit of his solicitude. Many boys received Holy Communion. Then followed the interesting rite of Jarach's Baptism. The boy's composure and frank replies, his joy, and his recollection were evidence of his deepest satisfaction. He took the name of Thomas Louis Mary. Duke Thomas Scotti and Marchioness Mary Fassati were godparents. With some three hundred boys he was confirmed immediately afterward. Among these boys were twenty-five chimney sweeps who, thanks to the St. Vincent de Paul Society, had been instructed for this sacrament at the Guardian Angel Oratory in Borgo Vanchiglia. Were it not for the Christian charity of interested people who thus enabled them to become full-fledged Christians, these poor boys, shying away from public churches because of their poverty, might never have been confirmed. Count [Charles] Cays acted as godfather for all.

Afterward, Bishop Moreno movingly and fervently exhorted the young Jewish convert to appreciate the gift of faith he had received and urged all who had been confirmed to show themselves ever true followers of Jesus Christ by fulfilling their Christian duties firmly, bravely, and fearlessly.

The services, ending with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament at about half past one, were enhanced by the silvery tones of soloists and choristers which stirred all hearts with heavenly thoughts.

"That same afternoon," we learn from an account by Joseph Reano, "the bishop told Don Bosco of the immense joy he had experienced on that day and of his readiness to return any time for similar functions, even on the shortest notice, without formal invitation. The youngsters' devotion, he said, had moved him to tears."

Such heartwarming events were not rare; the Oratory of St.

³ See p. 159. [Editor]

Francis de Sales was a true haven for many who left heresy to return to the Church. Don Bosco's kindness and endless patience in the face of rudeness and insult often penetrated obdurate hearts. His policy to overlook offenses for God's sake to win souls to Him charmed those who had gone astray. One of these was a former priest turned Protestant minister. He frequently showed up at the Oratory to argue with Don Bosco. On his first visit he told Don Bosco that the Bible would have to be basis for all discussions.

"Which Bible?" Don Bosco queried. "Yours or ours? Who has preserved the Bible for so many centuries? Certainly not you people who were born only yesterday. Who has jealously guarded this treasure before you? The Catholic Church alone can prove the authenticity of the Sacred Books with her tradition."

The poor man was at a loss. Don Bosco thoughtfully asked him to stay for dinner and extended him the same courtesy every time he came for further debates, as Joseph Reano testified. We are also told that one day a Waldensian called on Don Bosco for a debate. After the visitor had been in conference quite a while, Reano, fearing harm for Don Bosco, pushed the door ajar and peeped in. The visitor was on his knees before Don Bosco, making his confession.

At the end of January, Don Bosco accepted another young convert at the Oratory, as we gather from the following letter:

Vercelli, January 23, 1860

Dear Reverend Father,

The bearer of this letter is a convert who was instructed by my worthy colleague, Canon Barberis, whom you know. The lad has quit his sect and was baptized conditionally last Wednesday. He shows great promise for good. Your experience with youngsters will, I am sure, make you of the same opinion after you talk with him. I entrust him to you. Please try to get him a job with a God-fearing artist. Perhaps it might even be better for you to accept him as an artisan. I am positive this protégé of mine will give an excellent account of himself.

I received your most welcome letter yesterday and will reply later regarding the matter you mentioned.

Your devoted servant and friend
Can. Joseph De Gaudenzi

These four boys — a Jew and three Protestants — only recently regenerated in the waters of Baptism, celebrated the feast of St. Francis de Sales for the first time at the Oratory on Sunday, January 29. Chevalier Bosco of Ruffino, prior of the feast, treated all the boys, both resident and day, to breakfast. That evening awards were given to those with the best conduct marks.

Among those who took an active part in the feast was a young musician, Dominic Belmonte, aged 17, a native of Genola in the Fossano diocese. He had arrived at the Oratory that month⁴ with the sole purpose of becoming a good organist. The first few days were hard on him. He became homesick and fleetingly thought of running away. Sensing that the boy would turn out to be one of his most trusted and virtuous sons, Don Bosco sent for him, cheered him up a bit, and earnestly suggested that he study Latin; Belmonte agreed willingly and resolutely.

⁴ According to the Oratory school records, Belmonte entered the Oratory on April 13. [Editor]

CHAPTER 34

Holy Shrewdness

THE Superior Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, only recently established,¹ met early in February to consider its first applicant. The minutes, drawn up by Father Victor Alasonatti, read as follows:

On the second of February, in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and sixty, at half past nine in the evening, the [Superior] Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met in the room of its director — Father John Bosco — at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales to consider the application of Joseph Rossi,² son of Matthew, born in Mezzanabigli. The following were present: Father John Bosco, *Director*; Father Alasonatti, *Prefect*; Subdeacon Michael Rua, *Spiritual Director*; Deacon Angelo Savio, *Economer*; Clerics John Cagliero, John Bonetti, and Charles Ghivarello, *Consultors*.

After a short prayer to the Holy Spirit, balloting took place. With votes unanimously favorable, the young man was admitted to the said Society.

Later [in 1869] Joseph Rossi became purveyor of the Salesian Society. In a talk that same evening, Don Bosco, commenting on Isaiah — “Sion, the city of our strength: a Savior, a wall and a bulwark shall be set therein” [Isa. 26, 1] — remarked that the wall was God’s law and the bulwark was the Society’s rules, concerning which he agreed with St. Thomas Aquinas that it is difficult for men to observe God’s commandments unless, by following His counsels,

¹ See Chapter 24. [Editor]

² See pp. 159f. [Editor]

they also renounce what they possess. He concluded with a thought of St. Augustine to the effect that rules are as helpful to us as wheels to a vehicle or wings to a bird.

Meantime, the February issue of *Letture Cattoliche* was out, entitled *Timely Spiritual Resourcefulness* by Father Joseph Frasinetti, prior of Santa Sabina, Genoa . . .

Don Bosco appended to this booklet — a source of much spiritual good — a little treatise by Msgr. Louis Gaston de Ségur, *The Pope*, which he slightly edited in spots . . . and prefaced with a brief note:

Let the reader mind well that this treatise deals with religion, not politics. It appeals to good common sense and good faith, and so we hope it will be well received. The Pope's temporal power is discussed only from the viewpoint of religion and conscience, but to restrict conscience to the realm of immaterial things only would be foolish. An unbiased reading of these pages will show that truth speaks louder than sophism.

Don Bosco also appended a note to the treatise:

Dear readers, be steadfast in your union with the Pope and the Church. Fear not the enemy's furious threats and let not his honeyed words deceive you. Mostly, do not be taken in by those seemingly moderate ways and expressions which the wicked use to worm their way into the minds of the upright. Stand up bravely for your faith and convictions. Do not be afraid. God is with the Church all days to the end of time. It is for the wicked to tremble before the godly, not the godly before the wicked.

This booklet also appealed for a wider spread of *Letture Cattoliche* . . . whose every issue testified to Don Bosco's generous love for and attachment to the Holy See. He stood always in the breach, so to speak, in its defense. Just as in an issue of 1855³ he had threatened God's punishments to usurpers of Church possessions, so in this last he defended the Pope's temporal power. It required rare courage at that time because he took the risk of

³ See Vol. V, pp. 149f. [Editor]

mighty serious consequences; in fact, he soon was called to face them. However, Divine Providence so disposed things that he could even turn certain events to his advantage. With the guidance and comfort of the Blessed Virgin, he successfully blended simplicity and prudence — no mean achievement, as St. John Chrysostom declares: *Hoc est enim philosophiae culmen, simplicem esse cum prudentia*. [This is the apex of philosophy: to be simple, yet prudent.]

What first put him on the right track was a request from the Department of the Interior headed by Luigi Carlo Farini, who just a few days before had succeeded Urbano Rattazzi:

Department of the Interior
Division 5, No. 84

Turin, February 4, 1860

The mayor of Lagnasco has requested support from this ministry for the admission of Dominic Gorla, 14, a native of that town, into the boys' Oratory of St. Francis de Sales of this city. This lad has lost both parents and is totally destitute. I can do no less than second this appeal to provide for the future of a boy of good moral character and health by teaching him a craft which will assist him morally and materially.

I trust that Father John Bosco, director of the Oratory, will be favorable to this charity case. A prompt reply will be appreciated.

By Order of the Minister

Signed: Salino

Farini was just the man to be very hard on the Oratory, and yet one of his first acts on taking office was to recommend an orphan to Don Bosco. This may really seem strange, yet the explanation is quite simple — Don Bosco's shrewdness. Foreseeing that any cabinet minister would gladly lend support to a request costing him neither trouble nor expense because the paper work would be handled by secretaries, Don Bosco himself often suggested that applicants seek a recommendation from some government official. We must add that Don Bosco counted a great many friends among the secretaries and that often enough cabinet ministers found it in their interest to recommend applicants to the Oratory, even if

by so doing they placed themselves under some sort of an obligation to Don Bosco.

In all such cases Don Bosco obliged quickly, with a personal reply to the cabinet minister, from whom, in due time, he would know how to obtain protection and help.

In the above-mentioned case, he himself had probably suggested to the mayor of Lagnasco that he seek a recommendation from Minister Farini. Don Bosco replied to Farini very obligingly and filed the minister's letter. The boy was accepted in the artisans' division. To his surprise the lad found that his schoolmates in a show of national consciousness were conversing in Italian rather than in their native dialects. This had come about when a small group of artisans — Fassino, Roda, Giani, Biletta, Cora, and Variolato — at the suggestion of someone who knew how Don Bosco felt on this point, approached him on February 13 [1860] during the after-dinner ⁴ recreation while he was conversing with some clerics and students and asked that Italian be the Oratory's language even in familiar conversation. Don Bosco readily agreed in order to avoid an inevitable babel of dialects. Furthermore, he made Italian mandatory for students. The very next day Piedmontese was no longer heard, though the artisans soon returned to it since most of them feared to be ridiculed for their blunders and felt additionally that conversing in Italian smacked of snobbery.

On this same day, February 13, several newcomers arrived. The Porta Nuova railroad station was the favorite hangout of youths eking out a living as vendors, bootblacks, or porters. Out of sheer pity, Don Bosco used to invite them — coarse as they were and totally ignorant of religion — to board at the Oratory. To his great regret, however, most of them declined, having no interest in their souls or in discipline.

On this particular day, as he was returning to the Oratory from town, Don Bosco noticed seven youths about eighteen years old in a nearby square. They looked like wild leaders of harassing mobs. They greeted Don Bosco with jeers, but he walked up to them and kindly asked about their birthplace, family, and jobs. When they replied that they had no work and were not looking for any, Don

⁴ Dinner was at noon. [Editor]

Bosco asked them if they would like to go to a place where they would find shelter, food, and work. "Is that your Oratory?" they asked.

"Yes," Don Bosco replied. "How about it?"

"Shall we go?" one queried. All agreed and followed Don Bosco. When they got to the Oratory, Don Bosco called his pupils around him in the playground as soon as he could, and after some words of advice he said, "We'll have to be very patient with these newcomers. Do your best!"

Indeed, their every word was a blasphemy, a curse, or ribaldry. In the dormitory at bedtime they laughed boisterously, shouted, interrupted the public reading, and booed the young cleric who asked them to keep quiet. A few, once they got clothes and shoes, disappeared after a few days, but those who stayed on were given a chance to learn a trade. Understandably, it took endless effort to reform these youths, but before long Don Bosco's fatherly amiability won out. "I kept them constantly in sight," Joseph Rossi declared, "and personally saw how grateful they were. They vied in mutually exhorting each other to behave, to work well, and to do all Don Bosco asked."

A good cleric speeded up their conversion. Disturbed by their wretched upbringing and irreverence in church, he prayed fervently to the Blessed Virgin Mary to touch their hearts during Her month. A few days later, after Benediction one evening, one of the young men looked for him and tearfully asked how he might reform his life. He confided that as the boys were singing "Praised be the Holy and Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary" after Benediction he thought he saw Our Lady stretch Her arms toward him from Her altar. The cleric suggested a general confession, and the boy agreed. From then on he gradually became a model of behavior to all, especially in church, and never slipped back into his old ways.

The March issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, *The Reward of Charity* by M. Desoville, marked the start of the publication's eighth year. Appended to the issue was the pastoral letter of Msgr. Antony Vitaliano Sossi, Asti's diocesan vicar capitular general. Dated Feb-

ruary 10, 1860, it pointed out the baleful consequences of bad literature and urged widespread reading of *Letture Cattolice* . . .

The letter gave Don Bosco a chance to announce a plan of his. During the previous year he had mulled over the idea of founding a society which would help offset the evil effects of bad books by a widespread distribution of wholesome literature. Accordingly he drew up its bylaws⁵ and then, in 1860, he started a subscription drive by giving out booklets bearing the Oratory seal, with space for the subscriber's name and offering. We have a few such blanks in our archives.⁶

⁵ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

⁶ We are omitting the subscribers' names and also a short promotional circular. [Editor]

CHAPTER 35

Love for the Church

THE Lent of 1860 began on February 22, and Don Bosco's three festive oratories in Turin were geared for daily catechetical instructions. The Guardian Angel Oratory of Borgo Vanchiglia, however, was minus the bell used to assemble catechism classes because it had been stolen. Fortunately, a distinguished benefactor — Archbishop Louis Fransoni — made up for it, as we learn from a brief note in *L'Armonia* of February 18.¹

This year the St. Aloysius Oratory acquired a new catechist — John Mosca, an excellent teacher from Alba, who had directed his efforts with rare devotion to a Christian education for his pupils. Finding the school too narrow a field for his zeal, he volunteered to teach catechism in the festive oratories. He was most faithful, especially at the St. Aloysius Oratory, where Father [Theodore] Scolari of Maggiate and others also contributed their services. He regularly made his annual spiritual retreat at St. Ignatius' Shrine at Lanzo with Don Bosco. To show the worth of this catechist we will add that in 1876, after twenty years of teaching, he retired because of a throat ailment and at the age of fifty donned the ecclesiastical habit. He died in Turin in 1904 at the age of eighty, as rector of Holy Trinity Church. Like the holy Curé d'Ars, he was deeply grieved by the wretched state of souls in mortal sin and zealously spent most of his time in the confessional.

As usual, Don Bosco directed the Valdocco Oratory himself. At this time, his three festive oratories still had chapters of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.² An official report, dated March 11, 1894

¹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

² See Vol. V, pp. 306-311. [Editor]

and entitled *Golden Jubilee of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Nice* (1844-1894), reads as follows on page 36:

At the general assembly of February 19, 1860, Count [Charles] Cays, president of the Superior Council of Conferences in Piedmont, gave the following report:

“Turin has ten chapters whose activities are ever expanding. There are also three additional ‘affiliated chapters’ made up of youths from poor families mostly visited by the members of our Society.

“These ‘affiliated chapters’ operate as any chapter and are directed by the devout, zealous Father John Bosco. A problem met by these chapters was the regulation on the usual collection. How could the poor help the poor? And yet they take up a collection, and every one of these youngsters gives what he has been able to spare from his real necessities. When they cannot give cash, they give their hearts and spirit of sacrifice.

“Nothing is more impressive than to see these lads lavish most tender care — motherly, indeed — on younger boys who are weaker and poorer than they. They keep a prudent, friendly supervision over them with much greater emphasis on their moral training than on purely material needs. They also teach them reading and writing.”

Count Cays ends his interesting report with a well-founded observation that material resources are less important than zeal and sacrifice, the true mainsprings of all charitable works.

While Don Bosco’s spirit was an inspiration to his boys, he constantly shared the anguish of Pius IX, who was thoroughly grieved and disgusted by the positioning of enemy troops along the frontiers of the Papal States and the despicable duplicity of Napoleon III with his hypocritical, insolent diplomacy, recalling the legendary lamb and wolf. Moreover, a large number of Italian and foreign newspapers, impious forgers of shameless lies, bitterly insulted, slandered, and threatened him. In Rome itself, agitators, lavishly paid by Turin, kept inciting the populace to rebel. Even high-placed government officials treacherously transmitted top secret papers to the enemy. Count Camillo Benso Cavour watched and pondered and, finally, impudently proposed a conciliation plan to Cardinals Santini and Antonelli. Its first article would have required the Pope to renounce temporal dominion over all his provinces. Great advantages were promised to the two cardinals and their families if the plan went through.

Don Bosco, who was wont to say that we are never to let an occasion go by for doing good, could not leave the Vicar of Jesus Christ without the comfort he could give. In those days the Pope found it difficult to correspond with bishops because all mail to or from Rome aroused the suspicions of the Holy See's enemies. For one thing, Don Bosco had his boys recite a daily *Peter, Ave*, and *Gloria* for the Church's needs. Then, occasionally and very prudently, he wrote to the exiled Archbishop Fransoni or to the Sacred Roman Congregations about most delicate matters — cases of conscience, norms of conduct, or questions of moral theology and Canon Law. He would either entrust letters to a reliable person or have them delivered by special messenger. Likewise, not to jeopardize church authority, he generally did not keep replies he had received, but safeguarded them with trustworthy people who were beyond government suspicion. He also tried to comfort the Holy Father as much as possible with letters of filial affection and did his best to be helpful by keeping him informed of the secret plottings of the revolutionaries.

"I myself," Father Angelo Savio told us, "was once expressly sent by Don Bosco during those perilous years to Monsignor [Cajetan] Tortone, the Holy See's chargé d'affaires in Turin, to tell him of things Don Bosco had deemed unwise to put in writing." Father Paul Albera too was later entrusted with such errands.

Don Bosco took the Pope's interests to heart as his own, saying, "The Pope's word must be our norm in everything and at all times." Hence he prescribed that encyclicals and other papal documents were to be read at table. He also had them translated into Italian to be more easily grasped and remembered. Far from dissembling, he vigorously upheld his principles even in the face of opposition. In April, he extolled the papacy with *The Life and Martyrdom of St. Lucius I and St. Stephen I, Popes*, a *Letture Cattolice* booklet that he himself wrote . . .

Meanwhile, events harmful to the Church were fast following one another. Before proceeding further, though, we must say a word on our sources. In 1859, Dominic Ruffino,³ a virtuous, intel-

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 470f. [Editor]

ligent, and level-headed diocesan student of theology, came to live in the Oratory and began diligently to record Don Bosco's words and deeds that he himself had witnessed. He also jotted down Don Bosco's predictions of private and public events and of pupils' deaths, noting accurately the day, month, and year of the predictions and their fulfillment. For a clearer description of this good confrere of ours, we shall add that during the school year 1861-62 he taught religion at the Oratory to all secondary school students and church history to the clerics in 1862-63. He prepared his lessons conscientiously and, in his modesty, never mounted the teacher's podium, simply standing next to it. Ordained in 1863, he became prefect of studies for that school year. Finally, Don Bosco sent him in 1864 to open and direct a new school at Lanzo. This assignment forced him to discontinue his valuable five-year chronicle [of Don Bosco].

Another source of ours is Father John Bonetti, author of *Cinque Lustrì di Storia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales* [The History of the First Twenty-Five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales]. He was ordained a priest in 1864. In accord with Dominic Ruffino, he too wrote a chronicle of events he witnessed at the Oratory from 1858 to the autumn of 1863 when he was assigned to the Salesian school at Mirabello. As his confreres know, Father Bonetti was an educated man, especially in sacred sciences; he enjoyed Don Bosco's confidence and the esteem of Salesian general chapters. He won rich merit with God by his help to Don Bosco in governing the Society of St. Francis de Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians.

Father Ruffino and Father Bonetti, then, are very credible sources, and we have already availed ourselves of their testimony in the course of our narration. We will combine their two chronicles as supplements of each other. If an episode is recorded by only one, we will give his name; if both narrate the same event, we will simply identify the sources as "the chronicle." We will also add the very weighty testimonies of Father Michael Rua, Bishop John Cagliero, and other veteran Salesians. On our part we will produce historical proofs of what we shall have to say.

We shall now proceed. Father Dominic Ruffino writes: "At the

beginning of January 1860, Don Bosco, speaking of hard times awaiting the Holy See and of Italy's political situation, remarked, 'Let's wait and see what March will bring us.' Not missing a single syllable of his, the boys waited with keen expectation. Events proved he was right.

On March 11 and 12, Tuscany and Emilia (that is, Parma, Modena, and the Legations) held plebiscites and, as expected, overwhelmingly voted for annexation to Piedmont. Then, on March 18 and 22 respectively, the commissioners of Emilia and Tuscany — Luigi Farini and Bettino Ricasoli — formally acquainted King Victor Emmanuel II in Turin with the outcome of the plebiscites. The king received both commissioners with pomp and ratified the requested annexation with two decrees declaring those provinces integral parts of the kingdom of Savoy. Thus the Pope was irrevocably robbed of his Legations . . .

Meantime, to widen his activities on behalf of poor youths and perhaps also to find out how he stood with the government, Don Bosco applied to Luigi Farini, [newly appointed] Minister of the Interior, for a railroad pass. His request was forwarded to the competent department headed by Chevalier Bartholomew Bona, who obliged . . .

This gentleman had headed the Public Works Department from 1855 to 1857, had been Cabinet Minister and Secretary of State in 1858-59, and was now Director General of Railroads, an important post. He was constantly generous to Don Bosco. For several years he granted him and his traveling companion a second class railroad pass and a 75% reduction in fare to all Oratory boys. Occasionally he offered Don Bosco a coach or two for the boys' autumn outing [to Becchi]. On such occasions, instead of going through Chieri, the boys got off the train at Villanova d'Asti and walked the rest of the way — not too short a walk either.

Don Bosco reciprocated in a way which had always proved very effective in the past. When railroad accidents or some other causes prematurely took the life of a railroad employee, Don Bosco took in their orphaned sons. Divisional chiefs who knew Don Bosco personally frequently asked him to take these charity cases and he promptly obliged, thus winning the esteem and gratitude of all

railroaders. Chevalier Bona himself, a very influential man, was a great friend of Don Bosco, sincerely loved him, delighted to converse with him often and long, and gave him generous donations. Shortly before he died, Bona called on Don Bosco and spent several hours in conversation with him as they paced the library. Undoubtedly, Don Bosco did not fail to insert a word or two of spiritual worth for his benefactor's soul.

In view then of his ever ready and obliging charity, of the good will he enjoyed in the Public Works Department, and of Chevalier Bona's affection, we believe that Don Bosco had good hopes for help when he needed it. His trust, however, did not rest in men, but in the Blessed Virgin and in his boys' prayers. In April, one lad, a young artisan who was exemplary in piety and purity, wrote to him a confidential letter which Don Bosco saved because of his deep esteem and love for that boy:

[No date]

Dearly revered Father,

One night a man, poorly but neatly clothed, appeared to me. He was leaning on a staff and wore sandals. He looked friendly, majestic, and wise.

He showed me certain future events, and then, pointing to the ground with his left hand, said, "Follow in my footsteps." I did so and found myself in a strange place. He then made me understand clearly and indelibly that if the Oratory will constantly watch in prayer, if all will pray devoutly, the number of boys will increase and the Oratory will flourish and prosper to the Church's advantage. When, however, a distaste for the practices of piety will creep in, when the reception of the sacraments will decline, when prayers will be recited inattentively and slovenly — in short when love of God will yield to love of vain, worldly pleasures (as unfortunately is already the case with a few) — then the number of pupils and of priestly vocations will drop. Bitter will be the tears and sorrow of those who will see such outrages committed against God. The superior will lose his subjects' respect, he will be despised and even persecuted as one who wanted to do away with the traditional religious practices of the Oratory.⁴ Those who know the cause will be utterly dismayed and frightened.

⁴ This clause is puzzling because the original itself is mystifying: ". . . come se [il superiore] volesse disperdere le antiche usanze della religione nell'Oratorio." [Editor]

At present there is no such danger because you have pupils who can be of great help to you by their excellent conduct and purity of life.⁵

⁵ The boy's signature does not appear in the original Italian edition of these memoirs. [Editor]

CHAPTER 36

A Gift to the Pope

THE May issue of *Letture Cattolice*, entitled *Angelina*, offered suggestions on spending each day with Mary as one's model and help . . .¹

While directing his many efforts toward the common spiritual welfare of the faithful, Don Bosco also strove to bring individuals back to God, such as those he met by chance or looked for — a task more demanding in humility and self-sacrifice. Many such souls responded to his zeal, made their confessions to him, and on Easter Sunday, April 8, received Holy Communion with the Oratory boys.

Father [Felix] Reviglio told us an incident of this sort:

One day, at the corner of Via San Domenico and Via Milano, Don Bosco came upon an old bricklayer just as the latter slipped and lost his balance. He would have fallen, had not Don Bosco held him up. The old man thanked him profusely. "But for you I would have fallen," he said. Don Bosco replied, "Would to God that I could also prevent you from falling into hell!"

So impressed was the man that, as in a flash, he saw his soul's wretched state. Prompted by God's grace, he soon went to confession to Don Bosco, who felt deeply consoled by having been able to save a man from both physical and spiritual harm. The old man was ever grateful and greeted Don Bosco heartily any time he saw him.

On April 11 [1860] Don Bosco wrote to the Pope for himself and for the festive oratory boys to assure him of their loyalty. The

¹ We are omitting here a letter of the archbishop of Florence, dated April 2, 1860, concerning material for *Letture Cattolice*. [Editor]

letter carried 710 signatures; enclosed with it was a donation of 143 lire and 40 *centesimi* for "Peter's Pence."

A charitable lady had donated this sum to Don Bosco to give the boys a special treat at breakfast. When Don Bosco told them about it, they unanimously asked that it be sent to the Holy Father. Don Bosco emphasized that the donor wanted the money to be used for their treat, but they insisted that they would do without it and even without breakfast to forward the money to the Pope, who had already sent them so many gifts. On hearing of this, the charitable lady gave Don Bosco the same amount again, so that, as a reward for their love of the Holy Father, the boys could still have their treat.

To the boys' letter, Don Bosco had added one of his own, advising the Pope that "a great calamity which would shake the faith of many was about to fall on the Church, and that the faith would have to be defended by the blood of the bravest." He added that the Pope "was not to become discouraged, because Mary was preparing a great triumph for the Church in the near future."

These words, which come from Father Ruffino's chronicle, perhaps alluded to the volunteers who would rally to the Pope's colors and to the canonization of the Japanese martyrs. As we shall see, Don Bosco never wavered in his conviction that hopes of a political restoration were very, very remote.

On the following day, April 12, at the "Good Night," after commenting on the boys' gift to the Holy Father, he remarked: "In January I said, 'Let's wait and see what March will bring us.' Now I say, 'Let's wait and see what August will bring us!'" Then, after exhorting the boys always to be fearless and generous Christians, he went on:

Now I'll tell you about a frightful incident witnessed by a whole town. Before the Easter holidays I gave some advice to an Oratory pupil who was about to go home. Among other things I told him always to make the Sign of the Cross before and after meals. Being a very good boy, he quite willingly accepted every suggestion, but this last one presented a problem because saying grace was not customary in his family and would bring ridicule upon him.

Then I said, "Why are you afraid? If your parents object, tell them that the Constitution² has opened a new era — the era of freedom."

"All right," the boy chuckled in reply, "I'll do just that." And off he went. He was warmly welcomed and asked a thousand questions, especially as to what he had learned in Turin. At suppertime, all sat greedily at the table without saying grace, as if they were dumb animals. Our boy, instead, though blushing, bravely made the Sign of the Cross and said grace.

"What are you doing?" asked his big brother. And he began poking fun at him. "Is this all you have learned in Turin? Was it worth going there if you still hang on to these old-fashioned ideas? If all you learned was being a holy Joe, you might as well have stayed home!"

"Dominic," the boy replied (*Dominic was his brother's name*), "what you call old-fashioned ideas are religious practices handed down to us by our forefathers, teachers, and priests."

"They're antiquated notions! Forget them! Sit down and eat!"

"You're quite rude," our boy replied. "I believe in these things. The Sign of the Cross before and after meals is taught by the catechism, and it is the right thing to do. Only dumb animals eat and drink without giving a thought to their Creator. We are not dumb animals! We have reason and should see God's hand always and everywhere, especially when we take the food that He gives us to sustain our lives, which depend on Him and which He can take away at any moment."

"Words, words," said Dominic, echoed by his other brothers. The conversation then switched to other matters, but things were going to be worse the following day.

To celebrate the boy's homecoming, his mother — hardly a practicing Catholic — had invited relatives and friends to dinner. As the time drew near, our boy felt a little nervous, but when everybody sat down at table, he did not flinch and fearlessly made the Sign of the Cross while laughter and jeers rose all around him. When the noise had died down, Dominic, the leader of that unseemly outburst, derisively remarked, "Say, let's make a deal, the two of us."

"What deal?"

"You say grace and all the *Pater Nosters* you want and I will eat your share. Then we'll see who'll feel better."

"All right," the boy replied. "If that's what you want, you can have

² A reference to the Constitution granted by King Charles Albert on March 4, 1848. See Vol. III, pp. 213ff. [Editor]

my piece of meat, and I'll be satisfied with soup, bread, and cheese. Just don't bother me when I say grace. As for the *Pater Nosters*, that's not necessary."

They agreed. Dominic laughingly helped himself also to his brother's portion amid the guffaws of his ill-bred relatives. That evening at supper, Dominic again said to his brother, "The same deal! You pray all you want and I'll eat your share too."

"Well," was the answer, "I don't mind giving up food. What hurts me, though, is to see you so irreligious. If you don't want to practice your faith, at least don't mock it. Don Bosco told me more than once that no one can mock God and get away with it. Religion is a two-edged sword and wounds people who attack it. Don't take chances."

During supper a number of rough young men dropped in and joined Dominic in poking fun at his brother. I will not repeat their banalities and the sharp retorts of our brave boy. I will only say that things got to such a point that our friend could say nothing more than "Beware of mocking God!"

When supper was over, Dominic said teasingly to his brother, "Well now, did you enjoy your supper? How do you feel?"

"I feel fine! True, my stomach is not half as full as yours, but that should aid my digestion."

"Yes, indeed! *Pater Nosters* shouldn't be hard to digest!" He had hardly said these words when he suddenly paled, writhing in pain. "My stomach is killing me," he groaned. "Help . . ."

It was ten o'clock and his friends, who were just about to leave, had to carry him to bed. Violent convulsions and atrocious stomach pains made him break into frightful screams. While companions stood around in a stupor, his mother, gravely worried, sent for a doctor. Our young boy then approached his big brother and asked him if he wanted a priest. At this he got angry and tried to punch him. Soon afterward, though, he calmed down and motioned to his younger brother to get the priest. Both priest and doctor arrived at about the same moment. The patient, however, writhing in pain because of internal bleeding, died that same night. Even so, he was able to make his peace with God and tell his friends, "Don't make fun of religion. You can't mock God and get away with it. God has punished me for my gluttony and blasphemies."

Let's hope this poor lad died in God's mercy. His death, though, taught his friends a frightful lesson. Wasting no time, they went to a neighboring Capuchin monastery for confession and made their Easter

Communion. That youth's younger brother mourns his death and daily prays for the repose of his soul.

While Don Bosco thus sowed the good seed, he was heartened to see new, able co-workers at hand to help him gather the harvest. One of them was Michael Rua, who was now completing his theological studies. As his ordination was forthcoming, a dispensation was sought from Rome because of age [he was only twenty-three]. It was promptly and graciously granted through Cardinal Marini in a letter dated April 20, 1860.³

However, the dispensation came somewhat late because in those days a royal *placet* was required for its execution. Rua had to wait two more months before reaching his long-cherished goal.

Meantime Don Bosco's charisms clearly showed God's approval of his work. Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry under April 7 [1860]:

These past few days Don Bosco has repeatedly announced: "There will be a death in the house this month."

In fact, on April 24, a fourteen-year-old boy, Alexander Trona from Turin, died at the Oratory. He and his brother had arrived April 8 [Easter Sunday], registered by Mr. Gianoglio who had brought them to the Oratory to spare them a wretched family life. The following Sunday, April 15, Alexander made his Easter Communion after having been away from the sacraments for the last seven years. The next day he fell ill with German measles. On Sunday, the 22nd, he received Holy Viaticum, and on Monday the Anointing of the Sick; finally, on Tuesday, April 24, he died of typhoid fever at about nine thirty in the morning.

Much was said in the house about these repeated predictions. Occasionally Don Bosco remarked in the presence of Father John Baptist Francesia [then still a cleric]: "If you knew how much it costs me to foresee the future of others!" We may surmise that this charism entailed some mysterious condition or extraordinary sacrifice on his part and was granted in response to his prayers.

"But how do you come to know who is to die?" he was asked one day.

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

“Sometimes,” he replied, “I see boys walking on different paths which may be intersected by a ditch about one half, one third, or one fourth of the way. At other times I see a date written across the paths — a year, month, and day.”

Charles Gastini made bold to ask Don Bosco how long he would live. Don Bosco frankly replied, “You’ll live to be seventy.”

Gastini recalled this prediction on a thousand occasions in rhyme and prose so that it became common knowledge both in the Oratory and out. He actually died in 1901, assisted by Father Michael Rua, on the day following his seventieth birthday.

There were other predictions. Father Ruffino’s chronicle goes on: “On April 25, Don Bosco said in a private conversation, ‘Two things are certain: the fall of the two Sicilies and the departure of Cleric [Louis] Castellano⁴ for heaven!’ ” This cleric, often sickly, had gone home to rebuild his health. He lived in Turin.

While preparations were secretly underfoot in Piedmont for the conquest of southern Italy, Pius IX acknowledged Don Bosco’s letter through his Secretary of State:

Rome, May 17, 1860

Very Reverend Father,

With pleasure I gave the Holy Father the parcel you sent me with your explanatory letter of April 25. Knowing that it was dictated by filial zeal, His Holiness was greatly delighted with it and gratefully implores God’s abundant blessings on you and on the youths entrusted to your care. Please continue your prayers; they are greatly needed.

Sincerely yours,

James Cardinal Antonelli

At the beginning of May, Don Bosco was enrolling new members in his Society, as we read in the minutes of two chapter meetings:

The Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met on May 1, 1860 to consider four applicants: Peter Capra, son of Francis, of Alfiano; Paul Albera, son of John Baptist, of None; John Garino, son of

⁴ See Chapters 47 and 59. [Editor]

Anthony, of Busca; and Gabriel Momo, son of Joseph, of Saluggia. The applications had been presented by Don Bosco, our superior, at a previous meeting. Accordingly, after the usual invocation to the Holy Spirit, votes were taken. Peter Capra was unanimously accepted; all the others received six affirmative votes out of seven. Consequently all were admitted to the practice of the rules of the said Society.

Two days later another meeting was held:

The Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met on May 3, 1860 at 10 A.M. to consider the applications of Dominic Ruffino, cleric, son of Michael, of Giaveno; Francis Vaschetti, cleric, son of Peter, of Avigliana; and Edward Donato, son of the late Charles, of Saluggia. The result of the votes was: Ruffino, six affirmative votes out of seven; Vaschetti five, and Donato seven. All were therefore admitted to the practice of the rules of the said Society.

All the above men excelled in intelligence, study, piety, and conduct. Don Bosco had formed them to his own image and likeness in candor, work, and perseverance. As a matter of policy, he would not accept the undecided or weak-willed, especially if they had been recommended for academic courses. We see one such instance in this letter to Miss Adele Daviso of Chieri:

Turin, April 25, 1860

Dear Miss Daviso,

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us.

Before we accept the Rossi boy, he must make up his mind as to what he plans to do after his studies. At present he is not sure whether he prefers a craft or academic subjects. I suggest that in the meantime he go to Canon [Joseph] Caselle⁵ for an interview and advice on the matter of his vocation. On my part I shall always gladly do for your protégé whatever will redound to God's greater glory and the good of his soul.

I recommend myself and my boys to the kindness of your prayers.

Your devoted servant,

Fr. John Bosco

⁵ Don Bosco had known Caselle in Chieri when the latter was a secondary school student. *See* Vol. I, pp. 218f. [Editor]

We shall now quote briefly from Father John Bonetti's chronicle:

At the annual spiritual retreat held at the Oratory April 30 to May 4, to the souvenirs given by the preachers at its close, Don Bosco added his own at the "Good Night": Frequent confession and Communion, avoidance of bad companions, close association with the more virtuous and devout, and sincerity in confession.

"I assure you, my dear sons," Don Bosco concluded, "if you carry out these suggestions, you'll break the devil's horns."

The spiritual retreat had introduced Mary's month during which, as Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio testified, Don Bosco proposed a general nosegay for the whole month and a different one for each day. These nosegays given at the "Good Night" were diligently practiced by the boys to their great spiritual advantage and to the advantage of the whole house.⁶

⁶ We are omitting a description of Garibaldi's expedition into Sicily and the flocking of volunteers for the papal armies. [Editor]

CHAPTER 37

An Eventful Trip

ON May 6 [1860] Don Bosco left for Bergamo where diocesan church affairs were very distressing indeed. Its clergy — one of the best educated and most exemplary of Lombardy — had become the target of the anticlericals. The previous year the bishop's residence had been invaded by a maddened, thieving mob, and the bishop himself had been manhandled. "Death to priests!" was daily scribbled on walls. Worse still, government officials unashamedly inveighed against innocent priests. Ostentatiously they jailed several to the great scandal and sorrow of the Catholic population, alleging that they had conspired against the government by holding public meetings and prayers, collecting funds for "Peter's Pence," and the like.

Don Bosco went to Bergamo to comfort its prelate, Bishop Peter L. Speranza. Some days later, back in Turin, he gave a sort of report, as was his custom whenever he absented himself for some time from the Oratory. His boys shared his life intimately, and these vivid, cheery, familiar talks gave him an opportunity to impart sound knowledge while feeding their imagination. Don Bosco's account, covering several "Good Nights," is taken *verbatim* from Father Bonetti's chronicle. It may seem rather overdrawn,¹ but this was Don Bosco's style in such circumstances:

When I took the train on May 6, I shared my compartment with two other passengers. During the conversation, one of them complained that he had come to Turin to speak to Don Bosco about registering a

¹ We shall omit unimportant details here and there, indicating such deletions each time with dots. [Editor]

boy at the Oratory but had been unable to meet him. I asked him if he knew Don Bosco, and he replied that he knew him quite well. I kept asking about his boy till we came to Saluggia, when I identified myself to his great surprise and pleasure, and we had a hearty laugh together. Then we all got off the train and my friend took advantage of the stop to visit the town. When it was time to leave again, our fellow passenger, who had left a duffel bag and umbrella in our compartment, took a seat elsewhere, leaving us to ourselves. My friend was a good man, but quite biased, due to ignorance and his reading of anticlerical newspapers. Before reboarding the train, he bought a copy of *L'Opinione*. After a quick glance, he courteously passed it on to me.

"Thanks," I said, "but I don't read that kind of paper, and I'm quite surprised that you do."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Don't you see that it is antireligious?"

"Well, we can't be too squeamish about newspapers."

"Why not? Are good and evil the same?"

"But everybody reads this paper!"

"Easy, my good man. That is a gross exaggeration. Maybe less than two thousand people read this trash."

"That's your opinion. It has many readers, so it can't be too bad."

"That's poor reasoning! If many do read it, they are doing wrong. If we could take a look into hell, we would see how many are doomed there just because of having read bad literature."

"You scare me. If that's the case, to the devil with this paper."

So saying, he tore it to pieces and threw it out the window. I then tried to win his confidence, and before long he opened his soul to me, concluding, "I would like to make my confession." I was delighted and told him to prepare himself. Then, between Magenta and Milan, he made his confession with all the signs of a sincere conversion. Do you see, boys, the power of God's grace? I felt very happy, especially as I could not help but see God's intervention in the fact that our fellow passenger did not return, even though the train made several stops. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for me to help that soul. When we arrived at Milan, he came back for his luggage.

Some may ask: "Did you have faculties for confessions outside your diocese?" Certainly! When I was at Rome, Pius IX himself gave me faculties for anywhere in the world.

I arrived at Bergamo at 8 in the evening in the rain . . . I spent

a very pleasant evening with the bishop and his household . . . and then retired for the night. I was up very early the next morning and did quite a bit of desk work. Later, the bishop sent an attendant to escort me to the cathedral for Mass. . . . Afterward, when I returned to the bishop's house, I had a meeting with a priest who had been summoned to discuss setting up a chapter of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the city — a project very dear to the bishop. I skirted all difficulties by asking, "Can we count on two good Catholic young men in this city?"

"A great deal more than two," the priest replied.

"Well then, have them meet me at your rectory tonight, and we will get started."

That evening I talked to eighteen young men. I encouraged them by showing them what they could do for the poor and their own spiritual advantage. I told them to disregard human considerations, and to recall that we are not accountable to the world but to God, who will give us a hundredfold in this life and eternal life to come. They were enthused and promised to return the next evening to elect a council, as in fact they did.

But let us return to the bishop's house. The next day, May 8, while we were having dinner, we learned that the pastor of Terno [d'Isola] had been freed from prison. Moments later, a venerable looking priest, Father Ferdinand Bagini, came in and eagerly kissed the bishop's ring. The prelate was delighted at the good pastor's unexpected arrival. Turning to me and believing me to be the one who had come from Turin to seek his release — as rumors had it — the priest kept thanking me. No amount of denying on my part and of protesting that I had had nothing to do with it would change his mind. He was convinced that I was just trying to be humble. Therefore, he thanked me again and again, to my real embarrassment.

Father Bagini had been arrested February 22 after he had published a prayer for God's aid to the Pope and had promoted "Peter's Pence." He was not in the good graces of the government or of the liberal party, and so, on being reported to the police, he was promptly jailed. When his case came to court on May 8, the accusations proved baseless and he was acquitted.

After this interruption, we resumed our dinner. Presently, noticing the bishop's worried look, I asked him what was on his mind, and he replied that Father Bagini was to return to his parish the following day and the liberals might stir up trouble. He added that he wasn't

too happy about escorting him there — as was his duty — particularly since the government checked his every step and word to get him in trouble.

“In that case,” I replied, “if you wish, I will gladly rid you of this problem by accompanying Father Bagini myself.”

“Oh, thank you!” the bishop exclaimed with a sigh of relief. “You are doing me a very great favor. You can’t imagine how worried I was about compromising myself and church authority.”

This offer of mine cost me no inconvenience since Terno was on the way to Bottanuco, a parish ten miles from Bergamo, where I was expected for a sermon and where I was going to visit the seminary. The rest of the day passed pleasantly. The bishop offered his carriage for our trip, and I gladly accepted, since I did not feel up to walking that distance.

The morning of May 9, the bishop’s secretary, a seminary professor, Father Bagini, and I got into the carriage and left. As we crossed the city limits, a man from Terno, riding a pony that looked like a donkey, stopped us and asked, “Is our pastor with you?”

“Yes,” we answered.

“Good,” he exclaimed. So saying, he turned his pony about and galloped full speed to Terno to announce the pastor’s arrival. He waved his arms so wildly that I wondered how he could keep his balance. . . .

As we approached the little town, we met groups of people, mostly white-haired men and women and very young children, who had left their chores at home or in the fields and had flocked out to welcome their brave pastor. With tears of joy they cried, “Long live our pastor! May God keep him many more years in our midst! Let no one dare to come and take him away again!”

Their tears, obvious love, and enthusiasm deeply touched me and my two companions. Father Bagini was weeping profusely. No doubt he was comparing his sorrowful departure under arrest with this joyful homecoming. . . .

Finally the belfry of the parish church and the houses of Terno came into sight. As we approached, we saw not only the faithful but also pastors and priests who had come from near and far on foot or on horseback to honor Father Bagini. Bells were ringing and fire-crackers were popping, to the joy of all.

A vast crowd awaited the carriage at the town limits. The front of the church, nearby buildings, and triumphal arches were draped

in multi-colored bunting. At the church square the mayor and his councilors, with more distinguished parishioners, waited to honor their pastor whom they received with the heartiest ovations. . . .

The church was packed with parishioners anxious to hear their pastor, but he was so deeply moved that he could not utter a word. I then remarked that someone should address the congregation and invited several priests individually, but they all declined with various excuses.

“How about you?” some suggested.

“Very well!” I replied. “I’ll do it!” I walked into the sanctuary with my hat in my left hand and my topcoat on my right arm. I congratulated the people for their warm reception and invited them to thank God who, while permitting tribulations, often compensates for them even in this life with greater joys. I urged them ever to revere their worthy pastor and to accept his words as coming from God. After mentioning their duties toward him, I concluded with a few words about the sweet bond of charity that should always unite them with their spiritual father. While speaking, I could hear sighing and sobbing, and I could hardly hold back my own tears.

Then a solemn *Te Deum* was sung, followed by Benediction. Immediately afterward, all hastened to greet their spiritual father personally. . . .

That day proved a happy one for all. Immediately after dinner I set out for Bottanuco with the seminary professor and the bishop’s secretary. Since the major seminary at Bergamo had been commandeered by French troops during the war and these had lingered for quite some time, the bishop had sent his philosophy and theology students to the junior seminary. I immediately made friends with the young clerics. Then, after supper, I gave them a short talk. I really enjoyed the visit. Finally I went to bed, as you too will do right now. Good night!

Thus reads Father Bonetti’s chronicle. We shall add that Don Bosco also went to Chiuduno where the pastor, Father Joseph Calvi, had drawn anticlerical hatred on himself by his zeal.

On his return to Bergamo, Don Bosco told Bishop Speranza about the reception given to Father Bagini and about the possible opposition he might meet. His arrest had chiefly been due to repeated accusations by an unworthy priest. After gathering evi-

dence, the bishop ordered that priest to leave town within a few hours under penalty of suspension.

Don Bosco also mentioned his visit to the seminarians and offered to preach their spiritual retreat the following year. His offer was enthusiastically accepted and the clerics cheered at the news. Don Bosco's words had been so soul-thrilling that they had marveled at the saintliness and wisdom of this good servant of the Lord. Don Bosco also broached to the bishop the matter of having as many priests and clerics as possible take the state examinations so as to have certified teachers for his diocese. The bishop, however, looked askance on this idea and, being rather touchy on matters affecting his jurisdiction, replied that he could not in conscience yield in any way to the Church's persecutors. However, he could not help seeing the advantages of Don Bosco's plan. He mulled over it, and at the dinner table he stated that he did not believe it lawful for a bishop to submit his priests to secular approval for teaching. It was the bishop's right, he asserted, to oversee the education of his people, and he could not renounce it.

"I have no intention to argue the point," Don Bosco replied, "but let me briefly put it this way: Either the bishops take action — and thus recapture the field of education before the laity takes over — or they sit back and do nothing, and within ten years education will be totally secular."

The prelate, like many others, believed that the present turmoil would run its course and the old order would return. Don Bosco tried to disillusion him by making it clear that the revolution, backed by governmental power, was here to stay and that God only knew if and when church authority would be restored. Humanly speaking, the situation was hopeless, with not the slightest indication that the present state of things would ever change. To make matters worse, all foreign governments were hostile to the Church. The bishop kept his views. A few years later, though, he wrote to Don Bosco: "You were right, but now, perhaps, it's too late!"

While in Bergamo, Don Bosco also called on Count Rudolph De Maistre's daughter, who had been widowed at nineteen by the

untimely death of her husband, Count Medolago. Ever more grateful to the De Maistre family, Don Bosco hastened to give much desired news of her to her aged father, who lived at Beaumesnil, France.

CHAPTER 38

Church Harassment

JUDGING from letters in our archives, many people in Turin awaited Don Bosco's return, among them Father M. Conobbio, a scholarly Barnabite from Moncalieri, who regularly signed himself "Your loving son." He keenly desired a favor of Don Bosco and was not disappointed.

While Don Bosco was in Bergamo, two former Oratory boys — now apprentice bricklayers — were fatally injured when a newly laid roof of a building under construction suddenly collapsed, killing one outright and fracturing the other's skull. Rushed to the Cottolengo Hospital unconscious, the latter lay in critical condition for a week. On May 14, a week after the accident, Don Bosco went to see him. No sooner had he entered the ward than the youth regained consciousness, recognized him, and with an effort called loudly to him. All were amazed because, as the Capuchin chaplain of that ward tells us, the patient had not been able to utter a word since his accident. Don Bosco went to the boy's bedside immediately, and the latter asked for confession. After absolving him, Don Bosco cheered him and then went around comforting the other patients. The boy lapsed back into unconsciousness, and by the time Don Bosco returned to his bedside, he was dying. As with St. Philip Neri, God had brought Don Bosco at the right moment to save the soul of a dear child of his. Joseph Reano told us of this incident.

Don Bosco was guided by God at every step because he was a man of prayer, though he exhibited none of the outward signs usually noticeable in other saints. His was an "active" prayer, by

which he kept in God's presence constantly not only to serve Him but to rejoice in His holy will by carrying out the duties of his own state of life. St. Francis de Sales aptly described this when he wrote: "There is a certain manner of praying which is very easy and profitable, achieved by accustoming our soul to the presence of God in such a way that this presence will engender in us an intimate, unhampered, simple, and perfect union with God. How effective is this prayer!"

Thus Don Bosco promoted God's glory unassumingly, both in and out of the house, by word and deed. He still visited hospitals and prisons. On May 18 [1860], after supper, many young clerics crowded around him in the dining room, talking, among other things, about the need for good, zealous priests for the prison apostolate. Pondering the need of these unfortunate people for God's grace to break their shameful bonds, Don Bosco remained silent a while. Then, abruptly taking Dominic Ruffino's hand in his own, he looked intently at him, placed his elbows on the table, and rested his forehead against the cleric's hand for several minutes. Finally, raising his head, he said to him: "Be brave! You will need a strong arm to swing a scythe skillfully." His thought was of the evangelical harvest.

The following day, while again conversing with the clerics on public events, he remarked: "I believe trouble is just beginning." But things were already quite bad. Protestants were now completely free to build churches and schools, preach, spread literature, and even present plays mocking religion and the Pope. The 1855 law against religious orders ¹ — which also forbade them to accept novices — was to be enforced in all annexed provinces. Any priest daring to voice opposition to the new order, to uphold the Church's rights, or to publicize papal directives was liable to very severe reprisals. Many priests, in fact, were indicted and either imprisoned or exiled. Bishops tried to stem the rising flood of immorality and irreligion, but when some rightfully protested to the government, they were either jailed or put under house arrest. When, for instance, the archbishop of Pisa, [Cosimus] Cardinal Corsi, protested the harassment of his clergy, he was ordered to Turin

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 117, 152, 154. [Editor]

by Cavour. He arrived at ten on the evening of May 21 and was met at the station by Canon Michelangelo Vacchetta² who took him to the Vincentians where he was welcomed and housed. The following day, the same canon accompanied him to the Minister of Justice, John B. Cassinis, who severely reprimanded him.

During his two months of confinement, the cardinal said not a word against anyone. Like Our Savior under questioning, he answered mostly with silence. To his jailer, Canon Vacchetta, he declared: "I will neither defend myself nor accuse others. Nor will I ask pardon. I am accountable to God alone, to whom your friends, the cabinet ministers, shall also be accountable. They have power over my body, but not over my spirit." When Canon Vacchetta gave him the freedom of Turin and its environs, he replied, "I am a prisoner and shall conduct myself as one!"

Ever serene and cheerful, he went nowhere unless compelled. He received callers affably as a gentle father. When Don Bosco visited him for some two hours the evening after his arrival, the cardinal told him the full story of his arrest, adding that when he and his secretary were just about in Turin, they recited the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving that he had been judged worthy to suffer for God's sake. Don Bosco was amazed at his fortitude. Before leaving, he obtained the cardinal's promise to come to the Oratory and give Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

We shall now return to the chronicle. On May 24 [1860] Don Bosco stated at the "Good Night": "One of you boys must prepare for death." These announcements, though couched in general terms, always produced wholesome effects. Naturally, they also aroused conjectures as to who would die. For example, Dominic Ruffino's chronicle has this entry under May 25: "Gilardi is running a fever, Perona is at the Cottolengo Hospital, Bocca and Bolei are at the SS. Maurice and Lazarus Hospital, Enria and Ravizza have headaches, and Botto has a swollen forehead. Will it be one of them?"

During those very days, Don Bosco received from Pius IX an acknowledgment³ of his letter [of April 11] on behalf of the festive

² See *ibid.*, p. 32. [Editor]

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

oratory boys, assuring the Pope of their loyalty and offering him their “Peter’s Pence” donation.

At the Oratory, prayers for the Church were constantly united to [apostolic] work. The June issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled *Alexis, a Young Painter*, exemplified the reward promised for the observance of the Fourth Commandment: “Honor your father and your mother that you may have a long life . . . ” while the July issued concerned *The Precepts of the Church and Their Observance* . . . A boost for *Letture Cattoliche* came from *L’Armonia* in its June 20, 1860 issue.⁴ The article ended with a quote from the pastoral letter of the bishop of Biella: “We cannot praise and recommend *Letture Cattoliche* sufficiently. Its modest price rate, interesting material, and noble aims cannot help but please most readers and very effectively contribute to public welfare and morality.”

⁴ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

CHAPTER 39

A House Search at the Oratory

“**M**AKE yourself humble, steadfast, and strong,” the Blessed Virgin had ordered Don Bosco in a dream [when he was nine].¹ He obeyed and not only achieved this goal — particularly through the practice of the most arduous virtues — but stayed humble, steadfast, and strong in all his heaven-inspired undertakings.

Canon [Hyacinth] Ballezio wrote: “We marveled at Don Bosco’s Christian fortitude. We were near him almost all day, and yet he seemed to us entirely immune from human failings. He was firm under temptation whether of the spirit or the flesh, unyielding to discouragement in difficulty, unshaken in pride and vanity, and undismayed by threats and tricks of heretics.

[In the same vein] Bishop [John] Cagliero remarked repeatedly: “I have lived at his side for many years and always noted his exceptional serenity and high-mindedness in starting and successfully completing his many undertakings for God’s glory and the salvation of souls, despite obstacles of all sorts. He was invariably calm, gentle, and serene, no matter how outrageous were the calumnies, how mean the ingratitude, how oppressive his work, how persistent the assaults on his person and his congregation. His only reply was: ‘God is in Israel. Let nothing upset us!’ ”

Again, to quote Father Francis Cerruti: “His heroic fortitude was shown even more admirably in the moral and physical sufferings which afflicted him periodically through life. We marveled and were strengthened to see him tranquil as ever, smiling in his

¹ See Vol. I, pp. 95f. [Editor]

deepest grief, his bitterest humiliations, his most exhausting labors; ever undaunted, he stood steadfast even when God submitted him to unexpected trials or when public charity seemed to fail him. That he did not give up was nothing short of miraculous. It can be explained only by acknowledging the intervention of Divine Providence.”

This year too he showed how remarkable was his fortitude — the sum total of all virtues, which becomes heroic only through self-denial and an unwavering conformity to God’s will. It showed itself in his boundless love for the Pope for whom he seemed to live — a love that would seriously endanger his own institutions. But we will first remark that his fortitude was linked to a lofty justice and prudence. In those trying times, he always and everywhere managed to combine priestly duty with due respect to constituted civil authority. He could draw the line between authority and the men who wielded it. Abuse of authority does not justify contempt and rebellion, as St. Peter clearly told the Jewish converts of Asia Minor: “Be subject . . . for God’s sake . . . to the king as supreme or to governors as sent through him . . . Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.” [1 Pet. 2, 13-14. 17] Nero, we recall, was then emperor!

Don Bosco lived by these rules. Despite his frequent clashes with civil authorities, he always obeyed when they did not run counter to divine or church laws. On occasion he insisted on obedience and respect to civil authorities. He never permitted himself a word of disparagement in their regard and expected the same of his co-workers. He used to invite the leading authority of the province and Turin’s mayor to visit the Oratory, and he always gave them a most respectful welcome.

Within his means, he was always willing to help relieve public calamities. In keeping with conscience and priestliness, he willingly lent his services and cooperation to persons in authority, as Father Rua witnessed several times. He had his pupils pray “for kings and for all in high positions.” [1 Tim. 2, 2] “I ask only,” he used to say, “that they leave me alone to work and to help youngsters!” He prayed for the royal family and all cabinet ministers that God might grant them the guidance and fortitude they

needed. But he never let himself be drawn into discussions about Italian confederations, foreign intervention, or forms of government. He urged his young clerics to keep aloof from politics and not to appear in public with political newspapers. He always observed and had others observe similar wise precautions. He was very careful regarding material published with his name and deleted anything open to misinterpretation. "We are living in difficult times," he used to remark. "Our enemies are in power, and with one blow they can prevent us from doing good."

Yet, neither his loyalty to just laws nor his prudence saved him from harassment. His well-known unquestioning fidelity to the Holy See and his untiring zeal to inspire such fidelity among the faithful made people see him as a leader of the Catholic party, and it was feared that he might conceivably thwart attacks planned against the Pope. Consequently, in 1860 the government declared war on him.²

Notwithstanding the impressive undertakings which had even won him the favor of many so-called liberals, some government officers still suspected the Oratory to be a hotbed of conspiracy and anti-government propaganda. Sly and contemptible informers kept this misconception alive. Anxious to curry favor with their superiors, they kept insinuating that Don Bosco had secret contacts with the Jesuits, with Archbishop Fransoni, Cardinal Antonelli, and Pius IX, and even with Austria, in his efforts to sow discontent and arouse resistance. Government circles believed that Don Bosco kept the Pope promptly informed on the events which had increased the momentum of Italian independence since 1848; they saw him as a papal watchdog in each stage of Italian *risorgimento*. A brief of January 7, sent to Don Bosco by Pius IX, suggested anti-government correspondence between the two. Informers even went so far as to say that the Oratory held a secret cache of arms and ammunition to equip the [older] boys at any given moment. Evidently these detectives had mistaken the bread pantry for something else.

Luigi Farini had played a major role in the Italian revolutions

² A scriptural quotation no longer apropos in the new versions has been omitted.
[Editor]

and had often met with fellow conspirators in his sumptuous villa at Saluggia. Now, as Minister of the Interior, he was repeatedly assured in the same villa that the Oratory held clear proof of Don Bosco's complicity with Italy's enemies. In this matter his judgment had already been biased by his hostility to the Pope. (As a matter of fact, he was then writing the fourth part of his history, *Lo Stato Romano dal 1815 al 1850*, which smeared the papacy and Pius IX and misconstrued facts and intentions.) He ordered police surveillance of Don Bosco. As we narrated previously,³ the Oratory had already suffered harassment, but it had come from municipal authorities, and on those occasions government officials and King Charles Albert himself had sided with the Oratory.⁴ Some time later, too, Don Bosco had again been called on the carpet, but that had been mostly a courteous reprimand or warning. Now matters were entirely different. The government itself was hostile, and it was all-powerful.

For some time Don Bosco had suspected that something was amiss. Several important letters had not reached him. Seizure of mail was then quite frequent, as various incidents proved. In fact, every postal district had an official whose main duty was to censure the mail of persons suspected of hostility to the new order — and this notwithstanding the Constitution! Freedom, indeed!

At the beginning of the year, knowledgeable persons had warned Don Bosco that the Masonic lodges had decided to move against him and to prevent him from pursuing a mission so contrary to their sinister aims. A friend of his, a high official in the Department of the Interior, also informed him of a decision to close the Oratory down for good, and suggested that he would be wise to hurry and foil the plan.

A month after these warnings, the liberal press opened a bitter campaign against him. With invective, smear, and vulgarity they tried to show that his works ran counter to Italy's freedom and independence, and they did their best to portray him as his country's enemy. Describing the Oratory as a conspiracy den in the Pope's pay, they loudly demanded that it be shut down. A des-

³ See Vol. II, pp. 313f, 317, 343f, 346f. [Editor]

⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 345. [Editor]

plicable paper asserted that a search of the premises would unearth incriminating evidence. "Let the government send shrewd, impartial investigators, and the roots of the plot will be discovered," wrote another anticlerical paper. *La Gazzetta del Popolo* reached the extreme: "The Oratory of St. Francis de Sales is the heart of resistance. The government can never avert the danger that threatens it as long as the Valdocco den is allowed to exist."

Thus public opinion was being molded and prepared for the blow that was to strike the Oratory. It was hoped that an unexpected house search might unearth some evidence on which to build a case against Don Bosco. Even an ambiguous phrase in a letter would be enough, because it was a foregone conclusion that Don Bosco had to be found guilty and either imprisoned or confined to house arrest.

The Oratory, which had cost Don Bosco and his co-workers so much anxiety and toil in its nineteen years, was now in danger of being torn up by a hurricane. Threatening rumors circulated of imprisoning a priest who housed, fed, and clothed so many poor boys, of closing the Oratory, and of throwing hundreds of boys back to the streets or their indigent families, dashing any hopes for their future. They were not groundless fears; various institutions had already been closed in those very days; priests and religious in good standing had been jailed. However, as we have seen in previous chapters, Don Bosco calmly relied on Our Lady's protection.

After some temporizing, Farini finally ordered a house search of the Oratory. He should not be blamed entirely, however, since Count Camillo Cavour had a hand in it too. He seemed to be friendly and amiable, but it was only a façade. Though he did not sign the search warrant himself, he was informed about it and could or should have stopped it. We say "should" because he knew very well that the Oratory was not what liars made it out to be. He had been personally acquainted with Don Bosco for many years and had firsthand knowledge of the institution's peaceful, benevolent nature.⁵ As we have already narrated,⁶ in the Oratory's early

⁵ See Vol. IV, pp. 73ff. [Editor]

⁶ See Vol. III, p. 289. [Editor]

years he used to come on Sundays and holy days to supervise the boys at play and mingle with them. Moreover, he even joined in the Oratory's religious services and festivities. More than once, holding a lighted candle and a prayerbook, he walked with the boys in procession on the feast of St. Aloysius and sang with them the hymn *Infestus hostis gloriae* in the Saint's honor. On many occasions he persuaded Don Bosco to dine with him and was a most gracious host, whiling away evenings in long conversations on the Oratory, his boys, and his system of education.⁷ Yet, obligated to anticlericals, he let the search warrant go through, limiting himself to remark (as Don Bosco later came to know), "It's a waste of time to search the Oratory. Don Bosco is smarter than all of us. Either he has not compromised himself or by this time he has destroyed all evidence. Anyway, do as you please!"

A pretext for this high-handed step had come from a letter of the exiled Archbishop Frasoni advising Don Bosco that he was counting upon him for a delicate and very important mission which would earn him the gratitude of the archdiocese. This meant that he was to see to it that all pastors got a confidential letter containing directives for a prudent, just course of action they were to take in the midst of the conflict. The prelate was also asking Don Bosco for suggestions on how to get this pastoral letter to him without risking government interception; should he object to this task or fear compromising himself, he was to let the prelate know. In any case, he was to reply as soon as possible.

This letter never reached Don Bosco. Some time later, a friend of the archbishop personally handed him a note in which the prelate lamented Don Bosco's failure to reply and informed him that he had turned to someone else. Only a few years later did Don Bosco learn of this new token of confidence his archbishop had placed in him. The letter had been seized at the post office by the government.

Unaware of this, Don Bosco had no idea of what was coming when, three days before the house search, on the nights of Wednesday and Thursday [May 23-24], he had a dream which, however explained, proved providential. He narrated it himself as follows:

⁷ See Vol. IV, p. 75. [Editor]

I seemed to see a pack of ruffians break into my room, seize me, and rummage everywhere. While this was going on, one of them kindly said, "Why didn't you remove such and such a document? If those letters of the archbishop were to be found, what would happen to both him and you? And how about these letters from Rome" — he pointed them out — "and those over there? If you had hidden them elsewhere, you would have saved yourself a heap of trouble."

Next morning I jokingly related the dream and shrugged it off as mere fantasy. Nevertheless, I put a few things in order and removed several confidential letters which really had nothing to do with politics or government, but which could be misinterpreted. In those days, any papal or episcopal directive, even if strictly concerned with matters of conscience, could have been considered incriminating. Therefore, by the time the police search did take place, I had already removed all possible evidence.

Thus reads the witness of Don Bosco. This may explain the lack of documents on the early days of the Oratory. In clearing them out, Don Bosco had to rely on trusted pupils who most likely misunderstood his orders in their hurry. Some papers they burned, others they stashed away, and still others they entrusted to dependable persons in Turin for safekeeping. Most of the documents that thus were lost fell into these categories: Don Bosco's relations with the Holy See, letters of Pius IX, copies of Don Bosco's letters to the Pope, Don Bosco's correspondence with the archbishop of Turin from 1851 on, Don Bosco's correspondence with former cabinet ministers, notes and memorandums on dreams for his own comfort and encouragement, accounts of favors granted by Our Lady, miraculous occurrences, and also extraordinary deeds of some boys. Lack of time did not permit a judicious choice. Don Bosco entrusted many papers to Joseph Buzzetti who immediately destroyed them to protect him. In some cases the place of concealment was forgotten; years later, some documents were found under a beam in the Church of St. Francis de Sales.

We should not be surprised by this seeming rashness. Events proved it came none too soon. What greatly amazed Don Bosco was that the investigators searched especially those places which

had been pointed out to him in his dream and from which he had removed possibly incriminating papers.

Don Bosco wrote an account of this annoying house search and of other searches that took place three years later. In a Foreword to the account he seems to hint at a desire of his to widen the scope of his memorandum and dwell on the Church's situation in Italy, particularly in Piedmont. Afterward he would give a description of the causes behind the bitter hostility pitting the revolutionaries against the Pope and against the clergy that remained loyal to the Pope, according to that ancient maxim of *esprit de corps*: *Miles pro duce, dux pro causa militat* — the soldier for his leader and the leader for the cause. But Don Bosco either lacked time or changed his mind and limited himself to a simple narration of the facts. He saved that manuscript, and we have been drawing on it for this narration, adding some details which he omitted and which we later came to know from men who were then pupils. Don Bosco's Foreword is entitled:

A Reason for This Memorandum

Yielding to insistent requests that certain episodes of 1860 be duly recorded, I have finally been convinced that it is indeed right to draw up a memorandum highlighting the more striking incidents occurring during the government house searches made at the Oratory.

I shall accurately describe events of those trying circumstances; I will be strictly factual, neither condoning nor condemning. If I am somehow mistaken in anything or should express thoughts and opinions unbecoming a Catholic priest, I fully retract.

I have written for the benefit of my spiritual children, the Salesians, hoping that it will serve them as a norm of conduct and a warning. First, a norm of conduct: Should God permit a Salesian to find himself in like circumstances, let him try to talk with the highest authorities. I have found that in cases of prolonged odious anti-Catholic measures, cabinet ministers, though responsible for initiating a certain course of action, did not bother to see it through. In nearly all cases, their underlings went beyond limits in their ignoble harassment. Such people are always the worst to deal with. They put on a show of zeal with an eye to promotion and have no scruples about crushing a man. They often misrepresent facts to show their liberalism and want to

appear alert and diligent. Under the pretext of not having made the laws, they enforce them rigidly and rudely. It is not so with their superiors. These men have to account to no one, they have already achieved their ambitions, they need no popularity to maintain their positions, and they do not like to stir up trouble. They want to be praised and trusted, whether or not such trust rests on a foundation. Moreover, the possibility that they may one day need the help of the petitioner or his peers, the education they have received, the reputation and esteem they long for, their natural goodness and good-breeding — all these things contribute to make them much more fair-minded, reasonable, and understanding than their subordinates. If justice is warranted, one may hope to obtain it. Of course, even then one must not fear rebuffs and humiliations for Our Lord's sake. A personal, frank talk with them will be far more effective than pages of elaborate, impressive polemics. Following this norm, we have a chance to explain our actions and plans. A verbal explanation of our good intentions greatly lessens and often entirely removes an official's unfavorable opinions. Indeed, it pacifies and even wins opponents over, just as the Holy Spirit says: "A mild answer calms wrath." [Prov. 15, 1]

Secondly, this memorandum should serve as a warning to keep aloof from politics, even when it would seem a good thing to take part in them. When difficulties arise, we must first have frequent, heartfelt recourse to prayer for God's light and grace; then let us frankly state the truth. To questions, let our answers be respectful, clear, and firm. Moreover, if we are given leave to speak, let us make the most of it in order to present our views. We should also remember that when speaking with lay people, religious motives are to be mentioned only in passing; stress is to be laid on the integrity of people and their activities and on those undertakings which, in worldly parlance, are labeled "philanthropy," and which our holy faith calls "charity."

May God help us to overcome difficulties unfortunately unavoidable in this world of ours, which, as Holy Scripture says, "is in the power of the evil one." [1 John 5, 19] May the Most Holy Virgin obtain for us from Her Divine Son peace in our time, that we may love and serve God on earth and one day be forever happy with Him in heaven. Amen.

[The First House Search at the Oratory]

Political events of 1860 had set all Europe astir — Italy most of all, where a party, or rather a splinter group, whose members called themselves "liberal democrats" or simply "Italians," preached revolu-

tion the length and breadth of the land. Religious orders were suppressed, church laws and papal authority ignored, and church property confiscated; finally, most of the Papal States were invaded. To terrorize people and to emphasize their own fearlessness, men in power initiated the practice of house arrest and house search. Persons suspected of disapproving official policies were usually imprisoned or indefinitely confined to certain areas at government discretion without benefit of trial. Confinement was generally preceded by a house search, which became a legal assassination of sorts. Under the cloak of law, the police searched the homes of citizens denounced by informers as opposed to revolution. In these cases the police were supposed to make a most minute search to unearth the *corpus delicti* — letters or writings of any kind critical of the government.

The Oratory had the distinction of being searched eleven times. I shall describe but one such search. It will give us a good enough idea of the others.

Don Bosco's fortitude overcame these difficulties. Holy Scripture says: "A frame of wood bound together in the foundation of a building shall not be loosed; so neither shall the heart that is established by advised council . . . He that stands firm in the commandments of God shall never fear. [Sir. 22, 19. 23]

CHAPTER 40

A House Search at the Oratory (Continued)

ON the evening of May 25 [1860] a house search was made in the quarters of two Jesuits — Father Protasi and Father Sapetti. Though the latter was sick, both were jailed for a day and two nights in a basement prison of Palazzo Madama. On the next day, the vigil of Pentecost, at about two in the afternoon, Don Bosco was about to go up to his room when a poorly dressed woman and her young boy showed up at the entrance to the porticoes with a letter from the Department of the Interior.¹

While Don Bosco was reading it, with the cleric John Cagliero standing beside him, three gentlemen came up.

“We must see Don Bosco,” one of them broke in.

“I am he,” was the reply. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

“We can’t wait,” the other dryly replied.

“Very well, then. What can I do for you?”

“We must see you privately.”

“All right, come with me to the prefect’s office.”

“We want to go to your room.”

“I cannot take you there now.”

“You must! You have to!”

“But who are you? What do you want?”

“We are here for a house search.”

What Don Bosco had only surmised was now quite clear. “We have orders to search your Oratory thoroughly,” the visitor con-

¹ A routine letter of thanks for having accepted a boy. Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

tinued, "and to report whatever may endanger the safety of the State. We regret the inconvenience, but we have orders."

"You really think Don Bosco meddles in politics?"

"That's beside the point. We have orders. Please show us to your room."

"You still have not identified yourself!" Don Bosco firmly replied.

"Identify myself? Are you serious? We have known each other for years. We are not strangers."

"Sorry, but I don't know you or these other gentlemen."

"Well, then," the visitor curtly replied, "my name is Grasso. I am chief of police, and these two colleagues of mine are Captain Tua and Captain Grasselli of the Borgo Dora and Moncenisio precincts."

"Have you a search warrant, as the law prescribes?"

"No!"

"Then you are not authorized to search my premises."

"Authorities don't need authorization."

"Excuse me, gentlemen, you may be honest, but I could be deceived. Unless you produce a search warrant, I don't have to show you to my room or anywhere else on these premises. I stand by my rights!"

"What, would you dare resist?"

"I am a law-abiding citizen. I respect authority, and I make others respect it, but I will not be bullied!"

"There is no bullying here, unless you compel us to use force."

"You will do no such thing. The Constitution guarantees inviolability of domicile. If you use force and violate my constitutional rights, I will sue you."

The police chief and his two colleagues exchanged glances. Perhaps they had thought their presence alone would be enough to browbeat a simple priest to submit to their will, or they may have been told to go ahead without a search warrant.

"So," they replied, "you still refuse to believe that we are authorized to search your premises?"

"That's not the point. If you want to search my premises, you must show me a warrant."

While this argument was going on, eighteen plainclothesmen and uniformed policemen were scattering about the playground and stairways, and another platoon was being deployed outside the Oratory gate. A peaceable hospice seemed to have become a fortress about to be stormed. Chief Grasso, impatient with this unexpected delay and, perhaps, hoping to intimidate Don Bosco, called for several policemen and loudly and sternly asked Don Bosco, "Will you show us to your room?"

"Not till I see the search warrant! And beware of using force, because I'll call for help. I'll have the bells sound the tocsin and my boys and neighbors will throw you out as intruders. Yes, you might attempt to arrest me, but you would stand condemned by both God and men."

Don Bosco had spoken calmly. At this point a policeman stepped forward to seize him, but the two captains remarked that Don Bosco was within his rights. Yielding to them, Chief Grasso dismissed the policeman. "As far as possible," he said, "let us avoid unpleasantness." He then sent an aide to secure a search warrant at the police station. A good half hour went by before he returned.

Meanwhile, Don Bosco finished talking with the new boy and his mother, who had stood there bewildered by what had gone on. On his part, Don Bosco could not see how the Minister of the Interior would recommend a boy — about whom they had already exchanged letters — and still order a house search which could end in arrest and imprisonment. Was this an instance of double-dealing? A trap? Could it be that the house search had been ordered by some lower official without his superior's knowledge? Whatever the case, after setting terms with the mother, Don Bosco promptly accepted that boy, telling him, "Son, you are welcome to stay with me and share my bread." He was glad of Divine Providence's gift of a chance to render good for evil to people who, rather than thank him for his efforts to lessen society's number of unruly youths, repaid him by treating him as a conspirator and troublemaker.

Meanwhile, at two o'clock, the boys had gone to their classrooms and workshops but soon a few, who had lingered outside or had come out, sensed that something important was happening. The

presence of so many policemen augured no good. Like lightning, the word got about that they had come to arrest Don Bosco. In fact a police wagon was drawn up at the gate. The whole house was thrown into consternation. Shouting and crying, the boys wanted to leave their classrooms and shops to defend Don Bosco or go to prison with him. For a time emotions ran so high that even to this very day the mere remembrance moves former pupils to tears. Teachers and craftsmasters had a hard time calming the boys and convincing them that Don Bosco was not in danger, and that if the worst happened they themselves would lead them to his rescue. John Cagliero did his share in going from room to room, urging them to keep calm and pray. Still, some of the bigger youths were allowed out. They kept close to Don Bosco, and one of them whispered, "Shall we rid you of these ruffians?"

"No," Don Bosco replied. "I will not allow you to say or do anything offensive to them. Don't worry. I'll settle everything nicely. Go back to your chores, and tell your companions not to be afraid."

Had he not spoken thus, something tragic would certainly have happened that evening. The boys were so upset and angered that, to save Don Bosco, they would have let themselves be torn to pieces.

Most worried of all was Father Victor Alasonatti, Don Bosco's well-loved vicar and right-hand man. He feared Don Bosco's arrest for this reason: "Possibly," he explained, "his morning mail might have brought him a letter criticizing the government's annexation of Romagna. Such a letter, though not written by him, could put him in trouble. Woe to me if such a misfortune should happen! What could I do without Don Bosco? They had best put me in jail." He was deeply moved and determined to go to prison himself in Don Bosco's place.

Meanwhile, policemen had stationed themselves on all floors, at all landings, at hallway corners, and especially at restroom entrances, lest documents be flushed away. This of course led to amusing or irritating incidents. Other policemen closely scanned the various clusters of boys forming in the playground, while keeping their eyes on Don Bosco. Young apprentices returning from

their jobs in town and lads who had to go out on errands were carefully searched.

When the chief's aide finally returned with a search warrant, the chief donned the insignia of his office — a tricolored scarf — and, backed by five policemen, sternly declared: "In the name of the law, I order a search of Father John Bosco's quarters." So saying, he handed him the warrant, which also authorized a search of the premises of Canon [Joseph] Ortalda, Father [Joseph] Cafasso, and Count [Charles] Cays. The search of the first two took place a few days later, while Count Cays' turn came in February 1862. The search warrant might have been deliberately left behind so that Don Bosco would not know of the other impending searches.

The order concerning Don Bosco was worded as follows:

By order of the Department of the Interior, a diligent and thorough search is to be made of the quarters of Father John Bosco, doctor of divinity. He is suspected of compromising relations with the Jesuits, with Archbishop Frasoni, and with the Holy See. If anything is found seriously affecting the security of the State, the aforesaid priest is to be arrested immediately.

Don Bosco read the document, returned it to the police chief, and said: "I have no choice but to let you carry out your orders. I'll show you to my quarters. Let me point out, however, that legally I may still refuse because of an error in identity. The warrant concerns Father John Bosco, doctor of divinity. Gentlemen, I am not that man. There is another priest in Turin with that very name, and he *is* a doctor of divinity."

At that very moment, Police Commissioner Chiapussi — perhaps informed of the delay — arrived. Hearing Don Bosco's last words, he exclaimed: "Doctor or no doctor, go ahead!" And so they did. Escorted by three policemen they all followed Don Bosco upstairs.

Above the door opening into [a little room housing] the library and leading to Don Bosco's room was the inscription *Lodato sempre sia il Santissimo Nome di Gesù e di Maria*. [Praised forever be the most holy names of Jesus and Mary.] Captain Tua read it aloud mockingly. Don Bosco stopped him short and added: "And

ever praised be the name of Jesus, Word Incarnate.” But, before concluding this invocation, which we customarily sing and which is also written over the door of Don Bosco’s bedroom, he turned and ordered them to take off their hats. Seeing that he was not obeyed, he repeated: “You began mocking this prayer, but you’ll have to end it with respect. Take your hats off!” At these resolute words, they complied.

Don Bosco entered his room with those three officials and two guards and let them take over. Then the shameful search began. Most minutely they frisked him, even searching the tassel of his biretta. As they were going about this task very uncivilly, pushing and turning him about, Don Bosco could not help murmuring: “*Et cum sceleratis reputatus est.*” [And He was counted among the wicked.]

“What are you saying?” one of them asked.

Riveting his piercing eyes on them, he replied: “I am saying that you are doing to me what others once did to Our Divine Savior.”

After frisking him, they began on his quarters — two rooms, one of which housed his little library. The first thing to attract their attention was a large wastepaper basket. Spotting an envelope with a papal postage stamp, Captain Grasselli immediately exclaimed, “Let me have this. I’ll handle it.”

Then, hoping to discover a letter from the Pope, he began to examine envelopes, paper scraps, and whatever else was in the basket, item by item, with the assistance of his chief and of his colleague. In the process they got messed up.²

After searching in vain in the wastebasket, the three moved on to the desk . . . cupboards, chests, cabinets, and cashbox, inspecting everything with a diligence worthy of a better cause. A drawer of a dresser was locked.

“What’s in here?” they eagerly inquired.

“Confidential papers,” Don Bosco replied. “I don’t want anybody to see them.”

“Confidential or not, open this drawer at once!”

² We are omitting here and there some trivial details. [Editor]

"I absolutely refuse. Every man has a right to some privacy. You must respect family secrets."

"Secrets or no secrets, open this drawer, or we'll smash the lock."

"Very well, I'll yield to violence." So saying, he snapped the lock open. Sure that they had at last come upon incriminating evidence, all eagerly crowded around the drawer as if afraid it might be spirited away. Triumphantly Captain Tua seized a bundle of papers — the long-sought *corpus delicti*. He pulled out one sheet and read aloud, "For bread supplied to Don Bosco, amount due: 7,800 lire. Magra."

"This hardly interests us," he remarked. He took out another sheet: "For leather supplied to Don Bosco's cobbling shop, amount due: 2,150 lire."

"What's all this?" he asked Don Bosco.

"Keep going and you will find out."

To their embarrassment, all they found was a bundle of unpaid bills, mostly for groceries.

"Are you making fools of us?" asked the chief of police.

"By no means," Don Bosco replied. "It's just that I didn't want you to know my debts, but you insisted. At least, if you were good enough to pay some of these bills, you'd contribute to a very good cause. I would even suggest that you show them to the Minister of the Interior."

They laughed and continued their search. When they came across the previously mentioned brief of Pius IX,³ they insisted on seizing it.

"I won't let you have it," Don Bosco said, "because it is an original text."

"That's exactly why we want it," the police chief replied.

"I will give you a copy."

"Let's see it."

"It's right here in this issue of *Letture Cattolice*."

"We'd rather keep the original."

"But this copy is exactly the same!"

"It's a translation."

"But the original text is also here."

³ See pp. 304f. [Editor]

"Let me see," Captain Grasselli said. And he began to compare it with the translation word for word. Seeing that it was faithful, he concluded: "We are better off with the copy and translation." Don Bosco kept the original as a precious memento.

Disappointed by their search of Don Bosco's room, but still determined to find something that might enhance their standing, the searchers began to rummage through an adjoining room that served as a library. They went through all the books to make sure that there were no concealed secret papers; in the process they raised a cloud of dust. . . . "Well done, gentlemen!" Don Bosco exclaimed. "Thanks for dusting my books — a job long overdue! Were it not for you, months and maybe even years might have gone by before it could be done."

The inquisitors bit their lips. Yet, they could not help feel Don Bosco's sway over them. One of them found a paper with a sentence that sounded far too clerical: "At all times when the enemies of religion planned to destroy it, they all started by persecuting its ministers." They were already rejoicing over their discovery, when one noticed the author's name: Marcus Aurelius.

"Who was he?" he inquired of his colleagues. There was some muttering, but no answer.

"If you want to see the volume from which this sentence is taken, there it is," Don Bosco said, pointing it out.

One of them at once pulled it off the shelf, asking aloud, "Who was he?"

"Gentlemen," Don Bosco replied, "Marcus Aurelius was one of the persecutors of the Church. He used force to crush the weak and the innocent."

"Is that what the book is about?"

"See for yourself. You will find that Marcus Aurelius had Christian homes and catacombs searched in order to find pretexts to condemn them."

Their curiosity aroused, the inquisitors crowded around the book for a closer look, muttering, "Well said!"

CHAPTER 41

A House Search at the Oratory (Continued)

AT 4 P.M. Joseph Reano finished teaching his class of day students and went up to Don Bosco's room to see how things were getting on. He wrote:

Don Bosco was standing and proofreading [the forthcoming issue of] *Letture Cattolice*. I heard him exclaim: "What do you expect to find in a poor priest's home?" To which the chief of police replied, "Don't you realize that incriminating evidence could lie about here without your knowledge? You are not the only person in this Oratory, are you? Anyway, how is it that you don't even have the king's picture in your rooms?"

"Because there is no law that I must," Don Bosco replied. "After all, there is no picture of the Pope here either."

After I left Don Bosco's room, Father Alasonatti sent me to town to bring two hundred lire to Mr. Delponte, our contractor. I found guards everywhere — in the playground, at the gate, under the mulberry trees, in the meadow facing the Oratory. I was stopped at the gate but, after insisting and explaining that I had to make an overdue payment, I finally managed to get through, aided by a well-timed shove. On returning half an hour later, I again went up to Don Bosco's room. The search team was still questioning Don Bosco.

[Thus reads the witness of Joseph Reano.] While this was going on, one of the most esteemed city notables — Canon Louis Anglesio, superior of the Little House of Divine Providence — made a very fine gesture in Don Bosco's favor.

As a next-door neighbor, this saintly priest got wind of what was going on and instantly walked over to the Oratory to speak to Don Bosco. The guards would not let him in, and so he asked the

doorkeeper to inform Don Bosco that he had an urgent message for him. The doorkeeper agreed, but Don Bosco was still with the inquisitors and could not shake them off. The chief of police would not have let him out of his sight anyway. The doorkeeper reported the matter to the canon and asked him to wait.

"I can't," the latter replied. Then, spotting the cleric John Boggero, he called him. "Tell Don Bosco," he said, "to take courage and not worry. Today the Lord is putting the Oratory to a test, but from this moment He has also blessed it in a special manner, and it will wax stronger. From now on it will so develop and expand that its wholesome influence will spread beyond Turin to many parts of the world." Canon Anglesio proved to be a prophet.

Meanwhile the investigators were still busily pulling books from the shelves. One of them, picking up a bulky volume of the Bolandists,¹ asked Don Bosco: "What are these awesome volumes?"

"Jesuit books. There is nothing in them that could interest you."

"Jesuit books? We must seize them all!"

"No!" said the police chief. "They are too bulky. We would need a mule to carry them. Let's first see what they are about."²

"They are lives of saints," Don Bosco replied. "This volume is on St. Simeon Stylites, an extraordinary man. Terrified by the thought of hell, realizing he had but one soul, and fearing to lose it, he left country, parents, and friends and withdrew into the desert to live a holy life. He lived there and spent many years on top of a pillar, crying out against worldlings whose only concern was pleasure with never a thought to the eternal sufferings awaiting sinners." Turning to other pages, Don Bosco continued: "Look, this tells of other good people who, to avoid hell, obeyed the commandments of God and the Church. For example, this saint," and he pointed to the heading of the page, "went to confession once a week. This other one," and he pointed to another page, "went twice a week; and there were others who went every day."

¹ A small group of Jesuits in Antwerp, Belgium, organized into a society by Jean Boland (1596-1665) for the critical study and publication of the lives of the saints. Jean Boland edited the first volume. His collaborators and successors were named after him. [Editor]

² We are omitting here and there in this chapter some trivial details. [Editor]

"That's enough, Don Bosco!"

"All right then, but remember that all the people whose lives are narrated in these volumes did their Easter duty every year. I hope, gentlemen, that you too will do likewise."

"Of course, of course! You must not think we are so remiss . . ."

His unexpected, broad hint had thrown them off. While replacing the Bollandist volumes, one of the inquisitors remarked, "Don Bosco, if you keep preaching to us a little longer, we shall all have to go to confession."

"Wonderful!" Don Bosco replied. "Today is Saturday, vigil of the most solemn feast of Pentecost. Confessions for my boys will start around five o'clock. What a fine example you would give them if you were to go first!"

"It would indeed make history," Captain Tua remarked, "if our search were to end up in the confessional!"

"That's great, just wonderful. Prepare yourselves, gentlemen," Don Bosco went on. "I shall most willingly reserve the whole evening for you, and it will be far better spent than searching around."

"Count me out," the chief of police remarked. "Confession is useless for me, because I am not sorry."

By now their clothes were smeared with dust, cobwebs, and whitewash. The investigators wiped their hands on their handkerchiefs, craned their necks to look over their shoulders, and lightly flicked their coats.

At that moment the mailman came in with a large bundle of letters. They were immediately seized and one of them was opened. That very letter was from the Department of the Interior recommending another boy to Don Bosco. This was the third time that Luigi Farini, who feared that Don Bosco might jeopardize the future of Italy's kingdom, had directed boys to him.³

"Now see this," exclaimed the one who had opened the letter. "They send us here on a house search, make our lives miserable, and then they themselves deal with the persons they investigate."

"There you have it, gentlemen!" exclaimed Don Bosco. "You

³ This letter, signed by a secretary on behalf of the Minister of the Interior, recommended a ten-year-old boy whose father had died and whose mother was mentally ill. Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

have seen the letter. Now, do you think this is fair? We already have fifteen boys that have been recommended by the Department of the Interior and by municipal authorities. But I forgive all, and in return for this unjust search I shall do another act of charity and accept this boy.”

Without bothering with the rest of the letters, the investigators dropped them unopened on Don Bosco's desk. Had they opened them, they would have found one from Rome which, though most legitimate in itself, might have been twisted into a *corpus delicti* and aroused suspicions of heaven knows what plots against the State! How good is the Lord, and how playfully He rescues His beloved ones!

The useless search had now lasted some three hours. The investigators and the guards, what with the work, the dust, and the heat, were tired and thirsty. Don Bosco noticed it and felt pity for them. Joseph Buzzetti⁴ had just entered the room under the pretext of giving Don Bosco a message but really to see if he needed help. Don Bosco told him to bring up some refreshments.

At that hour the students were taking their after-school recreation. Worried, they stood almost in silence. Scattered groups talked in a subdued manner, afraid and hopeful; others went in and out of church to pray that all might end up well; all were longing to see the visitors go. When they saw Buzzetti carrying refreshments, they were elated and gave vent to their joy, realizing that the danger was over.

By now the investigators were convinced that the government had nothing to fear from Don Bosco. Grateful for his goodness and courtesy throughout their odious task, they could not help esteeming and admiring him. They all thanked him and cheerfully drank to his health.

The refreshments, the previous amenities, and the kind words with which he had now and again addressed them won over their

⁴ Buzzetti and his brother Charles had been among the first to attend the festive oratory while it still lacked permanent quarters. In 1847, Don Bosco persuaded Joseph to study Latin and prepare for the priesthood. He donned the clerical habit in 1852, at the age of twenty. The loss of his left finger shortly afterward disqualified him from priestly ordination. He remained with Don Bosco and greatly helped him in many tasks. In 1877 he took his vows in the Salesian Society as a coadjutor brother. He died at Lanzo in 1891. [Editor]

hearts. When the toasts were over, he told them that he had to hear confessions as usual on Saturdays, and either they should let the boys come to his room as they regularly did, or they themselves should set the example.

"I need confession badly," one of them remarked.

"I too," said another.

"And I most of all," Captain Grasselli concluded.

"Well then, let's get started," Don Bosco said.

"What would the newspapers say if we did that?" asked the chief of police.

"And if you go to hell," Don Bosco replied, "will the newspapers pull you out?"

"You're right, but . . . well, some other time . . ."

It was now six o'clock. The diligent search of Don Bosco's room and adjoining library had unearthed nothing. The investigators were now not only thirsty, but hungry too. Besides, Don Bosco was insistently sought by various members of the community for various reasons, and the boys who usually went to confession to him insisted on coming to his room, the guards notwithstanding. The inquisitors thought it best, therefore, to call the search off. At this point Don Bosco interrupted them. "Before you go," he said, "I want you to draw up a report."

"We will do that in our office," the police chief replied.

"That won't do."

"Why not?"

"Your report could be biased. I insist that it be drawn up right here."

"But we have found nothing."

"Make a statement to that effect."

"Will you also sign it?"

"Draft it truthfully, and I will sign it." The report ran as follows:

Turin, May 26, 1860

Location: A hospice for students and artisans,
directed by Father John Bosco in Via Cottolengo.

In accordance with the orders of Police Commissioner Chiapussi, a thorough house search of the aforesaid premises was carried out by the undersigned Stephen Tua, captain of the precinct of Borgo Dora;

Anthony Grasselli, captain of the precinct of Moncenisio; and Savino Grasso, chief of police, with a number of patrolmen. The above-mentioned went to the said premises and served Father John Bosco with the search warrant. In his presence they proceeded to a diligent inspection of every corner and closet, including papers and books, in the two rooms which make up his personal quarters. Despite the most minute search, nothing was found of any interest to government authorities.

This report was approved and signed by all participants in this house search. A copy of the same was given to the above-mentioned priest at his request.

Savino Grasso, *Chief of Police*
Stephen Tua, *Captain*
Anthony Grasselli, *Captain*

At about 6:30 P.M. the investigators and the police left the premises. No sooner had they gone than Don Bosco became the center of the most loving demonstrations. His beloved boys flocked to him as angels flocked to Our Savior after a certain inquisitor departed, as the Gospel narrates. Some asked him if he needed anything or wept for joy at seeing him free, others wanted to know what those men had done to him during those long hours, and still others expressed their indignation at such a hostile measure. Serene and smiling, Don Bosco answered questions, consoled the frightened, silenced the critics, and invited all to thank God for having made them worthy to suffer something for His sake.

This first house search only managed to satisfy the greed of some government spy and the revenge of some informer. Though it caused considerable trouble to the house, it also clearly proved the innocence of Don Bosco and of all the Oratory residents. This report (a copy of which was kept in our archives) should have persuaded certain government officials to leave Don Bosco in peace. Unfortunately that was not to be.

Don Bosco emerged unscathed from this harrowing experience. The specific purpose of the house search was to find a pretext for uprooting his work, but the prayers of thousands of good people foiled the evil attempt. Mr. [John Baptist] Coriasco, a carpenter better known as "Johnny," whose little house stood close to the Oratory on the spot where now we have our bookstore, on seeing the guards, had run excitedly and in tears to the Rifugio, to St.

Peter's Home, to the girls' orphanage, and to other religious institutions, exclaiming, "Pray, pray! They are making a house search at the Oratory. They want to arrest Don Bosco."

On returning home, he spied about to get news of Don Bosco and again made the rounds every half hour, saying: "Pray, pray! The police are still there!" Finally, sometime before sunset, he announced, "Thank God! The guards are gone and Don Bosco's free!"

Truthfully this was a signal favor from Our Lady. It was quite clear that Don Bosco's arrest had been taken for granted. In fact, that very morning *La Perseveranza* had blared out the great news that Don Bosco had been jailed in the basement of Palazzo Madama. The news caused a moving incident. Charles Gastini,⁵ who, like other Oratory boys, had a job in town, had returned to work after lunch, never suspecting that within minutes the enviable peace of the house would be so terribly upset. While he was at his job, a fellow worker went up to him and said: "I've got news for you! Your Don Bosco is in jail!" Gastini dropped his tools. "What did you say?" he cried in anguish.

"Don Bosco is in jail! It's in the paper!" And he handed it to him.

Gastini glanced at it, paled, and dashed out to the Oratory. He rushed in, his eyes almost out of their sockets, shouting, "Where is Don Bosco? Where is Don Bosco? I want to see him."

Don Bosco was still on the porticoes, but Gastini did not see him in his excitement and kept asking, "Where is Don Bosco? Where is Don Bosco?" His companions pointed him out and even led Gastini to him, but the youth was still so upset that he did not recognize him. When he eventually calmed down, he burst into tears and threw himself into Don Bosco's arms, exclaiming: "Don Bosco! Is it really you?"

The next morning, Pentecost Sunday, John Villa,⁶ alarmed by the rumors and press reports of Don Bosco's arrest, also hastened

⁵ Gastini was one of the pioneers of the Oratory. He had begun frequenting it at the age of eleven in 1848 at Don Bosco's invitation. See Vol. III, pp. 243ff. [Editor]

⁶ Villa had begun attending the Oratory in 1855 and continued frequenting it till his death in 1870. [Editor]

to the Oratory. He found Don Bosco in church hearing confessions. He returned in the afternoon and saw him surrounded by more than two hundred boys. Approaching him, he remarked, "In town they say that Don Bosco is in prison. I see he is only imprisoned by his boys."

On Monday [May 28, 1860], Don Bosco hurried to Father Cafasso to warn him of the impending search. When Don Bosco reported the exact words of the search warrant, Father Cafasso quietly remarked, "They have crucified Our Lord. Why should they spare us?"

People were surprised to see Don Bosco in the streets. They all thought he was in jail. In fact, while Don Bosco was in town with John Garino,⁷ at the corner of Via San Maurizio and Via Santa Teresa, they heard newsboys shouting, "Don Bosco in jail!" The little paper was selling briskly. Don Bosco gave two *soldi* to Garino to buy two copies and had a good laugh. The news vendor never even suspected that Don Bosco himself was right there in the street.

As the news of the Oratory house search spread through town, people of every rank and condition flocked to Don Bosco, anxious to show their solidarity and offer their congratulations on the happy outcome. Marquis Fassati was among the first to arrive. The flow of visitors continued for several days, and their severe condemnation of such a high-handed measure was unanimous.

L'Armonia commented in its issue of Tuesday, May 29 [1860]:

House Search of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales

In this vaunted land of liberty, no day goes by without some priest, bishop, or cardinal being arrested, or some clergyman being tried in court or subjected to a house search.

Last Saturday [May 26], at two in the afternoon, it was the turn of that "conspirator" Father John Bosco. As everybody knows, he plots against the State by helping the needy, housing and educating poor boys, and wearing himself out in works of charity and priestly duties.

The Department of the Interior hoped to find incriminating docu-

⁷ Garino, born in 1845, had entered the Oratory in 1857. A few years later, in 1862, he took triennial vows in the Salesian Society, was ordained a priest in 1869, and distinguished himself as a Latin and Greek scholar and a fervent religious. He died in 1908. [Editor]

ments in his possession. A platoon of policemen, led by their chief and two captains, was dispatched to make a minute house search.

These unexpected visitors arrived just as Don Bosco was in the act of accepting a poor boy recommended by the Minister of the Interior. He received them affably, as he always does, and though he had very good reason to question the legality of the proceedings, he gave them free access to all they wanted to see.

The search went on from two till past six. As it was a Saturday and the vigil of Pentecost, Don Bosco would normally have been busy with confessions. Instead, he had to watch a police operation, and he did so with the cheerfulness that stems from a tranquil conscience, trying to make the best of those hours of involuntary idleness by suggesting suitable Christian reflections to the guards and pointing out to the inquisitors the abject character of their task.

Needless to say, the search was an utter failure. Priests are no conspirators, and the government knows it. Two papers aroused suspicions. One contained a sentence sounding somewhat too clerical, but it was found to be from Emperor Marcus Aurelius; the other was a brief of Pius IX to Don Bosco, which had already been published.

When the police withdrew after six, they left Don Bosco the following declaration . . .

That declaration was the same one we gave earlier in this chapter. Other papers gave reports similar to that of *L'Armonia*, but the anticlerical press continued to inveigh against Don Bosco and the Oratory, hoping to set public opinion against him. More vicious was *La Gazzetta del Popolo*. "The Department of the Interior," it published, "has made a house search of Don Bosco's premises — that hotbed of goody-goodies in Valdocco. Reportedly, nothing incriminating was found. What of that? Is not *Storia d'Italia* by this modern Loriquet⁸ enough proof of how dangerous this man can be to the State?" Other articles were in the same vein, always portraying the Oratory as a reactionary center because of its large number of priestly vocations.

On his part, Don Bosco, realizing how true was the promise: "I

⁸ Jean Nicholas Loriquet, a French historian, entered the Reims seminary in 1778, was imprisoned during the French revolution, and only in 1814 was able to join the Jesuits. His *History of France* (1814) aroused violent opposition from anticlericals, who accused him of having distorted history and made him their favorite target. [Editor]

will deliver you from those who afflict you," made up his mind to expand his premises. His serenity evidenced his unalterable hope in heavenly protection.

Some time previously he had already discussed with Father [Louis] Anglesio the purchase of buildings and land adjacent to the Oratory in order to double its capacity. One evening, therefore, he convened the house chapter and said, "The search of our premises has given us free advertising with friend or foe. Now is the time to expand. The house search was a godsend. Let's make the most of it. The person most responsible for our trial is one who benefited most by our charity. He turned against us to appear to be a freethinker and have a chance at promotion. Our enemies have tried to shut us down. So, tomorrow we will purchase the adjacent Filippi property for eighty thousand lire. Don't worry! Next year we shall have a large number of boys!" Father Michael Rua, Father Angelo Savio, and others present guarantee that this is what Don Bosco said.

Divine Providence smoothed the way for this purchase. East of the Oratory was a silk mill belonging to the son of the Filippis. Don Bosco had several times tried in vain to buy it, hoping also to rid the Oratory of the nuisance of girls working at the mill. After the Oratory house search, the owner himself asked Don Bosco to bid for the mill.

"I have no money now," Don Bosco replied.

"Do not worry about that," the owner replied. "I'll give you credit. I am in no hurry." Then and there they signed an option.

Shortly afterward, Chevalier [Joseph] Cotta visited the Oratory, and Don Bosco told him of the purchase. The gentleman approved, and without further ado told Don Bosco, "Go ahead! I'll contribute half the money." Moreover, he put his promise in writing in the presence of [John Baptist] Francesia and [Francis] Vaschetti.

However, the building needed alterations. Speaking of this with two of his older pupils, Don Bosco remarked that the outlay would come close to a hundred thousand lire. One of them, knowing that Don Bosco was far from possessing such a sum, observed: "Don Bosco, buying that building and altering it to our needs is fine, but where is the money?" Don Bosco replied: "You are really materi-

ally-minded! Don't you know that it is just as easy for God to inspire a good idea as to give the means to realize it? If anything, giving the idea might be more difficult. In all my undertakings, I follow this rule: First, I try to make sure that the new project is for God's glory and the salvation of souls. Once that is settled, I go ahead without fear, as Our Lord will not fail to help. And if such an undertaking turns out differently from what I expected it to be, then I have no regrets in seeing it fade away."

While good people worried about him and some even found fault with him for being too daring, Don Bosco was quite hopeful. As Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi wrote, "He went ahead, calmly and smilingly. I lived with him many years and gradually became convinced that every decision of his stemmed from advice received from on high. We fly to Thy protection, O Holy Mother of God."

CHAPTER 42

Oratory Family Life

WE shall now resume our narration with a few candid excerpts from Father Ruffino's chronicle:

May 27 [1860], Pentecost Sunday. Canon [Louis] Anglesio called on Don Bosco to comfort him for the harassment to which he had been subjected.

"Rejoice in the Lord, my dear Don Bosco," he repeated. "Your work has been tested. When persecution struck the Apostles, they left Jerusalem and carried the faith to other towns and countries. You will do the same with your work."

Today two plainclothesmen listened in to the morning sermon¹ and two others to the evening instruction. Among today's callers was Canon [Louis] Nasi, whom Don Bosco pressed to give the morning homily . . .

After the afternoon services, at which Don Bosco preached on the Holy Spirit's descent upon the Apostles, other distinguished visitors came, among them two solid pillars of the Church: Father James Margotti, director of *L'Armonia*, and Father Ferrando, director of *Il Campanile*. Unbounded joy reigned throughout the house, which resounded with shouts of *Viva Don Bosco*. In addition, a general amnesty was given to all who had received unsatisfactory marks in conduct or study. There was a delirium of joy. A sense of triumph was the more heartily felt because a traitor who had posed as our friend and was a frequent visitor had lied outrageously about Don Bosco to officials of the Department of the Interior, and the house search had backfired, proving him to be a liar.

At the "Good Night," after telling us that our patron saints watch over us, Don Bosco added, "The king of Naples saw his deceased

¹ On Sundays and feast days, Oratory church services included a second morning Mass as well as Vespers and Benediction in the later afternoon. [Editor]

saintly mother in a dream. 'Take courage, my son,' she told him. 'There is peace in Naples. Tomorrow, Friday, keep a strict fast.' The following morning, he refused his usual coffee and milk. When it was later brought to him again, he still refused to take it. His staff was surprised. Noticing that some were disappointed by his refusal, the king became suspicious and said, 'Let someone else drink this coffee.' Since all declined, alleging that they had already eaten, the king demanded a chemical analysis. The coffee had been poisoned."

On Tuesday, the conversation having turned to Garibaldi in Sicily, Don Bosco remarked: "Unless God or some foreign power intervenes, Naples will fall."

May 28. The secretary of Cosimus Cardinal Corsi, archbishop of Pisa, and Father [Cajetan] Tortone² paid us a visit. The secretary assured Don Bosco that the cardinal would also visit the Oratory if and when he obtained his freedom.

June 2. Father Angelo Savio was ordained a priest in the Church of the Sisters of St. Joseph by [retired] Archbishop Balma, titular of Ptolemais, now residing in Turin. It was a solemn event because Father Savio was the second Oratory pupil who stayed with Don Bosco after ordination.

June 4. Don Bosco had all the Oratory clerics pay a courtesy call on Cardinal Corsi. On their return the conversation centered on the Church crisis. "The troubles were short-lived," Don Bosco remarked, "but much more acute than formerly."

Thus reads Father Ruffino's chronicle. Don Bosco's concern for the ever growing troubles of the Church was painfully aggravated by more worry, as can be seen from the following words he wrote:

Father Cafasso was almost fifty, an age at which a man knows quite a deal about life. Though frail and tirelessly busy, he enjoyed fair health and had hardly ever been ill. Even these last few months, though exhausted by work, penance, and fasting, he carried on his priestly ministry. Suddenly, a marked change came over his thinking, speaking, and acting. He sent for the priest with whom he was to give a spiritual retreat at St. Ignatius' Shrine. Father Cafasso told him that he himself had to withdraw. When asked why, he only replied, "You will know the reason later." He gave up all priestly activity outside the Convitto

² Father Tortone was the Holy See's unofficial representative to the Piedmontese government. [Editor]

Ecclesiastico, even his highly cherished sick calls, which he asked another priest to cover. Then, withdrawing almost completely to his room, he made his will and put his affairs in order as though he were ready to die.

Don Bosco was concerned. He prayed and asked others to pray. Meanwhile, he too was being prayed for by his numerous friends throughout Italy who feared the worst in the wake of the Oratory house search. Many believed that he had been imprisoned. To allay their fears and show up the lies of the anticlerical press, *L'Armonia* ran the following notice on June 3 [1860]:

Rumor has it that Don Bosco has been arrested. We can assure our readers, as of now, that it is not true. We say "as of now" because by the time this gets into print, Don Bosco may very well be in jail. Not that there is any basis for it. Everybody knows who Don Bosco is, but today a priest is an outlaw just because he is a priest, and everything and anything in his disfavor is considered lawful.

Obviously this notice was not a full reassurance to the Oratory benefactors. They imagined its young residents living in great anxiety for their future. Actually, the boys were undisturbed. They trusted Don Bosco's assurance since they saw him as a saint endowed with prophecy. As Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio remarked, "This spirit did not seem to be the flash of a moment but a permanent condition. He prophesied in praying, conversing, or even joking. He was unaware of it and did not know that others noticed it." The reader may judge the truth of this for himself as we continue our narrative.

The boys' firm trust in Don Bosco was based not just on his gift of prophecy but on other charisms as well, as we gather from a letter of a very fine, sickly young cleric:

Oratory, June 3 [1860]

Very Reverend and dear Father,

I want to tell you of my illness and ask your help. I was hoping I'd get well soon, but unfortunately I see I am getting worse. I try to be cheerful, and smile, but my smile is only a cover-up. Will it always be

like this? Dear Father, you have already helped so many others; can't you obtain a cure for me too? I know I don't deserve it; but I also know that God grants even the greatest favors to one who prays as he ought.

About two months ago, I told you, "Don Bosco, won't you please dream about me?" You replied, "Tonight I will come to you in spirit."

That night I awoke and, if I remember well, I prayed that you would dream. I felt I had to talk to you, but somehow I did not want to do so. I hoped you would know through a dream what I had not disclosed to you. I reasoned thus, "If Don Bosco dreams, he'll know everything; if he doesn't, he won't know. So I will say nothing."

But you did dream. You called for me and, after telling me of a strange incident — namely, that I was walking with you along the Po riverbed — you said, "Donato, don't worry."

These were cheering words, though I expected something else. But you went on, "As for what you want to know, I will only say, 'Do not fear where there is no reason for fear.'" Those words consoled me.

A recent event gives me good reason to hope that things will go well for me. Just four weeks ago, you asked someone who was ill, "Do you want to get well?" When he said yes, you continued, "How soon?" And within that time he was cured.

These and similar incidents tempt me to try the same and seek your help. I tell you truthfully, I felt so sure of your help that the mere thought cheered me. Once, when I broke down in my grief, I felt deeply relieved by the mere thought that I was going to seek your help. Indeed, what greater comfort can a child have than to pour out his grief to his father? But this affliction of mine will at least help me to learn God's will in my regard. If He grants me a cure, I will thank Him with all my heart and dare to promise that I will prove worthy of so great a favor. Should He will otherwise, patience! Unpleasant as it may be, I will still be glad to know that God allows this for my own good.

I say no more. You know what I should ask for and what God wants me to do. I beg you to *charm* me as only you can, to pray for me, and to find some way to cheer me. Please forgive me if I have been overly familiar.

Your loving son,

Cleric Edward Donato

Peaceful joy, unmarred by worry, ruled the Oratory, and family spirit brightened its life. The boys were given all the freedom

compatible with discipline and good conduct. When the bell summoned them to school, they were not required to line up; in the hot season they could remove coats and ties in the study hall. Assistants often reminded Don Bosco that order and decorum demanded otherwise, but he was loath to yield to this, so anxious was he to avoid all regimentation. Only years later did he agree when enrollment had grown to extraordinary size.

Former pupils still remember with emotion those happy years when life at the Oratory seemed no different from their own home life. They in turn reciprocated Don Bosco's fatherly care with attentions that bespoke filial affection.

When, for example, Don Bosco one day sat in the confessional for five consecutive hours while an endless line of penitents awaited their turn, a boy named Merlone, realizing that Don Bosco could use some refreshment, went to the kitchen and asked the cook for a cup of camomile, which he took to Don Bosco. The good Father appreciated this gesture and amiably told him, "May the Lord repay you for your thoughtfulness and give you 'good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over . . .' in this world and in the next." [Luke 6, 38]

He was all eyes to provide for his pupils' needs. Peter Enria wrote:

If anyone looked sick, Don Bosco would anxiously ask, "How do you feel? Do you want a doctor, or should I tell Father Prefect to have better food served to you?" I remember that the doctor had advised a companion of mine, a young cleric, to return to his native air. When he called on Don Bosco to say good-bye, the latter asked him, "Do you have money for your fare?"

"Yes," the cleric replied. "Father Prefect gave it to me."

"Did he give you anything more?"

"No, Father, just my fare."

"How long will you stay home?"

"The doctor said at least two months, but I doubt that it will be enough."

"Your parents are not well off. How will you manage to get what you need? I don't want you to burden them. Take this." And he gave him two hundred and fifty lire. "As soon as you run out of this," he

added, "let me know, and I will send more. Be sure to do all the doctor said. Take care of yourself and do not tire yourself out. Remember me to your parents. I will pray for you every morning at Holy Mass."

Father John Garino also declared:

It is remarkable how, regardless of many pressing occupations, Don Bosco could solicitously look after his clerics' well-being. Unfailingly, every month or every other month, he would ask those whose parents could not provide for them whether they needed clothes or personal items. Then he would ask a wealthy benefactress to supply what was needed. He did the same in finding benefactors to pay seminarians' board and tuition fees.

On seeing a pupil distressed by his parent's grave illness or death, he would comfort him by saying, "From now on I will be your father." To a young Salesian cleric who had already lost his father and tearfully told him that his mother too had died, he said reassuringly, "Don't worry. The Salesian Congregation will be a mother to you."

Dear Don Bosco! His love cheered the spirit, nourished the soul, and strengthened the body. To him we may well apply Scripture's words: "The heart of the wise man shall instruct his mouth and shall add grace to his lips. Well-ordered words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the taste, and healthful to the body." [Prov. 16, 23-24]

CHAPTER 43

New Undertakings

EVER since rumors had it that a possible house search might be made at the Oratory, Don Bosco had fearlessly put his mind to new plans. The first involved construction. As we have already mentioned,¹ between the main gate and the Church of St. Francis de Sales stood two classrooms for day students and a small doorkeeper's room. A suitable parlor for visitors was unquestionably needed, and Don Bosco built it toward the end of 1859. Located on the eastern side of the main gate, just a few yards from the old Visca shed,² it was larger than the classrooms. This addition consisted of a vestibule, doorkeeper's quarters, and a reception room. Between the classrooms and this new unit ran an uncovered vehicular passageway to the main gate. Don Bosco decided to roof it over³ [and gave the job to Joseph Buzzetti's brother Charles, then a bricklayer. He soon got started on it and completed it within a short time].

The whole construction was financed by Father Cafasso, who had given Don Bosco a large sum, probably to purchase the Filippi property. According to the [periodical] *L'Apologista Cattolico* of September 1860, the sum amounted to more than forty-five thousand lire. Don Bosco mentioned this generous gift several times to Father John Cagliero, adding that Father Cafasso had demanded he keep it secret. He often told his boys that Father Cafasso was a great benefactor of the Oratory and had on several occasions given him substantial donations. On his last visit to the Oratory Father

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 349f. [Editor]

² See Vol. II, p. 418. [Editor]

³ We are omitting details about its construction and cost. [Editor]

Cafasso observed the work in progress (he had seen the blueprints previously) and gave his blessing to Don Bosco's apostolate. Until then he had rarely come to the Valdocco neighborhood.

Once the new addition was ready and the parlor had been opened to visitors, Don Bosco drafted a set of rules and had them framed for display.⁴ He also had Charles Buzzetti build a small sacristy alongside the sanctuary on the west side of St. Francis de Sales Church. This, with an upper room, was to be used by the altar boys. The land on which it was built had been part of a small vegetable garden owned by Don Bosco which extended toward the boundary wall on Via della Giardiniera.

Buzzetti finished the sacristy during the same year, 1860.⁵ For the next thirty years Don Bosco entrusted him with all construction, and Buzzetti became one of Turin's foremost building contractors.

Don Bosco's next plan was to raise the enrollment, with the particular aim of increasing priestly vocations. To meet Piedmont's widespread shortage of priests he decided on a new tack. He invited wealthy, charitable families to send him boys who were properly prepared to study Latin, and assumed the obligation of giving them a complete secondary school education for an all-inclusive payment in advance of five hundred lire. At the same time, so as to give their charity a double impetus, his plan was to assure them that part of their payment would go toward the erection of a new building.

Some tried to dissuade him from this project as a bad risk, Father Cafasso among them, but when he heard Don Bosco's reasons and sensed that it seemed to accord with God's will, he said, "No use! He wants to do things his own way. We had better leave him alone. Even when a project seems impractical, Don Bosco somehow manages to carry it through." Accordingly, Don Bosco prepared a circular⁶ in which he enlarged his original plan and also included boys wishing to learn a craft or a trade.

In promising to provide a complete secondary school education, trade or academic, for the single payment of five hundred lire,

⁴ See Appendix 14. [Editor]

⁵ We are omitting some details about Charles Buzzetti. [Editor]

⁶ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

Don Bosco also had in mind to create a situation which would make it almost impossible for the authorities to close the Oratory. He was convinced that the rights of a third party [the parents] would make his enemies hesitate before carrying out their hostile plans.

This undertaking — like many others we shall have occasion to mention — was criticized by some who trusted in their own judgment, but was approved by others. As Father [John] Turchi relates, a pious, distinguished, scholarly priest used to remark, “It’s easy to criticize but, meanwhile, we can’t do a fraction of what Don Bosco does without dependable means. Don Bosco is an extraordinary man and should not be judged by ordinary standards.”

To those who found fault with his enterprising spirit, Don Bosco himself would often reply, orally or by letter; “When I see the devil has stopped ensnaring souls, I too will cease looking for new ways to save them from his wily deceits.”

Don Bosco’s third plan — to expand his fledgling congregation beyond Turin in a boys’ school — was most daring, considering the times. Divine Providence saw to it that the municipal authorities of Cavour⁷ offered him the management of an old boarding school which had been closed for some time but was being considered for reopening. At the same time Canon Celestine Fissore, provicar general of Turin, later archbishop of Vercelli, had informed Don Bosco of his desire that he consider taking over the junior diocesan seminary in Giaveno. Opened shortly after the Council of Trent had issued its wise decrees, this seminary had been a nursery of priestly vocations for some three centuries, first for St. Michael’s Abbey and Shrine,⁸ to which it belonged, and then for the archdiocese of Turin into which it had been incorporated at the beginning of the 19th century. Long flourishing as a secondary school — the only one specifically intended for priestly vocations — the school had recently seen its enrollment decline so badly that it was in danger of being closed down and taken over by the government. When John Baptist Anfossi visited there as a young cleric in 1859, he was astonished by its pervading silence and was

⁷ A small town near Turin. [Editor]

⁸ See Vol. I, p. 368; Vol. IV, pp. 83f. [Editor]

told that it held no more than twenty pupils, that studies were neglected, and that the vicar and purser, Father Alexander Poggolotto, resided nearby but off the premises. The rector, who represented the chancery and had full authority over the seminary, was a canon and rector of the collegiate Church of St. Lawrence. Student admission, general discipline, management of seminary property, and pupils' fees were all under his control. The seven teachers who made up the staff resided on the premises but had no other duty beyond teaching; they had been unpaid for an entire year because seminary revenues were insufficient. Two young clerics were in charge of supervision; one of them also substituted grammar school teachers whenever necessary. The seminary premises also housed three elementary grades, mainly made up of day students from town. The grammar school teachers were paid by and were dependent on the municipal authorities. Furthermore, the local clergy made it a practice to meddle in seminary affairs, to the detriment of discipline. Too often the vicar had to bow to the will of outsiders. Besides the baneful influence of the times, this was one cause of the seminary's present sad plight. It was dead. Its reputation had fallen so low that parents no longer sent their children there. And no hope was in sight. We ourselves heard all this from one of the professors who taught there in those years.

The chancery of course was considering shutting it down rather than pay teachers to talk to empty seats, but before implementing its decision, Canon Vogliotti, provicar general and rector of the major seminary, called on Don Bosco and asked him to inject some life into that lifeless institution. Would he at least assign a priest as director and a young cleric as assistant?

Don Bosco asked for time to think it over, since the offer of a school at Cavour was still standing. He consulted Father Cafasso, but the latter hesitated to suggest a solution, probably because he was aware of certain intrigues which Don Bosco also knew. Finally he asked Don Bosco, "Whom would you send as director?"

"I have no priest to spare," Don Bosco replied, "and so I have thought of a diocesan priest — Father so and so, a seminary classmate of mine. He is good, learned, and unimpeachable in reputation."

“He is not for you!” replied Father Cafasso, who had insight into people. “He is too quick-tempered and cross-grained.”

Meanwhile municipal authorities were eagerly awaiting the seminary’s closing so as to take possession and convert it into a city school. Assertedly they had a right to it if the seminary could no longer serve its original purpose. Having been informed of the plan, the chancery was quite worried over the imminent danger of losing a magnificent building.

Giaveno’s mayor, Joseph Schioppo, had even more ambitious aims — a secondary school to be directed by Don Bosco. He had made the proposal in May [1860] and Don Bosco had duly informed the chancery. In an effort to retain possession of the seminary and still meet the town’s desires and pretensions, Canon Vogliotti sent for Don Bosco and, after briefing him on all points and making generous promises, urged him to accept.

Don Bosco raised no difficulties, since it was for the good of the diocese, and he assured the canon that, should the municipal authorities of Giaveno offer him acceptable terms, he would find a way to satisfy his wishes.

He then wrote to the mayor of Giaveno for a contract, clearly spelling out what financial contribution the municipality would have to make for this secondary school that was to benefit the town, though he had not yet declined the offer of the municipal authorities of Cavour.

Canon Vogliotti was understandably impatient for Don Bosco’s reply, which gives us an idea of Canon Vogliotti’s letter. In this letter, as in all others, Don Bosco pleads the cause of his dear children:

Turin, June 5, 1860

Very Reverend Father,

First, let me thank you for all you have done and will do for these boys of mine. According to our agreement, I was to keep the cleric Ruffino at the Oratory gratis and you would extend the same charity to the cleric Berutto in the Chieri seminary. While there, Ruffino could not afford even a cent, but I gladly kept him without charge because of his genuine good will. An aunt of his provided, and still provides, him with

clothing. In case you cannot keep the cleric Berutto entirely gratis, do what you can for him, and I will beg for the rest.

I will wait for a reply from Giaveno before committing myself to Cavour. Many thanks for the green chasuble you have promised us.

I am still out of jail. Be sure that you and the vicar general do likewise.

Respectfully and gratefully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

CHAPTER 44

A Second House Search at the Oratory

MEANWHILE the government resumed its harassment of the clergy. In a steady flow of accusations the Minister of the Interior ordered the resumption of house searches in Turin in the hope of finding evidence of anti-government activities. The public at large could hardly believe that a few priests, dedicated to charity, could so frighten a government with all its might, yet it is historically true.

Canon [Joseph] Ortalda ¹ had just been arrested after a futile house search, whose pretext had been, as Don Bosco reported, that without a license he had transferred a small press from the Falletti printshop to another location in order to print his periodical *Il Museo delle Missioni* [Museum of the Missions].

On June 6 [1860] came the turn of the Convitto Ecclesiastico. Since Father Cafasso had heeded Don Bosco's precautions, the search uncovered nothing.² Disappointed, the police hoped for better success at the Oratory. Don Bosco left us this report:

I thought that the Oratory's first house search had made it clear that only a fool would believe we were reactionaries, and that consequently no one would again disturb our peace. Apparently, some government officials must have enjoyed this kind of activity. They came back ten times, always with different agents. I shall briefly report the more important incidents of the second house search, always blessing the Lord for having protected us so visibly in those trying circumstances. "As

¹ At this time Canon Ortalda was director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. [Editor]

² We are omitting here some unimportant details. [Editor]

chicks, when threatened by the hawk, hasten to their hen's wings, we likewise seek the cover of thy wings."

We shall base ourselves on Don Bosco's report and add other testimonies to it.

On June 9 [1860], just fifteen days after the first house search, three gentlemen showed up at the Oratory at ten in the morning with a police posse. They were Mr. Malusardi, secretary of Minister Farini; Chevalier [Stephen] Gatti, chief inspector of the Department of Education; and Professor Petitti, a lay theologian. The first was to audit the books and inspect the premises, the second to visit the classrooms and question the pupils, the last one to act as stenographer. A few other officials also came along, and a guard was set up at the Oratory main gate.

Unfortunately Don Bosco had just gone to town before their arrival and had left no word of his whereabouts. Joseph Buzzetti and several boys were immediately sent to look for him, but in vain.

The inquisitors first visited the nearly ninety day students, mostly rejects of municipal schools because they were too unruly or too dirty. They were only beginners at reading and writing and taxed their teacher's patience to the utmost. In his written report Reano declared:

A gentleman from police headquarters came into my classroom and asked whether I had certification. I replied in the negative. Then he questioned me minutely on the curriculum. I described it to him and also showed him a notebook in which I had collected a number of maxims which I used to dictate to these poor boys to help them become good Christians and citizens. The gentleman asked what punishments I used, and I replied: "None."

"Is that possible?" he exclaimed.

"Of course," I replied. "All these boys come from needy families. On appointed days, as my superior bids me, I give out bread stamps to those whose conduct is good. These stamps can be redeemed at the Magra bakery in Via Pellicciai. Those who have misbehaved get no stamps. This is their only punishment. Moreover, to entice them to school, Don Bosco at times offers them clothing." The gentleman left apparently satisfied.

Crossing the playground, the three inquisitors went up to the second floor. Since Don Bosco was out, they called on Father Victor Alasonatti, his vicar, introduced themselves, and disclosed the purpose of their visit. Mr. Malusardi took the initiative.

“Please show us the books.”

“Here they are,” Father Alasonatti replied. “This is the pupils’ register, this is a journal, and this lists the conditions of admission of each pupil.”

The men glanced through them. After a few minutes, the stenographer remarked, “I can’t make head or tail of this sort of bookkeeping.”

“Too bad,” Father Alasonatti replied, “but, if you have a little patience, I will explain it all.”

“Yes, we want to know everything, but briefly. First, tell us how many boys board here.”

“Three hundred, between students and artisans. Forty are orphans; one hundred and twenty-seven have lost one parent. Besides these, seven hundred boys frequent the Oratory every day.”

“How much do the boarders pay?”

“Only seventeen boys and two clerics pay regular fees. Most boys pay nothing because they are too poor. In fact, we have to give them shoes and clothes. The rest pay a little, according to their families’ means.”

“What is this ‘little’?”

“Ten or twelve lire a month, a cask or two of wine a year, or some bushels of rice, maize, chestnuts, and the like.”

“You certainly cannot feed so many boys the whole year on this! How do you manage?”

“The city gives us a subsidy of three hundred lire annually, the Order of SS. Maurice and Lazarus five hundred, and the diocese one thousand.”

“These donations only amount to eighteen hundred lire, far short of the need. What other means do you have?”

“In the beginning Don Bosco and his mother used to make up the deficit partly by selling their personal property and partly by obtaining charitable donations. But now we may admit that our main support comes from benefactors.”

“Who are these people?”

“Many I don’t know. Others do not wish to be identified. I’m sorry, but I cannot answer your question.”

“Where do you keep the money?”

“Nowhere. We don’t even have a safe. No sooner does money come in than it goes right out to pay overdue bills.”

These conscientious, truthful replies did not quite suit the three inquisitors. Indoctrinated by their bosses, they were convinced that Don Bosco had vast sums of money at his disposal sent to him by the Pope and by dispossessed princes, ostensibly to provide for his boys, in reality to recruit soldiers and promote anti-government activities. This absurd obsession was fed by the anticlerical press which broadcast the false rumor that a house search of the Jesuits in Turin had uncovered huge sums of money and important documents revealing the existence of a vast conspiracy. According to their logic, since Don Bosco was in contact with the Jesuits, a *corpus delicti* had to be found at the Oratory. Obsessed with this idea, the three searchers demanded that Father Alasonatti show them the treasure. In an attempt to frighten him, Malusardi cuttingly cried, “You’re a liar! You have money, and you are hiding it from us. You are a Jesuit. But we know how to handle people like you.”

They seized him by the arms, shook him, and shoved him about with no regard for his priestly character. Under such rough villainous handling, Father Alasonatti, already in poor health and exhausted by work, fainted. “Gentlemen, I am doing you no harm,” he said and blacked out. This unexpected occurrence shamed the inquisitors into realizing that they had acted not as honest officials but as bullies. Trying to remedy the situation, they propped him up and helped him to a chair.

Where was Don Bosco? He had gone to town, calmly absorbed in reading the [latest] government decree on education. He had two errands to do — one in court to clear up some matters on the purchase of the Filippi house, and one at Marquis Fassati’s, where he was expected for dinner and a promised donation. But a strange thing happened. As he left the court building to keep his appointment at the marquis’ home, he lost his trend of thought and, instead

of walking downtown, aimlessly went in the opposite direction and soon came to Via Cottolengo. Only after going some distance on that street did he realize where he was. "My goodness," he exclaimed. "What a pickle I'm in! If I go back to the Oratory, I will miss my appointment. If I turn back, I'll certainly be late. Tomorrow is Sunday, and tonight I must start confessions very early." As he pondered, he kept walking and finally made up his mind. "Happen what may, I am near home and home I will go!" he declared.

At that moment he spotted three boys — Duina, Martano, and Mellica — who ran up to him. "Hurry," they cried. "Another house search is on. The Oratory is full of police!"

"Now I see . . ." Don Bosco thought. "It's the all-knowing Divine Providence that led me here." Hurriedly he went in just as everybody was anxiously looking to him as to a delivering angel.

At that moment Father Alasonatti was undergoing the painful experience we have mentioned. The Oratory boys were terribly upset, especially when they saw guards rudely keep John Cagliero from leaving the Oratory for his music lessons in town. Some boys were praying in church, as were thousands of people in the Cottolengo Hospital at the request of Canon Anglesio, who anxiously awaited the outcome of this high-handed abuse of power.

As soon as Don Bosco got to the second floor, a number of husky artisans blocked the stairway to prevent his arrest at all costs. The cleric [John Baptist] Anfossi could not resist following Don Bosco into Father Alasonatti's office just as the latter fainted. Seeing his dear companion in such a pitiful condition, Don Bosco, deeply pained, took his hand and kept calling him by name. Hearing Don Bosco's voice, Father Alasonatti rallied a bit and faintly murmured, "Don Bosco, help!"

"Don't worry," he replied. "I'll take over. Just relax . . ."

"*Vim patior*" [I suffer violence], the good priest painfully muttered.

"I see too well that you suffer violence," Don Bosco went on, "and I feel for you, but remember that 'the kingdom of God suffers violence . . .'"

He turned to the inquisitors and demanded what they wanted.

One of them (Anfossi told us) answered, "We want an exact account of your finances and of the cash in your possession. If you do not comply, we have orders to arrest you."

Don Bosco replied, "Wait a moment till I give Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and then I'll be with you. You want what I haven't got. We depend entirely on Divine Providence."

As he was speaking, Father Alasonatti seemed to faint again. Justly indignant, Don Bosco turned to the searchers and took them to task.

"You are abusing your power. Are you investigators or executioners? Your conduct will earn you the condemnation of both God and men. If you have orders for a house search, go ahead and search, but don't terrorize law-abiding citizens in their own home! I will formally file a complaint with the government and the king himself. I trust I will be listened to."

At such resoluteness Chevalier Gatti meekly and courteously replied, "Excuse us, Father, we did not come to harm anyone. All we did was to ask questions."

"You should have asked them of the right person. *I am* the superior. Ask me. Leave my dependents alone."

"We are sorry," the other two apologized, "and we want to assure you that this was unintentional." Thus this incident was closed.

After making sure that Father Alasonatti was cared for, Don Bosco took the officials into the next room to get them away from Father Alasonatti. There they told Don Bosco of their orders to inspect the premises and visit the classrooms, but in a friendly, courteous way.

"If that's the case," Don Bosco observed, "why the platoon of guards to frighten my boys?"

"Be assured," Malusardi replied, "that the guards will not hurt anyone in the least. They are only here for appearances' sake."

"Parade grounds are the place for that," Don Bosco rejoined. "When police show up at private homes it is to arrest evildoers. It seems incredible that liberal, intelligent cabinet ministers should gratuitously believe that this hospice harbors evildoers and should

not hesitate to trample constitutional guarantees of inviolability of domicile and personal immunity."

Don Bosco's firm stand somewhat disconcerted the inquisitors. They seemed to be doing many things on their own, because the guards soon unobtrusively slipped away to post themselves in the empty fields encircling the Oratory.

Don Bosco stayed with the officials for over half an hour. After their attempts to trap him into contradicting Father Alasonatti's statements failed, Don Bosco thoroughly briefed them on the Oratory's financial situation. They should have been convinced that the Oratory posed no threat to the government.

"Anyway," one inquisitor asked, "what do you think of the recent annexation of the papal provinces to Piedmont?"

Raising his voice, Don Bosco firmly replied, "As a citizen I am ready to defend my country with my life, but as a Christian and a priest I shall never approve of that."

The cleric [Charles] Ghivarello, who was in the next room, distinctly heard his words.

Then, hoping to find something to boast of to their superiors, the searchers asked to visit the classrooms. Don Bosco consented. Father Alasonatti, now fully recovered, led the way. Of the hundred and eighty-six pupils, ten were day students.

We must remark here that Chevalier Gatti, whose special assignment as chief inspector of the Department of Education was to check the Oratory classrooms, was scarcely versed in Latin and Greek. Since his teaching experience had been limited to history and geography in the Collegio Nazionale, his questions were confined to these subjects but were slanted and sly. Meanwhile, Mr. Malusardi had taken a front seat and was privately questioning nearby students, while Professor Petitti took notes or examined pupils' notebooks. The inquisitors seemed to be trying to elicit answers or discover some phrase in the boys' compositions which could be construed as critical of the king or the government. Don Bosco would then be accused of giving his boys an education that was harmful or dangerous to the State.

They checked all books and asked for Don Bosco's teaching on

the Constitution, the army, and Italy. Even the catechism served them well for the strangest and trickiest questions. They wanted to find out what ideas were being instilled into the boys' minds in order to trick them into compromising answers.

Latin I was being taught by Celestine Durando, a young cleric. Chevalier Gatti, while questioning a pupil named Ricchiardi on Italy's frontiers, asked, "How many kinds of monarchical governments are there?"

"Two," the boy replied, "absolute, and moderate or constitutional."

"Which is the better of the two?"

The pupil did not know how to answer a question beyond his knowledge. Gatti realized it and, as though hoping for an answer critical of constitutional government, prompted, "Don't you think that an absolute monarchy, in which a king does what he pleases, is better?"

At this suggestion the teacher felt he had to point out that this was no question to ask a First Year Latin student. "This question," he remarked, "would be hard even for a mature politician."

But the pupil, as if prompted by an angel, replied, "I would say that any form of government is good, provided that those at the top are good people."

This very sharp answer dumbfounded Gatti and was the Oration's conversation piece for many days.

The inquisitors then asked the teacher if he were certified. He was not. They took his name down and used this as a pretext for continuing their classroom investigation. Before leaving, they examined his books and took along a copy of Dominic Savio's biography.

The most subtle questions were asked in Latin IV and V, taught by John Baptist Francesia, a cleric.

Chevalier Gatti asked a pupil, "What class do you belong to?"
"Latin V, sir."

"Have you studied Roman history?"

"Yes, sir, but only the part in our program."

"Can you tell me who killed Julius Caesar?"

"Marcus Junius Brutus and other conspirators."

“Brutus certainly did the right thing in slaying that tyrant, didn’t he?”

“Brutus did wrong. A subject ought never to rebel against his sovereign, much less take his life.”

“And what if the sovereign is bad?”

“Then God will judge and punish him, but his subjects must still respect him.”

“Tell me, don’t you think it would be a good idea if someone would take a pot shot at the king? Then monks and nuns, priests and bishops, and the Pope himself would have peace.”

“Sir,” Father Alasonatti interrupted, “these are no questions to ask young pupils. You are trying to trap them. I’ll have to forbid them to answer.”

Ignoring the protest, the inquisitor insisted. “No, sir,” the boy replied. “That would be wrong. If a king does wrong, he will have to render an account to God in due time, but his subjects cannot in conscience harm him. Rather, they should pray that the Lord will show mercy, touch his heart, and convert him. Meanwhile they must be patient.”

“If we must ask God to touch his heart and convert him, that means he is bad, doesn’t it?”

“I didn’t say that! I was only speaking in general!”

The boy became upset and began to cry.

“Why are you crying?” Chevalier Gatti asked.

“Because you ask me questions which do not concern history, and I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing.”

“Don’t cry, lad,” Gatti concluded. “You answered well.”

Perhaps to his chagrin, he had to admit that much. Gatti then called on another pupil.

“What’s your name?”

“Ropolo. I come from Villafranca.”

“What class are you in?”

“Latin IV.”

“Do you know the king?”

“I have never seen him, but I know that Victor Emmanuel is our king.”

“A bad king who persecutes the Church, right?”

"That's not part of our program, and so I don't know what to say."

"Even if you have not studied these things, you've probably heard of them. Don Bosco must have talked about them lots of times, hasn't he?"

"I never heard any such thing. Instead our textbook, *Storia d'Italia* by Don Bosco, speaks well of Victor Emmanuel and of his ancestors."

"But lad," another of the trio broke in, "those who persecute religion are evil. Victor Emmanuel persecutes religion. Therefore he is evil. Isn't that so?"

"You are better informed than I am, sir, and may say so, but I never said or even heard from Don Bosco or my teacher that the king is a bad man. I know that some time ago, when the king was sick, Don Bosco told us to pray for his recovery and the good of his soul. I too prayed for him."

"You are only parroting what somebody told you."

"No, sir, I'm telling the truth. Nobody could have prompted my answers because nobody could have imagined you would ask me such questions."

In Latin III, taught by the cleric John Turchi, the questions were on Italy's geography, and the examiner appeared satisfied with the prompt, adequate answers of a pupil named Louis Jarach. The examiner then turned to the teacher.

"They asked me about punishments," Turchi wrote. "I remember replying that, aside from some very slight ones, I used none."

The Latin II students, however, taught by the cleric Secundus Pettiva, were put through the third degree. Here the inquisitors at last found something to brag about. In examining the boys' composition books, they discovered that the teacher had dictated an extract from a Latin letter of Pius IX which had already appeared in the press.

"How come you dictate the Pope's letters?" Gatti exclaimed.

"Please notice," the teacher replied, "that this passage is only an excerpt from a letter, and its Latin would do credit to Cicero."

Chevalier Gatti, who knew little Latin, made no comment but added, "Well, these are not Latin authors for our schools."

"I wish to point out," John Turchi insisted, "that I only dictated a few lines as a translation test. There was never any intention of introducing a new Latin author. For these weekly tests I usually select material from sources other than textbooks. I came upon this passage, found it suitable, and dictated it. This does not violate scholastic regulations."

His explanations did no good. The three inquisitors seized all the composition books and, thinking they had at last discovered the thread of the conspiracy, decided to question each pupil. As it was lunchtime, they postponed the task until the afternoon.

While all the Oratory was having lunch, the inquisitors, accompanied by Don Bosco who replaced Father Alasonatti, went about the house looking for the imaginary *corpus delicti*. Every corner and closet was thoroughly searched.³ Then they passed on to the church, the workshops, the study halls . . . and the dormitories, minutely examining everything . . .

By now it was two in the afternoon and, their uneasy recreation over, the boys went back to their shops and classrooms. The inquisitors then, abandoning their demeaning task, resumed interrogating the pupils, a task they seemed to relish more. At this point Don Bosco left them for his own lunch.

To be more at ease, the inquisitors settled themselves in the prefect's waiting room and had each of the Latin II students sent to them. They were less numerous than in other classes. A routine question was: "What did your teacher say before and after dictating that extract from the Pope's letter?" Some replied that the teacher had said nothing; four could not answer because they had been absent that period; the rest said nothing of interest to the investigators.

"Are you sure," they asked a boy named Rebuffo, "that the teacher said absolutely nothing? Didn't he comment on the '*machinationibus*' [intrigues] and on the Pope's '*afflictionibus*' [tribulations]? And what about the verb '*patrare*' [to achieve]?"

"I don't remember," the pupil answered. "I know that he gave us the Italian word for it very quickly and then left hurriedly."

He was telling no lie. Pettiva, their teacher, being late for a

³ We are omitting here some trivial details. [Editor]

music lesson one afternoon, had hurriedly dictated the excerpt of the Pope's letter for translation into Italian and had then gone out. Being told of the sort of questions being put to his pupils, he stalked into the room and said to Chevalier Gatti: "See here, sir, we don't talk politics in the classroom. You may as well save yourself the trouble of questioning the boys on that subject."

Afterward, a number of pupils of other classes were also interrogated in such a way as to outdo any inquisition. These were a few such questions: "To whom do the Legations,⁴ Marche and Umbria, belong? What is the Pope's temporal dominion? Who rules Italy? What textbooks are you using?" Noticing Don Bosco's *Storia d'Italia*,⁵ they even took them to task for it. They stopped at nothing, as is shown in the questioning of a boy named Costanzo.

"To whom do you go to confession?"

"To Don Bosco."

"How long have you been going?"

"For the past two years, since I came here."

"Do you go willingly?"

"Very willingly."

"What does he tell you?"

"He gives me good advice."

"For example?"

"That's private and it's not right to tell it to others. If you want good advice too, go to confession to Don Bosco, and I'm sure he'll give you plenty."

"I have no time now. Tell me, doesn't Don Bosco say that the Pope is a saint?"

"He tells us that the Pope is called 'Holy Father.' I believe he is a saint, because he is very good, and he is the Vicar of Christ."

"Doesn't he ever tell you that those who have seized portions of the Papal States are wicked people?"

"These things have nothing to do with confession."

"But aren't these things sinful?"

"If they are, those who are guilty should worry. I've never done these things, and so I don't have to confess them."

⁴ Papal provinces governed by the Pope's legate. [Editor]

⁵ See Vol. V, pp. 322-331. [Editor]

After several hours of fruitless investigation, the inquisitors, tired or convinced of the futility of the whole thing, gave up their inglorious task and decided to leave. However, they seized a number of composition books from various grades for a closer examination in their office. Chevalier Gatti also took a copy of Dominic Savio's biography from a pupil in Latin I. For good measure, Don Bosco gave them a handwritten copy of the house regulations.

"These rules will show government authorities the moral principles on which I base the education I give to my boys. They should realize that, far from creating trouble for the government, this Oratory contributes to the welfare of families and of society by forming good sons and upright citizens. I venture to hope that from now on my poor boys and I will be left in peace."

After they left, Don Bosco went down to his boys and invited them to church to thank the Lord. However the cleric Durando, annoyed that his pupil's composition books had been seized, had the boys put in a claim for them on the grounds that they needed them for their lessons and final examinations and that they owned them. The books were returned.

Don Bosco later experienced a great consolation. Two of the principal instigators of this second house search came to see him about their spiritual affairs. Thus reads the witness of Canon Ballezio.

CHAPTER 45

A Plea for Justice

ABOUT the time of the Oratory house searches, far from losing heart, Don Bosco seemed to gain self-confidence. One day he gathered his co-workers and told them: "Do not fear. God will not abandon us. With His help our small Society will forge ahead. Mary is our salvation, our life, our hope, our guide, our refuge, and our help."

In fact, as though things were normal, he was readying a document that was to be most important for his congregation's further growth. On June 7 [1860], two days before the second house search, he called a meeting of the twenty-six members of the Salesian Society. The rules were read, and Don Bosco asked all the members to sign them at the following meeting, after which he would submit them for Archbishop Fransoni's approval. Someone proposed that Don Bosco also have the right to appoint members of the [Superior] Chapter, but he gave sound reasons why he opposed this policy and favored election by the whole Society. After the meeting was adjourned (we read in Father Ruffino's chronicle), a few Salesians lingered on. Constantly aware of the strained political and religious situation, Don Bosco remarked, "From now on things will be different in Italy." This was a clear hint that Italy would be united under one sovereign.

Don Bosco called another meeting of his Salesians on June 11, after night prayers. Once again the angels beheld the wonders of that Egyptian night when the Israelites, about to depart for the Promised Land, swore never to separate but to keep faith with each other and God. "For the just children of good men were

offering sacrifice secretly; and they unanimously ordered a law of justice: that the just should receive both good and evil alike, singing now the praises of the fathers.” (Wis. 18, 9)

Father Ruffino’s chronicle reads as follows:

One June 11 [1860], we set our signatures to the rules of the Society of St. Francis de Sales which were to be submitted to Archbishop Frasoni. We solemnly promised that, should the present troublesome times prevent us from making our vows, each of us would strive to promote this Society’s growth and, as far as possible, always keep its rules, even if all its members should be dispersed or if only two, or even one, should remain.

Here is the precious document:

Your Excellency:

We the undersigned, prompted only by the desire to ensure our eternal salvation, have joined together in community life in order to dedicate ourselves more effectively to those things which pertain to God’s glory and the salvation of souls.

To maintain unity of spirit and discipline and avail ourselves of suitable, effective means to achieve our aims, we have drawn up rules after the pattern of religious congregations. Our Society shuns all politics and aims only at its members’ sanctification, especially by the practice of charity toward our fellow men. We have already lived these rules and have found them suitable to our strength and helpful to our souls.

We are aware, though, that personal judgment is too often open to illusions and frequently to error, unless it is guided by Holy Mother Church — the divinely appointed authority on earth. Hence we humbly ask Your Excellency to read the enclosed rules, and to make changes, additions, or deletions as the Lord will inspire you for His greater glory with due regard to our capabilities.

In Your Excellency we see the shepherd who unites us with the Holy Father. We shall accept your words as a clear manifestation of God’s will.

As we request your blessing, we also ask that you kindly accept this petition of ours to examine the enclosed proposed rules to which we have appended our signatures:

Fr. John Bosco	<i>Director pro tempore</i>
Fr. Victor Alasonatti	<i>Prefect</i>
Fr. Angelo Savio	<i>Economer</i>
Deac. Michael Rua	<i>Spiritual Director</i>
John Cagliero	<i>Consultor, 3rd Year Theology Student</i>
John Bonetti	<i>Consultor, 1st Year Theology Student</i>
Charles Ghivarello	<i>Consultor, 2nd Year Theology Student</i>
John Baptist Francesia	<i>3rd Year Theology Student</i>
Secundus Pettiva	<i>2nd Year Theology Student</i>
Joseph Bongiovanni	<i>2nd Year Theology Student</i>
Dominic Ruffino	<i>2nd Year Theology Student</i>
Celestine Durando	<i>1st Year Theology Student</i>
John Baptist Anfossi	<i>1st Year Theology Student</i>
Francis Vaschetti	<i>1st Year Theology Student</i>
Anthony Rovetto	<i>2nd Year Philosophy Student</i>
Francis Cerruti	<i>1st Year Philosophy Student</i>
Joseph Lazzero	<i>1st Year Philosophy Student</i>
Francis Provera	<i>1st Year Philosophy Student</i>
Louis Chiapale	<i>2nd Year Rhetoric Student</i>
John Garino	<i>2nd Year Rhetoric Student</i>
Peter Capra	<i>2nd Year Rhetoric Student</i>
Edward Donato	<i>2nd Year Rhetoric Student</i>
Gabriele Momo	<i>2nd Year Rhetoric Student</i>
Paul Albera	<i>1st Year Rhetoric Student</i>
Joseph Rossi	<i>Coadjutor Brother</i>
Joseph Gaia	<i>Coadjutor Brother</i>

Archbishop Fransoni answered Don Bosco as follows:

Lyons, July 7, 1860

Very Reverend Father,

Your letter of June 13 and the accompanying Constitutions took some time to reach me. I have already examined them once, and intend to study them more leisurely before returning them to you. I think I will also consult someone better acquainted than I with community life. This is just an acknowledgment.

I sympathize with you for the harassment you have been subjected to and thank the Lord that your health has not been seriously hurt.

I write in haste because I am very busy. Wishing you and all the

members of your Society bountiful heavenly blessings, I recommend myself to the prayers of all.

Your devoted servant,

✠ Louis, *Archbishop of Turin*

Thus did Don Bosco react to the threats of the world, but they did not abate. A few days after the above-narrated search, Police Commissioner Chiapussi (it is not known at whose order) summoned several men who he knew had lived or worked at the Oratory — some still there as craftsmasters or handymen, others holding jobs in the city. He asked all just about the same questions: What were Don Bosco's political leanings? Had he received money from the Pope to recruit soldiers? What were his financial resources? Who were his main benefactors? No one could say anything that might imperil the Oratory. Consistently they replied that they had never heard Don Bosco talk of weapons or war, and that when he needed money he went all over creation searching for people to help him.

One of those questioned was forty-year-old Dominic Goffi, former craftsman at the Oratory cobbling shop and doorkeeper. He limped but was not tongue-tied. Though he had never faced bureaucrats, he was not cowed and candidly replied: "Sir, do you want to know Don Bosco's politics? I can tell you because I lived with him many years. His politics is to find food for his boys."

"Didn't he ever try to talk you into volunteering for the papal army to fight against our king?"

"He certainly never asked me because I limp and would only be a burden. As doorkeeper I often spoke with my fellow workers and all the Oratory older pupils, both day and resident, and I can assure you I never heard that Don Bosco spoke to them about it. He often speaks of fighting the devil by prayer and the sacraments, but he never bothers about war or soldiers."

"People say Pius IX has sent him a large sum of money. Do you know anything about it?"

"I know that in 1858, when Don Bosco was in Rome, Pius IX gave him money to treat the boys of the festive oratories of Val-

docco, Porta Nuova, and Borgo Vanchiglia. I don't know, but I don't believe that the Pope later sent as much money as you say. If it were true, we wouldn't see Don Bosco going around so often begging for his boys, nor would we see so many creditors pestering him. Many times I've witnessed heartrending scenes in the parlor. When they know that he is going into or returning from town, his creditors keep a sharp lookout for him. They want to be paid; they beg, shout, and threaten. All want money. The poor priest promises to pay and assures them they won't lose a cent, if they will only be patient because he hasn't got a penny. I know, because when I was in charge of the cobbling shop, the leather supplier stopped all deliveries when Don Bosco could not meet his bills on time. Don't you think, sir, that if Don Bosco had all the money they say he has, he would first use it to rid himself of such nuisances?"

"But what about the money he sends his brothers? They buy farms and build houses and mansions. Where does he get all that money?"

"That's not true. Don Bosco has only one brother still living and the man is working his farm with his sons."

"And yet I was told that in the summer Don Bosco takes his boys on vacation to Castelnuovo d'Asti. Where do they stay?"

"At his own house. But far from being a mansion or a big farmhouse, it's so small that he has to have the boys sleep in the stable and the hayloft, where they are hardly sheltered from bad weather."

"You may be right, but you can't deny that Don Bosco receives money. Who are his main benefactors?"

"Surely he must have benefactors, or else several hundred boys would go hungry or would have to be turned out into the streets. All good-hearted people help him, but I don't know who they are. I must admit I wish that all of Turin's people were his benefactors, including the police commissioner and his subjects. If you can, give Don Bosco a helping hand, and you may be sure that your money will be well spent!"

Spoken with candor by that simple-hearted man, these words provoked smiles. A guard jokingly remarked, "His name is 'Goffi' [Italian for clumsy, stupid] but he speaks wisely."

The harassment was really annoying, but, thanks to God, it also

had its good side effects, not the least of which was the good will of upright people — even those who did not share Don Bosco's religious views but who were known for honesty and fairness.

Those who instigated this second house search, wishing it to remain secret, imposed silence on those who had been interrogated, but they obtained the opposite effect. News quickly spread about, evoking little sympathy for a government which, under the mantle of legality, presumed to break into the homes of private citizens, making itself hateful to its own subjects.

Even some deputies did not hesitate to qualify this harassment as illegal and unwise abuse of power: illegal as contrary to the Constitution; unwise because it was carried out against an institution which housed, fed, and educated hundreds of indigent boys, many of whom — were it not for such provision — would probably have caused the government grave trouble.

Among others, Urbano Rattazzi — now no longer a cabinet member but only a deputy — sent for Don Bosco and made him tell minutely all that the inquisitors had said and done. On hearing the facts, he became very indignant, declared the searches infamous, and offered to demand a public explanation from the Minister of the Interior in Parliament. He declared, "I am not overly fond of clergymen, but when something good is done, I pay no heed to the person doing it or to his political affiliation. By harassing or permitting his dependents to harass such an institution as yours, the Minister of the Interior makes himself guilty of an outrage against philanthropy and deserves to be censured by all civilized nations." Don Bosco thanked Rattazzi for his benevolence toward the Oratory but did not deem it prudent to let him air this harassment in the Chamber of Deputies. He preferred to leave the matter to God and seek a peaceful approach. To this end he drew up and sent the following statement to the Minister of the Interior and to the Minister of Education:

Turin, June 12, 1860

Your Excellency:

I respectfully ask that you kindly read this brief statement concerning the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco. Last Saturday, June 9,

by order of the Department of the Interior, our classrooms, dormitories, and kitchen were inspected, our books were audited, and our financial resources were questioned.

So far I have been unable to learn what prompted this government measure. If Your Excellency will kindly explain it, I assure you that I shall thoroughly and truthfully acquaint you with all the facts, thus sparing the authorities further trouble and the oratories irreparable harm. I humbly beg you to believe that:

1. During my past twenty years in Turin I have dedicated myself wholly to the priestly ministry in jails and hospitals. I have also searched about town for boys in order to get them off the streets, give them moral upbringing, and provide them with a trade or academic schooling.

2. I have always striven to discharge my priestly duties with no remuneration whatever. On the contrary, I have used — and would gladly do so again — all I had to put up the present building and to support the boys now living there.

3. I have always vigorously shunned all politics, never taking sides in any political issue. Moreover, to forestall even the chance of a political partisanship in this house, I have forbidden that politics be even discussed. This house subscribes to no political paper. I have taken these steps in the firm belief that a priest will thus be free to exercise his sacred ministry at any time and place and with any form of government. While assuring you that I have always kept aloof from politics, I can also with equal truthfulness affirm that I have never said, done, or suggested anything against the government.

4. My schools have never been legally certified because they are "charity" schools. But the superintendents, inspectors, and Ministers of Public Education were fully acquainted with them and gave them tacit approval by visiting them, by presiding at the examinations — as was done several times by Chevalier [Peter] Baricco [former deputy mayor of Turin], Inspector [Peter] Nigra, Chevalier [Ferrante] Aporti,¹ and others — by making cash donations or gifts of books, and occasionally by waiving scholastic fees and by letters of commendation. I hereby enclose one such letter from Minister [Giovanni] Lanza² in which he encouraged the work of the oratories and of the day schools attached to them. The commendation of Lanza stemmed partially from two orders

¹ Father Aporti (1791-1858) had been one of the foremost educators in Italy. See Vol. II, pp. 148f, 165ff, 311f. [Editor]

² Giovanni Lanza (1810-1882) had been Minister of Education from 1855 to 1858. [Editor]

of the day: one of the Senate, the other of the House urging the government to uphold and promote such institutions. True, the Casati Law does require teacher certification, but on this score I can say I had already taken initial steps during Minister Lanza's tenure. He was and still is a benefactor of ours. I would certainly have fully complied with the law (Art. 379) before the start of the forthcoming school year.

5. For the last few years, due to the inadequacy of our workshops and the need of sheltering a greater number of boys, I have assigned more pupils to academic courses. A considerable number of them are now earning an honest livelihood as school or music teachers or as priests.

If, after reading this statement. Your Excellency should come to some decision, I shall readily submit. I only ask respectfully that you do so privately as a father who desires work to be done in the best way possible and not through alarming measures which may at times cause irreparable harm.

Having acquainted you with my deep-hearted concern, I now wish to recommend these poor boys of mine to your benevolence. Please forgive me for taking up so much of your time. Wishing you God's blessings, I am,

Respectfully and gratefully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

This statement was accompanied by an exact, detailed account of the state of the Oratory. Unfortunately all we have is but an outline. At any rate, it agrees perfectly with Father Alasonatti's and Don Bosco's answers to the inspectors.

[Through a messenger] Minister Farini's secretary sent the following reply:

Turin, June 13, 1860

Department of the Interior
Office of the Minister

The Minister of the Interior acknowledges receipt of Father John Bosco's letter. Unable at present to reply in writing, the Minister informs Father Bosco that he will be pleased to receive him in his office before 5 P.M. today or any time tomorrow morning.

G. Borromeo, *Secretary*

Don Bosco kept the appointment, but the clerk's cold reception and the message that unforeseen official business kept Minister Farini from seeing him gave Don Bosco to understand that the storm buffeting the Oratory was not yet fully spent.

He returned to the Oratory with the conviction that more and greater trouble was ahead. Faced with his enemies' obstinate hostility, he began to ponder possible future complications and became greatly worried. He asked himself: "What will happen to the Oratory? Can it be that, for a time at least, God may permit its destruction?" The future loomed dark. Not that Don Bosco doubted for a moment the final outcome of his mission, but God permitted this worry to make it clear that He alone was the source of all strength. Nevertheless, recalling what Canon Anglesio had said at the time of the first house search, Don Bosco felt greatly buoyed. Outwardly he looked always serene, but when to his outward calm Don Bosco added facetiousness, it was a clear sign to Rua [who knew him well] that his troubles were acute.

Just about this time he received letters ³ from the Department of the Interior asking him to accept five more boys.

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

CHAPTER 46

A Painful Loss

THE death of Father Cafasso in June 1860 brought grave loss to the entire Church, especially the church of Turin and Piedmont. He was active to the very end, notwithstanding various ailments that further undermined his poor health. A certain distaste for this world and a longing for heaven transpired through all his actions.

On Monday, June 11, a messenger from the Convitto Ecclesiastico brought Don Bosco the disquieting news that Father Cafasso had felt very weak while hearing confessions and at about eleven had been forced to take to bed. An internal hemorrhage had been further aggravated by the grief he felt because of the house searches made at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and the Convitto Ecclesiastico and because of the persecution of the Church in Italy. In several cities many religious, seminarians, and priests had been jailed. Cardinal Baluffi, bishop of Imola, and the bishops of Carpi, Ferrara, and Faenza had fared no better. On June 9, Bishop Anthony Ranza of Piacenza had been brought to Turin under police escort. Haled before the Minister of Justice, this good shepherd had to suffer the indignity of being lectured on the Gospel by a sheep, and of then being placed under house arrest in the residence of the Christian Brothers. These venerable bishops were being thus harassed because they had refused to have a *Te Deum* sung in their churches!

Lay people too felt the government's wrath. Thorough house searches were made at the country estate of Duchess Laval Mont-

morency — a generous benefactress of Father Cafasso and Don Bosco — at Borgo Cornalese near Turin, and in the residence of the count of Collobiano who often visited [Cardinal Corsi], archbishop of Pisa.¹ Not the least trace was found of the alleged clerical conspiracy.

Father Cafasso found comfort in such moral anguish by frequently turning his thoughts to heaven. So clearly did he foresee his death that he seemed to have received an explicit revelation of the day, hour, and circumstances, notwithstanding the fact that for an entire week the best doctors, doing all that friendship and skill suggested, entertained hopes of his recovery. His calm, patience, resignation, and lively faith were truly heroic.

Don Bosco visited him daily. On one occasion, Father Cafasso asked him for special prayers at the Oratory. "We have done so already," Don Bosco replied, "and will continue. I have also told the boys that some Sunday you will come and give them Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament."

"Never mind that," Father Cafasso declared. "Keep praying and tell your boys that I will bless them all from heaven."

Don Bosco then asked him if he had any errand or unfinished business that he wished to entrust to him. "None," he replied smilingly. "It would indeed be strange if after constantly preaching that a priest should settle his affairs every evening as if he were to die that night, I should have failed to do so myself. Everything is taken care of. The only unfinished business concerns paradise, and I shall indeed soon have that."

Everyone noticed that he welcomed visitors as amiably as usual, but that after a few minutes he would dismiss them, asking for their prayers. He did not wish them to stay any longer than strictly necessary. He longed to be alone, free to converse with God, even during his last moments on earth. He was not too happy with the short invocations suggested to him. They seemed to interrupt his colloquies with Jesus, Mary, his Guardian Angel, and St. Joseph.

The steady attendance of the infirmarian annoyed him, but one day, when he was alone with him, Don Bosco made bold to point out that it was quite right to have someone always present to nurse

¹ Cardinal Corsi was under house arrest in Turin. *See* pp. 303f. [Editor]

and comfort him. "Not at all!" he immediately replied. Then forcefully he added, "Don't you know that every word spoken to men is a word stolen from God?"

Occasionally, on going out, Don Bosco left the door ajar and watched him join his hands, kiss the crucifix repeatedly, and, gazing intently to heaven, converse familiarly with God.

On Friday, June 22, after solemn Holy Viaticum, he himself gave the bystanders to understand that he wished preparations to be made for the Anointing of the Sick and the papal blessing, and that the twenty-five or so priest-students still at the Convitto Ecclesiastico should attend.

That evening Don Bosco asked his spiritual father and benefactor for a last blessing. It was a most touching scene. Bishop Cagliero wrote: "When Father Cafasso was about to die, we met Don Bosco as he was returning from his last visit. He was deeply grieved and so were we. To cheer us, he told us we would soon have Father Cafasso as a heavenly patron. As a saint speaking of another saint, he told us of Father Cafasso's virtues and charisms and of his devotion to Our Lady whom he honored every Saturday by a strict fast. He also confided to us how Our Lady had promptly granted him any favor he had asked that day."

In the early hours of Saturday, June 23, Father Cafasso followed the Mass said in the chapel adjoining his room, and as usual received Holy Communion. Having worked hard for the glory of Mary, he wished to die on a day sacred to Her. He had often said and written: "How joyful to die of love for Mary, pronouncing Her name! To die on a day sacred to Her, in Her most glorious moment! To die in Her arms, leave for heaven with Her, and be eternally near Her!"

At about nine that morning he folded his arms. The end seemed imminent. Shortly after ten, while prayers for the dying were being said, he shook himself and turned as if he had heard his name called. Bystanders saw his body rise into the air. Turning to one side, his eyes open and surprisingly bright with life, Father Cafasso lovingly stretched out his arms to some unseen, mysterious object. We have reason to believe that it was the Most Holy Virgin Herself, visibly appearing to him to console him in his last moments

and grant him the favor he had sought for many years — to die in Her arms.

His last glance was at a framed picture of St. Joseph's death at the foot of his bed. Moments later he expired. This scene was attested to by Father Allachis and Father Bonino, who were present, and by Bishop Cagliero who heard it from Don Bosco himself.

A messenger had hurried to the Oratory to tell Don Bosco that Father Cafasso was dying. Don Bosco immediately went to the Convitto Ecclesiastico with Francis Cerruti, then a cleric, but he arrived when Father Cafasso had just expired. Falling on his knees beside the bed, Don Bosco burst into tears. After night prayers, he told the boys the sad news, warmly praised the deceased priest, and promised to write his biography. He also announced that the feast of St. John the Baptist would be postponed to Sunday, July 1, after the feast of St. Aloysius which would be kept on June 29.

Father Cafasso's room was converted into a mortuary chapel and his wake was held on June 23 and 24. Flocks of people came to pay their respects. They kissed his hands; eager for relics, they cut snips of his clothes and his hair and touched objects to his body as cherished keepsakes.

On the evening of the 24th, the coffin was closed and taken to St. Francis of Assisi Church. Endless throngs accompanied it; very many kissed the drape covering the coffin. At the crowd's insistence, the coffin was opened once more for a last view of the remains and then sealed. Early on the morning of June 25, after recitation of the Office of the Dead, Father [Felix] Golzio sang a requiem Mass. The church was packed. People wept; some placed lilies and flowers on the coffin. It was a touching spectacle. Finally, at the appointed hour, the funeral cortege formed, led by various confraternities and followed by a delegation of Franciscans, a sizable number of Oratory boys and clerics, and some two hundred priests, among whom was Don Bosco. Crowds walked behind the coffin and thousands of people lined the route. Praises, prayers, and sobs could be heard on every side.

When the coffin arrived at Holy Martyrs Church, which was already thronged, a solemn requiem Mass was sung and exequies followed. Then, members of St. Roch's Confraternity lifted the

coffin on their shoulders and carried it to the cemetery, followed by a vast crowd reciting prayers and rosaries. The little church of the Turin cemetery could not hold the multitude. After a last absolution, the coffin was taken to a mortuary chapel on the premises where the faithful vied with each other in picking as keepsakes the flowers that had covered the coffin. During the following days, many who had experienced Father Cafasso's charity kept visiting his grave. Don Bosco was one of them. He wrote, "The Christian cemetery, always an eloquent teacher for those who enter in faith and prayer, becomes indispensable to the heart when among those tombs there rest the ashes of our beloved benefactors."

On June 25, Father Cafasso's last will, dated October 10, 1856, was opened. He left his family patrimony to his relatives and all he had inherited from Father [Louis] Guala² to the Cottolengo Institute. Among the many legacies, the fourteenth was in favor of Don Bosco and his boys. It read: "I leave to Father John Bosco of Castelnuovo d'Asti, resident in Turin, the land and building I own adjacent to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales at Valdocco, in this city, and the sum of five thousand lire. I also cancel whatever debt he may have with me at the time of my death. All relative documents should be either destroyed or handed over to him."

By this will Don Bosco became the sole proprietor of the land and buildings purchased from Francis Pinaridi.³

At the "Good Night" that evening, Don Bosco told the boys how Father Cafasso had left them a token of his love for them in his will and described his magnificent funeral as a sincere public tribute to his virtuous life. He also remarked about the salutary impression a good death produces, and the horror caused by the death of the wicked. He illustrated the latter point by narrating a tragic event which had happened during those very days.

In the town of Prato a militant rebel stalked into a tavern and, brandishing two pistols, shouted, "With one I will shoot Pius IX and with the other the cathedral rector!" Then, as if to emphasize the point, he slammed the butt of one pistol upon a table. The impact triggered it and the bullet hit him in the head. A bystander

² See Vol. II, pp. 96f. [Editor]

³ See Vol. IV, pp. 172, 409. [Editor]

ran for a priest. The first one to be found was the very priest the poor man had wanted to shoot. The priest hurried, but it was too late. The man was already dead.

Father Ruffino's chronicle records the celebration of the feast of St. Aloysius on June 29. On this occasion, medals of the Saint, with the Guardian Angel on the reverse, were given to all. Boys, clerics, and priests pinned them on their clothes. The sermon, much liked by the boys, was preached by Father [John] Ciattino, pastor of Mareto. He dwelt on the importance of little things. That afternoon there was a stage play, and in the evening a procession in which all the boys wore their medals. As on previous occasions, several boys dressed as various saints — among them St. John the Baptist. At dusk there was a show of balloons and fireworks.

On June 30, Don Bosco attended a requiem Mass for Father Cafasso in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi. The service was conducted with no outward solemnity.

Don Bosco always found comfort at the Convitto Ecclesiastico. He had chosen Father [Felix] Golzio as his new confessor and went to him regularly every week. The latter too was convinced that God was leading Don Bosco by unusual paths and never opposed his method of spiritual direction, even when the Oratory was packed with resident pupils and young clerics. Father Paul Albera declared, "Don Bosco greatly revered Father Golzio, and the feeling was mutual. The latter so esteemed and loved Don Bosco that he decided to make him his heir."

Father Cafasso's successor to head the Convitto Ecclesiastico was Canon Eugene Galletti, who for love of God had already renounced his benefice to live with the poor of the Cottolengo Institute. This worthy priest was also a friend of Don Bosco and continued to place a room and the Convitto library at his disposal where he could have a quiet place to write. At Canon Galletti's request, Don Bosco continued going to St. Ignatius' Shrine [to help with confessions] at various spiritual retreats.

CHAPTER 47

A Cardinal's Visit to the Oratory

ON Sunday, July 1 [1860], the Oratory boys solemnized Don Bosco's name day with the customary festoons and an assembly program featuring vocal and instrumental music, prose, and poetry. In addition, they wanted to show their love by a gift. "Don Bosco," Peter Enria wrote, "never cared whether or not his cassock was well-fitted and seasonal, as long as it was clean and neat, and so in the Oratory's early years, boys occasionally used to chip in to give him some suitable article of clothing as a token of their affection and gratitude."

We now draw again from Father Ruffino's chronicle:

July 4 [1860]. Today the cleric Louis Castellano was cured. It happened this way. His doctor, who had given him up, seldom even visited him. A second and a third doctor were summoned, and they too gave no hope of recovery. Don Bosco himself agreed with them. Even as far back as April 25 [1860] he had remarked, "Two things are certain: the fall of the Two Sicilies and Castellano's departure for heaven." Nevertheless, after hearing the young cleric's confession, Don Bosco blessed him and exclaimed, "If Dominic Savio cures him, it will be a sure proof of Dominic's sanctity." That very day, Castellano's temperature dropped to normal and shortly after he returned to the Oratory.

As we shall see, though, Don Bosco's prediction was to come true.

The Oratory meanwhile again honored the memory of Father Cafasso. The boys had felt keenly the loss of their generous benefactor and kept offering prayers and suffrages for the repose of his

soul. Not content with this, however, they all wished to pay him a public tribute of gratitude on July 10, the seventeenth day after his death, with as solemn a requiem Mass as their humble condition could afford. The church was draped in black and two inscriptions¹ were placed over the entrances, while others were put around the catafalque. These latter were placed as follows:

At its foot:

Vere sal terrae et lux mundi fuit.

He was truly the salt of the earth and the light of the world.
[Cf. Matt. 5, 13]

On the right:

Quia ad iustitiam erudit multos, fulgebit quasi stella in perpetuas aeternitates.

Because he led many to justice, he shall be like a star forever.
[Cf. Dan. 12, 3]

On the left:

Labia Josephi custodière scientiam et legem requirebant ex ore eius.

The lips of [Father] Joseph kept knowledge, and the people sought the law of his mouth. [Cf. Mal. 2, 7]

At the head:

Corona senum filii eius, et gloria filiorum pater eorum.

Children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children are their fathers. [Prov. 17, 5]

Each inscription near the catafalque carried a symbol of his virtuous deeds. The Oratory choirboys lovingly rehearsed the musical program. Prayers preceded and followed the solemn requiem Mass celebrated by Father [John] Borel at 6:30 in the morning. As usual, the boys received Holy Communion, which certainly is one of the most effective means to aid the souls of the faithful departed. The church was filled with youngsters, distinguished guests, friends, and admirers of Father Cafasso.

After Mass, before the exequies, Don Bosco read an appropriate biographical sketch of the deceased which was published the next

¹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

month.² Several times he could not hold back his tears, while his audience was so taken up by his words that they did not want him to stop.

At about this time Don Bosco was also busy reading the August, September, and October issues of *Letture Cattoliche*.

The first — authored by Don Bosco and entitled *The Pontificate of St. Sixtus II and the Glories of St. Lawrence, Martyr* — belonged to his series of the lives of the popes. . . . The second — by Father Joseph Frassinetti, a dear friend of Don Bosco — concerned a saintly maiden, Rosina Pedemonte . . . and the third, by Father Charles Filippo, a Capuchin, was entitled *Confession, the Gate to Heaven*.

As recorded in Father Ruffino's chronicle, on July 14 [1860] the government allowed Cosimus Cardinal Corsi, archbishop of Pisa, to return to his see. As soon as he was free, the cardinal visited the Oratory. Accompanied by his secretary and his valet, he arrived at the church at 6:30 in the morning and said Mass, assisted by Canon [Joseph] Ortalda, Canon Alasia, Father Dadesso, Father Corsi, and Father [Victor] Alasonatti. The cardinal gave the Gospel homily and also a very touching short talk before Communion. Mass was followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament imparted by the cardinal. After treating the boys at breakfast, the cardinal sat on a makeshift dais in the porticoes for a brief reception. He graciously listened to the choir and band, to the poems of the clerics John Baptist Francesia and Joseph Bongiovanni, and to an address read by Michael Rua and written by Don Bosco himself.³ In responding, the cardinal told the Oratory boys, clerics, and priests that from that moment he included them all in the prayers he would order offered up in his archdiocese, and that he would speak of them to the Holy Father when he next saw him.

Then three boys offered him a complete set of *Letture Cattoliche*. In the presentation, one of the lads noted that since the Holy Father highly recommended *Letture Cattoliche*, he respectfully requested His Eminence to make this publication known in his arch-

² We are omitting a description of its contents and a review by *L'Armonia*. [Editor]

³ A routine address of greeting and good wishes. Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

diocese, if he felt it would contribute to God's greater glory and the salvation of souls. "We shall be honored," the boy concluded, "if Your Eminence will accept this gift." The cardinal nodded approval and consent. Then he visited the dormitories, study hall, workshops, dining room, and kitchen, which he blessed, saying, "May the Lord provide abundantly for all."

He left the Oratory at 10:30 amid shouts of "Long live Pius IX! Long live Cardinal Corsi!" As he walked through the double line of boys from the porticoes to the gate where his carriage awaited him, he blessed all with heartfelt warmth. Canon Alasia remarked that he had never seen anything like that before and that he had been deeply moved. Canon Ortalda agreed.

On leaving the Oratory, the cardinal informally called at the Rifugio.⁴ He did not address the community but gave Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Later, escorted by Marchioness Barolo, he paid a visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation to thank the Most Blessed Virgin for his deliverance. On July 21 he left for **Pisa**.

⁴ An institution for wayward girls where Don Bosco had been a chaplain. See Vol. II, pp. 184f. [Editor]

CHAPTER 48

A Stand for Survival

THE troubles of Pisa's archbishop had come to an end, but not Don Bosco's. Normally, his explanation to the Minister of the Interior and his acceptance of so many boys into the Oratory at the request of government officials ought to have allayed the latter's fears and ended the Oratory's harassment, but the times were not normal. An anticlerical press daily maligned Don Bosco, inventing and spreading the wildest accusations in an effort to turn public opinion and civil officials against him. They certainly succeeded in arousing the hostility of the rabble because one day, as Don Bosco was crossing Piazza Savoia with John Garino [then a boy], two passersby shouted to his face, "All priests should be hanged!" With a smile Don Bosco replied, "Yes, if they were as deserving as you!"

True, there were also honest newsmen who came to his defense. They exposed the absurdity of the accusations and the injustice and meanness of such attacks, but the anticlerical papers ignored the rebuttals as a matter of policy and kept on repeating their lies while prodding the government to close the Oratory down. Unfortunately, with the type of men then in power, there was little hope for a fair deal. Cabinet ministers had misgivings about the success of their goal [the unification of Italy] and were easily misinformed by their aides. Often, they saw enemies and dangers where there were none and, in their own fear, tried to scare off those whom they regarded as possible rivals. There was sound reason to fear that some day they might order the Oratory shut down. Don Bosco knew that it had already been decided to move

him out and put him under house arrest, but that influential persons had prevented it.

He therefore had to take defensive measures, but which? "It's useless to write," Don Bosco mused, "because they never answer. An audience with Minister Farini would easily prove my innocence, but he won't grant me one. Yet I must try!"

He had unsuccessfully sought an audience three times before. His sway over people — even those less friendly — was such that government officials were quite fearful that, granted an audience, he would win his point, and so they had taken all precautions to prevent that from happening. But Don Bosco was calmly and bravely determined to overcome every obstacle. He was ready to sacrifice his very life and move heaven and earth rather than let his little ones be torn away from his side. Without him, humanly speaking, the Oratory was lost.

Unable then to get a hearing from Farini, Don Bosco turned to Chevalier Silvio Spaventa, head secretary of the Department of the Interior, but this gentleman too had no intention of seeing him. To tire Don Bosco out, he kept putting him off day by day, morning to night to morning again. Finally, however, Chevalier Spaventa had to give in. He gave Don Bosco to understand that hopefully he might receive him on July 14 at eleven. While the Oratory boys worried about their fate, Don Bosco, sad but not perturbed, called the cleric John Cagliero and told him, "Please come with me to the Department of the Interior."

As they reached Via Palatina, Don Bosco exclaimed, "What a wicked world this is! Some government officials can't wait to shut the Oratory down and destroy it. Poor men, how misguided they are! They shall not succeed. They think they are dealing with Don Bosco alone. They don't realize they have pitched themselves against the Blessed Virgin and God Himself. He will shatter their plans. No, they shall not succeed in closing the Oratory!"

At the appointed hour Don Bosco arrived at the ministry and was announced, but Chevalier Spaventa had either forgotten or regretted his promise. His aide informed Don Bosco that very important matters kept the secretary from receiving him. Don Bosco's reply was, "I'll wait!" Determined to see the secretary, he

stayed on till six that evening, unruffled, despite the heat, hunger, and thirst. During those seven hours a steady flow of all sorts of people were ushered into Chevalier Spaventa's office, but Don Bosco's turn never came. The ushers paced to and fro and as they passed each other would grin and wink mockingly at Don Bosco. People awaiting their turn gazed in astonishment at the poor priest seated in a corner, accompanied first by the cleric Cagliero, and later by Father Angelo Savio, who had come to relieve Cagliero for lunch. Now and again Don Bosco would walk up to an usher and insist upon being admitted; then he would patiently return to his place. Chevalier Spaventa's deliberate snub was so demeaning that even the ushers began to sympathize with the priest.

At last, perhaps ashamed of the way he was treating a citizen who, though a priest, had civil rights like anyone else, the secretary decided at least to show himself. "What does this importunate priest want of me?" he asked from within his office loudly enough to be heard by Father Savio. He opened the door and, facing Don Bosco, asked peevishly, "Why do you keep pestering me?"

"I must speak with you, sir, for a few moments."

"What do you want?"

"May I speak to you privately?"

"Say what you want right now, as long as you are brief. These people can all be trusted."

Disregarding such discourtesy, Don Bosco replied loudly and clearly, "Chevalier, I am caring for five hundred boys. From this moment on, they are yours. You take care of them and their future!"

"Who are these boys?"

"Boys whom the government has entrusted to me and now is willing to throw back into the streets. They are orphans and abandoned children."

"Where are they now?"

"At my house."

"Who provides for them?"

"Charitable people!"

"Doesn't the government pay for their keep?"

"Not a cent!"

This brisk dialogue drew the bystanders gradually closer to Don Bosco as they wondered how the affair would end. They were also indignant at the treatment given this worthy priest. Sensing their change of mood, Chevalier Spaventa thought it best to mollify his approach, all the more so when Don Bosco, drawing closer, whispered, "Please give me an audience and soon, or you'll regret it before tomorrow night."

Courteously, the secretary invited him in. Later, Father Savio narrated: "As the door closed, I no longer heard or saw anything, but a few moments later Spaventa reappeared. He was quite perturbed and told the bystanders, 'Gentlemen, I have very important, pressing business at hand. Please return tomorrow.' Then he again withdrew into his office. Don Bosco remained closeted with him for a very long time. What he had said to Spaventa to produce such a change has never been revealed."

Later on Don Bosco acquainted his co-workers with that part of the interview which concerned the Oratory. From what he said we can reconstruct the gist of their dialogue. After inviting Don Bosco to sit near him, Chevalier Spaventa courteously and kindly said, "I know you are doing much good. Tell me what I can do for you and I'll be happy to oblige."

"I respectfully ask for the reasons of the house searches and for the harassment I have been subjected to by the government."

"Your leanings, your ideas. . . . I cannot tell you more. I leave that to the Minister of the Interior. You should speak with him. One thing I can tell you, though. All your troubles would end at once if you would make a clean breast of everything."

"I don't know what you mean, Chevalier."

"I'm referring to your secret dealings with the Jesuits. That's why your premises were searched."

"I still don't know what you're talking about. Come to the point clearly if you want me to tell you what you wish to know. Be honest with me and I'll be equally honest."

"I can't get into this matter. Ask the Minister of the Interior. He will tell you everything."

"In that case, be good enough at least to make an appointment for me."

“Very well, I’ll do my best, although it’s rather late to arrange one today. I’ll try, but keep this to yourself lest it be misunderstood, or, worse yet, misinterpreted and twisted against you. Wait a few moments.”

Chevalier Spaventa then left to confer with the Minister of the Interior. Half an hour later, he returned and said to Don Bosco:

“He is busy and cannot receive you now. He will send you word of an appointment tomorrow.”

Don Bosco thanked the secretary; tranquil and smiling, he was escorted by him to the stairs. The secretary was grave and respectful. Impressed by this change of manners, the ushers bowed to Don Bosco and crowded around him as soon as the secretary was out of sight. Some kissed his hand in respect and one of them escorted him downstairs to the exit.

Don Bosco and Father Savio were back at the Oratory at eight that evening. Don Bosco had as yet had no lunch. Before retiring for the night, he looked through the day’s mail and found a request from the Department of the Interior to admit an orphan named Albert Lasso from Oneglia to the Oratory. The request, No. 2091, dated July 13 [1860], was signed by Chevalier Salino [secretary of Minister Farini]. On July 10, Don Bosco had received requests on behalf of two other boys — Reydet and Penchie-natti — who had recently lost their fathers.

These requests, like previous ones, contained the following thought: “I make bold to ask Your Honor kindly to have this charge of ours received in a charitable institution of this city — for example, in the one directed by Father John Bosco who, on request, would have no difficulty in accepting him and taking good care of him.”

Don Bosco jotted down on the application “Accepted,” though it was not likely that his compliance would avert the danger which threatened him. Most probably, that night he heartily prayed to God in the words of Esther to King Ahasuerus: “If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, give me . . . my people for which I request.” (Est. 7, 3)

CHAPTER 49

A Stand for Survival (Continued)

ON July 15 [1860] Don Bosco received a note from Count Guido Borromeo informing him that Minister Farini would see him the next morning at about eleven.

At the "Good Night" Don Bosco urged all to pray, to hear Mass the next day with greater devotion than usual, and possibly also to receive Holy Communion the next morning for the success of a very important matter. His added request that all the boys take turns in making visits to the Blessed Sacrament till his return did not go unheeded.

The following day, July 16, feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Don Bosco, fully trusting in the Blessed Virgin's protection, went to his appointment. Some time previously he had told John Cagliero the reason for this confidence. "I never shrink," he said, "from any undertaking which I know is good and necessary, no matter what the difficulties. If, for example, I must see some unfriendly, important person, I don't hesitate, but first I recite a Hail Mary. I do the same before calling on anybody. Then, come what may, I do my best and leave the rest to the Lord."

Accordingly, then, Don Bosco said his Hail Mary and punctually kept his appointment. Shortly before eleven Minister Farini arrived. The clerics John Baptist Francesia and John Baptist Anfossi accompanied Don Bosco and told us that Farini immediately shook hands with him, courteously greeted him, and then escorted him to a room where several secretaries were at work. The conference that followed was most important, because it meant life or death for the Oratory. Minister Farini was one of those who "speak civilly to

their neighbors, though evil is in their hearts . . . because they consider not the deeds of the Lord." [Ps. 27, 3-5]

"So you are Don Bosco!" Farini began. "We met once before at Stresa as guests of Father Rosmini,¹ and I am delighted to see you again. I am acquainted with your work for poor boys. The government is grateful for your philanthropic, social work. Tell me now, what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to know why repeated house searches were carried out against me in the past four months."

"Good, I will be frank and expect you to be as frank as I am. As long as you busied yourself with helping poor boys, you enjoyed the government's favor, but once you strayed from charity into politics, we had to be on the alert and watch you."

"Your Excellency," Don Bosco replied, "I have constantly kept aloof from politics. I am anxious to know what could have possibly compromised me in this."

"Your articles in *L'Armonia*, the reactionary meetings held at your house, and your correspondence with State enemies. These are things which make the government uneasy about you."

"Let me comment on what you have been good enough to tell me, Your Excellency. I will speak frankly as you asked me to. First, let me say I know of no law forbidding anyone to write for *L'Armonia* or any other paper. Moreover, I can assure you that I have never written for any paper. As a matter of fact, I don't even subscribe to one."

"You may deny everything and anything, but the fact is that a good many articles appearing in *L'Armonia* are from your pen. Intrinsic evidence dispels all doubts."

"I fear nothing on that score. There is no evidence!"

"Are you insinuating that I am lying?"

"Not at all! You state what has been reported to you, but if the report is false, the facts reported are naturally also false. In this case the reporter is to blame, not he who receives it in good faith."

"I want to assure you that our staff members are honest and dependable. They are your accusers."

"But they are mistaken."

¹ See Vol. IV, pp. 90ff. [Editor]

“Do you accuse the government of employing dishonest persons who are not above making false reports and charges?”

“I’m not saying that. I only hold that people have lied about me.”

“In other words, Father, you are finding fault with public and private functionaries and with the government itself. I would ask you to amend your remarks.”

“I will retract and amend if Your Excellency can prove to me that I have not spoken the truth.”

“It ill becomes a good citizen to criticize and malign public authorities.”

“Your Excellency, I have no intention at all of criticizing authority. All I want to do is tell the truth as any honest person would do in defending himself against false accusations. A loyal citizen must also have the courage to alert his government lest it be betrayed into unjust judgments and acts against its loyal subjects, ruining their reputation. As an honest man and loyal citizen, I must say — and shall always say — that it is defamation to hold me up as the author of newspaper articles which I have never even dreamed of, to call my charitable hospice a den of revolutionaries, and to make me out as one who corresponds with enemies of the State. Such accusations are sheer fabrications of ill-intentioned people who want to deceive the authorities and push them to colossal blunders to the dishonor of justice and liberty.”

Minister Farini could not help but be impressed by Don Bosco’s frankness. Astonished and somewhat put out, he tried to intimidate him. Scowling and asserting his authority, he went on, “Don Bosco, don’t let yourself be carried away by excessive ardor and indiscreet zeal. You may get hurt if you forget that you are talking to the Minister of the Interior.”

“Your Excellency, I am not afraid of you.”

“Don’t you realize that I could have you jailed right now?”

“Even so, I am not afraid.”

At this point, Farini turned to his private secretary, Count Borromeo, and to others who, interrupting their work, were listening intently to the dialogue. “Borromeo,” he said, “listen to what Don Bosco says.” The secretary and the others drew closer.

“Yes,” Don Bosco continued, “I do not fear at all what men can

do to me for speaking the truth. I only fear what God would do if I were to lie. Besides, Your Excellency is too honorable and upright to commit the infamy of jailing an innocent citizen who for the last twenty years has been giving up his life and property for the good of his fellow human beings.”

“What if I did just that?”

“I would hardly believe that an honest man like you could turn into a villain, but if it should happen, I have means to assert my rights.”

“How?”

“By imitating your example.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have written on history² and have singled out for public reprobation certain persons you considered guilty. I have written *Storia d'Italia*.³ All I need to do is to add but one chapter about what has occurred here.”

“You would never do that!”

“Why not?” Don Bosco added smilingly. “Why couldn't I do what you have done and perpetuate the memory of the house searches at the Oratory? I could tell the whole world about a cabinet minister who abused his power and attempted to destroy a charitable institution, frightening all the children sheltered there.”

“You will not dare do that!”

“Won't I? It's my decision. Your Excellency, let me say that you have not conducted yourself as the accomplished, talented gentleman I know you really are. The blow you aim at me would fall on the poor boys whom you yourself befriended by asking me to accept them into the Oratory. I did not expect to be so repaid for my cooperation. . . . I'll say no more. God is just and almighty. In due time He will avenge the innocent.”

The secretaries were astonished. Some were smiling, others were pensive.

“Don Bosco,” Farini continued, “you're out of your mind. If I send you to jail, you'll have no chance to write or publish anything.”

² Farini had authored *Lo Stato Romano dal 1815 al 1850*. This four-volume work was published in 1850 and 1851. [Editor]

³ See Vol. V, pp. 322-331. [Editor]

“Your Excellency, I should like to believe that you would be decent enough to allow me the solace of writing. Should you deprive me of that or even life itself, other writers would rise up in due time to take my place.”

“Would you dare defame a minister and a whole government in the name of history?”

“Those who wish to uphold their reputation should act honorably. I believe that telling and proclaiming the truth is the right and duty of every good citizen and a service rendered to society. Far from being blameworthy, it is most commendable, something to be proud of. I myself like to believe that these motives induced you to write your various works, especially *Lo Stato Romano*.”

For a moment, Farini remained silent and pensive. Then he went on in a friendly tone: “But can you sincerely affirm that no reactionary meetings took place in your house and that you do not correspond with the Jesuits, with Archbishop Frasoni, and with the Holy See on political matters?”

“Your Excellency, if you stand for truth and sincerity, let me tell you I am very indignant — not at you, whose authority I respect, but at those who have slandered me to you, at those cowardly wretches who, for the sake of filthy lucre, have trampled underfoot honesty and conscience and bargained away the reputation and tranquillity of peaceful citizens. Yes, I tell you again unequivocally that I have not done any of the things that I or the Oratory stand accused of. I challenge you to produce even a single proof to the contrary.”

“But the letters. . . .”

“There are no letters.”

“And your political dealings with the Jesuits, with Archbishop Frasoni, and with Cardinal Antonelli. . . .”

“Pure fiction! I do not have nor ever have had any such dealings. As regards the Jesuits, I don’t even know where they live in Turin. As for Archbishop Frasoni and the Holy See, I have had no relations with them beyond such as a priest must maintain with his ecclesiastical superiors in matters concerning the sacred ministry.”

“And yet we have letters and sworn statements.”

“If that’s the case, why not show me the evidence? At this stage I’m not asking for favors. I want justice. I demand justice from you and from the government, not for myself, but for so many poor boys frightened by repeated house searches and the presence of police. They are scared and fear for their future. I no longer have the heart to see them so upset, especially when even the press singles them out for public blame. For them I demand justice and redress lest they be deprived of their very livelihood.”

At these last words Farini looked worried and even moved. He rose and silently paced the room. He had with him Archbishop Franson’s ⁴ letter which government agents had intercepted, but perhaps the shame of having tampered with the mail dissuaded him from confronting Don Bosco with it. On the other hand, that letter, written by the archbishop and not by Don Bosco, proved nothing. Besides, Farini would have had to admit that one reason the government had to suspect Don Bosco was something he had nothing to do with.

A few minutes later, who should walk in but Count Camillo Cavour, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Premier. Rubbing his hands, he smilingly approached Don Bosco as if he were totally ignorant of the situation. “What’s the trouble?” he asked. Then in a good-natured tone, he went on: “Let’s be easy on Don Bosco. Let’s settle things in a friendly way. I’ve always liked Don Bosco and still do. What’s the trouble, then?” he repeated, taking Don Bosco by the hand and asking him to sit down.

The sight of Cavour and his benevolent expression told Don Bosco that things would end well, not because Cavour’s policy was any better than Farini’s, but because he and Don Bosco had been on friendly terms, and Cavour knew the nature and scope of the Oratory. Quite confidently, Don Bosco rejoined, “My dear count, the Valdocco oratory which you so often visited, praised, and helped is now marked for destruction. Those poor children gathered from the streets and trained to earn an honest living, as you yourself saw to your satisfaction, are now in danger of being thrown back into the streets. The same priest whom you — undeservedly, no doubt — so often praised to the sky is now accused of being a

⁴ See p. 311. [Editor]

rebel and revolutionary leader. What grieves me most is that, with no explanation, I have been searched, harassed, and publicly defamed to the great harm of my institution, which so far has been able to operate through public charity because of its good name. Moreover, my faith and my religious beliefs and practices were derided by government agents in my own house and in the presence of my boys, who were scandalized by such conduct. I omit other very serious things which I cannot believe Your Excellency consented to. I don't know what will happen to me, but these things cannot be long suppressed from the public, and sooner or later will also be avenged by God.

"Calm down, Don Bosco," Cavour interrupted. "Rest assured that none of us is against you. Besides, you and I have always been friends, and I want our friendship to continue. But, my dear Don Bosco, you have been deceived. People have taken advantage of your goodness and lured you on into a kind of politics that leads to sad consequences!"

"What politics, what consequences!" Don Bosco interjected. "A Catholic priest has no politics but the Gospel and fears no recriminations. Meanwhile cabinet ministers hold me guilty and proclaim me as such to the four winds without offering a single proof of the accusations tossed out against me and my institute."

"Since you press me," Cavour went on, "I will speak up and tell you clearly that the spirit you and your institution have exhibited of late is incompatible with the government's policies. You are with the Pope, and the government is against the Pope. Therefore, you are against the government. It's as simple as that."

"Not quite so," replied Don Bosco. "First, I want to point out that if I am with the Pope and the government is against the Pope, it does not follow that I am against the government, but rather that the government is also against me. But that's a minor point. What I want to say is this: In matters of religion I stand with the Pope, and, as a good Catholic, I intend to stand with him until death. But this does not in the least keep me from being a good citizen. Politics is not my field. I avoid it and do nothing against the government. I have now lived in Turin for twenty years. I have written, spoken, acted openly and publicly, and I challenge anyone to pro-

duce a single line, word, or deed of mine deserving the government's censure. If this is not so, let me be proved guilty, and I will accept my punishment; otherwise, let me work in peace."

"Say what you like," Farini interjected, "but you will never convince me that you share our ideas, the ideas of our government."

"For heaven's sake, do you mean to say that at a time when freedom of opinion is so much extolled you would find fault with a citizen for privately holding opinions of his own? Would you exercise such tyranny as to dictate to a citizen's mind or chain it?"

"I simply cannot believe," Farini replied, "that, living as you do in a country where laws run altogether contrary to your opinions, you can remain silent."

"Why not? A person may believe that someone is acting wrongly, and yet say and do nothing against him either because it would be useless or dangerous, or even because it's none of his business. Whatever I may think of the government's handling of certain matters, the fact is that neither in nor out of the Oratory have I ever said or done anything that could warrant treating me as an enemy of the nation. This should satisfy the government. But, Your Excellency, I do more than that. By sheltering hundreds of poor, forsaken boys and teaching them a craft or trade, I cooperate with the government for the well-being of many families and of all society. In this way I lessen the number of idlers and vagrants, and I increase the ranks of hard-working, educated, upright citizens. This is my only politics."

The two cabinet ministers could find no fault with Don Bosco's position, all the more so as it was bolstered by facts, but Cavour, priding himself on his knowledge of religion and the Gospel, like a good sophist, kept quibbling: "Doubtlessly, Don Bosco, you believe the Gospel, and the Gospel says that he who sides with Christ cannot side with the world. Therefore, if you side with the Pope, that is, with Christ, you cannot side with the government. As the Gospel says, let your speech be 'yes, yes; no, no.' Don Bosco, let us be frank: we are either with God or with the devil."

"This kind of reasoning," Don Bosco replied, "would lead us to believe that the government is against not only the Pope but also the Gospel, that is, against Jesus Christ Himself. I cannot imagine

that you and Minister Farini have become so impious as to cast away the faith in which you were born and raised, and for which you have several times in word and writing shown great respect and admiration. However, since you have quoted the Gospel, I may add that it answers your objection most perfectly in the words: 'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God!' Therefore, according to the Gospel, any citizen can be a good Catholic — that is, side with Jesus Christ and the Pope and do good to his fellow men — and at the same time side with Caesar, namely, observe the laws of the land, except when the rulers persecute religion or tyrannize the consciences and minds of citizens."

"But doesn't the 'yes, yes; no, no' of the Gospel oblige a Catholic to declare openly what party he belongs to, whether he stands for Christ or against Him?"

"As a priest, I am in a better position to explain those words. They have nothing at all to do with politics. Their meaning is that though an oath is lawful in confirmation of truth, yet it must not be used without necessity. Simply, to be believed an honest person needs but to assert that a thing is or is not true, without need of an oath. Honest, educated people should accept the word of another without requiring an oath. To act otherwise would be a sign of mistrust in one party and of bad faith in the other. It would also show little or no respect in both for the Holy Name of God, which must never be taken in vain. Let us now come to our case. Considering what I have stated, do you perhaps believe that I am a conspirator, an enemy of the State, or a liar?"

"By no means! On the contrary, I have always held you as a model of honesty and sincerity. I intend therefore that from this moment you be no longer bothered."

"Yes," Farini joined in, "let this end it all! Go home and take care of your boys without any worry. By so doing, you will not only be spared further vexation, but you will earn the gratitude and protection of the government and the king. But prudence, dear Father, prudence! Times are difficult, and a gnat may look like a camel."

“Can I then be sure of no further harassment?” Don Bosco asked. “Can I believe that the government has changed its opinion in my regard and is convinced there never was or is anything in my institute to cause it alarm?”

“Yes, we assure you,” Farini replied, “that no one will ever bother you again. We are all convinced of your personal honesty and of the charitable nature of your institute, but be on your guard with certain individuals who pose as friends but are traitors.”

“Your Excellency,” Don Bosco went on, “if at any time you wish to give me advice or suggestions, please do so as a loving father but not with threats, because that would irreparably injure a work which has benefited by the solicitude of the government and of private citizens. In fact, in extraordinary circumstances I have always appealed to cabinet ministers and obtained their friendly assistance.”

“We are agreed, then. Always keep away from politics.”

“I have no worry on that because I have always shied away from it. I have no political affiliation.”

“Then we are in perfect agreement,” Cavour concluded. Both men rose and shook hands with Don Bosco. “We shall always be friends,” continued Count Cavour. “Pray for us.”

“Yes, I will ask God to help you in life and in death,” Don Bosco concluded. He then left, most grateful to God for having assisted him in an ordeal which might have had fatal consequences not so much for himself as for the boys who depended on his charity. He got back to the Oratory at about two in the afternoon.

On the same day when the Oratory’s very existence had seemed at stake, the Lord seemed to take delight in defeating the ill will of men. We read in the chronicle of the Oratory:

By a deed of July 16, 1860, drawn up by the notary Lomello, Mrs. Lucy Ganna, widow of Mr. Filippi, and her children Cajetan and Rita sell to Don Bosco approximately three acres of land, with house, yard, sheds, vegetable garden, and meadow for the price of 65,000 lire.

That evening Don Bosco made the following announcement to his boys after night prayers: “See the first effects of persecution.

For the past several years I tried to buy the Filippi house. I made good offers to the owners, but they always refused to sell. Now, without my asking, Mr. Filippi came to discuss the sale of the house at a considerably lower price than I had previously offered. I told him I had no money at present, but he assured me that he was in no hurry for it and would wait. Therefore we made a contract. This is a sign of Our Lady's protection."

CHAPTER 50

Good out of Evil

IN Don Bosco's ample memorandum [of his audience with Farini and Cavour] and in Father [John] Bonetti's and Father Dominic Ruffino's chronicles we have a thorough account of the memorable conversation of our founder with both cabinet ministers. Father Ruffino adds a comment: "Don Bosco knew how to endure persecution, but he was also brave enough to face any man, no matter what his position — a trait more unique than rare. He would not let himself be browbeaten or dismayed. Mincing no words, he argued, pleaded, rebuked, and even threatened when necessary. He was always firm but calm; sometimes serious, though always benign; never offensive, often smiling. His very voice never changed tone."

These traits along with his practical knowledge of his legal rights and his constant efforts not to avoid whatever might worsen a situation enabled him to turn to his own advantage the very obstacles that cropped up against his institution. All that he managed to overcome in the course of so many years is a clear proof of this. We have often heard both strangers and friends remark: "He is quite a man. He never fails." At other times they would exclaim: "Isn't he shrewd! What a diplomat! Saints are truly smart!"

This time too he managed to turn opposition to his own advantage. The popular saying, "Even misfortunes can bring some good," and St. Paul's dictum, "For those who love God, all things work together unto good" [Rom. 8, 28], proved true for him and the Oratory because the government's harassment and the cowardly attacks of a hostile press turned out to be blessings in disguise.

The odious, well-publicized house searches spread Don Bosco's name and his work far and wide, while they answered public authorities that they had nothing to fear from Don Bosco's activities. As an added benefit, hundreds of boys were directed to him from all parts of the country, so that in a short time the Oratory's enrollment soared to six hundred, to seven hundred, and even to a thousand. The Oratory became, as it were, a settlement of boys who were the best hopes of the Church and civil society. Parents and pastors alike, as well as local and regional civil authorities, started to send Don Bosco more sons of their deceased employees and of needy people who had sought their aid in getting their children into a charitable institution. Some government officials thought so highly of Don Bosco and his Oratory that they could think of no better person or home in the land to whom to entrust their charges.

Minister Farini himself resumed, or rather continued, to direct boys to the Oratory. On July 18 [1860] he had his secretary, Chevalier Salino, forward an application (No. 2155) on behalf of thirteen-year-old Paul Bertino of Levone. The request had been drawn up by the town officials and endorsed by the pastor and the town deputy, and had been then channeled to Minister Farini to enlist his support in getting the lad into the Oratory as a free student.

Many other similar requests,¹ couched in terms of high praise and promises of financial assistance, kept pouring in. The Oratory needed such solid support in those days, when any institution, no matter how reputable, once it lost government favor or fell under suspicion, would find itself open to fierce attacks and even to destruction from those who wielded sword or pen. That is why Don Bosco very prudently shied away from all kinds of politics, all the more so when later it became Catholic policy to shun political life.² He realized that priests had to be catholic in their love and must necessarily keep all doors open, so that, whether called or not, they could bring spiritual comfort to all.

Bishop [Jeremiah] Bonomelli wrote: "One day, not many years

¹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

² On February 29, 1868, Pius IX's decree *Non expedit* forbade Italian Catholics to participate in political life, especially in the election of representatives of the new kingdom of Italy. [Editor]

ago, I was speaking familiarly with Don Bosco, a man of God and a true apostle of youth whose name is regarded with reverence. Characteristically simple and practical, he told me these exact unforgettable words: 'In 1848 I realized that if I wanted to get anywhere in doing some good, I had to put all politics aside. From then on, I always shied away from politics and managed to do good without interference. In addition I found help where I least expected it.' This rule is the fruit of experience and needs no comment." (*Questioni religiose-morali-sociali del giorno*, Vol. I, p. 310)

If Don Bosco's prudence did not save him from bitter, anti-clerical harassment, it was not because of politics but because of his courageous stand for the sacred rights of the Church. His persecutions earned him God's blessings, but it was not so with those who had twice ordered and carried out a search of the Oratory.³ As Holy Scripture states: "They shall be turned back, overthrown, and destroyed before You. For You upheld my right and my cause." [Ps. 9, 3-4]

On his own part, Don Bosco had nothing but lasting compassion for his foes, whether public officials or private individuals, as we have been assured by witnesses in word and writing. For example, Father John Bonetti testified:

In those very days when we were harassed most bitterly by our enemies, Don Bosco assured us that things would end well. He kept urging us to pray that they might realize the harm they were doing, cease their attacks, and thus merit God's mercy.

Bishop John Cagliero tells us:

Amid struggle and persecution Don Bosco kept always calm, serene, and trusting in God, saying, "If God permits these trials and tribulations, it is because He wants to draw great good from them. We must be brave, unselfish, and patient. We must keep going with trust in Him." He bore no grudge against his adversaries and persecutors; to my knowledge, he never spoke ill of them. I recall that some of us, indignant at the meanness of public officials, like Zebedee's sons wanted to call down fire from heaven upon them, but Don Bosco would calmly smile and reply, "You are still too young! Leave that to God. He lets all this happen and then

³ We are omitting a detailed description of the misfortunes that befell Minister Farini and others responsible for Don Bosco's harassment. [Editor]

will foil their evil plans. Let us just pray and have no fear." When the conversation drifted to the misfortunes and the bad end that befell those who had opposed his festive oratories, he would look heavenward and remark, "How frightfully severe has God been with our persecutors. Let's hope He has been merciful to their souls!" When newspapers like Turin's *La Gazzetta del Popolo* slandered him, he would allow no one to send in a rebuttal. Likewise he did not want anyone to hold any grudge against its shameless writers or voice uncharitable feelings toward them or their instigators. Indeed, he was content to remark, "Oh well, let's be patient. This can't last forever. Poor men! They pick on Don Bosco who only tries to do good! Should we let souls be lost on that account? They unwittingly oppose God's work. He will surely foil their plans!"

Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi stated:

Several times I warned him about certain people who posed as friends. "Look out, Father," I would say; "so and so is not a friend." He would reply, "I think you are wrong, because more than once he has recommended boys to me, and I did all I could to oblige him." When we spoke of his slanderers, he tried to excuse them by saying, "They talk like that because they do not know Don Bosco. Most of them have never visited the Oratory. If they came around, they would stop fighting us." If someone would tell him that some person was hostile to him, he rarely believed it.

Father Francis Dalmazzo declared:

I often marveled at his friendly, very charitable conduct toward persons notoriously hostile to him, who had slandered him and his work in word and writing. Asked once why he acted so kindly to them, he replied, "Because we must love all, even our enemies." If they were men in authority, he would add, "Also lest they harm me more!"

I noticed too that he reacted the same way to certain ungrateful pupils of his whom he had fed, housed, and clothed for years. After receiving a good education and sometimes even earning academic degrees, they left the Oratory and unjustifiably turned against him. Don Bosco always spoke well of them, welcomed them generously whenever he met them, and even got some of them honorable well-paid positions, regardless of their ill-treatment of him.

One young man, who for years had done him great harm and had shunned him, called on him one day toward the end of dinner time, not to apologize but to transact some business. When the boy serving at table announced him, we were surprised and anxious to witness the encounter. On hearing the man's name, Don Bosco calmly remarked, "What is he after now? . . . Tell him to leave me in peace."

Meanwhile, the man had walked in unobserved. Standing behind Don Bosco he called his name. Don Bosco was not taken aback. He gave no sign of embarrassment or impatience. He simply said, "Oh, is that you?" and he went on talking with him as if they had always been on the best of terms.

Father Francis Cerruti asserted:

Those who know him well are convinced that resentment and revenge were totally alien to him. His revenge was to help his enemies and he happily did so at any opportunity. Thus he won over many enemies and even turned them into friends and benefactors.

Father [Michael] Rua, Father [Joachim] Berto, and Father [John] Turchi unanimously declared:

Don Bosco manifested his boundless charity by forgiving public and private offenses, by dealing kindly with his offenders, by praying for them, and by willfully forgetting their most bitter insults. To his pupils he gave these norms among others: "Always tend to think well of other people. Give them credit at least for their good intentions. Never throw back into their face wrongs already forgiven. Do good to all; harm no one." On his part, when harm was done to him, he took it meekly. He defended his rights but bore no grudges; on the contrary, when asked, he helped those who had hurt him. If one of his helpers felt resentment at such ill-treatment and wanted to retaliate, he would say: "Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." [Rom. 12, 21]

This heroic meekness of his gave him a deep, lasting tranquillity of soul which enabled him to concentrate on each task as the only thing he had to do, and helped him succeed in his projects to the astonishment of all. Praise and blame left him unaffected, the latter especially. One day in our presence he exclaimed, "You may either praise or speak ill of me as you wish, as long as it may help someone spiritually. In that case both praise and blame mean the same to me."

CHAPTER 51

Plans for Expansion

IN July [1860] matters of great importance for the new-born [Salesian] Society began to develop. Of the many requests he had received for foundations outside the archdiocese, Don Bosco favored a boarding school in Monferrato,¹ if financial help could be found. Meanwhile he left it to Divine Providence to determine the time and place. Presently, Father Felix Coppo, a pastor in Mirabello in the Casale diocese, called on him and insisted that he open a school in his parish. The pastor's arguments — supported by the cleric Francis Provera [a native of Mirabello] — persuaded Don Bosco and he agreed to consider such a project, though at the time he was physically worn out by the cares and fatigues of the past school year. Furthermore, a large boil on his neck was giving him discomfort and pain. Father Coppo noticed it and remarked, "You have cured many through Our Lady's intercession. Why not ask Her to cure you too?"

"Even if it took but one Hail Mary, I would not say it. Let God's holy will be done!"

After disposing of the school project, Don Bosco went to St. Ignatius' Shrine for his yearly retreat and a share of priestly ministry, regardless of the pain he was in. The clerics [John] Boggero, [Celestine] Durando, and [John Baptist] Francesia went along with him. As soon as the bell sounded the retreat's start, Don Bosco went into the church. A young adult, a slight acquaintance of his, sat next to him. This young man had mostly kept busy in having fun and had agreed to make a retreat just to please his brokenhearted

¹ A most fertile, hilly region of Piedmont, renowned for its vineyards. It was also Don Bosco's native district. [Editor]

mother inasmuch as she had promised to pay his debts. While Don Bosco was kneeling, his boil suddenly burst and in weakness he fainted. With a sense of pity such as he had never felt before, the young man picked him up in his arms and gently carried him to his room. He soon managed to bring the priest to consciousness. On opening his eyes and seeing his young friend in tears at the foot of the bed, Don Bosco called him, clutched his beard, and gently drew him down to his chest. Then in fatherly tones he said, "Now you are in my hands. What shall I do with you?" And he whispered a few more words. The young man was won over. Yielding to the impulse of grace, he made his confession and resolved sincerely and perseveringly to turn over a new leaf.

While at St. Ignatius' Shrine, Don Bosco answered his boy's letters which they had written to him from the Oratory or from home. Here are a few of them:

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 25, 1860

Master Stephen Rossetti

First Rhetoric Class

Montafia

My dearest son,

Your letter was a delight because it showed that you correctly understand my feelings for you.

Yes, son, I love you with all my heart, and my love prompts me to do all I can to make you grow in knowledge and piety, and guide you to heaven.

Keep in mind the many suggestions I gave you at different times. Be cheerful, but let your cheerfulness be genuine, stemming from a conscience free from sin. Study to become very rich, but rich in virtue, because the greatest of all treasures is the holy fear of God. Shun bad companions, associate with good ones. Place yourself in your pastor's hands and follow his advice. All will then go well with you.

Remember me to your parents and pray for me. While God wills that we be far from each other, I beg Him to keep you in His grace until we shall be together again.

Affectionately yours,

Fr. John Bosco

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 25 Iulii 1860

To Dominic Parigi

Parigi, fili mi,

Si vis progredi in viam mandatorum Dei, perge quemadmodum aliquo ab hinc tempore cepisti. Quod si volueris animam tuam pretiosis margaritis exornare, amicitiam institue cum humilitate, caritate et castitate. Eo sanctor eris quo strictior erit haec amicitia. Ora pro me. Vale.

Sac. Bosco Giovanni

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 25, 1860

My dear Parigi,

If you want to advance in the way of God's commandments, continue as you have started some time ago. But if you want to adorn your soul with precious jewels, make friends with humility, charity, and chastity. The stronger this friendship, the holier you will be. Pray for me. Good-bye.

Fr. John Bosco

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 25 Iulii 1860

To the cleric John Baptist Anfossi

Dilecto filio Anfossi salutem in Domino.

Ut recipiam fratrem tuum domi apud nos per epistolam postulasti. Hic et nunc absolutum responsum dare non possum; sed cum venero ad te disponam quomodo satius in Domino fieri potuerit.

Interim, fili mi, praedica Verbum importune et opportune, argue, obsecra, increpa in omni patientia et doctrina. At cave a magistris, et sunt, qui a verbo Dei auditum avertunt, ad fabulas autem convertuntur; hos devita. Audi constanter verba oris mei et spera in Domino esse futura verba et monita salutis. Ora pro me. Vale.

Sac. Bosco Giovanni

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 25, 1860

To my beloved son Anfossi, health in the Lord.

Your letter asked me to accept your brother into our house. Just now

I cannot give you a definite reply, but when I come back, I shall decide what is best in the Lord.

Meanwhile, son, preach the Word both when convenient and inconvenient, correct, exhort, rebuke in all patience and doctrine. Beware of those teachers, and there are some, who shut their ears to the Word of God and turn to fables. Avoid them. Always hearken to my words and trust them to be words and counsels of salvation in the Lord. Pray for me. Good-bye.

Fr. John Bosco

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 25 Iulii 1860

To John Garino

Garini, fili mi,

Magnam rem, fili mi, obtulisti per epistolam tuam; in manus meas voluntatem tuam commendasti; hoc frustra non erit. Praebe mihi etiam cor tuum; et ego duo tibi promitto. Rogabo Dominum ut quotidie intendat in adiutorium tuum, et totis viribus agam ut cor tuum semper immaculatum coram Domino permaneat.

Bono animo esto; res magni momenti te expectat: cum venero apud te nexum resolvam.

Ora pro me ne in vacuum gratiam Dei recipiam. Vale.

Sac. Bosco Giovanni

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 25, 1860

My dear Garino,

You have offered me a great gift in your letter: you have placed your will into my hands. It shall not have been done in vain. Give me your heart too, and I promise you two things: I will ask the Lord to come to your aid every day, and I will do all I can to help you keep your heart always pure in the sight of God.

Be of good cheer; something very important awaits you. On my return, I will solve the riddle.

Pray that I may not receive God's grace in vain. Good-bye.

Fr. John Bosco

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 25 Iulii 1860

To the cleric Charles Ghivarello

Dilecto filio Ghivarello salutem in Domino.

Si propter dentis deficientiam verborum articulatio et pronuntiatio impeditur, utique tibi concedo ut eidem alium ab artis perito substituere valeas. Cave tantum ne res melioris boni gratia incoepta in peius vertatur.

Interim, fili mi, praebe teipsum exemplum bonorum operum. Cura ut scientia, gratia, et benedictio Dei quotidie augeatur in corde tuo, adeo ut eas de virtute in virtutem donec videas Deum deorum in Sion.

Ama me in Domino, sicut ego amo te. Vale.

Sac. Bosco Giovanni

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 25, 1860

To my beloved son Ghivarello, health in the Lord.

If the loss of a tooth keeps you from speaking and pronouncing correctly, I surely permit you to have your dentist put in another tooth. Only take care that what is done for the better may not turn out to be for the worse.

Meantime, my son, be an example of good deeds. See that knowledge, grace, and God's blessing daily grow in your heart, that you may stride from virtue to virtue, until you see the God of gods in Sion.

Love me in the Lord as I love you. Good-bye.

Fr. John Bosco

Sancti Ignatii apud Lanceum, 27 Iulii 1860

To the Deacon Michael Rua

Dilecto filio Rua Michæli salutem in Domino.

Litteris Gallicis conscriptam epistolam ad me misisti; et bene fecisti. Esto Gallus tantum lingua et sermone; sed animo, corde et opere Romanus intrepidus et generosus.

Scito ergo et animadvertite sermonem. Multae tribulationes te expectant; sed in his magnas consolationes dabit tibi Dominus Deus noster. Praebe teipsum exemplum bonorum operum; vigila in petendis consiliis; quod bonum est in oculis Domini constanter facito.

Pugna contra diabolum; spera in Deo: et si quid valeo totus tuus ero. Gratia Domini N. J. C. sit semper nobiscum. Vale.

Sac. Bosco Giovanni

St. Ignatius' Shrine near Lanzo, July 27, 1860

To my beloved son Michael Rua, health in the Lord.

You sent me a letter in French, and you did well.

Be French only in tongue and speech; in mind, heart, and deed be a courageous and generous Roman.

Listen then and mind my words: Many tribulations are in store for you, but through them the Lord our God will give you many consolations. Be a model of good deeds; be cautious in seeking advice; constantly do what is good in the Lord's sight.

Fight against the devil. Trust in God. For whatever I am worth, I am entirely at your service.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us. Good-bye.

Fr. John Bosco

In those very days, the deacon Michael Rua was on retreat at the Vincentians' house in Turin, preparing for his priestly ordination. Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti [diocesan provicar] paid the retreat fee as he had already done when Rua received the subdiaconate. He had also paid most of the rather substantial government fee for its *placet* to the dispensation obtained from Rome. We derive this from Rua's letter of thanks to the canon. The latter's gesture was not just a thoughtful act of charity. It was also meant to sway Don Bosco in favor of [accepting the direction of the seminary of] Giaveno.

As yet Don Bosco had not made up his mind on this point. Toward the end of the school year 1859-60, even before the official closing date of August 12, the seminary had very few pupils. As they left for their summer vacation, they were told that probably school would not reopen in the fall.

Seemingly there was no hope at all to revive this school where so many priests had received their early training. Archbishop Frasoni was deeply grieved but, unable to solve the problem because of exile, had left it entirely to his vicar general, who personally could see no other solution than to again press Don Bosco into taking it over. Hopefully, Don Bosco's name and the efforts of his spiritual sons could breathe new life into that seminary and save it for the Church. Accordingly, interpreting his archbishop's mind,

he again asked Don Bosco to accept the responsibility. Don Bosco yielded to his ecclesiastical superior's wish and obliged, quite content to keep contributing to the good of the archdiocese. Yet he had his prudent reservations, as we shall see.

Because of this, he broke off negotiations for the Cavour boarding school, putting that project off to some other time, but he had to wait over a month for the reply of the Giaveno municipal authorities. Without that, it would have been imprudent to make a decision. Finally the authorities replied and submitted a tentative contract to the chancery, as Don Bosco and the mayor had agreed. After studying it, Canon Vogliotti forwarded it to Don Bosco at Lanzo. He returned it with the following remarks:

Lanzo, July 18, 1860

Very Reverend and dear Canon:

I have attentively read the reply, or rather the tentative contract submitted by the Giaveno municipality. I appreciate their good will and am ready to do all I can, but I find it impossible to accept all the burdens to be placed on me for the sum of a thousand lire.

The only possible solution I can see, for which I would do all I can in the Lord, is to try to set up a seminary exclusively for young men with a priestly vocation. I would also break off negotiations with municipal authorities so as to regain freedom of action in choosing teachers. We should limit ourselves to a few certified ones.

We could try this plan for a year, and see what Divine Providence will do for us. On Friday, July 27, I shall be back in Turin and will hasten to call on you.

God grant you health and grace.

Gratefully yours,

Fr. John Bosco

Canon Vogliotti, a gentle soul, fearing that the municipal authorities would take it hard if these negotiations did not succeed, decided to go to Giaveno himself and try to reach a compromise. This step was necessary because the city officials had already applied formally to the Department of Public Education for authorization

to take over the seminary and had also gained the support of the Minister of Justice. Rumor had it that the necessary decrees were ready. The canon therefore wrote to Don Bosco, inviting him to go with him to Giaveno. Don Bosco replied as follows:

[No date]

Very Reverend and dear Canon:

I will very willingly accompany you to Giaveno, but I think very little will be accomplished.

The main reason is this: Don Bosco has already gone through two house searches and so in the government's eyes he is suspect. In view of this, the municipality might like to find some face-saving way of withdrawing the offer.

Even if I did go to Giaveno and the seminary were entrusted to me, we would perhaps continually clash with all those who . . .

I thought I should point this out to you. But I am ready to do all I can to cooperate with you in everything which seems to be for God's greater glory and the good of souls.

With esteem and gratitude, I am,

Your servant,

Fr. John Bosco

On July 27, accompanied by his three clerics, Don Bosco left St. Ignatius' Shrine to go with Canon Vogliotti to Giaveno. No agreement was reached, because the municipal councilors stuck firmly to their tentative contract, alleging financial difficulties. Don Bosco therefore broke off negotiations.

On Sunday, July 29, Michael Rua was ordained a priest by Bishop Balma at Caselle in St. Anne's Villa, the country home of Baron Bianco of Barbania, a distinguished benefactor and dear friend of Don Bosco. The clerics [Celestine] Durando and [John Baptist] Anfossi served at the ordination ceremony.

On the following day, July 30, Don Rua said his first Mass at the Oratory without special solemnity, and in the evening he took Don Bosco's place in giving the "Good Night." Deeply moved and grateful for the warm demonstrations of respect and affection, he

urged all to pray that he might worthily carry the burden laid on him by his new dignity. That day, in fact, the pupils kept continuously crowding around him, affectionately kissing his hand. This dutiful greeting sparked a discussion among the clerics on the custom of kissing relatives or friends on certain occasions. In this regard, the chronicle carries the following entry:

On July 31, as Don Bosco was returning from town, he was questioned on this matter. He replied:

1. We can kiss and be kissed by father, mother, or another person bound by similar ties.

2. We may kiss when it is useful or convenient, as, for instance, when by doing so we can end feuds or show we have no ill will. Women should always be excluded, however.

3. A kiss is also proper on meeting a friend after a long absence. However, all superiors of communities and all who teach young people generally forbid laying hands on one another, kissing, or touching hands except when leaving for a long journey or meeting again after a long absence.

CHAPTER 52

A Dream: Fourteen Tables

ON August 3 [1860] the Oratory observed Father Victor Alasonatti's name day.¹ This yearly tribute of gratitude was offered immediately after dinner² as the good Father had to leave for St. Ignatius' Shrine to hear confessions of pilgrims flocking to the shrine.

On Sunday, August 5, feast of Our Lady of the Snow, Father [Michael] Rua sang his first solemn high Mass assisted by Don Bosco. Knowing how delighted the newly ordained priest would be if they went to Holy Communion, all the boys received at the Community Mass, earlier in the morning. No one who was not present can imagine the intense joy of all. The youngsters were very excited and could not find enough ways to express their affection for Father Rua. The festive oratory boys too offered greetings and congratulations. At the assembly program in his honor twenty-seven compositions were read — among them a most warmly applauded Petrarchan sonnet by the cleric [John Baptist] Francesia. The recurring theme of all the compositions was nicely worded by the cleric Francis Vaschetti as follows: "You are the Oratory's model for priests, the clerics' teacher in virtue and knowledge, the students' counsel, the artisans' guide, solace for the sick, comfort for the afflicted, everyone's joy. All love and admire you because you are another Don Bosco. All of us even now see you as his worthy successor."

¹ In Italy, as in many other countries, the name day is observed with greater festivity than the birthday. It is a reminder that the child at Baptism — his spiritual birthday — is placed under the protection of a saint whose virtues he should imitate. [Editor]

² In several European countries the main meal is at noon. [Editor]

All day long, as *vivas* were shouted to him, he kept trying to divert the cheers to Don Bosco. The celebration was a wonderful display in real life of brotherly love. Closing the entertainment, Father Rua addressed the boys as brothers, thanked them, and asked for their prayers as well as their pardon if he had to reprimand them for their own good. He promised a firm, lasting affection, begged them not to hesitate to tell him if he should seem to fail in his promise, and ended with a warm eulogy of Don Bosco — his and their beloved father.

At this time, Father Rua was already managing in great part all the oratories by his unyielding, firm character and by his many talents crowned by deep humility. He was the most straightforward, practical man one could ask for. Knowing his capability, Don Bosco soon gave him wide freedom of action, though Father Rua never swerved from a most rigorous obedience. This outstanding trait of his prompted Don Bosco to say, "Father Rua could work miracles, if he so chose!"

That same day Don Bosco gave a solemn token of gratitude to a family of illustrious benefactors who had joined in the joyous celebration of Father Rua's first solemn Mass. He conferred upon Marquis and Marchioness Fassati and their descendants the patronage of Our Lady's Chapel³ in the Church of St. Francis de Sales.⁴ The marquis responded with a substantial sum for its eventual needs.

Don Bosco closed the celebration by telling the following dream at the "Good Night":

I saw my boys in a most gorgeous garden, seated at fourteen long tables arranged amphitheater-wise at three different terrace-like levels. The topmost tables were so lofty that they could hardly be seen.

At the very bottom, a certain number of boys were seated at a table which was bare except for bits of rancid, moldy bread mixed with garbage and husks. These poor boys looked like swine at their trough. I meant to tell them to throw that rubbish away, but instead I just asked them why they were served such loathsome refuse. They replied, "We

³ See Vol. IV, p. 417. [Editor]

⁴ We are omitting the declaration conferring such patronage. [Editor]

have to eat the bread we have provided for ourselves. It's all we have."

This table symbolized the state of mortal sin. As Holy Scripture states: "They hated knowledge and chose not the fear of the Lord; they ignored My counsel, they spurned all My reproof . . . Now they must eat the fruit of their own way, and with their own devices be gluttons." [Prov. 1, 29-31]

As for the tables set on higher levels, the boys seated at them looked happier and ate better bread. They were very handsome, with a comeliness and radiance constantly increasing. Their tables too were richly set with special linen, glittering candelabra, sparkling chinaware, and indescribably gorgeous flowers. The platters held delicious foods and rare delicacies. The number of these boys was very great. These tables symbolized the state of repentant sinners.

Lastly, the tables at the top had a sort of bread I cannot describe. It looked gold and red, as did the boys' garments and faces, which shone with brilliant light. All these boys looked radiantly happy; each one tried to share his joy with the others. Their comeliness and the glitter and splendor of their tables far surpassed all the others. These tables symbolized the state of those who had retained their baptismal innocence. As Holy Scripture says of the innocent and of the repentant sinner: "He who obeys Me dwells in security, in peace, without fear of harm." [Prov. 1, 33]

The most surprising aspect of this dream is that I knew each of the boys, so that as I see one of them now, I immediately seem to see him seated at one of those tables.

As I was entranced by that exceptional sight, I noticed a man some distance away. I ran to him to ask him questions but tripped on the way and awoke in my bed. You asked me to tell you a dream and I obliged. Give it no more importance than dreams deserve.

The following day Don Bosco told each boy privately at which table he was seated in the dream. To show them how high or low they stood, he graded them from the topmost table to the lowest. Asked if one could move from a lower to a higher table, he replied in the affirmative except for the topmost table. Those who fell from that could not return, because that table was exclusively for those who had kept their baptismal innocence. Their number was small, whereas very many boys sat at the other tables.

Father Dominic Ruffino and Father John Turchi, who were

present at Don Bosco's narration of this dream, took it down and wrote the names of some who were seated at the topmost table.

On August 15, Don Bosco left for Strambino [a small town in Piedmont], accompanied by Joseph Reano to whom we are indebted for a description of that trip.

No sooner had Don Bosco taken a seat in the train when a man — probably a prosperous merchant — walked in. He soon lit a cigar although he was in a "No Smoking" compartment. Before doing so, however, he asked Don Bosco's permission, which the latter granted on condition that he would not smoke too long. On finishing one cigar, the merchant was about to light another when Don Bosco stopped him, saying with his usual friendliness, "Excuse me, sir. Up to now I have done penance and put up with your smoking. Now it's your turn to do penance and abstain from it."

"Quite right, Father," the merchant replied, putting away his cigar. The two then began to make small talk about Turin and other things. Finally, the man brought up the subject of charitable institutions, the generosity of priests, and finally Don Bosco and the Oratory, declaring that this good priest sheltered over three hundred boys and gave them a sound physical, intellectual, and moral education. "One of these days," he said, "I am going to visit that school." Don Bosco listened smilingly and said nothing. Presently the train arrived at Montanaro, the merchant got off, and another passenger walked in. He too at once struck up a conversation with Don Bosco and soon steered it to the subject of priests, remarking that they were useless creatures, enjoying fat incomes and caring nothing for the Gospel's teachings. At this point Don Bosco courteously interrupted him.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you of the opinion that there should be no priests at all?"

"Oh, not that! Religion is necessary, I know."

"Then what would you do?"

"I would get rid of half of them."

"Which half? The good or the bad?"

"The bad, of course."

"And what do you suggest should be done with them?"

"Put them to work."

“Do you know many priests?”

“More than fifty.”

“Do you know any bad ones among them?”

“Half of them.”

“Could you tell me their names?”

“Oh, yes! Quite a few!”

Don Bosco pulled out his notebook and pencil.

“All right,” he said, “tell me the names of these bad priests, and I promise to have them all suspended from their priestly duties.”

At this challenge, the other passengers became very attentive, curious to see its outcome. Many obviously sided with the priest.

“Well?” Don Bosco repeated, still poised to write. The man hesitated. Don Bosco insisted, “Who are these priests?” Stroking his mustache, his opponent falteringly said, “I know one who is . . . well, he is said to be a real, diehard reactionary, sending money to the Pope instead of giving it to the poor.”

“Any other?”

“Yes, I know another one who doesn’t agree with government policies. He criticizes laws passed by Parliament. . . . He is an enemy of the State.”

“But these are not crimes,” Don Bosco replied.

Perhaps the poor fellow had never talked to a priest and all he knew was what he had read in anticlerical papers. Not knowing what else to say and annoyed by Don Bosco’s prodding, he brusquely concluded, “Let’s talk about something else.” However, Don Bosco made a few timely remarks, and they were well received by all his fellow passengers.

At Strambino Don Bosco preached on Mary’s heavenly glory. The following day his sermon was on St. Roch and he delivered it outdoors in front of the Saint’s chapel. The confraternity officers asked him what his stipend would be, and he replied that since that chapel was so poor, he would take none. After services, they asked him to join them in some refreshments. Always obliging, Don Bosco willingly went along with them. They first went to the house of one of the officers where they sampled a variety of pastry and choice wines; then they proceeded to another place for more of the same. Finally the group walked to a third house where a

table was sumptuously laid in the center of a large room. This time Don Bosco told them that he wanted to say a few words. "I thought I was dealing with poor people," he remarked with innate simplicity, "but I see you are well off. I'll ask you then kindly to give me the usual stipend you have given these past years on this occasion. It would not be fair for me to neglect asking for a contribution for my poor boys." His unexpected remark provoked some laughter, and Don Bosco was given his remuneration.

In Turin, meanwhile, a committee had been formed to arrange for a solemn Month's Mind Mass in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi on the thirtieth day of Father Cafasso's death. Contributions came to five thousand lire. For the funeral oration, some favored asking Canon John Baptist Giordano [a renowned orator], while others preferred Don Bosco. The latter choice prevailed, because Don Bosco had known Father Cafasso since his youth and had been close to him all his life.

Father Ruffino's chronicle carries this entry:

On August 30 [1860] a solemn requiem Mass was celebrated in St. Francis of Assisi Church for Father Cafasso. Tastefully draped in mourning, the church presented a very impressive sight. Eight inscriptions — the art work of Professor Charles Ferreri — stood over the church door and around the catafalque. Many Masses were said throughout the morning, while very many people received Holy Communion for the repose of his soul. The Oratory boys too received Communion there. The Mass was sung by Canon [Louis] Anglesio and attended by three hundred priests; many, wearing surplices, were lined in double rows from the sanctuary to the door. Maestro Rossi directed the great orchestra which rendered selections from the maestro's own repertoire. Crowds flocked to the church from all over Turin. After Mass, Don Bosco read the funeral sermon and many wept with him. His text came from the Second Book of Paralipomenon: "He wrought that which was good and right and true . . . in all the service of the ministry of the house of the Lord." [2 Par. 31, 20-21]

His eulogy was a truthful description of Father Cafasso's virtues and eminent qualities.

L'Armonia reported the Mass, referring to the eulogy in these

terms: "Simply charming, movingly delivered by Father John Bosco, one of the most intimate disciples and friends of the deceased." The article concluded: "Hopefully this funeral oration and the inscriptions set over the door and about the catafalque will be published soon."

A little pamphlet which Don Bosco was readying⁵ was the second publication in memory of his incomparable master. In going through it one can see how Don Bosco looked upon Father Cafasso as a great saint.⁶ He planned to write a more expanded biography and tried to gather more depositions on Father Cafasso's extraordinary deeds and virtues. Since he could not do this himself because of too many undertakings, he asked several other priests to take up this labor of love, but for one reason or another could find no one.

Don Bosco himself always treasured the regulations of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*; they were a keepsake, comfort, and guide to him. Always a master and model of gratitude, he graced his room with a treasured picture of Father Cafasso, out of veneration as well as gratitude for benefits received. How often the boys heard him speak with feeling of Father Cafasso as a second father! He proposed him to them as a model, and repeated to them his wise counsels, especially that of conforming one's will to God's. "In all circumstances," Father Cafasso used to say, "we must be so minded to do God's will that as soon as we realize something does not accord with it, we will be ready to drop it and take up something else, regardless of difficulties. To know God's will, we must pray, wait, and seek advice."

[We shall now resume our narrative.] We have already said⁷ that Father Ruffino's chronicle bears this entry: "On April 12, Don Bosco publicly remarked: 'In January, I said, "Let's wait and see what March will bring us!" Now I say, "Let's wait and see what August will bring us!"' " That had been his answer to those who wanted to know the outcome of events then agitating Italy and posing a threat to the Papal States. While all at the Oratory were

⁵ The first one had already been published in August. *See* p. 376. [Editor]

⁶ Father Cafasso was proclaimed a saint by Pope Pius XII in 1947. [Editor]

⁷ *See* p. 288. [Editor]

apprehensive, Garibaldi left Sicily and on August 19 invaded the mainland.⁸

[Naples fell, leaving Rome and its territory open to attack. Soon afterward, Marche and Umbria were annexed to Piedmont, and in those regions too religious orders were suppressed and their buildings confiscated.]

In those critical days Don Bosco had to be most cautious. Honestly and not so honestly, many kept asking him whether Piedmontese soldiers could in conscience fight against the Pope and whether draftees should refuse to serve or could desert. Don Bosco's answer was, "My best advice is to make a good confession."

Amid this turmoil, bishops, priests, and religious suffered very grave injustices. On September 28 [1860], [Philip] Cardinal De Angelis, archbishop of Fermo, was arrested and deported to Turin, where he arrived on October 5. He was confined to the residence of the Vincentian Fathers and took over the rooms vacated by Cosimus Cardinal Corsi.

Meantime the Piedmontese army passed from the annexed Papal States to the kingdom of Naples to help Garibaldi, hard pressed by Bourbon forces. On November 2, the latter were defeated on the banks of the Garigliano. After a second stand at Capua, they were again repulsed. Part of the army disbanded, while the rest withdrew to Gaeta with their sovereign, Francis II. The latter, betrayed by Napoleon, and abandoned by Russia, his ally, had no hope of receiving help from Austria.

Don Bosco had expressed an opinion of his on the future of the last-named empire, but we have been unable to discover it, in spite of our persistent inquiries to alumni and Don Bosco's most intimate friends. This appears from an entry in Father Ruffino's chronicle in these terms:

September 19, 1860. Don Bosco had the following dream:

*Ecco una gran vittoria
Segue il valor dell' Austria!
Ma poi con essa gloria
Il trono insiem cadrà.*

⁸ What follows in brackets is a summary of the military and political events of that time. [Editor]

[Behold a brilliant victory
Is wrested by Austria's valor!
But then her glorious throne
Shall fall with all its glamor.]⁹

⁹ Perhaps this prediction was fulfilled when Austrian troops broke through at Caporetto toward the end of the First World War. This victory, however, was eventually followed by the disintegration of the Austrian empire and, finally, the absorption of Austria by Germany in 1937. [Editor]

CHAPTER 53

A Providential Takeover

AFTER Don Bosco broke off negotiations with Giaveno's city officials, the diocesan authorities of Turin had reason to fear that the mayor of Giaveno might try to make a deal with someone more pliable than Don Bosco and more acceptable to the party then in power. They therefore decided to latch on to Don Bosco as their only hope.

Canon [Alexander] Vogliotti and Canon Innocent Arduino, the pastor at Giaveno, had come to the Oratory in August to beg him most earnestly to hurry to the seminary's rescue. Don Bosco declared that he was ready to do all he could but first wanted to know what conditions they would set. "None at all," they replied. "You will have complete freedom of action. You will run the place as you wish. You will choose both director and staff, you will admit students, and you will set up the regulations. Just make a go of this place, that's all!"

On those terms Don Bosco accepted, and the two canons again warmly thanked him and confirmed his full authority. "And now, how do you plan to succeed?" they asked.

"Leave it to me," Don Bosco replied. "You will see. We will open the school in November with at least a hundred pupils."

Canon Vogliotti was outspokenly skeptical of having so many pupils at the very onset of the school year, but Don Bosco restated his promise and explained his plan. He would reserve the direction of the seminary to himself — as Father Francis Vaschetti declared — without, however, assuming the office personally. This he never did. He made it an absolute requirement that the director

be independent of the pastor and of all local priests, answering to no authority but the archbishop. Further, he asked for a statement from the chancery to that effect. Canon Vogliotti accepted the conditions.

Don Bosco had hoped to be able to send Father Victor Alasonnatti to Giaveno as director, but since he could not spare him from the Oratory, he suggested Father John Grassino, a friend of his who was the assistant pastor at Cavallermaggiore. He had spent six months at the Oratory and was well acquainted with Don Bosco's method of education. Canon Vogliotti, the diocesan provicar, consented, and shortly afterward, Father Alexander Pogolotto — the seminary's former vice rector and administrator — was made a canon at Chieri.

As soon as Father Grassino learned of the important but heavy responsibility that was in store for him, he went to the Oratory to decline the assignment, but he accepted after hearing Don Bosco's reasons. Don Bosco also promised to give him some excellent young clerics for supervision and an experienced prefect to handle administration, discipline, and preaching. He further promised constant aid and guidance of his own.

Having settled this, Don Bosco next gave some thought to personnel. Giaveno was quite a topic of conversation at the Oratory, and several young clerics told Don Bosco that they would like to be sent there. However, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, as well as God's designs for them, he kept forestalling those he considered unsuitable for that work. One of these was John Baravalle, a very fine cleric, who told Don Bosco that he was quite concerned about his future and wanted to go to Giaveno the following year. He fully trusted Don Bosco because, at their first meeting, when he told Don Bosco he wanted his advice on a matter that was of great importance to him, Don Bosco, though he hardly knew the cleric, astounded him by replying, "For some time now I too have been anxious to speak to you about the same thing." The cleric admitted that Don Bosco was fully acquainted with his problem. To his request for a transfer to Giaveno in the fall, Don Bosco evasively replied, "Another year! Another year! Wouldn't you be glad to go to heaven this year?"

“Yes!” the cleric answered.

“Why worry then?” Don Bosco concluded. He said no more.

Baravalle confided this to a friend, Dominic Ruffino, who entered it in his chronicle. Baravalle’s vocation was to become a Franciscan. In due time he joined the order and became one of its stalwart leaders.

On September 6 [1860], while he was quite busy with plans for Giaveno, Don Bosco called a meeting of the Salesian Society and thus made his position clear to them:

Should it turn out that our rules and our very congregation do not promote God’s greater glory, then I will be the first to ask Our Lord to raise up obstacles to keep our congregation from being approved. For now, let me say: Do not introduce innovations in the house, even if they are obviously better. Let us simply stick to what is good and forsake what is better. Let there be no interpretation or twisting of rules, no leaving off of some practices of piety in favor of new ones. For instance, some would like to set up the Association of the Sacred Heart of Mary. I approve of the Association and would like to introduce it, but since it would hurt the St. Aloysius Sodality which is now struggling to hold its own, let us put such projects aside, excellent though they may be, and try just to foster devotion to Our Lady.

Another remark of some slight consequence: When anyone is admonished by his superiors about a shortcoming or fault, he should not feel that his superior thinks less of him. That’s not so at all! We all fail in one thing or another. The admonition comes from a friend who loves sincerely, and where there is love there also is esteem. Likewise, let no one gauge his superior’s esteem by a look of his. Sometimes, because one thinks that a superior has not smiled at him or greeted him or spoken to him, he is saddened and wonders why. The reasons could possibly be many, other than dissatisfaction with someone’s conduct. It might just be an oversight or a preoccupation with other matters, but it never means that he has something against you. If he does not admonish you, it is only because he has no reason to. It is not our custom to wait for a fault to be repeated, so as to make a rebuke more effective. By no means! If we have something to say, we say it.

From now on I wish our conferences to be held on feasts of Our Lady. I also want to tell you that Father [Maria Anthony] Durando, a Vincentian, has been appointed to study our rules for approval by our archbishop.

Archbishop Fransoni informed Don Bosco of Father Durando's appointment in a written reply ¹ to a letter of his, although Don Bosco had already learned of it through confidential sources. In due time, Father Durando submitted his report on the Salesian Society's rules to the archbishop. God put Don Bosco's humility to the test by allowing obstacles to crop up and hinder the rules' approbation. [Father Durando's report follows:]

Tentative Rules of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales

A detailed study of each article of these rules would end up in a host of observations, since some rules are loosely worded, others are deficient, and some are not even consistent with the aims of the Congregation. But the following general remarks can be made:

1. Though the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales can — and one day may — be approved by the Church, its civil approbation is hardly likely at present, since the laws of the land and public opinion are against anything resembling a religious congregation. Now, these regulations and this constitution make it clear that the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales does own buildings and various liquid assets and may come into possession of others. But how can the Congregation own anything if the State does not recognize its existence? How and by what means can it retain its possessions? Everything is in Don Bosco's name. What will happen to these goods after the death of any heir Don Bosco may appoint, especially as the Rector Major is to be changed every twelve years? This most important point must be well understood and explained either in these same rules or in a separate constitution.

2. The main aim — or at least one of the aims — of the Congregation is the intellectual and moral formation of aspirants to the priesthood, and yet the extent of the ordinary's authority in their regard is insufficiently explained. Nothing is said of the relations which must necessarily exist between rector and ordinary in matters of admission or dismissal of pupils and reports on their progress, conduct, etc. Nor is anything said of school curriculum, methods and a plan of spiritual direction. The articles are vague, leave much to be desired, and give no assurance for the present, much less for the future.

3. The rules mention boarding schools for poor youths and clerics; apparently they are to be brought up together and given the same education. Yet it is most important that clerics be by themselves with their

¹ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

own spiritual directors, with rules befitting their calling and the decorum of the priestly state. What can we expect of clerics who have neither spiritual direction nor rules of their own, and who are merged with a crowd of poor, uneducated lads whose only ambition is to learn a trade or handicraft? This is not only apparent from the rules; *it is a real and actual fact.*

4. Since the members of this Congregation are bound only by triennial vows and perpetual vows are at their option, they cannot be ordained unless they have the required patrimony, inasmuch as ordination *titulo paupertatis* or *mensae communis* is reserved for congregations having perpetual vows. It can therefore happen that many youngsters will enter the Congregation only to receive a free education, be ordained, and leave to become a problem for bishops and perhaps a scandal to the people.

5. The success, or rather the future, of any congregation depends on its beginnings. If now in fact there is no separation between young clerics and others, if there are no fixed norms for each group, if the Congregation has no distinct novitiate, house of studies, and specific norms and rules by which to form its aspirants in the spirit of the institute, we cannot hope that it will either succeed or last.

6. The articles on the vows are inadequate, particularly in the matter of poverty; doubts are bound to arise.

As for the Congregation's government, the rights and duties of the Rector Major, local superiors, consultors, and prefects are not at all clear, and it is hard to grasp the harmony, unity, and interdependence of superiors, as well as administrative methods. Likewise, the manner of electing the Rector Major and local superiors is not sufficiently clear.

Fr. Maria Anthony Durando

Obviously, Father Durando's report was not too favorable. He rejected the rules as a whole, whereas the archbishop had found fault with only one point, but that was because the saintly and learned Vincentian did not grasp Don Bosco's spirit, mind, and work. It was not a question of a religious order but of a congregation which had to have a special structure to fit the needs of the times. Pius IX had recognized this.

Don Bosco did believe in a distinct novitiate, but only within the range of possibility. On the other hand, the spiritual formation

he gave his clerics was in no way inferior to that given in fervent novitiates, so that those who left the Oratory to become diocesan priests did not prove a burden, but rather a help to their bishops. Moreover, the experience and the virtue they acquired while living with the boys fitted them aptly for the direction of a parish. We shall elaborate on this matter further in the course of our narration. Certainly the articles still needed additions and corrections. Don Bosco knew it and often gave serious thought to the task. His ideal was that of the Book of Sirach: "The sons of wisdom are the church of the just, and their generation obedience and love." [Sir. 3, 1]

Meanwhile he awaited a reply from Rome on the Salesian Society's rules. It came in October.

Rome, October 14, 1860

Very Reverend Don Bosco,

I have received your packet containing the manuscript on the Society of St. Francis de Sales with your attached letter and that of the cleric [John] Boggero. I gladly accept the task of reading over the rules and making needed observations as you suggested. But I cannot do so now, because not only am I convalescing from an illness of last July, but a new ailment has hit me now and I have had to submit to bloodletting five times already. I feel somewhat better but am still under doctor's orders to rest for several months. If you are not in a hurry, therefore, I'll do all I can on the manuscript when I am able to; otherwise, please feel free to ask whomever you may deem best in the Lord.

Kindly tell the cleric Boggero (we come from the same town) that I thank him sincerely for his letter, his interest in my health, and his desire to hear from me. I shall oblige as soon as I am better. Meanwhile, let him continue to pray for me, as I hope you also will, together with the members of your Society.

With kindest regards and much esteem, I am

Yours affectionately,

Francis Cardinal Gaude

This was the cardinal's last letter to Don Bosco. This trusted adviser and influential protector passed away on December 14 of

that year; his death further delayed the approval of the Salesian Society and its rules.

But the project which took up most of Don Bosco's time during these months was breathing new life into the Giaveno seminary. We shall tell the entire story in the words of Father [Francis] Vaschetti who dictated them to us in the presence of Father Julius Barberis. Some further details were given by Father [Michael] Rua, Father [John] Bonetti, Father [Celestine] Durando, Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi, Mr. Tamone of Giaveno, and other contemporary witnesses.

On September 25, the cleric Vaschetti was sent to Giaveno by Don Bosco to be prefect. He found only bare walls. The building had been stripped of everything; not a picture, a spoon, or a piece of firewood remained. The chapel, tiny and wretched, was hardly fit for divine worship. Only one pupil was left, a very wealthy orphan from Collegno named Peracchione who had been left there by his guardian.

Seeing this desolation, Vaschetti returned to Turin the next day and called on the vicar general, Canon [Celestine] Fissore, to inform him of the physical condition of the seminary. The vicar gave him four hundred lire for emergency needs. Canon Vogliotti later added another three hundred. Everything was needed, and everything eventually came. Don Bosco began sending to Giaveno all that was needed for its kitchen, dining room, classrooms and dormitories, pantry and bookstore, woodshed and cellar.

The task [of supervising the seminary preparations] had been assigned to Chevalier Frederick Oreglia, a Turinese gentleman well known for his talent, easy manners, uprightness, and fearlessness. He had met Don Bosco at a spiritual retreat at St. Ignatius' Shrine and had been so impressed by his conversation that he had resolved to consecrate himself wholly to God in a genuine Christian life. After his retreat, he had spent nearly a month with the Rosminians at Stresa, but, because of ideological differences with some members of that institute, he decided to spend some time at the Oratory, seeking his vocation while making himself as useful as possible. Willingly and generously he accepted all sorts of sacrifices and edified the whole house by his humility and patience. His decision

to share the Oratory's life was praised by many, occasionally in writing.²

While Chevalier Oreglia was at Giaveno to supervise the seminary preparations, Don Bosco was working out an estimate for building and equipping a new school. The estimate is in our archives. It was to serve him in good stead later when he would open the numerous foundations Divine Providence was entrusting to him.

He also revised the old seminary prospectus, establishing two sets of monthly fees: one of thirty lire, the other of twenty-two, to be paid quarterly in advance, in addition to six lire annually for chapel expenses, and two and a half lire monthly for laundry. The last item was optional. The seminary was to remain open during the summer for the benefit of those who wished to take summer courses. The syllabus for 1860-61 was limited to the elementary grades and the first three years of Latin.

Canon Vogliotti, the provicar, had the prospectus printed by the Paravia Press and mailed to all pastors of the archdiocese. Applications were to be sent only to the rector of the major seminary or directly to Father Grassino at Giaveno. The response was nil. Twenty days later, not a single application had been received.

In this predicament, Don Bosco, who had hundreds of applications for the Oratory, decided to channel a good number of them to Giaveno. He had all applications answered affirmatively, and when parents brought their sons to the Oratory, he urged many of them to go to Giaveno. At first they flatly refused, but when Don Bosco assured them that from then on the Giaveno junior seminary would be under his direction, like the Oratory, and that the food and climate were even better, they yielded and willingly gave their consent, so great was the trust they placed in him. In most cases, Don Bosco suggested the move to those who were better off and could pay full tuition, even though the disadvantage fell to the Oratory, which retained the poorer boys.

Some time previously, Don Bosco had gone to Giaveno. The mayor, unaware of the latest chancery decision and believing the

² We are omitting letters from two friends of his because they are unnecessary to this narrative. [Editor]

seminary to be definitely closed for lack of students, dropped in for a conference with Father [Alexander] Pogolotto [former vice rector]. He had with him a letter from the Department of Education recognizing the town's right to take possession of the school. On meeting Don Bosco, he asked, "Where is the rector, please? I have an important message for him."

"I am the rector."

"You, Don Bosco? Isn't the seminary closed for good?"

"Not at all! It's still in operation and will continue to be."

"But there are no students!"

"On the contrary, it's full of students. Many will arrive this week. Come back in a few days, and you will see them crowding the place."

Dumbfounded, the mayor watched the hustle and bustle preparatory to the school's opening and left. It was quite a shock!

Besides the cleric [Francis] Vaschetti, who was to be the prefect,³ the clerics John Boggero and Philip Turletti came to supervise the boys and to introduce the Oratory spirit into the school. Father [Joseph] Rocchietti⁴ was appointed to journey from Turin and visit the seminary at intervals as its spiritual director. Thus, for the benefit of the diocese, Don Bosco made the sacrifice of excellent personnel who could have been of considerable help to him at the Oratory in its steady, rapid growth.

Pupils began arriving at the beginning of October. Vaschetti brought the first group of twenty-two from Turin, among them some of the finest Oratory boys picked by Don Bosco from students who had already spent a year or two there. Other groups of fifteen, twenty, or thirty followed every week, escorted by Joseph Rossi, [Joseph] Buzzetti or the cleric [John Baptist] Anfossi. By the middle of November enrollment had risen to a hundred and ten. From then on, as the news spread that the Giaveno seminary was under Don Bosco's direction, applications poured in from everywhere, so that before the school year ended, registration was one hundred and fifty.

For that school year — 1860-61 — three teachers who had been

³ The superior entrusted with the administration of temporal matters. [Editor]

⁴ See p. 56. [Editor]

on the former staff were hired with Don Bosco's approval. Five students had asked the chancery to be allowed, exceptionally, to take their rhetoric course at Giaveno, and Canon Fissore, the vicar general, granted permission, appointing the cleric Vaschetti to teach the course. Those youths later turned out to be excellent priests.

School opened on November 4, as scheduled, in an atmosphere of perfect discipline, good conduct, diligence, and piety. An employee of the Convitto Ecclesiastico, Mr. Bargetto, heard Father Grassino exclaim, "But for Don Bosco, the Giaveno seminary would never have come back to life!" This was Don Bosco's first test of his system of education outside Turin. The cleric [John] Cagliero, whom he sent toward the end of November for an official visit of the seminary, conducted a diligent inquiry and drew up a most consoling report. The vicar general, the provicar, the cathedral canons, the parish clergy of Giaveno, and the whole town found themselves at a loss for words to praise Don Bosco to the skies. Among those who were thrilled by this success was Giaveno's pastor, Father [Innocent] Arduino, who had once sharply deplored the seminary's decline. He had considered its full recovery so difficult that, regardless of his esteem for Don Bosco, he had repeatedly declared that if Don Bosco could manage to raise the number of pupils to fifty, he would have his portrait placed with those of its most distinguished benefactors. Since all expectations had been surpassed, he exclaimed, "We owe Don Bosco not a portrait, but a statue!"

Canon Vogliotti, too, visited the seminary once the school year was well advanced; he was astonished and delighted by the change. Noticing see-saws, parallel bars, and other athletic equipment in the playground, he remarked, "It's obvious that Don Bosco was here."

Meanwhile, anxious that nothing should creep in to disturb the harmony that reigned there, Don Bosco directed Father Grassino and the cleric Vaschetti in these terms: "Do not yield an inch of your authority. It must be total and absolute, or you will get nothing done!" He also warned Vaschetti to assist and advise Father Grassino if he might somehow be about to yield to pressure from

influential townsfolk. He also urged him to insist that the chancery issue the promised statement giving the seminary director authority wholly independent of outside interference.

Vaschetti obeyed, and Don Bosco also kept after the chancery, but it took six months to get the statement.

CHAPTER 54

Fostering Vocations

RESTORING Giaveno's junior seminary to its former vigor was not Don Bosco's only project to foster priestly vocations in those months. He was also thinking of the diocese of Casale. The cleric Francis Provera, ever since his pastor's visit to Don Bosco,¹ had unceasingly prayed that a Catholic school would be opened in his native Mirabello. His generous-minded father was determined to further this noble aim and, to speed its success, he offered Don Bosco a small house on a piece of land on the town outskirts which he had inherited from his father. It had once been Church property, and though his family had acquired it with the bishop's permission, the good man wanted it to revert to the ownership of the Church. After studying the project, Don Bosco saw that it would be feasible to erect a large building near the existing home, but he would not commit himself before consulting and obtaining the permission of Bishop Louis Nazari of Casale, with whom he had been in contact for the past ten years. With this purpose in mind he traveled to Casale. On the last lap of his trip, his fellow passengers were a priest and a Franciscan friar from St. Anthony's Monastery. These two started talking about priests in Piedmont who were outstanding for their charitable undertakings, and Don Bosco's name came up before very long. "As for him," the friar remarked, "he is not the man that reports make him out to be. He's a sponger and a storyteller, a master at money-making to enrich his nephews. They used to be poor peasants at one time, but now they live it up in the mansion he built for them in his own village."

¹ See p. 400. [Editor]

Without disclosing his identity, Don Bosco calmly asked him whether he had ever met the priest he was judging so severely and whether he had visited his institution at Valdocco. The friar said no, but declared that what he had said he had learned from trustworthy persons. He took nothing back. Don Bosco merely urged him to inform himself by a personal visit to the Oratory and meeting Don Bosco. "You see," he said, "I've been in the village where you say Don Bosco built a mansion, and I've never heard anyone mention such a thing."

By this time they had reached Casale, where some priests were awaiting Don Bosco. One of them, Father Oclerio Provera, the tutor of Countess Callori's children, boarded Don Bosco's compartment to help him with his luggage while the others, on seeing him, called him by name in joyful welcome. The friar then realized who his fellow traveler was. In shame he begged his pardon, assuring him that he had not meant any offense, inasmuch as he had no idea of his identity. Busy in exchanging greetings with his friends, Don Bosco apparently did not hear the friar, but finally, turning to him, he said with some gravity, "I understand, but in the future do not talk of things you don't know anything about. Above all, please remember never to run down your neighbor."

At the episcopal residence, where he was to stay, Don Bosco was joyfully welcomed by the bishop and by Canon John Baptist Alvigni, the rector of the seminary and an old friend. After discussing various diocesan matters, Don Bosco outlined his plan for a boarding school in Mirabello for the purpose of fostering priestly vocations, which were then scarce. The bishop was delighted and, grateful to God, gave the plan his blessing. Don Bosco remained for a few days, intending to show the bishop in due time how fitting and advantageous it was to give that school the character of a junior diocesan seminary.

While at Casale, Don Bosco was invited to a formal dinner at which the bishop, clergy, and prominent laymen were present. As he found himself mostly with friends, he happened to learn that saying grace was not customary on such occasions, much to the chagrin of more devout guests. Unconcerned and unabashed when God's honor was at stake, he schemed up a little ruse to put over

his point. As dinner was announced, the guests took their seats and immediately helped themselves to the hors d'oeuvres. Deliberately coming in somewhat late, Don Bosco went to his place, briefly excused himself for the delay, and recited *Benedicite* in a soft but clear tone. At the end, he turned to the bishop and, with a slight bow, added a blessing: *Jube, Domne, benedicere*. For a moment all was silent. The bishop smiled. "Don Bosco, we get the message!" he replied. Later, when alone with Don Bosco, he remarked, "You taught us a good lesson and I won't forget it."

Father John Bonetti entered this incident in his chronicle, noting that in urging his boys to be always frank but respectful and temperate in speech, Don Bosco would say: "You need only a bit of courage, that's all!"

After informing Father Felix Coppo, Mirabello's pastor, and Francis Provera's father of the bishop's approval of their plans, he left Casale. He was also quite concerned about the diocese of Asti, still vacant after the death of Bishop Philip Artico in Rome on December 21, 1859.² Its seminary had been confiscated by the government, its few philosophy and theology students had been dispersed, and its upper classmen of the rhetoric course soon found themselves in serious danger of giving up their vocation. The chancery had set up classrooms and assigned them teachers, but no one knew how to forestall further troubles. Some seminarians had already quit their studies. On learning of this, Don Bosco had written to the vicar capitular and offered to take his seminarians into the Oratory. In reply the vicar had asked him to come to Asti to discuss the matter personally.

Don Bosco obliged and, after offering his program for the formation of young seminarians, he returned to Turin, gratified that he had done a good deed for the Church. The Oratory had several Asti boys, among them John Molino, Charles Viale, and Secundus Merlone, who had finished their Latin courses and, having donned the cassock, were continuing their studies at the diocesan seminary. At the time, they were home on vacation. Don Bosco knew that they did not care to teach or join the Salesian Society. Still he realized that their good example and supervision would be a big

² See Vol. IV, pp. 418ff; vol. V, p. 569. [Editor]

help to their fellow seminarians who would be coming from Asti, and he was sure that their close ties would make the Oratory rules and customs easier for them to follow. Hence he wrote to Canon John Cerutti of Asti to have them return to the Oratory for one more year, and to provide them with the same subsidy that had been agreed upon for the others. The canon replied:

Asti, October 2, 1860

My dear Don Bosco:

I was glad to speak to the vicar general on behalf of the clerics you mentioned. Though we have not given up hope of getting our seminary back, the vicar general is quite content to have the three clerics spend their school year at the Oratory, where they can receive only good example. He is also very well disposed to grant them a subsidy and has asked me to tell you that he will be in Turin to see you himself before All Saints' Day.

The publication of the circular on *Letture Cattoliche* — which we had prepared sometime back, as I have already told you — has been somewhat delayed by more pressing matters, but it will certainly not be forgotten.

Commending myself to your prayers, I am,

Yours devotedly,

Canon John Cerutti

The vicar general delayed in acquainting Don Bosco with his decision, perhaps because of problems, financial or otherwise, and, doubtlessly, because he needed the parents' consent before sending those clerics to Turin. The awaited reply finally came:

Asti, October 22, 1860

My dear Don Bosco:

In view of our discussions at Asti some time ago and of your recent letter to my illustrious friend Canon John Cerutti, I have decided to discontinue our rhetoric class and send you our young seminarians — about a dozen or so. Some can pay their way; for most the diocese will send a monthly subsidy. Kindly let me know your minimum fee, so that

I can make the necessary arrangements. Turn these young men into good, zealous priests. Pray for me, and consider me always

Yours devotedly,

Anthony V. Sossi

Vicar General Capitular

In due time seventeen Asti seminarians, escorted by the three previously mentioned Oratory boys, were warmly welcomed at the Oratory. Not all were rhetoric students. Don Bosco notified the vicar capitular of their safe arrival and enclosed a list of their names, which the vicar general acknowledged.³

The Asti seminarians were responsive to Don Bosco's loving care, although during the first two months a misunderstanding seemed to threaten their serenity. It was to be expected that, with all of them being from the same region and forming a close-knit group of newcomers moving in with others far more numerous than themselves, some friction would arise engendering ill feelings, as if they were looked upon as inferior to the rest. By mutually airing their gripes they turned shadows into realities.

Fortunately, their complete respect for Don Bosco's sense of fairness came to the rescue. Knowing human feelings, he could sympathize with them and give them comfort. When they came to him on January 27, 1861, and complained that their grades in conduct and diligence were not fair, he soothed them with a few words. "Do your work," he said, "and don't worry about grades. I know all of you, not only outwardly but inwardly too." They were satisfied with this statement, for in those very days the young clerics had just received convincing proof of Don Bosco's veracity, as we shall soon see. They had taken warmly to Don Bosco, as he anxiously looked after them even at the cost of grave sacrifice, and they never ceased showing him their affection. They were expected to stay at the Oratory only for the school year of 1860-61; then, hopefully, they were to return to their own seminary, if the government relinquished it. Not all of them succeeded in their vocation. Three had to give up their studies because of illness; two realized that they did not have the necessary qualifications and left; the

³ We are omitting the list and the vicar general's acknowledgment. [Editor]

others did well, returned to their seminary, and were ordained in due time. Several became pastors and labored zealously and fruitfully.

Two of the group remained at the Oratory. One, very attached to Don Bosco and pleased with community life, stayed several years with him even after ordination, until he decided to accept duties in the diocese. The second, Father Joseph Fagnano, joined the [Salesian] Society [in 1864] and is now [1907] Prefect Apostolic of Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Canon Anfossi, one of many witnesses, personally knew these clerics and confirms all we have said.

Though he was caring for priestly vocations in three dioceses during the latter half of 1860, Don Bosco did not neglect his own pupils during the summer vacation. Father John Bonetti wrote: "He abhorred idleness and taught by example that our days must be wholly employed in God's service. Above the door of his room he kept the inscription, 'Every moment is a treasure.' He was never seen wasting an instant, either at home in the Oratory or out. Since he had to go out nearly every day either to visit the sick or to beg for help, he put that time to good use by taking along a priest, a cleric, or a coadjutor brother to discuss personal matters with them. If he took a trip alone, he read his mail, corrected galley proofs, continued work on a book he was writing, or simply prayed. This was also his custom when he went out with his boys on hikes in the fall."

When he sent boys to Becchi a couple of weeks before the feast of the Holy Rosary, he demanded that they never be idle. He liked them to take hikes to neighboring villages like Mondonio, Capriglio and Albugnano, or to help his brother Joseph with the grape harvest. But he also demanded that, besides keeping the Oratory practices of piety exactly, they should spend an hour or so a day reviewing school work of the past year or getting a taste of courses they would have to study during the following school term. They always had a cleric or a priest to coach them. Occasionally they were given lessons in French.

The time for the yearly excursion to Becchi was drawing near. On September 15 [1860] the first contingent of pupils set out.

Three days later came the sad news of the battle of Castelfidardo.⁴ In view of this there was some fear at the Oratory that Don Bosco might cancel the Becchi trip, but he had no such intention, though he seemed much grieved by the Pope's afflictions and deplored what was happening. All at the Oratory shared his sorrow. On September 27, for example, the cleric John Cagliero, after leading a group of boys to Becchi, went to visit his mother at Castelnuovo. He later described what happened: "While I was at Castelnuovo, a former teacher of mine, a priest, upheld and defended the government for its invasion of Marche and Umbria, adding, too, that the Pope, without harm to religion, could very well leave Rome and transfer his residence to Jerusalem or anywhere else. Thus, Italy could be united and independent. I did not remain silent. I opposed him so heatedly that, the next day, believing I had been disrespectful, I apologized. Waiving apologies, he said, 'I sympathize with you. Don Bosco so works you up for the Pope that the whole lot of you would not hesitate to be martyrs for him.' "

Meanwhile, at the Oratory, during playtime after dinner or after supper, the clerics would crowd about Don Bosco to discuss events then agitating Italy. Since the main war efforts were directed against the kingdom of Naples, they were anxious and curious to know how the war would end. Don Bosco's reply to them is contained in Father Ruffino's chronicle: "On October 1, Don Bosco said, 'This crisis will end in 1861. The political future of those regions will all be settled by 1862.' "

Don Bosco's prognostications proved true.⁵ First France, and then England, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Holland, the United States, Greece, Prussia, and Turkey recognized the new Italian kingdom. The last to do so was Russia on August 6, 1862. Thus Don Bosco's predictions were literally fulfilled.

⁴ Here Piedmontese troops defeated papal forces. [Editor]

⁵ We are omitting the description of military operations. [Editor]

CHAPTER 55

A Yearly Outing

DON Bosco decided to leave for Becchi on [Friday] October 5 [with some boys and clerics]. After Mass that morning [Louis] Jarach, Constantius Rinaudo, [Francis] Cerruti, and [Paul] Albera set off on foot for Chieri where Canon [Francis] Calosso¹ expected them for lunch. Don Bosco arrived by coach in the evening and was very warmly hosted by the Gonella family where he was joined by the four boys. As there was still an hour or two before supper, they spent the time in pleasant, useful conversation with Don Bosco. Taking advantage of a moment when the hosts had excused themselves to look after supper, Don Bosco remarked to Paul Albera who was sitting by him, "If only I had some writing material! I could start on the next issue of *Letture Cattoliche*. But it can't be helped. We must be sociable." After supper, Jarach, Rinaudo, and Cerruti went to sleep at Canon Calosso's whereas Albera had a bed set up for him in the antechamber to Don Bosco's room. In the morning, with that exquisite respect he always showed to his boys, he called out, "Albera, are you up?"

"Yes, Father."

Don Bosco then came into the antechamber and said to him, "Let's go to the chapel. If Cerruti is not there, please lead the prayers during Mass." Don Bosco always did this whenever he had boys with him at Mass in order to edify his hosts and others.

That day he visited Canon [Louis] Cottolengo, brother of the saintly founder of the Little House of Divine Providence, and met many friends who had come to greet him. He also went to pay his

¹ A teacher Don Bosco had known in Chieri in 1832. See Vol. I, p. 206. [Editor]

respects to his old rhetoric professor, also named John Bosco,² who was then substitute professor of literature and philosophy at the University of Turin and taught Italian literature at the Royal Military Academy. We have already noted that, on discovering his pupil's rare gifts, this professor had kept up a close, long-lasting friendship with him.³ While at Chieri, Don Bosco and his young companions visited the cherished tomb of Louis Comollo⁴ in St. Philip's Church. Then they trekked on to Becchi through Riva di Chieri and Buttigliera, where they were met by the boys who had set out before them. After a short rest and refreshments provided by the pastor, they again took to the road. On the way, one boy pierced a worm with the point of his stick. Don Bosco noticed it and remarked, "Why did you kill the poor little thing? Life is all that God gave them. For them everything ends with death!"

Later that same evening, the Oratory bandboys and choirboys, who had deserved this special treat, also reached Chieri, along with other students who needed this encouragement to live up to their good resolutions.

The next day, Sunday, October 7, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, was marked with customary religious services and evening entertainment. The following day, the whole Oratory group was invited to dinner by the pastor of Castelnuovo. Here Don Bosco met a ten-year-old boy named Bernard Arato. Smilingly he patted his cheek and with his thumb lightly traced the Sign of the Cross on his forehead. "Keep being good," he said. "One day you will be a priest and you will do much good." Don Bosco's words did not then and there impress the boy, and he forgot them, but when he later entered the Oratory and again met Don Bosco, he immediately recalled them. A cousin of his had also come, and so Arato asked Don Bosco, "Will he become a priest too?"

Don Bosco did not reply at once but, looking intently and kindly at the boy for a few moments, replied, "No, he will not be a priest, though he will don and wear the cassock for some time. His vocation is in the world where he'll do much good." Arato did become

² *Ibid.*, pp. 206, 248. [Editor]

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 270f, 273. [Editor]

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 250ff, 271f, 289, 298ff, 303f, 307, 321f, 330, 332ff, 340f, 364f. [Editor]

a priest and a zealous pastor, whereas his cousin, after donning and then putting aside the clerical habit, took up teaching and is now [1907] an able, religious-minded teacher.

On Tuesday, October 9, the Oratory boys, each carrying his own bundle, set off on a trek which was to last just over a week. We shall describe it briefly, not to repeat ourselves, and refer our readers to our account of the 1859 outing⁵ and the shorter ones of preceding years⁶ when the boys would return to Becchi every night.

This year's first stop was made at Passerano, near Mondonio, at Count Radicati's summer home. Both he and the local pastor, Father John Allamano, were very good friends of Don Bosco; in the past the count had often generously hosted the Oratory superiors and boys. Another stop was made in Primeglio at Marquis and Marchioness Doando's. The marquis was over ninety. A calf had been slaughtered for the occasion to afford everyone a delicious, abundant roast. In the village, the boys were unexpectedly called upon to sing a requiem Mass without organ and music. Father Joseph Prinotti, the local pastor, was the celebrant.

The group also spent a whole day first at Montechiaro and then at Montiglio as guests of both pastors, Father James Belussi and Father Joseph Aluffi, to the great joy of the vicar forane, Father Vincent Roberto, and, finally, at Marmorito, whose pastor, Father Charles Valfredo, welcomed them in triumph. After passing through other hamlets they reached Marmorito. Everywhere Don Bosco was greeted by extraordinary crowds. Instrumental music, stage plays, and solemn church services certainly drew crowds, but what really carried the day was God's Word. For Don Bosco these outings were true, up-to-date apostolic journeys. He preached most willingly on every occasion, convinced of his strict obligation. He had made his own — and this he disclosed on various occasions — St. Paul's thoughts: "For even if I preach the Gospel, I have therein no ground for boasting, since I am under constraint. For woe to me, if I do not preach the Gospel." [1 Cor. 9, 16-17] After preaching from the fullness of his heart, Don Bosco always made himself available for confessions.

⁵ See pp. 143-154. [Editor]

⁶ See Vol. IV, pp. 445ff; Vol. V, pp. 223ff, 353f, 482. [Editor]

In the evening, a most varied hustle and bustle began. Some boys would erect a makeshift stage or set the supper tables, while others played instruments, sang, or went to Don Bosco for confession. The townsfolk, seeing these youngsters devoutly prepare for confession, were moved to do likewise, and they too knelt by Don Bosco's confessional.

"What drew you to come?" Don Bosco would query.

"I saw your boys. . . . I too need confession."

The village youths curiously watched this rare spectacle. For many of them the good example of the Oratory boys was a spur to regain God's grace. One evening a youth stopped to look at Don Bosco and his young penitents. After a while he left, only to return again. Finally he resolutely approached Don Bosco.

"Father," he said, "I can't stand it anymore. I want to get rid of my sins!" And he broke into tears.

"What made you come?" Don Bosco asked him.

"These innocent boys," he replied. "I said to myself: Look how these youngsters are so concerned about making good confessions! Shall I, a sinner, remain in my misery? I too want to make my confession." And tears streamed from his eyes. The following morning crowds flocked to the altar rail. The moral and religious reform of very many young people was long-lasting.

The townsfolk were full of admiration for the lively, cheerful, well-behaved Oratory boys who knew how to blend laughter and piety. In the evening they entertained the whole village, but the next morning they devoutly went to Holy Communion.

Don Bosco himself, ever concerned about his boys, stayed with them when they played and when they took to the road. He kept reminding them of God, the Blessed Virgin, or some virtue to practice. His deportment was ever that of a saint. The townsfolk, noticing his boundless fatherly solicitude, felt a great esteem for priests, and several were spurred to entrust him with their sons' education. The village youngsters, in turn, enthusiastically trooped about the Oratory pupils, charmed by Don Bosco's amiable ways and kind, impressive words. He resembled Our Savior inviting the little ones to come to Him. Many lads followed the group all day long, sharing their meals, games, and prayers before returning home

at night. Others could not break away from their new friends and stayed through the night. A few tagged along for days at a time, sleeping in neighboring haylofts if there was no room in the host's premises. Some even went all the way to Turin with Don Bosco and could not be persuaded to return home.

"During these memorable outings," Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio wrote, "Don Bosco caught his fish — the village youngsters — enticing them to a virtuous life in order to make of them instruments for his holy undertakings. In this he exercised very fine, keen discernment." This was especially true with the boarders, who vied with each other in walking alongside him on those long jaunts, enjoying the opportunity to open their hearts fully to him and candidly tell him all they had done, thought, heard, or seen. Occasionally he saved all that time to converse with one boy alone, mostly about his vocation and the way to discover it. As the Book of Proverbs says, "The shrewd man's wisdom gives him knowledge of his way, but the folly of fools is their deception." [Prov. 14, 8] That is, the fool abandons the right way or takes the wrong one through passion, vanity, or selfishness.

How many interesting anecdotes we could narrate on this score! For example, a priest told us that one day, when he was a first-year cleric, Don Bosco sent the whole group ahead to Passerano to Count Radicati's summer home but kept him back so that they could walk there together an hour or two later. As they reached the top of a hill, Don Bosco remarked that many of his boys were good, but that very few would stay on at the Oratory. Taking this cue, the cleric asked: "Shall I always remain?" Receiving no reply, he insisted, "Will you at least tell me if I shall always remain good?" Smilingly, then, Don Bosco answered the two questions with a double yes.

His thoughts often turned to his dire need of co-workers, all the more so since he shied from extending invitations unless he was certain the boy had a vocation. If a youngster seemed called elsewhere by God, he frankly told him so. For instance, on October 28 of that year, 1860, Don Bosco told Dominic Ruffino, not yet a priest: "The clerics Duino and Becchio are not called to remain with us. Their vocation is to become Dominicans and I have ad-

vised them so. They thought it over, but did not like the idea. Therefore I gave Duino a letter of recommendation for his bishop, who readily accepted him into the Pinerolo seminary."

Those who asked to remain with him he sometimes tested in different ways. For instance, during one outing, Jerome Suttill ⁷ [an able pianist and musician] asked Don Bosco — as he had already done other times — to take him into the Salesians. Don Bosco replied, "How will you manage to adapt yourself to the mortifications, humiliations, and hardships a Salesian must be ready for?"

"Test me," the youth replied, "and you will see that I can take it."

"You won't make it. I can tell you that!"

"Try me out!"

"All right, I take you at your word," Don Bosco replied.

"It's a deal!" the young man concluded.

Don Bosco made no further allusion to such a challenge, but one day when he and a group of boys were at Buttigliera for a day as guests of [Countess Miglino] ⁸ a benefactress of long standing, he put him to the test. A generous table had been prepared in a splendid hall on the upper floor for Don Bosco and the more important guests. While waiting for dinnertime, Suttill impeccably played some difficult piano selections and was warmly applauded.

Dinner time arrived. The boys' tables had been suitably set on the ground floor. As usual, Suttill sat with the guests. At this point Don Bosco sent for him.

"Look," he said, "I know I can depend on you. Please go with the boys and tell them to feel at home and eat all they need, but not to gorge themselves. I'll feel more at ease if you are there. Please stay with them."

Without a word, Suttill went down. Sullenly he took a seat, but soon got up and began pacing up and down between the tables while the boys merrily enjoyed their meal. He tried to disguise his feelings, but finally, unable to conceal his disappointment and chagrin, he went out into the yard and continued pacing alone.

"What's the matter with him?" the boys asked one another. "Is

⁷ This talented young musician was a political refugee. (*See* Vol. IV, p. 292.) He will be mentioned again in subsequent volumes. [Editor]

⁸ *See* Vol. V, p. 484. [Editor]

he sick? Did somebody hurt his feelings? He is not himself this afternoon!"

After dinner Don Bosco and the other guests joined the boys downstairs. On being told that Sutil had not touched any food and seemed dejected, Don Bosco approached him.

"What's the trouble, Jerome? Don't you feel well?"

Sutil kept silent, but after a few more questions from Don Bosco he swallowed hard and replied, "I tell you candidly, Father, that I did not expect to be excluded from the guest table. I just couldn't take it!"

"Ah!" Don Bosco exclaimed. "Didn't you tell me to put you to the test?"

Up to this moment the young man had kept his eyes to the ground. At these words he looked up and, breaking into laughter, exclaimed: "Why didn't you tell me? I would have been on guard and not made a fool of myself."

"If you had known it, it would not have been a test."

"You're right!" Sutil concluded, in good spirits once again.

He was not accepted into the Salesian Society. Later he went to France, but after many years he returned to die at the Oratory.

After returning to Becchi and visiting Dominic Savio's grave at Mondonio, Don Bosco went on to Chieri — as in past years — where Miss Pozzo treated the boys to a good meal. Then he sent Paul Albera and a companion to Turin to tell Father Alasonatti that the party would not arrive at the Oratory that evening.

After dinner, with the brass band and the rest of the boys, Don Bosco took the road to Turin, but shortly before reaching Madonna del Pilone and the Po River, he turned right, uphill, to Pino Torinese where an old friend of his, Father James Aubert, was pastor. In 1845 and for many years thereafter, Don Bosco had gone to this country parish for services and had found and helped a number of priestly vocations. There he met a boy named Del Mastro, whom he sent to the Cottolengo Institute to join the "Tommasini,"⁹ then numbering only ten. The boy turned out to be a saintly, learned pastor.

Pino was the home of the Ghivarello family, whose son Charles

⁹ Junior seminarians at the Little House of Divine Providence. See Vol. V, p. 254. [Editor]

had entered the Oratory years before [in 1856 and who was now a member of the Salesian Society ¹⁰]. Often, when going to Chieri, Charles' schoolmates — few or many — used to stop briefly at the Ghivarello home where they were always welcomed. Among Don Bosco's friends in this little town was a wealthy old farmer. Through a misunderstanding of many years' standing, this man was at odds with his pastor, had severed all connections with him, and steadily avoided him. Don Bosco had tried for some time to find a way to reconcile them. Fortunately, this year, the old man, headstrong but good-hearted, invited Don Bosco and his boys to spend a day with him. The latter willingly accepted, especially in view of a plan of his. The old farmer gladly gave all a good supper during which the bandboys played various selections. Later in the evening they staged some skits and spent the night there. Meanwhile Don Bosco had done his best to win the man over. Now and then, he succeeded in steering the conversation to the need and advantages of settling old grudges. The old man protested that he was willing to forgive the pastor but did not have it in his heart to resume relations.

"How long is this to drag on?" Don Bosco asked him. "You already have one foot in the grave. Are you ready to face God with this grudge in your heart? Why not make friends again with your pastor who after all is a good man, is fond of you, and speaks well of you?" It was all in vain! The old man would not budge.

The next morning, as they were leaving, Don Bosco asked his host to walk part of the way with him. Before the man could realize it, Don Bosco had his boys detour to the rectory under the pretext of having them pay their respects to the pastor by playing some music in his honor. The pastor came out to meet them, of course, and invited Don Bosco and the old farmer in. Unwilling as he was, the latter could not refuse such a cordial invitation. The pastor treated his old friend with the utmost regard and, after offering his guests some choice wine, he begged the old man to be friends again. To these entreaties and Don Bosco's renewed exhortations, he yielded and was thus richly compensated for the hospitality he had given Don Bosco and his boys.

That evening the light-hearted brigade was back at the Oratory.

¹⁰ See pp. 157, 181. [Editor]

CHAPTER 56

Heavenly Promptings

ORATORY preparations for the school year 1860-61, meanwhile, ran into greater expense than ever before.

Beds were badly needed to replace a motley assortment of cots, pallets, trestles, and plain straw mattresses on which the boys slept. "Action on this was triggered by the mother of a boy named Ropolo," wrote Joseph Reano. "While visiting the Oratory, she met Don Bosco and, after discussing her boy's conduct and diligence, frankly remarked, 'Don Bosco, I have seen the dormitories. They are a disgrace! Why don't you put in regular iron beds?'"

"'I will as soon as I win the first prize in the lottery,' he replied."

Over four hundred beds were needed. Yet, a few weeks later, notwithstanding the heavy expense, Don Bosco placed an order for them with a local factory near the Santa Barbara Fountains. Delivery was to be made at the rate of twenty a week, so that a few months later the lady's wish was fulfilled. Don Bosco did not win the lottery's first prize, but Divine Providence provided. All the beds were paid for.

This improvement, beginning with the student dormitories, forced Don Bosco to revise admission requirements.¹ Furthermore, since applicants were many and he needed time to investigate the parents' means and intentions as well as the youngsters' moral and intellectual dispositions, he set a fixed rate for the first two months of residence — a necessary precaution to prevent burdening the house with boys who did not deserve its charity. Don Bosco knew

¹ See Appendix 15. [Editor]

of course when to make the exceptions — and such exceptions he made quite often.

By this time he had taken over both the land and the building he had bought from the Filippi family² — a quadrilateral piece of land separated from the Oratory playground by a wall. The building had three floors, but since the first two still had tenants, only the top floor could be put to use immediately as a dormitory. Then, inasmuch as the wall between the properties was not razed till over a year later, a temporary wooden walkway had to be built at the third-floor level.

Many pupils felt in their hearts that God Himself had lovingly prepared a shelter for them at the Oratory and said that they could clearly prove it. Others believed it was the Blessed Virgin Herself who had won that great favor for them and, as it were, had brought them there by the hand to shower Her blessings upon them. Others had been wondrously and irresistibly drawn to the Oratory by the combined intervention of both Don Bosco and the Blessed Virgin. Of this third group, we will narrate an incident we came to know from a good mother; it was variously repeated hundreds of times in the course of years.

In 1860, Mrs. Rose Rostagno, née Masino, a resident of Pine-
rolo,³ came to Turin on business with her fifteen-year-old son Severino. After settling her affairs, she called on Don Bosco to make his acquaintance and was enchanted by his friendliness. In the course of her visit Don Bosco took the boy aside and whispered a few words, such as work wonders.⁴ His mother could not hear his words, but she was astonished at seeing Severino suddenly brighten up. Both left the Oratory happy. The boy kept Don Bosco's words to himself and never revealed them, even to his mother.

On bidding him good-bye, Don Bosco had remarked, "Write to me sometime, and I'll reply." The youngster was not much good at writing because poor health had hindered his school work and he kept putting it off.

His mother continued to remind him, but even though he claimed

² See p. 393. We are omitting here a detailed description of this property. [Editor]

³ A small town near Turin. [Editor]

⁴ See pp. 230ff. [Editor]

that he had many things to tell Don Bosco, he still delayed. "Don't be afraid," his mother told him one day. "Imagine you are talking with him and just write what you would say to him."

Severino finally agreed and Don Bosco replied as follows:

Turin, September 5, 1860

My dear son,

I was glad to hear from you. If you felt so happy to be with me for a few moments, imagine our joy when, with God's help, we shall be always together in heaven, praising God, our Creator, with one voice.

Be strong then, son. Be steadfast in the faith, grow ever more in God's holy fear, and avoid bad companions like vipers; go to confession and Communion often, be devoted to Mary Most Holy, and you will certainly be happy.

When I last saw you I thought I detected a special design of Divine Providence for you. I am not going to tell you what it is now, but if you will come to see me again, I'll be clearer about it, and you will know why I spoke to you as I did on your visit.

May the Lord grant you and mother health and grace.

Pray for me.

Yours affectionately,

Fr. John Bosco

Severino was impatient to see Don Bosco again, but this time it was his mother who kept putting it off because she had no time. Finally, on the eve of St. Severino's feast, the boy said, "Mother, tomorrow is my name day. For a present take me to see Don Bosco." She agreed. After a long talk with Don Bosco, Severino pressed her to enroll him at the Oratory. Difficulties were cleared by another letter from Don Bosco.

Turin, October 29, 1860

My dear son in the Lord,

If you can take it like a soldier and be satisfied with our ordinary food, as Muriana did, I will accept you at the Oratory free of charge. Your mother will have to pay for books and clothes. As to the outfit to bring with you, ask someone who has already been here. If you agree, come

soon, and we will work with might and main for your soul's benefit. God bless you!

Yours affectionately,

Fr. John Bosco

The lad flew to the Oratory. Others too were led there by Our Lady. Henry Bonetti, twenty-four, from Caprino (Bergamo), had donned the clerical habit, only to put it aside when a very serious obstacle barred his way to the priesthood. In need of work, he came to Turin and found a job, but was unhappy. His longing for the priesthood, his aversion for the profligate people he lived with, the unpleasant necessity of working on Sunday, and the obstacles in the way of his religious duties all combined to make life miserable. Whatever free time he could snatch from his many tasks he spent at Our Lady of Consolation Shrine, begging his heavenly Mother for the favor of soon withdrawing from the world's dangers. She granted his fervent prayer. One Sunday evening, more depressed than usual, he wandered along the tree-lined footpath parallel to the avenue near the Oratory. Loud and happy boyish shouts reached him. He paused a few moments before the Church of St. Francis de Sales, sadly bowed his head, and tearfully sighed, "How happy those boys must be!" He asked a passerby what place that was and was told that it was Don Bosco's Oratory. Without more ado, he went in, approached Don Bosco, and opened his heart to him. He explained how, due to family circumstances, he could not pay the seminary tuition. Don Bosco accepted him, and shortly afterward he became one of the Oratory's happy residents. When, a few months later, Bonetti mentioned his desire to consecrate his whole life to working for boys, Don Bosco, aware of his virtue, intelligence, and knowledge, waived his boarding fees and provided him gratis with books, clothing, and all else he needed. Henry Bonetti proved a real treasure for the Oratory and became a [Salesian] priest.⁵ He often spoke of Our Lady's goodness to him with earnest gratitude.

Another young man, the same age as Henry but from a different

⁵ Henry Bonetti was ordained in 1866. A year later he died of cholera. His passing was greatly lamented by his pupils, fellow Salesians, and friends. [Editor]

province, one day told a priest of his desire to enter a religious order or congregation, adding that for one reason or another he had not yet found one to his liking.

"In that case," the priest replied, "I assure you that Our Lady loves you so much that if you can't find an order or congregation to suit you, She will start one for you. You will see."

On one Sunday or holy day this young man, eager to know God's will in his regard, knelt at Our Lady's altar in his village church and recited the rosary, entreating Mary for guidance. The next morning, as the Angelus bell rang at dawn and he was still half asleep, he heard a voice distinctly saying, "Go to L. . . and there you'll find Don Bosco." He started up. The words were set in his mind. He had heard of Don Bosco several times and had once even gone to Turin to seek his advice, but had been unable to meet him. He knew that Don Bosco was the founder of the Oratory, but he had never heard of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. To his knowledge no one in his village had ever seen Don Bosco, since it was an out-of-the-way place and the chances of Don Bosco's coming there were even less than the Pope's. Anyway, the young man confided in three good friends of his. "L. . . is only an hour's walk from here," they said. "Go and find out!"

And so the following day he set out with one of his friends. Not knowing the pastor of L. . . he first called on an elderly chaplain who had taught school in his village. Warmly received, he asked the priest whether he knew Don Bosco's whereabouts. The chaplain shook his head and replied that the pastor kept in contact with Don Bosco. The young man went to the pastor and, on telling him that he had gone to Turin without being able to see Don Bosco, was astonished to hear that Don Bosco would be coming to L. . . within a week.

Overjoyed, he returned home. His two other friends came to meet him and, imagining his walk to have been a waste of time, laughingly shouted from afar, "Is Don Bosco coming?"

"You bet he is!" he and his companion shouted back. Their astonishment increased when Don Bosco did come. As the young man went up to him, Don Bosco looked intently at him and asked his name and birthplace. A short conversation followed, termin-

ated by Don Bosco's words, "Tomorrow come to Turin with me."

Without further ado the young man went along. Neither then nor later did he tell anybody else of the mysterious voice he had heard while the morning Angelus rang. At the Oratory he found the congregation which Our Lady had prepared also for him. He liked it and is happy in it.

Other youngsters, too, found effective incentives to be good as a result of certain heartening fancies which suddenly popped into their minds out of a clear sky. For example, a talented lad attending public school was having difficulties with discipline and studies. His father, while conversing with friends about his son's unsatisfactory school work one evening, lamented that he could not afford to place his boy in a boarding school. At this his friends told him of a priest who had opened such a school in Valdocco where students achieved excellent results with little expense to their parents. The father then objected that his son — who was present — would not go along with such a decision, but, to his father's surprise, the boy impulsively retorted, "Dad, put me there. I bet I'll stick it out!"

Later, though, before going to bed, the boy felt some misgivings at the thought of soon losing his freedom. That night he dreamed he was among a crowd of boys in a playground, holding some papers in his hand. All were applauding a priest who smiled down on them from a balcony. In the dream he saw himself going to the balcony and kissing the priest's hand. A few months later, he entered the Oratory. He had completely forgotten the dream and was finding it somewhat difficult to adjust to this new life. As yet he had not met Don Bosco, who was out of town. One day, during playtime, a teacher sent for him and asked him to bring a sheaf of papers to one of the superiors. While going downstairs, he heard lively, prolonged applause and cheers. Immediately he ran to the playground so as not to miss the excitement. Don Bosco, back from his trip, was standing on the balcony just as in the dream. It was the same playground, the same boys, the same balcony, the same priest. All the details of the dream came back to the boy — he *was* holding a sheaf of papers. Wishing to see the dream fulfilled to the last detail, he dashed up to the balcony and kissed

Don Bosco's hand. That kiss was a pledge of lasting filial affection, as he himself declared with emotion in his old age, while telling us of his dream.

Another similar instance occurred at about this time. The one who enjoyed this heartening experience told us of it in these terms:

I was about ten years old, when I became concerned for a few days about my future. One night in a dream I saw a priest standing at the entrance to a gorgeous garden. I approached and the priest, taking me by my arm, kindly invited me in. "Take heed," he said; "this is where you will spend your life." The dream made such an impression on me that for some days — I remember — I was recollected and devout and went more frequently to church. A good many years have passed now, but that scene is still vivid in my mind. When I eventually came to the Oratory I saw that the one who received me with such fatherly care was the priest of my dream, and I soon understood that our Salesian Society was the garden.

Can such dreams be dismissed as mere boyish fantasies when we consider that these boys came from different provinces and that these dreams showed them the one same path that would lead them to follow their vocation? The boys concerned thought otherwise! After many years of priesthood, heartened by the remembrance of these incidents, they keep working undauntedly among the youths entrusted to them by Don Bosco.

A fellow pupil of these boys was Joseph Rollini, who boarded at the Oratory while taking art courses at the Accademia Albertina. He later was privileged to paint the side chapels and dome of the Church of Mary Help of Christians. With Rollini there also came to the Oratory on November 6, 1860, seventeen-year-old Peter Racca of Volvera. He was a simple-hearted country boy whose native ingenuity occasionally made him the butt of light-minded companions. He never complained. His even temper clearly showed that, far from resenting his deriders, he sincerely loved them and sought to please them. He was a slow learner, with a slack memory. Due to these handicaps and his weak grasp of the fundamentals of Latin, he often did not know his lesson, notwithstanding all his efforts. Pained by the thought that this might hinder him from becoming a priest, he often prayed to Our Lady, whom he most

tenderly loved. His prayer was heard. One morning while his schoolmates were waiting for their teacher and reviewing their lessons, Racca walked into the classroom more cheerful than usual. Seemingly something nice had befallen him. When a boy asked what had happened, he candidly replied that Our Lady had appeared to him that night and granted him the gift of memory. At this, some marveled while others laughed. Racca took no offense and said nothing. When his teacher, John Baptist Francesia, called on him to recite the lesson, he astonished all by a faultless recitation. From that day on he never again had trouble with his studies. Moreover, he began excelling among his companions as a result of his extraordinary memory. We believe that this sudden change can be attributed only to a singular favor of Our Lady, whose love and devotion he never ceased to instill and recommend to all he met. This gift lasted throughout his lifetime and was proven by the studies to which he later applied himself tirelessly and successfully. His friends — Father John Garino among them — can testify to this.

Since we will later have many other occasions to speak of Our Lady's wondrous favors to Oratory pupils, we shall now return to the start of the school year 1860-61.

On November 3, twenty-two young Oratory clerics took exams at the seminary with the following results: two earned *egregie* (above excellent); sixteen, *optime* (excellent); three, *fere optime* (almost excellent); and one, *bene* (good). All the clerics who taught regularly were among those rated "excellent" — a clear proof that their teaching assignments had not interfered with their theology studies.

To mark the start of the school year, the house regulations, not as yet in print, were solemnly read to the pupils in the presence of Don Bosco and all the superiors. Furthermore, in each class, during the first period, the teacher would give a short talk on the importance of study, the means to achieve solid, lasting progress, the necessity and nobility of an upright life, and the obedience required to cooperate with one's teachers. Other important topics were the salvation of one's soul, love of the Church, obedience to the Pope, and priestly vocations. Whatever the topic, the teachers spoke in

accordance with Don Bosco's spirit with which they were imbued. He was always mentioned with praise. Once, the cleric John Baptist Anfossi ended up a talk to his Latin II students by saying, "Boys, you are fortunate to be in the ark of salvation. The Lord has given you in this house a servant of His to be father and guardian. Guided from above, he will keep you from evil, from the yawning abyss of perdition; by his holiness he will spark your love of God and His Immaculate Mother and transform you into angels to make you worthy of heavenly glory. How fortunate you are! To your good fortune add a firm good will!"

These words neatly summed up everyone's opinion of Don Bosco at the Oratory. To spur the boys to further efforts to profit from the new school year, he had scriptural verses printed on the face of the quarterly report cards he himself signed. The inscription on the right read: *Initium sapientiae timor Domini*. [The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom — Ps. 110, 5] The one on the left stated: *Quae in iuventute tua non congregasti, quomodo in senectute tua invenies?* [The things that you have not gathered in your youth, how will you find them in your old age? — Sir. 25, 5]

Don Bosco always gave the clerics two good pieces of advice to preserve good spirit in the house. The first was taken from St. Vincent de Paul: "A community that observes strict silence at prescribed times is certainly faithful to all its other rules. But if everyone talks at will, there is a general disregard for all other rules as well." The second piece of advice concerned the pupils' supervision. "If you have no special duties," he said, "make a daily tour of the stairs and corridors during recreation periods, and you will gain the merit of having saved a soul."

CHAPTER 57

Special Charisms

ON November 1, 1860 Don Bosco petitioned the Department of the Interior for a subsidy, and on December 5 he likewise tapped the War Ministry for surplus clothing and footwear.¹ [The latter appeal was granted but the former was put off to the close of the fiscal year and made contingent on a credit balance.]

Besides clothing, bread was needed. This too was provided — at times wondrously — by Divine Providence. One such instance was described to us by Francis Dalmazzo of Cavour [near Turin] who at this time was a fifteen-year-old secondary school student at Pinerolo. His narration follows:

At the start of my rhetoric year, I read some issues of Don Bosco's *Letture Cattoliche*. On inquiry I learned that the writer was a holy priest who had opened a boys' boarding school in Turin. Then and there I decided to leave my school and go to Don Bosco's. I entered the Oratory on October 22, 1860. My schoolmates called Don Bosco a saint and told of extraordinary, wondrous things he had done. Among others, the cleric Ruffino told me that Don Bosco had recalled to life a festive oratory boy in order to hear his confession,² that he had multiplied consecrated Hosts and chestnuts,³ and that once, when he had taken his boys on a pilgrimage to the Madonna di Campagna [Our Lady of the Countryside Church], the bells had rung of their own accord on his arrival.⁴ I became more convinced of Don Bosco's holiness, and this

¹ We are omitting these two routine appeals. [Editor]

² See Vol. III, pp. 349ff. [Editor]

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311f, 404ff. [Editor]

⁴ See Vol. II, pp. 327f. [Editor]

belief deepened all the more as I came to know him personally and witnessed his saintliness and the extraordinary deeds God wrought through him. Let me give you an example.

Having been brought up on a rather choice diet, after a few days I could not easily adjust to the far too frugal meals and the Oratory's new way of life, and so I wrote to my mother to come and bring me home. I refused to stay.

On the morning of my departure, however, I decided to go to confession once more to Don Bosco. He was seated in the apse of the church behind the main altar, surrounded by a crowd of penitents. At that time meditation was made before Mass, usually said by Father [Victor] Alasonatti. After Mass, each boy received a bun for his breakfast.

While I was awaiting my turn for confession during meditation, the two kitchen helpers came in and told Don Bosco, "Father, there is no bread in the house."

"Well," Don Bosco replied, "go to the baker and get some."

"He won't give us any more. He says he won't deliver bread unless he is paid, and he really means it!"

"We'll see," Don Bosco replied.

I heard this whispered dialogue and sensed that something extraordinary was about to happen. The two kitchen helpers left. When my turn came, I began my confession. The Mass had already reached the Elevation. One of the helpers returned and told Don Bosco, "Mass is half over already. What shall we give the boys for breakfast?"

"Are you here again?" exclaimed Don Bosco. "Let me hear confessions." Then he added, "Look in the pantry and the dining rooms and collect all the bread you find."

The boy left and I continued my confession, unconcerned about breakfast since I would be going home after Mass. I was just through telling my sins when the same fellow came back a third time and said to Don Bosco, "Mass is nearly over and all we have is a few buns!" Don Bosco calmly went on with confessions while the youth kept pestering him for an answer. After telling him not to worry, Don Bosco concluded, "Put all the buns you have in a basket. In a few moments I'll come and give them out myself."

In fact, when he was through with the boy kneeling at his side, he got up and strode past Our Lady's altar to the door opening upon the playground. Here the boys usually got their breakfast as they filed out of church. The bread basket was standing there. Recalling the great things

I had heard of Don Bosco and curious to see the outcome, I went out ahead of him and picked a spot where I'd have no trouble seeing everything. At the door I met my mother, who was waiting to take me home.

"Come, Frankie," she said. I motioned to her to stand aside for a moment. "Mom, I just want to see something," I whispered. "I'll be right with you." She walked off to the porticoes. I bent over the basket and picked up a bun. There were some fifteen buns in the basket — certainly no more than twenty. Unobserved, I placed myself on a step right behind Don Bosco and alertly watched his every move as he began to distribute the bread. The boys kept filing past to get their buns from him and kissed his hand as he smiled and said a kind word to each. Each lad — some four hundred — received a bun. When the distribution was over, I again peered into the basket. To my great astonishment, I saw as many buns in it as there had been before, though no other bread and no other basket had been brought up. Dumbfounded, I ran to my mother. "Let's go," she said.

"Mom," I replied. "I've changed my mind. I'm staying! I'm sorry I bothered you!" Then I told her what I had seen with my own eyes. "I can't leave this place," I exclaimed. "It is blessed by God! Don Bosco is such a holy man!"

This was my one reason for remaining at the Oratory and later becoming a Salesian.

[Francis] Dalmazzo witnessed another surprising incident on November 10, 1861 — an extraordinary cure described in detail by Chevalier Oreglia of Santo Stefano as follows:

One evening, shortly after six, a domestic rushed to tell me that a young apprentice shoemaker named Modesto Davico had suddenly become ill. His companions had carried him to bed and were having a hard time to keep him there. I hastened to his side and was frightened by the strange effects of his illness: screams, whinings, moanings, unintelligible words, contortions, and repeated struggles to fight those holding him down. Then for a few minutes he seemed to calm down and let himself be put to bed. All the while, though, he kept complaining of intense cold along his sides, especially in his feet. We moved him to a pre-heated bed and loaded him with blankets, slipping a footwarmer close to him. It was no use. He kept complaining that he was freezing. Soon he was raving again and struggling to get out of bed. His pulse began weakening. His illness was a mystery to us all. Some thought it a

nervous fit; others a case of worms, rather common among youngsters; others yet a malignant fever or a sudden rush of blood to the brain. To this day, I for one cannot make it out. The boy kept complaining of intense cold even though he was perspiring profusely, and he repeatedly begged for cold water to clear his stomach and throat. Nothing would relieve him. Two hours passed by, and his condition rapidly worsened. We were all upset. Someone tactfully mentioned Don Bosco in order to direct his thoughts to confession. It was a good idea. No sooner was Don Bosco named than the boy, despite his pain, insisted on seeing him. Fearing the end, I ran to tell a priest to fetch the holy oil. As I spoke to Father Alasonatti, Don Bosco came in from town. It was then about eight in the evening. Father Alasonatti told him, "If you want to see Davico, hurry. It's a miracle that he's still alive." Smilingly Don Bosco replied, "Oh no, Davico isn't going yet. I haven't signed his passport." I took him to the boy's side. Superiors and boys were in the room praying for him. Seemingly Davico was in the throes of death. Don Bosco went up to him, noted his critical condition, and, stooping, whispered into his ear. No one heard what he said. Turning to the bystanders, he then asked us all to say a *Pater*, *Ave*, and *Gloria* in honor of Dominic Savio. We all knelt. Don Bosco extended his hands over the boy and blessed him. Immediately his raving stopped. He sat up, looked about as if awakening from a long sleep, and calmly and cheerily exclaimed, "I feel fine!" Then, turning to Don Bosco, he asked, "What shall I do now, Father?"

"Get up and have supper with me."

Father Alasonatti tried to help the boy to dress, but Don Bosco said, "If he wants to be cured, he must get up by himself."

Someone commented that since he had perspired so much he had better stay in bed.

"Don't worry, Davico," Don Bosco reassured him. "Dominic Savio does not do things by halves. Get up and have supper with me."

Now we all understood what Don Bosco had whispered in Davico's ear: he had exhorted him to pray to Dominic Savio for a cure. I too tried to help him cover up as a protection from the cold, but Don Bosco told me, "Leave him alone! He can manage by himself." Another surprising thing was that no sooner was Davico out of bed than he vomited everything he had swallowed. His instantaneous cure can only be attributed to the intercession of the saintly Dominic Savio.

When Davico got dressed, we took him down to the playground, happy and grateful to God. His schoolmates were anxious to see him.

Still wearing a white nightcap, he talked and laughed with them. At supper he sat next to Don Bosco, ate heartily, and later went back to bed. In the morning he arose with the others and now is as fine as ever. Deo Gratias!

This report is signed by Chevalier Frederick Oreglia of Santo Stefano and by the cleric Dominic Ruffino. Francis Dalmazzo also fully testified to this instantaneous cure. So did Davico who became a priest and toward the end of his life confirmed this cure, attributing the saving of his life to Don Bosco's lively faith.

These incidents made Don Bosco the focus of an endless, reverent, and sharply curious attention on the part of the Oratory boys, especially the newcomers. Several pupils would jot down their impressions of the more notable things he did. The above-mentioned Francis Dalmazzo was also present at a solemn prediction Don Bosco made during this month.

On October 11 [1860] Premier Count Camillo Cavour had declared in Parliament: "Our goal is to make the Eternal City — glorified by twenty centuries of history — the splendid capital of the kingdom of Italy." Sorrowfully Don Bosco realized that the revolution would not be sated until it had stripped the Pope of his last piece of territory. One evening, shortly after Cavour's declaration, with no allusion to the man, Don Bosco declared that in the coming year, 1861, a great, famous diplomat would die an inexplicable and totally unexpected death, and that all Europe would speak of it as a most grave event.

The pupils ventured guesses. Even the emperor of France — Europe's most powerful monarch — was mentioned, but both he and the others were still in the prime of life and hardly seemed likely to die soon. Don Bosco was asked for clarification several times but he always maintained the strictest secrecy. The general impression was that he had spoken to inspire a wholesome fear of God's punishments.

No one thought of Count Cavour. Though only fifty-one and still vigorous, toward the end of 1860 Cavour began to suffer from high blood pressure which occasionally made him rave and rant. Worn out by a stormy political life and endless efforts to unify

Italy, he lived in constant deadly fear of not being able to restrain the forces he had himself unleashed. For a time his resignation was rumored, but as his health improved, he stayed in office, both using and abusing his power. The older Oratory pupils were absolutely positive that Don Bosco's prediction would somehow be fulfilled.⁵

Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry:

November 1. This evening, after supper, [Louis] Jarach, Costantius [Rinaudo], [John] Cagliari, [Jerome] Sutil, and others were crowding around Don Bosco in the dining room, and they kept pestering him about their future. Don Bosco replied, "Two of you will turn out bad and cause me great sorrow; others will become good priests, and others will be good, devout laymen." Then, waving his hand in a circular motion above their heads, he added, "And one of you will be a bishop."⁶

⁵ Camillo Cavour died prematurely on March 14, 1861. *See* Chapter 71. [Editor]

⁶ John Cagliari was consecrated a bishop in 1884. [Editor]

CHAPTER 58

Excerpts from the Oratory Chronicles

AS the topics covered in this chapter and the next are somewhat varied, we shall try to give them a unity of sorts by following Father Ruffino's chronicle of Don Bosco's words and deeds during November and December of 1860. We will add clarifications, details, talks that Don Bosco gave to the boys, and reports received from trustworthy witnesses.

One of these describes another instance of Dominic Savio's intercession on behalf of former schoolmates who confidently invoked his aid. This report was written by one of our priests, Father John Garino, and confirmed by Don Bosco himself. It reads as follows:

In 1860 I had severe eye trouble and could not attend to my studies. Similarly afflicted schoolmates of mine received medical care and recovered. I should have done likewise, but I was too afraid to submit to the painful treatment. In my predicament I informed Don Bosco of my trouble. He told me that Michael Rua's mother, then residing at the Oratory, still had a piece of black silk Dominic Savio used to place over his eyes when they would hurt. I immediately asked for it. Then, as my companions returned to their classrooms, I lay down after firmly bandaging my eyes with the cloth. Most unusually, I immediately dozed off and slept soundly for two hours, not waking till the bell rang for the end of class. Then I took the bandage from my eyes and washed them with cold water. Immediately I felt as if nothing had ever been wrong with my eyes. I credited then, and still do, my instantaneous cure solely to the intercession of Dominic Savio whom I invoked in my distress.

We shall now quote the chronicle:

November 27 [1860]. Don Bosco exhorted all his boys, including the artisans, to use the Italian language in conversation [instead of the Piedmontese dialect]. Then he went on: "We are about to begin the Immaculate Conception novena. Every novena at the Oratory is fatal to someone because Our Lady uses this occasion to separate the cockle from the wheat and dismiss those who persist in their evil ways. Let us remember that death comes when we least expect it. For instance, recently here in Turin, a lady died suddenly when her dress caught fire as she sat by the fireside chatting with her parents. All attempts to save her life failed."

Don Bosco often talked of sudden death and stressed the need of keeping prepared. At the same time he fostered devotion to one's guardian angel because these heavenly spirits love their charges and often warn them of impending death by interior presentiments, dreams, or visions. He told us of the case of a boy who in his shame kept back a sin in confession. The following night his guardian angel let him know in a frightful vision that if he did not confess that sin he would be eternally lost. The next morning he wasted no time in going to confession. A few days later he was suddenly called into eternity.

Don Bosco, though, usually added that sudden death was not to be feared by those who habitually lived in the state of grace. Likewise he made it clear that undue worry was not to be felt at the sudden death of relatives or friends who had been practicing Catholics but had died without the sacraments. Thus, by reminding people of God's ineffable mercy and goodness, he knew how to console the bereaved. It happened, for instance, that Count M. . . , an Oratory benefactor, died quite suddenly. Deeply grieved, his sons sent for Don Bosco, who, on arriving, found the whole family deeply shaken and grieving. "Where is your faith?" he asked. To understand the full impact of his words we must add that the deceased had prepared for death by daily Communion and weekly confession. Immediately, the mourners became calm and resigned.

Father Ruffino's chronicle continues:

On November 28 [1860] Don Bosco began giving daily nosegays for

the Immaculate Conception Novena. They were the same ones he had suggested in 1857,¹ but he put the devout making of the Sign of the Cross first.

On Sunday, December 2, Don Bosco substituted for Father [John] Borel at the evening instruction. He effectively extemporized on the necessity of giving oneself to God early in life, briefly developing three points: whoever delays will run the risk of eventually lacking the time, the will, or the grace to do so.

Don Bosco was always ready to preach, to address gatherings on short notice, or to give conferences to his Salesians, mostly after night prayer. This was not necessary or routine for him, but resulted from his ever ardent love of God. It was apparent from the ease with which he spoke of God in every instance, timely or untimely. Often throughout his life, the priests at the Oratory — superiors especially — unable to do so at any other time, went to confession to him while he was busy answering his mail or concentrating on a problem after hours of long, tedious audiences. Don Bosco would listen to them and give such timely, inspiring advice that he could not have done better had he just finished saying Mass. “Every word he spoke,” Father [Louis] Piscetta² affirmed, “was about God. I never once approached him that he failed to speak to me of God and the things of God. The same was true of my fellow Salesians, as they themselves assured me. Thanks to his intimate union with God, he lived and worked in full trust of God’s goodness. Neither fatigue nor ill health ever diverted him from his constant, heroic tasks.” Under the date of November 9 [1862], the chronicle quotes Don Bosco as saying: “For the past fifteen years I have not prayed even once for my bodily health. Neither have I taken medicines, nor spent a day in bed.” In fact, in those very days, though he was ailing, he agreed to preach a mission at Saluggia, where he was eagerly expected by the pastor, Father John

¹ See Vol. V, pp. 511f. [Editor]

² Father Piscetta became a Salesian at the age of sixteen in 1874. Ordained a priest in 1880, he earned his doctorate in theology and for nearly forty years successively taught Church history, Canon Law, and moral theology in the Turin archdiocesan seminary. His work *Theologiae Moralis Elementa* had several reprints and editions. From 1892 to 1907 he directed the Salesian Studentate of Philosophy at Valsalice (Turin). In 1907 he became a member of the Superior Chapter of the Salesian Society. He died in 1925. [Editor]

Fontana. As the time drew near, however, he was too weak even to travel. Seeking a substitute, he wrote to Father Appendini at Villastellone:

Turin, November 30, 1860

Dear Father,

Can you get me out of a fix? On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, I have to go to Saluggia to give a spiritual retreat (one meditation, daily), but I don't feel well at all.

Would you substitute for me? It's a nice parish with a fine pastor. Canon Anglesio suggested that I write to you. I'll deeply appreciate a prompt reply, as it would set my mind at ease. Tommy feels fine and is doing very well.

God be with you always.

Yours devotedly,

Fr. John Bosco

Undoubtedly this decision pleased everybody at the Oratory, because whenever he was away, especially in winter, they worried about his health. Inclement weather and other discomforts made his priestly ministry all the more burdensome, although he never complained or asked for anything. At times, however, if he ran into a case of deliberate, uncharitable neglect, he knew how to give a friendly hint. The chronicle narrates one such episode at this time:

During one December, Don Bosco went to a village in the Apennines to preach a mission. After a long, uncomfortable trip, he arrived at the rectory exhausted and soaked with perspiration and slush. The pastor was in the church. His sister received Don Bosco rather coldly and did not even offer him refreshments. Don Bosco pretended not to notice the discourtesy. After supper, as Don Bosco sat by the fire with the pastor and his sister, he began to tell of his experiences, comical and otherwise. Though in a bad mood, the pastor's sister listened quite attentively. Don Bosco went on to speak of missions he had given in various parishes and mentioned some physical ills which afflicted house-keepers who had poorly treated the missionaries because of a nasty disposition, niggardliness, or aversion. At this, the woman lowered her

eyes, paled, and began shivering as in a fever. At bedtime all retired to their rooms. During the night the woman awoke in great pain and started screaming. The housekeeper ran to her assistance. The next morning, the pastor's sister asked for Don Bosco's blessing. Her pains vanished. From that moment on she was most considerate and generous with him and the other missionaries who came to help out at the close of the retreat.

The chronicle continues:

On December 3 [1860] Don Bosco summoned the clerics for a short talk on vocation, particularly its exterior manifestations — one's speech and gait, devout deportment in church, humility, charity, and chastity. On a previous occasion, he had exhorted them to persevere in the Salesian Society. After expounding a few thoughts on the matter, he narrated this episode:

“Liffard, a famous nobleman, became a religious and was tested by his superiors by being given the lowliest monastery tasks to practice humility. He persevered for several years and offered a fine example of virtue. One day the devil appealed to his pride by insinuating that it was quite disgraceful for a man of his standing to devote himself to such mean tasks. The temptation grew so strong that the monk was about to abandon the religious life. One night, as these thoughts troubled him, his guardian angel appeared in human form and said, ‘Follow me.’ He led him to a mausoleum full of skeletons and corpses. The spectral corridors and the sight and stench of decaying flesh so horrified him that he begged his angel to let him go back, but the latter forced him to continue. Then he firmly rebuked him for his inconstancy, saying, ‘Shortly you too will be turned into worms and ashes. Therefore, consider if it is worth your while to yield to pride and turn your back upon God because of a humiliation which can earn you an eternally glorious crown.’ At this reprimand Liffard broke down and asked forgiveness, promising to be faithful to his vocation. The angel then led him back to his room and vanished. The monk faithfully persevered till death.”

CHAPTER 59

Excerpts from the Oratory Chronicles (Continued)

FATHER Ruffino's chronicle goes on as follows:

At the "Good Night" on December 4 [1860] Don Bosco forbade handshakes among the boys except after a lengthy absence. He had already made this announcement twice before.

During these days [John] Turchi is hard at work studying Roman antiquities; [Michael] Rua is busy with history and [Angelo] Savio with geography.

Don Bosco also enlisted outsiders — both men and women — into God's service by inviting them to translate his own or other authors' booklets, as we can see from this letter:

December 4, 1860

Very Reverend Father,

I am finally sending you the book you had asked me to translate. I would have finished it long ago had it not been for the many misfortunes that befell me this year. Please forgive this long delay. If I can be of help again, I shall gladly oblige.

Yours devotedly,

Caroline Gloria

In addition, Father Joseph Frassinetti, his revered and scholarly

co-worker on *Letture Cattoliche*, was busy preparing two valuable little works: *Holy Virginity*, and *Stories of Our Times for Girls*. Don Bosco, in turn, reprinted his funeral eulogy of Father Cafasso, delivered at the solemn requiem Mass at the Oratory.¹ The booklet also contained his second eulogy in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi.² Entitled *A Biography of Father Joseph Cafasso*, it served as the November and December issues of *Letture Cattoliche*. . . .

Despite the pressure of work and a steady flow of mail, Don Bosco paid no attention to fatigue. "One night, at a very late hour," the chronicle relates, "he rose from his desk somewhat dizzy and thought he saw a young cleric standing in the corner. 'Who are you?' he asked. There was no reply. 'Speak! Answer me!' Again there was silence. He moved toward him and seized, instead, a coat hanger holding his hat."

A matter weighing heavily on Don Bosco's mind this year was the plight of nations still living in idolatry, as he had read in a history of Catholic foreign missions. One day, he remarked to the cleric [John] Bonetti, "I heartily wish I could send priests to evangelize so many uncivilized peoples." He very often manifested this ardent desire, even from the very beginning of his congregation. Had he had the means, he would have started foreign missions without delay.

"On Thursday, December 6," we read in the chronicle, "a comedy entitled *Baldini* was staged at the Oratory. Don Bosco attended with Father Matthew Picco." Now and then he let his pupils enjoy themselves with dramatics. Father Charles Gilardi, a Rosminian who earnestly loved our Oratory, wrote two comedies for our boys — *Il Passatore* and *Il Giannetto*. The latter was staged many times because it was much more popular — and deservedly so — with our young spectators.

Two days later, the feast of the Immaculate Conception brought joy to the Oratory. Feeling a little stronger, Don Bosco yielded to renewed invitations of the pastor of Saluggia and went there shortly before the close of that mission, accompanied by the cleric Francis Cerruti who wrote this account:

¹ See pp. 376f. [Editor]

² See p. 414. [Editor]

In December, 1860, Don Bosco spent two days at Saluggia³ on a parish mission. The parishioners were so pleased with him that, years later, the mere mention of his visit would stir fond recollections of him and of his manner of preaching. He charmed everyone with his extraordinary amiability. In welcoming penitents to confession he lovingly drew their heads down to his chest.

Some people declared that they rushed their jobs in order to hasten back to the charming air of paradise surrounding him and to enjoy his unmatched affability. Suffice it to say that, during the two days he was in Saluggia, his morning and evenings were spent hearing confessions. Crowds flocked to him as if drawn by an irresistible force; many had not been to confession for years.

About this time two extraordinary events impressed the Oratory boys. His predictions were never forgotten.

In a previous chapter⁴ we narrated how Don Bosco had definitely announced in April that the cleric Castellano would [die and] go to heaven. We also told how the same cleric, given up by doctors, had been blessed and cured by Don Bosco in July.⁵ Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry for November [1860]: "In these days the cleric Louis Castellano died at home in Turin." The entry continues: "On November 25, Don Bosco announced that a pupil would die shortly." And again: "On December 13, twelve-year old John Racca, of Marene, died at the Oratory, eight days after he had taken to bed with a cold."

Very seldom did Don Bosco draw the boys' attention to the fulfillment of his predictions. He limited himself to simply recommending the souls of these dear pupils of his to the community's prayers and showing them how pleasing these prayers were to God.⁶

On December 16 Don Bosco received a letter from one of the clerics he had sent to teach at the Giaveno junior seminary. This letter reveals the young cleric's good spirit:

³ A small town near Turin. [Editor]

⁴ See p. 292. [Editor]

⁵ See p. 375. [Editor]

⁶ We are omitting the narration of a 17th-century apparition concerning the efficacy of prayers for the dead. [Editor]

Giaveno, December 15, 1860

Beloved Father in Jesus Christ,

Wholly to live and die for Jesus and Mary is my only desire, the goal of all I do and pray for. Yes, I want to live and die serving God, providing thus for my eternal salvation and possibly also for that of my neighbor, with no regard to cost. If in the past it was a duty for me to find and do God's will, it will from now on be an absolute need. I earnestly beg you to keep giving me that spiritual direction which I could never get elsewhere.

I seem to find peace of mind and heart in the new Society of St. Francis de Sales at the Oratory. I have already read and studied its rules. I accept them and hope, with God's help, to observe them. As your loving son, I beg you to receive me into this Society, if this meets with your approval and if I am not unworthy of such a great favor. I know my merits do not deserve it, but I rely on your goodness and charity. Do not reject the prayer of one who wants to offer God a sacrifice of his whole being through you by putting himself entirely into your hands. May I then hope that soon the Society of St. Francis de Sales will have a new member eager to save his own soul and those of others, a servant of servants? Command, Father, and I shall promptly obey. Tell me what I am to do and how I must conduct myself, for I am yours from this moment.

Trusting my application will be accepted, I humbly offer you my most respectful regards and kiss your hand.

Your obedient son in Jesus Christ,

John Boggero

This letter, like many others that his beloved young clerics wrote to him toward the end of the year, deeply consoled Don Bosco. Meanwhile, as Christmas drew near, he prepared his boys for its stirring solemnity by suggesting these nosegays:

Christmas Novena, 1860

December 16 — Prompt obedience in everything, pleasant and unpleasant.

December 17 — Humility in dress, appearance, and speech, in obeying, and in facing unpleasant tasks.

December 18 — Charity in bearing with others' faults and in avoiding offense to others.

December 19 — Charity in consoling the sad, helping and doing good to all, hurting none.

December 20 — Charity in warning the negligent and in kindly correcting those who give bad advice.

December 21 — Charity in forgiving enemies and giving them timely advice.

December 22 — Avoiding those who indulge in bad talk.

December 23 — Diligence in fulfilling one's duties.

December 24 — Confession as if it were the last one of our life.

Christmas Day — Devout Communion with a promise of frequent reception.

Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry:

On Christmas Eve Don Bosco told the boys this incident: "The niece of the pastor at Saluggia has testified that for years she suffered from bad teeth and had to have them extracted. Since her gums kept bleeding and no remedy could be found, she prayed to Dominic Savio. Shortly after, the bleeding stopped and her gums healed."

Then Don Bosco gravely announced: "Within a few months, some of you will be no more. . . . I know of one . . . but he doesn't give it a thought. We will try to prepare him before he leaves us. I can also tell you that Castellano is in heaven, whereas Racca needs our prayers badly."

We have checked the Oratory death records and have found that two pupils died in April 1861, one of them quite suddenly. Some idea of the Oratory's [1860] Christmas celebration is contained in a letter of Don Bosco to the countess of Camburzano, who was then vacationing at Nice:

Turin, December 26, 1860

Dear Countess:

Your letter rich in Christian sentiments is an inspiration to me and my boys; it increases our faith and courage.

I have prayed and had prayers offered for Marquis Massoni's intentions. He means well, but the matter has very thorny aspects. My suggestion is: Let him ponder if his decision is for his spiritual good and God's glory. If so, fine. If not, let him wait.

Our Christmas celebration was very consoling. We had three Midnight Masses; the first was sung by some one hundred choirboys. Over six hundred lads, day and resident, received Holy Communion. The service ended at two in the morning.

May our bountiful Lord bless you and Count Victor, your whole family, and your friends.

Your servant,
Fr. John Bosco

We shall now return to the chronicle:

December 28 [1860]. This afternoon Bishop [Thomas] Ghilardi of Mondovì paid us an unexpected visit. He willingly preached and gave Benediction. He spoke on the usefulness and value of the faith by showing how only two hundred million out of eight hundred million people were privileged to possess it. He promised to return on Thursday to say Mass for us.

Don Bosco often invited bishops or prelates to come to say the Community Mass. Besides those we have already mentioned in our narrative, Father John Garino recalls Canon Andrew Ighina of the cathedral of Mondovì, Bishop [Stephen] Oreglia of Santo Stefano, internuncio to Holland and now [1907] a cardinal, and Bishop John Sola of Nice. All of them highly valued Don Bosco's saintliness. Canon John Baptist Anfossi testified:

When still a young cleric, I was sent by Don Bosco on errands to various bishops. On such occasions I was astonished to see how highly they regarded Don Bosco's holiness and work. I particularly remember Archbishop [Alexander] d'Angennes of Vercelli. He received me most warmly, and profusely praised Don Bosco in the presence of several canons for the good he was doing for youth, and especially for fostering priestly vocations. Bishop [John] Losana of Biella, to whom I am per-

sonally indebted, highly esteemed Don Bosco from the very start of his work and kept in close touch with the good he was doing for youth in his festive oratories. On any trip to Turin, he either invited Don Bosco to pay him a visit or called on him at the Oratory to enjoy his company. I pass over many other bishops' tokens of regard and veneration for Don Bosco which I myself have seen.

We return to the chronicle. At the close of each year Don Bosco gave oral or written keepsakes to his young clerics and older pupils. We managed to find a few in Latin:

Pone finem in voluntate peccandi et invenies Mariam.

Put a halt to your will to sin and you will find Mary.

Frustra quaerit qui cum Maria invenire non quaerit.

One seeks in vain if he seeks to find without Mary.

Plus Maria desiderat facere tibi bonum et largiri gratiam quam tu accipere concupiscas.

Mary is more eager to be good to you and heap favors upon you than you are to receive them.

Scire et cognoscere te, Virgo Deipara, est via immortalitatis; narrare virtutes tuas est via salutis.

To know and understand You, Virgin Mother of God, is the path to endless life; to recount Your virtues is the path to salvation.

Father Ruffino's chronicle goes on:

On December 29 [1860] Don Bosco gave me the following keepsake: "*Adiuva me in lucro animarum.* Help me to save souls." I gave him the key to my heart, confiding entirely in him.

December 30. Don Bosco asked all the boys to give him a gift by offering a Communion for his intention.

Thoughtfully Don Bosco sent New Year's greetings to his benefactors. It took him a month to write them out. We have one such note to Count Pio Galleani of Agliano:

Turin, December 31, 1860

My dear Count,

All the priests, clerics, and pupils of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales wish you a very Happy New Year as their distinguished bene-

factor, and ask Our Lord to grant you and your family abundant blessings.

Most gratefully,

Fr. John Bosco

The Oratory enrollment as of December 31 [1860] was some four hundred and seventy. Don Bosco's field of work kept widening. Without mentioning those who had gone to seminaries, he described the results of his work with boys, from the very first years up to 1860, as follows:

To properly evaluate the results obtained through the festive oratories, day schools, and this hospice, we must divide the boys into three groups: bad, shiftless, and good. Good boys manage to remain so and make wonderful progress; the shiftless, that is, those accustomed to wander about and do little work, eventually turn out well when taught a trade, given a job, and supervised; the bad ones require a lot of care. If they can be coaxed into taking an interest in work, they are mostly won over. The results obtained through the above institutions can be summed up thus:

1. The boys did not become worse.
2. Many changed their outlook on life and began to earn an honest living.
3. Even the seemingly unresponsive eventually turned out well. In time, the good principles they absorbed produced their effects.

A proof of this is that every year several hundred boys were placed with good craftsmasters, many runaways returned to their parents and now are more docile and obedient, while a good number found work with honorable families.

The number of boys accepted into the Oratory and completing their courses is about three hundred a year. Of the graduates, some join the brass band of the National Guard or of other army units; some go into the trade they learned; a sizable number go into education and, on receiving their degrees, teach either at the Oratory or in their own home towns.

CHAPTER 60

Don Bosco's Almanac, 1861

DON BOSCO'S last publication in 1860 was *Il Galantuomo*,¹ *Almanac of 1861 for Lombardy and Piedmont*.² Its Foreword was important:

*Il Galantuomo to His Friends
on Last Year's Prophecies*

During this past year, friends, you were watching to see if my prophecies would come true, perhaps in order to tell me how good or bad I am at this game. In fact, some of you kept pestering me to clarify some points.

You did well to keep watch, because when a "galantuomo" gives his word, he must be sure to keep it. Now I believe that I can satisfy your curiosity, not only by showing you how last year's prophecies were fulfilled, but also by adding a few things about this year, 1861.

Before proceeding, I must remind you of what I said last year, namely that the fulfillment of the prophecies would begin in 1860 and continue in subsequent years. Now I am ready to satisfy you.

Last year I said: "I am afraid we shall be at war again this coming year.³ We shall have another war which, though less gory than last year's, will plunge a still greater number of souls into hell." The events of 1860 are a literal and sad fulfillment of those words.

¹ This word means an honest and upright man, an honorable man, a gentleman. [Editor]

² For the 1860 Almanac *see* pp. 205-208. [Editor]

³ For this and other quotations in this chapter, *see* p. 206. [Editor]

"We shall have two terrible epidemics; I won't name them, but you will see their frightful effects." These two epidemics are religious in-differentism and the inroads of Protestantism. The contempt of things religious, of clergy and hierarchy, and of the Pope himself is now so widespread that no one can disregard the frightening effects of these two epidemics.

"Two important figures will disappear from the political scene of this world." They are the grand duke of Tuscany and the duke of Modena. Having lost their states to Piedmont last March, they have ceased to exist as rulers.

"Parents will be upset no end by their children's insubordination, and will weep and lament over the grief and discord they will cause." Over thirty thousand Garibaldi volunteers, the drafting of all men between twenty and thirty years of age, and two additional drafts within two months are facts that speak for themselves.

"Wine will be cheaper, but bread will cost more." Wine — that is, human blood — will be shed more abundantly. According to reports, Italian war casualties are nearly 100,000 dead and wounded. Death has raised the price of bread — that is, the value of able-bodied men. Manpower is now scarce both for the war effort and for domestic needs. The cost of a drafted substitute has risen fourfold.

"Farms will be scourged by hail. . . ." Hail has frightfully devastated farmlands between Moncalieri and Casale, between Milan and Brescia, and other places as well.

"A town will be laid waste by an earthquake" and several areas "will be scourged by frost and drought." This will happen next year.

Do not think, though, that this is the full explanation of my prophecies. Prudence suggests that I say no more. Perhaps someone will laugh at both the prophecies and the explanations. In that case I am glad that my Almanac can at least make people laugh. As for myself, though, I know better than to laugh; I would rather cry.

Forecasts for the Year 1861

I'd better say something about 1861, but I'll be clear and positive. In the course of this year astounding events will happen. The good will be consoled because, after frightful catastrophes, bloodshed will cease and an era of peace will begin. The wicked, stunned by events totally unforeseen and contrary to human expectations, will be forced to say, "*Di-gitus Dei est hic!* This is God's doing!"

I am sure, friends, that on reading this you will want to ask me many questions. I can easily guess what they would be, but my lips are sealed and I can say no more. Still, to satisfy somewhat your desire to know the future, I shall here list the famous predictions of the "Nun of Taggia" as they were published in 1849.⁴

⁴ We are omitting these and other predictions dealing mostly with local political and religious eventualities. [Editor]

CHAPTER 61

A Dream: Consciences Revealed

AT the beginning of 1861 the Society of St. Francis de Sales had twenty-six members, four of whom were priests. The latest recruit was Chevalier Frederick Oreglia of Santo Stefano. Two diocesan priests and several young clerics also lived at the Oratory.

The year 1861 seemed to hold much promise for Don Bosco's boys, as we gather from Father Bonetti's *Cinque Lustri di Storia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales* [History of the First Twenty-Five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales]:

The three festive oratories in key areas of the city were very well attended; likewise, the boarding school section at Valdocco was thronged with pupils remarkable for their piety and good conduct. Some artisans and students excelled in imitating Dominic Savio and renewing the example of his marvelous, supernatural life among their schoolmates. Brotherly love reigned: there were no fights, quarrels, or disagreements; all formed one heart and one soul in loving God and trying to please Don Bosco. Everyone eagerly strove to behave beyond reproach. At the end of the week, when conduct marks were publicly read, very few rated little less than excellent, and even such a rating was considered so demeaning that when a boy got it — more through thoughtlessness than ill will — he sadly wept and usually would never again get it for the rest of the year.

True, extraordinary incidents — which Don Bosco's biographer will narrate — helped to build up this enviable spirit, but much of it was largely due also to the zealous, holy expedients of Don Bosco and of

his co-workers. After dinner and supper, Don Bosco usually joined in our recreation. Standing, or, at times, sitting on a table or squatting on the ground, always hemmed in by boys, he delighted us with amusing stories or edifying examples. Sometimes he would slip a needed word of encouragement to someone or whisper a message to another. As the boys kept switching places in their eagerness to get near him, practically each one of them, like chicks about a mother hen, would receive a choice morsel of spiritual food from him every few days. Sometimes he would send for or go himself to find a boy who had to be urged to greater efforts or warned about moral pitfalls. Then, privately and amiably, words would come which did that youngster more good than a week's spiritual retreat.

After night prayers and the "Good Night," as the boys pressed about him to kiss his hand, tell him of a problem, or seek advice, he used the chance to whisper a confidential word which would be treasured and most faithfully practiced. From the very start of the Oratory Don Bosco had always used these and similar expedients, but now that experience had proven their worth, he used them much more frequently to our endless benefit.

Father [Victor] Alasonatti, the prefect of the house and a second father to us, did not have Don Bosco's efficacy of speech,¹ but he too helped us in countless other ways. He safeguarded us from abuses and took over the unpleasant task of reprimanding us or mildly punishing disobedient, stubborn pupils as a last resort. But he did it so kindly, calmly, and wisely that, though feared, he was not hated. He could temper bitterness with sweetness, firmness with meekness, punishment with consideration and benevolence. He studied each case carefully and prudently, questioned the offender, and, if a warning sufficed, spared a reprimand; if a reprimand was enough, he neither threatened nor punished. He faithfully abided by the scriptural maxim: *Pro mensura peccati erit et plagarum modus*. [According to the measure of the sin shall the measure also of the stripes be — Deut. 25, 2] In every case, moreover, he showed that he did not act through dislike but love, not from whim or resentment but from a sense of duty to help the offender.

Others also helped Don Bosco in the good training of the pupils — young clerics, teachers, craftsmasters, and assistants, as well as a good number of pupils who followed Dominic Savio's footsteps and, like him, became hunters and fishers of souls. Mixing freely with the boys, these helpers took the lead in all games with such zest and eagerness as

¹ See Vol. I, p. 386. [Editor]

to outdo the most active players. Anyone unaware of their noble, lofty aims would have thought them scatter-brained and uncouth. The truth was far otherwise. They promoted a healthy interest in games, enlivened them with their enthusiasm, and got sluggish youngsters to join in, thus ridding them of melancholy and promoting their physical and moral well-being. They started the games and controlled them to forestall arguments, quarrels, fights, and eventually sin. They spent hours at this task, often at a personal sacrifice, but they did it gladly so as to know the boys better, discover their inclinations and weaknesses, and opportunely advise them.

They either joined in the games or scattered over the playground. On spotting a boy standing idly about, one of them would invite him to play or would stroll with him to cheer him up or give him good advice, encouraging him to study, work, and pray. After playing or chatting with such a lad, the good cleric would wisely pass on to questions like, "Are your parents living? Do you try to please them with your good conduct? Do you pray for them? What was your conduct mark last week? When did you go to confession last? I need a favor of Our Lord. Would you come with me to confession tomorrow and receive Holy Communion for my intention? Shall we go to see Don Bosco? Maybe you could ask him for a little word of his."

Teachers, assistants, and craftsmasters did the same with their charges. Each strove to entice his pupils to carry out their duties, to obey, study, work, and be good more out of love than fear, more for their spiritual than their physical welfare, more for the sake of heaven than for the sake of earth. Inspired by Don Bosco's example and words, these co-workers of his eagerly tried to find, create, and make the most of every opportunity to keep their pupils in God's grace, lead them to God, and save their souls. A principle most faithfully observed was to open a way for God into a boy's heart not only in church but also in the classroom and workshop. This they tried to achieve, but so prudently and discreetly that the boys, hardly aware of the effort, felt and realized that it was much more pleasant to pray and be good than not to pray and be bad. They looked upon the Oratory as a happy home and loved their superiors as real friends.

However, it was Don Bosco's own example that gave all of them the most powerful incentive to be good. A model to all in faithfulness to his duty, to the evangelical counsels, and to promoting God's glory, he could truthfully say of himself, "The zeal of Your

house consumes me.” [Ps. 68, 1] Following is Father Francis Dalmazzo’s testimony:

I will remark that many of my confreres and I noticed that — contrary to the normal reaction of people — our frequent, familiar contacts with Don Bosco always showed us new virtues and admirable traits which had not struck us before. I must candidly admit that in the thirty years I was close to him, I not only never saw anything blameworthy in him, but, rather, had to always admire his embodiment of every Christian virtue. What I personally saw and heard convinced me that what everybody said was really true: Don Bosco was a saint.

However, regardless of all this, we cannot adequately explain the budding and flowering of so many virtues at the Oratory if we are to attribute it all only to the normal means suggested by religion and sound pedagogy. Another factor, far more wondrous, compensated for the ever-present human limitations [known only by God], searcher of hearts, who sees hidden failings where we mistakenly see perfection. In Holy Scripture God tells Samuel concerning Eliab: “Look not on his countenance nor on the height of his stature. . . . I judge not according to the look of man; for man sees those things that appear, but the Lord beholds the heart.” [1 Kgs. 16, 7] This is why God’s goodness showed itself in extraordinary ways to match His faithful servant’s zeal for the salvation of souls. It is to this divine goodness that Father Bonetti alludes [in the above-quoted excerpt] when he hints at the extraordinary incidents which Don Bosco’s biographer would one day narrate. Here is the first wondrous incident, taken from the chronicles of Father [Dominic] Ruffino and Father [John] Bonetti: “On the nights of December 28, 29, and 30 [1860] Don Bosco had what he called three ‘dreams.’ From what we have seen, heard, and experienced, we can unhesitatingly call them ‘visions.’ It was the same dream repeating itself with new details. Our good father Don Bosco narrated it briefly, as follows, to all the boys gathered together at night prayers on the last day of the year 1860:

For three consecutive nights I found myself in the countryside of

Rivalta with Father [Joseph] Cafasso, Silvio Pellico,² and Count [Charles] Cays.³ The first night we discussed current religious topics; the second night we debated and solved moral cases relevant to the spiritual direction of young people. After having the same dream twice, I decided I would tell you about it, if it came to me again. Sure enough, on the night of December 30 I found myself once more with the same people in the same place. Putting other matters aside, I recalled that the following night, the last of the year, I would have to give you the customary *strenna*⁴ for the New Year. Therefore, I turned to Father Cafasso and said, "Father, since you are such a dear friend of mine, please give me the *strenna* for my boys."

"On one condition," he replied. "First you must tell them to put their accounts in order."

We were standing in a large room with a table in the center. Father Cafasso, Silvio Pellico, and Count Cays sat themselves at the table. As I had been requested by Father Cafasso, I went out to get my boys. They were all busy adding up figures on a tablet. As I called them one by one, they presented their papers to the above-named gentlemen, who checked the sums and either approved or rejected them. Quite a few boys were turned back, sad and worried. Those whose totals had been found correct were quite happy and ran out to play. Since the line of boys was long, the examination took some time, but eventually it came to an end, or so it seemed to me until I noticed that some boys were still standing outside and were not coming in.

"Why don't they come in?" I asked Father Cafasso.

"Their tablets are perfect blanks," he replied. "They have no totals to show us. This is a question of summing up all that one has done."

² Silvio Pellico (1789-1854), a Piedmontese patriot, spent most of his early adult life in Milan, where he joined the "Carbonari," a secret society working for Italy's independence. Arrested by the Austrians, who then ruled Lombardy, he was sentenced to twenty years at hard labor. Pardoned in 1830, he returned to Turin. Up to his imprisonment, Pellico had been a lukewarm Catholic, but in the distress of prison life he resolved to love God and his fellow man. In 1832 he wrote the story of his prison life, *Le Mie Prigioni*, which became the most famous book in the literature of the Risorgimento. At this time he was employed as secretary to Marchioness Barolo in Turin. [Editor]

³ See p. 201. [Editor]

⁴ A New Year's gift customary in Italy. From the very beginning of the Oratory (see Vol. III, p. 433), Don Bosco had started the custom of giving a spiritual *strenna* or gift to his boys and co-workers on the last day of the year. It took the form of a motto or slogan to be practiced in the year then about to dawn. This custom is still kept by Don Bosco's successors. [Editor]

Let them add up whatever they have done and we'll verify the totals."

After all the accounts had been checked, I went outside with the three gentlemen. All the boys whose totals had been found correct were running about having a joyful time, as happy as could be. You cannot imagine how that sight cheered me. Some boys, though, just stood apart, wistfully watching the games. Some were blindfolded; others had a mist about their eyes or a dark cloud around their heads. Smoke came from the heads of some; others had a head full of clay, or empty of the things of God. I recognized each boy. So clear is the picture in my mind now that I can name each one. I soon realized too that many boys were missing. "Where can those boys be who had blank tablets?" I wondered. I looked for them [but in vain]. Finally I spotted some boys in a distant corner of the playground. What a wretched sight they were! One lad was stretched out on the ground with the pallor of death; others were seated on a low, filthy bench; still others were resting on dirty straw mattresses or on the hard, bare ground. These were the boys whose totals had not been approved. They had various diseases: their tongues, ears, and eyes were swarming with worms that ate into them. One boy had a rotting tongue; another's mouth was crammed with mud; a third's breath was foul with pestilence. Other diseases afflicted the rest. One boy's heart was moth-eaten; another's was rotted away; others had all kinds of sores. One lad's heart seemed to be all chewed up. The whole scene was a veritable hospital.

The sight shocked me, and I could not believe my eyes. "How can this be?" I kept asking myself. I went up to one boy and asked, "Are you really so and so?"

"Yes," he replied, "that's me."

"What happened to you?"

"It's my own doing, flour from my own grist. I reaped what I planted!"

I questioned another and got the same reply. I felt terribly hurt, but was soon to be comforted by what I am about to tell you.

Meanwhile, pitying these boys, I turned to Father Cafasso and begged for a remedy. "You know what must be done just as well as I," he replied. "Figure it out for yourself."

"At least give me a *strenna* for the healthy ones," I insisted humbly but trustfully.

Beckoning me to follow, he went back to the mansion and opened a door leading into a spectacular hall which was richly draped, glittering with gold and silver. Dazzling chandeliers of a thousand lights flooded it with blinding radiance. As far as the eye could see, it stretched end-

lessly in length and width. In its center stood a giant table laden with all kinds of sweets, oversized bitter-sweet cookies, and biscuits. Any one delicacy alone would have satisfied a person. At the sight, I impulsively made as if to run and call my boys to enjoy this bonanza, but Father Cafasso stopped me. "Wait!" he said. "Not everyone may enjoy these sweets, but only those whose totals were approved."

Even so, the hall was quickly filled with boys. I started breaking up and handing out the cookies and biscuits, but again Father Cafasso objected. "Not everyone here may have those," he said. "Not all deserve them." And he pointed some boys out to me: those whose totals had been approved but who had a mist over their eyes or clay in their hearts or whose hearts were empty of the things of God. These too were excluded, just as those with sores who had not been allowed into the hall.

I immediately begged Father Cafasso to let me give them some of the sweets too. "They also are my dear children," I said, "and besides, there is plenty."

"No," he repeated firmly. "Only the healthy ones can savor these sweets. The others have no taste for these delicacies. They would only get sick."

I said no more and began serving those who had been pointed out to me. When I was through, I gave out another generous helping to all of them. I must say that I really enjoyed seeing the boys eat with such relish. Joy shone on their faces and so transfigured them that they did not look like the same boys anymore.

The lads in the hall who had not been allowed to have any sweets stood in a corner, sad and mortified. I felt so sorry for them that again I begged Father Cafasso to let me give them some also.

"No," he replied. "Not yet. Make them get well first." I kept looking at them, as well as at the many others outside. I knew them all. I also noticed that, to make matters worse, some had moth-eaten hearts. Turning to Father Cafasso, I said, "Won't you please tell me what medicine to give them?" Again he replied: "Figure it out for yourself. You know what to do!"

Again I asked him for a *strenna* to give to all the boys.

"Very well," he answered. "I'll give you one." Turning about as if to leave, he exclaimed three times, each time in a louder voice: "Watch out! Watch out! Watch out!" With these words he and his companions vanished. I woke up and found myself sitting in bed. My shoulders were as cold as ice.

That's my dream. Make of it what you like. It's just a dream, but if

anything in it is good for our souls, let's take it. However, I wouldn't want you to talk about it with outsiders. I told it to you because you are my children. I positively don't want you to tell it to others.

Meanwhile, I assure you, I have you all present in my mind as I saw you in the dream, and I can tell who was diseased and who was not, who was eating [those sweets] and who was not. I am not going to disclose each boy's condition here, but I will do so privately.

Now here is the *strenna* for the New Year: "Frequent and sincere confession, frequent and devout Communion."

We will make three comments. The first one is in the very words of the chronicler, Father Ruffino:

In telling his dreams, Don Bosco gives only a summary of what exclusively concerns the boys. Had he desired or been free to tell them in their entirety, each account might have filled a whole volume. Every time we had a chance to question him at leisure about the dreams, his answers disclosed so many new angles and details as to double and triple his previous narration. Many times, even on his own, he hinted at having received knowledge of future events — often, though, in a veiled way — events which he either was not free to manifest or could not explain.

Father Ruffino made the above comment on January 30, 1861. We must therefore infer that Don Bosco had already told other dreams of which we have no record, or, at least, that with great wealth of details, reflections, and warnings he narrated those dreams which we scarcely mentioned in the preceding volumes. Whatever the case, we cannot help but concur with Father Ruffino's statement because, after hearing these narratives from Don Bosco's own lips, we came to the same conclusions.

The second comment is from Father Rua and concerns the authenticity of the knowledge Don Bosco received from the dreams of the boys' spiritual condition. Father Rua declared:

Someone may think that, in manifesting his pupils' conduct and personal secrets, Don Bosco was availing himself of information he had received from the boys themselves or from the young clerics supervising them. I can state with absolute certainty that, throughout the many years

I lived with him, neither I nor any of my companions ever noticed any such thing. Furthermore, boys can hardly keep a secret, and since all of us were then young and always with them, we would easily have found out whether he had received private information. The belief that Don Bosco could read our sins on our foreheads was so common that, when anyone committed a sin, he shied away from Don Bosco until he had gone to confession. This happened particularly whenever Don Bosco narrated a dream. This conviction arose in the pupils especially when they saw that in confession — even when they were perfect strangers to him — he told them sins they had forgotten or were trying to conceal.

Besides showing them their state of conscience as he had seen it in his dreams, Don Bosco used to announce things one could not humanly know, such as future deaths and other events. The more I consider these facts and revelations of Don Bosco as I grow older, the more deeply am I convinced that God had endowed him with the gift of prophecy.

The third comment is strictly our own. From this dream we may see that Father Cafasso was the judge in matters of piety and moral conduct, Silvio Pellico in what concerned diligence in studies and work, and Count Cays in matters of obedience and discipline. The sweets perhaps symbolize the food of those who are only beginners in God's service, and the bitter-sweet cookies the more substantial nourishment of those who have already progressed in God's service. To all, however, we can truthfully apply the words of the Psalmist: "He fed them with the best of wheat and filled them with the honey from the rock." [Ps. 80, 17]

CHAPTER 62

A Dream: Consciences Revealed (Continued)

THE long-lasting effects of the above-described dream on Don Bosco's boys were amazing. Father Dominic Ruffino and Father John Bonetti reported these effects in their chronicles; together, they present a fairly complete narrative of what was happening at the Oratory in the spiritual realm. They tell us of an unremitting struggle between good and evil, between the spirit of light and the spirit of darkness, of victories and defeats, of falls and rises. They also picture the work of God's minister. Afire with zeal, enlightened and strengthened from above, he heartens the young fighters facing formidable, mysterious battles, strengthens the brave ones, and drives back the obstinate foe.

This astonishing battle of the spirit will take on greater dimensions as other dreams and other incidents follow one after another during this year, highlighting such wonders as the spiritual struggles of individual boys and clerics, their calling to the Salesian Congregation or the priesthood, the future of their earthly lives, and the growth of the Salesian Congregation.

We shall here confine ourselves mainly to the text of the two chronicles we have cited ¹ to indicate our determination to adhere strictly to the truth:

Father Bonetti's Chronicle

January 1 [1861]. [Today] Don Bosco had a hard time trying to shake off the boys. One wanted to know if he was among the diseased;

¹ See pp. 282f. [Editor]

another, if his heart was clogged with clay; a third, if his totals had been approved and he had been given the bitter-sweet cookies and biscuits. Wishing to satisfy all as a good father, Don Bosco spent nearly the whole day with these boys, as one by one they trustingly went to him to learn their spiritual condition. He told them the section of the dream that concerned them and then — as was his custom — gave them a personal message for the new year. John Bonetti's message read: "Seek souls and you will give your soul to God."

We cannot estimate how much good this dream did to the boys. Let us just say that those who had been unmoved by the good example of their companions, the saving advice of their superiors, and even the talks of several retreats were finally shaken and vied with each other in making a general confession to Don Bosco himself, who deeply rejoiced at Our Lord's signal favor to his beloved boys. Anxious to see everyone take advantage of this special grace, he told us things which would thoroughly convince us that this mysterious dream of his was one of those gifts which God occasionally gives to His chosen souls.

January 10 [1861]. Today another incident further convinced the boys that God had used that extraordinary dream to show Don Bosco his children's spiritual condition. This is what happened:

A boy had repeatedly kept back a sin in confession. During these days of salvation, increasingly troubled by remorse of conscience, he decided to make a general confession to Father [Matthew] Picco who was then just beginning to come to the Oratory for the purpose of priestly ministry. The lad told all his past sins, but, when he came to that particular sin, he again felt shame and concealed it. That morning, on his way to the sacristy, he met Don Bosco on the stairs. "When will you come for your general confession?" Don Bosco asked.

"I've made it already," he replied.

"You must not say that."

"Yes, Father, I made it the day before yesterday to Father Picco."

"Nonsense, lad. You made no general confession. Tell me: Why did you keep back this sin? . . ."

The youngster hung his head and tears welled in his eyes. Sobbing, he went to the sacristy and made a most comforting confession.

The cleric John Cagliero, who had heard Don Bosco's account of the dream and was friendly with all the boys, questioned this lad who somewhat reluctantly told him the above-mentioned incident. However, Don Bosco himself never revealed to anyone but the

interested person what he had learned about him in dreams. This mutual exchange of confidences between Don Bosco and the pupils who had experienced his loving solicitude [for their spiritual welfare] made it ever clearer that God spoke through Don Bosco's mouth.

Father Ruffino's Chronicle

January 11 [1861]. Many boys look worried, sad, and troubled; several are getting ready for a general confession. Very many want to speak to Don Bosco; to each he reveals most important, intimate matters of conscience. I saw a few cry as if they had been told very bad news. Others are glad because they have been reassured.

A young cleric whom I know well asked Don Bosco about his spiritual condition. "Be brave," he replied, "and try to detach your heart from worldly things. Do your utmost to banish darkness from your mind and come to understand what true, selfless piety is. Through confession endeavor to purify your heart of anything which may still taint it. Enliven your faith which is essential to understand and achieve piety. That is my assessment of your spiritual state."

The Oratory is singularly blessed. "We have boys," Don Bosco said to a large number of youngsters crowding around him during recreation, "who are even more devout than Dominic Savio. One especially — hardly ever noticed by his schoolmates — can tell me after Mass the distractions and thoughts I had while saying it."

Father Bonetti's and Father Ruffino's Chronicles

January 12 [1861]. This morning Don Bosco called a boy to his room and said, "Last night I saw Death threaten you with his scythe. I grabbed him by the arm. 'Let go!' he cried, facing me. 'This boy is unfit to live. Why should he go on living when he does not respond to your care and abuses God's favors?' I begged him to spare you, and he disappeared." Surprised and shaken, the poor fellow tearfully made his confession at once and resolved to lead a better life.

At the "Good Night" that evening Don Bosco told this dream, without saying that it was his or that it concerned someone at the Oratory. The incident would have remained unknown, except that the same night after the "Good Night" Bartholomew C . . . went up to the cleric [John] Bonetti and confided to him that Don Bosco himself had had that dream

and that he was the boy concerned. He also candidly admitted that he had not made a good confession since his First Communion, but that his conscience was now in order.

Father Ruffino's Chronicle

Sunday, January 13 [1861]. Most of the artisans — especially the bookbinders — made general confessions without being urged by anyone to do so.

A youngster said to Don Bosco in the playground: "Father, nearly all of us went to confession at Christmas. How come so many of us were in such a bad shape in your dream?"

"You are asking me something I am not free to say," Don Bosco replied. "I know the reason and, strictly speaking, can reveal it, but not to everyone. I will tell it privately only to those concerned, if they ask. But many things I cannot tell even privately."

Father Bonetti's and Father Ruffino's Chronicles

January 13 [1861]. At the "Good Night" Don Bosco said, "As things stand now, I feel I must speak clearly about the dream which, as I told you, lasted three consecutive nights — December 28, 29, and 30. The first night we discussed current theology, and the dream enlightened me on many matters. The second night we debated contemporary moral cases bearing especially on the spiritual condition of the Oratory boys. The third night we dealt with individual cases and I came to know the spiritual condition of each and every boy. At first, I refused to give the dream any importance, for God forbids such conduct in Holy Scripture. But these past few days, after checking privately with several boys on what I had learned of them in the dream and being assured of the truth of my knowledge, I could no longer doubt that God was giving the Oratory boys an extraordinary grace. I feel bound, then, to tell you that the Lord is speaking to you loudly and clearly. Woe to those who will not heed Him.

"Father Cafasso made all go into a long hall and gave each one a tablet. Some had all their accounts in order. Others had numbers, but no total. Did every boy get a tablet? No, because many were outside, lying on straw mattresses or seated on benches, on the bare ground or in the mud. Some boys were covered with hideous wounds and sores.

"Those who had received their tablet went out to play, but not all took part in the games because many had a mist over their eyes or were

blindfolded, and still others had moth-eaten hearts. Those whose totals had been approved are those whose consciences are in order.

“Those whose numbers had not been totaled are those whose consciences are in order, but they have not yet summed matters up by going to confession.

“I can name all those who were lying down. I can tell you why they were lying on straw mattresses, benches, or on the bare ground. I saw the very inside of your hearts. Many hearts were lined with most fragrant roses, lilies, and violets, symbolizing charity, purity, and humility, but others. . . ! Moth-eaten hearts meant hatred, spite, envy, aversion, and so on.

“Some boys had vipers in their hearts, signifying repeated mortal sins; others had clay, a symbol of attachment to earthly, sensual things. Empty hearts meant that those boys — though in the state of grace and detached from worldly things — do not strive through prayer to acquire the holy fear of God. They lead a careless life; even if they manage to avoid the devil’s first snare, they will still become bad gradually.

“Hence, my dear boys, if you have not yet put your conscience in order, do not delay any further. Come to me. Only promise that you will not hide anything. If you don’t know what to say, don’t worry; I’ll say it for you. I can tell each of you his past and present as well as a little of his future. I really shouldn’t be telling you these things. My dear boys, I shudder at the thought. I assure you I would never have believed that this very Oratory had so many boys in such a spiritual mess. No, I would never have believed it! I was amazed to see so many boys covered with sores, lying on the ground. I tell you, I spent frightful days and nights. I praise those who have already cleared their consciences, but there are many who are still not giving it a thought.”

As he spoke with deep emotion, tears were falling from his eyes. After a short pause he bade us all good night. Many boys also wept. His words obtained their desired effect.

Father Ruffino’s Chronicle

January 15 [1861]. The artisans are still flocking to Don Bosco for general confessions.

Today some boys asked Don Bosco, “Father, how is it that you had the first dream at Christmas time and you did not tell us right away?”

“I have already answered that question,” Don Bosco replied. “At first, I did not care to believe the dream; on the other hand, it seemed

quite important and I took time to think about it. I called a boy whom I had seen covered with the most sores in the dream and said to him, 'You have this and that on your conscience,' according to the sores I had seen on him. He admitted that it was really so. I called another, with the same result. I saw my dream fully verified again when I spoke to a third boy. After this, I could no longer doubt. That dream showed me the present spiritual condition of all my boys and also much of their future."

Later, Don Bosco told a few confidentially, "I learned more theology during those three nights than in all my time at the seminary."

January 16 [1861]. After dinner a few clerics asked Don Bosco for his opinion of various theological trends in the field of morals and of theories on the efficacy of grace. "I have studied these questions carefully," he replied, "and my policy is to do whatever promotes God's greater glory. What do I care if a theory is strict or lenient? The important thing is that it succeeds in guiding souls to heaven."

As a matter of fact, whenever Don Bosco mentions a new project, his norm is always to first examine if it is conducive to the greater glory of God. If it is, he minds neither labor nor expense. Nothing matters, as long as the undertaking advances God's glory. He often urges us to do our best to prevent sin. "When it is a matter of preventing sin," he tells us, "let nothing stand in your way. Prevent sin at any cost."

Father Rua too asked Don Bosco, "Is what you told us really a dream?"

"I really don't know," he replied. "The fact is that when it was over, I found myself sitting in bed and feeling very cold." And he smiled.

That Don Bosco's dreams were no mere dreams can be seen from their effects. When Francis Dalmazzo² came to the Oratory, Don Bosco asked him: "What will you do when you are through at the Oratory?"

"I'll be a druggist or some such thing," the boy replied.

"Wouldn't you like to become a priest?"

"No."

"Still, I want to make a priest out of you."

Dalmazzo looked at Don Bosco and laughingly said: "You won't succeed."

Three months of the school year are over now and Dalmazzo is most attached to Don Bosco. He often tells him, "If you will let me, Father, I would like to become a priest."

January 26 [1861]. Seemingly Don Bosco's dream also showed him

² See p. 453. [Editor]

other boys who are now not at the Oratory. One day, when some of his closest co-workers were around him and Don Bosco was reminiscing about some past pupils who now were leading a bad life, he exclaimed, "If I could only speak to them. I am sure that if they were clearly told of their present spiritual condition, they would yield to grace. Take A. . . , for example. I've never met him. Yet I could tell him what's on his conscience." He paused a while in thought and then went on, "If I could see as clearly in the evening as in the morning, I could hear three times as many confessions. In the morning, while I hear one boy, I see the spiritual condition of all the others waiting their turn, even though they have not said a word to me."

We must also mention his kindness to his penitents. A lad who had just finished his confession said, "I still have one more thing."

"What is it?"

"I wish you'd let me kiss your feet."

"There is no need. Just kiss my hand as that of a priest."

The youth wept openly as he kept saying, "How I wish I had known what I know now! How happy I'd be! Thanks for opening my eyes!" And he walked away in tears. Later, when he was himself again, he went back to Don Bosco to confer with him on his spiritual welfare.

As always, Don Bosco was also concerned about boys who were not Oratory pupils, as can be seen from a letter of his to Marchioness [Mary] Fassati:

Turin, Epiphany, 1861

Dear Marchioness,

Last Thursday I forgot to mention two things to you and to the marquis:

1. Would you kindly try to get me an English prayerbook for Countess Bosco's son?

2. Our young convert, Dominic Landon, is leaving tomorrow for Biella, where he will be an assistant in a boys' boarding school, as agreed with Bishop Losana. He needs clothes, and I freely recommend him to the charity of his godparents. One word to the cleric John Turchi will be reply enough.

May the Lord give you a good day and bless your whole family.

Devotedly yours,

Fr. John Bosco

Don Bosco later told Countess Bosco's son of the marchioness' reply:

January 9, 1861

My dear Octavius,

Marchioness Fassati was unable to find the English prayerbook you had asked for. She will keep looking, but meanwhile she sent me a booklet by St. Alphonsus on how to love Jesus Christ. She tells me it is an excellent English translation.

Be strong, dear Octavius! Beware of bad companions; keep away from them. Look for good ones and imitate them. God's holy fear and His grace are our greatest treasures.

Your affectionate friend,

Fr. John Bosco

While caring for his boys, Don Bosco did not neglect his *Letture Cattoliche*. The January issue by Louis Friedel was entitled *Virtuous Sons*. . . . The story was preceded by an appeal for subscriptions.³

The February issue was the valuable little work of St. Leonard of Port Maurice: *Holy Mass, the Hidden Treasure*. . . . and the March issue by Father Re was entitled *The Life of St. Cyprian, Martyr*. . . .

This year *Letture Cattoliche* spread to Alghero, Cagliari, and Iglesias in Sardinia.

³ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

CHAPTER 63

A Memorable Retreat

ON January 23 [1861], the feast of Our Lady's Betrothal, John Boggero — a young teacher at the Giaveno Seminary — was accepted into the Salesian Society. He had applied the previous December.¹ The minutes of the Superior Chapter read:

On January 23, in the year of Our Lord 1861, the Superior Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met to consider the application of the cleric John Boggero, son of Michael, of Cambiano. After invoking the Holy Spirit's aid, we voted and the cleric was unanimously admitted to the Society.

Such occasions brought Don Bosco much joy. The exemplary conduct of these clerics and their serious study of philosophy and theology made him hope that they would become efficient, zealous priests. He urged them on to a deeper knowledge of Holy Scripture by continuing his weekly "Testamentino" sessions. We have already narrated² how he had them memorize a set of verses of the New Testament, and then on Thursdays [a school holiday] he would have them recite them at a meeting and would occasionally comment on the verses himself. Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry:

On January 31 [1861] at a "Testamentino" session, Don Bosco commented on these verses of St. Luke: "Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there shall be great earthquakes in diverse places, and pestilences and famines and terrors from heaven,

¹ See p. 467. [Editor]

² See pp. 109f. [Editor]

and there shall be great signs. But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you. . . .” [Luke 21, 10-12]

After speaking of the world’s destruction, Don Bosco remarked: “If one were to believe certain revelations and prophecies, this could seemingly take place toward the end of this century. One could say that many of the predicted signs are here already. We see war upon war, nation against nation, brother against brother. The Church is oppressed, priests are persecuted and killed, and outrageous sacrileges are left unpunished. Pope Saint Gregory, too, inferred from many signs of his times that the Lord’s coming was near, but he missed the point and so will others, since it is a secret God reserves to Himself. Still, we must not disregard these signs, because the steady succession of so many frightful upheavals and woes is but a sad, slow prelude of the inevitable final catastrophe — a persistent reminder of the great day of triumph for God’s justice. As for ‘pestilences and famines’ we shall have them — if not this year, then next year, or two or three years from now. These ‘pestilences’ do not mean just war casualties. We shall have a real epidemic — cholera, perhaps; people will beg for bread and there will be none; or bread will be on hand and no people to eat it.”

Undoubtedly, Don Bosco was alluding to some revelation — if we may call it that — because his various dreams kept mentioning pestilence, famine, and war without ever stating the time, though they would seem to be contemporary.

Since hereafter we shall frequently meet Don Bosco’s descriptions of future events, we think it opportune to quote some observations drawn by Father Vigoroux³ from the Church Fathers concerning Old Testament prophecies. They are adaptable to our own case as long as the Church does not disapprove, for only she can make valid pronouncements on the supernatural inspiration of God’s servants. Vigoroux states:

Prophecies are often obscure for several reasons, the main ones being:

1. Our own ignorance. . . .

2. The prophecies themselves. Unavoidably, they cannot be clear and precise because they predict future events, describing them only in a general way and omitting a great many details. We might say that prophe-

³ Fulcan Grégoire Vigoroux (1837-1915) was one of the key figures in the Catholic Scripture revival. [Editor]

cies give us but a sketch, not a full picture, of the future. Just as some ancient events are still obscure to us because we have only a fragmentary knowledge of them — for instance, the story of Lamech in Chapter 4 of Genesis — so, also, prophesied events are equally obscure because we have merely a few clues to go by.

3. We have no clear-cut distinction between periods of history. Prophecies are like pictures without perspective. Often God reveals at one and the same time events which will take place in different epochs. He presents them as part of one and the same design, regardless of imminent or remote fulfillments — as, for example, the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction and the end of the world in Chapter 24 of St. Matthew. It is for this very reason that prophecies are extremely difficult to grasp. (*Manuel Biblique*, Vol. II, Part 3, Ch. 1, Art. 1, No. 899)

We now return to our narrative. At this time, the Oratory was making a novena to prepare for the feast of St. Francis de Sales, usually postponed to the following Sunday. On February 1 [1861], after asking the Oratory patron saint's blessing on an expansion plan of his, Don Bosco filed a request with Turin's mayor for permission to take over part of the city street leading to the nearby gun barrel factory and to close Via della Giardiniera to traffic. The mayor returned the request two weeks later with comments from the city building commission so that Don Bosco could discuss the plan with adjoining interested proprietors.

The chronicles of Father Bonetti and Father Ruffino carry this summary of Don Bosco's "Good Night" on [Friday] February 1:

This Sunday we shall celebrate a beautiful feast [that of St. Francis de Sales]. It calls for cleanliness of body and soul. True, we have had confessions without end — general and particular — all this past month and your consciences are all in order. Yet, I desire [something more] — that all the boys of this world, especially the Oratory boys, gain a plenary indulgence.

I said that you all have your consciences in order, but that is not really true. Some are still turning a deaf ear and resisting God's call. Obviously, something stronger than God's voice is needed to shake them up. These boys are so few that one can hardly refer to them in the plural, but it is still very unfortunate that there should be some who do not take advantage of so many extraordinary graces. I myself have learned more during those three nights than during the whole of my life.

I hope that these unfortunate lads will heed the Lord's warning, but if they continue to delay clearing up their consciences, I will call them myself.

The feast of St. Francis was celebrated with the usual solemnity on Sunday, February 3. *L'Armonia* ran a short article on the celebration on February 6 [1861].⁴

On Monday, February 4, Don Bosco left for Bergamo where he had been invited by Bishop Peter L. Speranza to preach the spiritual retreat to the seminarians. One of them — the cleric Locatelli — was appointed to escort Don Bosco from his room to the pulpit. He was later to become rector of St. Alexander's Church, a subsidiary of the cathedral. He told us of the efficacy of Don Bosco's simple, incomparable eloquence. Midway through his sermon on hell, Don Bosco, deeply moved and sobbing uncontrollably, stopped abruptly, unable to continue. The impression on his audience was indescribable.

Father Bonetti's and Father Ruffino's chronicles continue as follows:

An incident that took place during this retreat convinced us strongly that Don Bosco sees far into the future. On Wednesday evening, February 6 [1861], at about six, he wrote to Father Alasonatti, telling him among other things: "Yesterday, Tuesday, the devil scored a telling victory among the Oratory boys, and I am afraid he will do the same today." While writing, he could also see that two boys, Jarach and Parigi, were at that very moment writing a note to him. He then saw them chasing each other in the playground. He closed his letter with greetings to both of them. That evening at supper with the seminary staff, he jokingly remarked, "Today, while writing a letter to the Oratory, I saw two boys writing a letter to me."

"How is that possible?" they exclaimed.

"Tomorrow you'll see if it's true or not!"

The next day, Thursday, Father Alasonatti received Don Bosco's letter. At the seminary, during dinner, a servant brought a letter for Don Bosco.

"It's from Turin," the faculty members remarked.

Don Bosco opened it and, to everybody's astonishment, delightedly

⁴ Omitted in this edition. [Editor]

pulled out two short notes from Jarach and Parigi. After night prayers that evening, Father Alasonatti publicly read Don Bosco's letter. All were painfully surprised, but the letter told the truth.

Meanwhile, as Don Bosco continued the retreat, he won over the seminarians' hearts by his persuasive sermons and his down-to-earth familiarity. Mingling freely with them in recreation, he told them jokes and stories, squatting on the ground with a crowd of them about him in a semicircle. The rector, however, was not too happy with this approach. In his opinion, it did not befit priestly dignity, but the seminarians were immensely pleased. Had they been allowed, one and all they would have followed him to Turin. We cannot adequately tell how much good Don Bosco did during that retreat. It was referred to in the following letter to Father Michael Rua, Don Bosco's successor:

Lomello, March 4, 1891

Very Reverend and dear Father,

I am glad I can bring my little tribute of esteem and grateful affection to Don Bosco's saintly memory, by telling you something that may be useful to his fortunate biographer.

In 1861, our most revered Don Bosco preached a spiritual retreat to the Bergamo diocesan seminarians. I was one of them. In one of his sermons he spoke more or less as follows:

"On a certain occasion I was allowed to ask Our Lady for the grace of having several thousand boys with me in heaven (*I think he also specified the number, but can't remember*) and the Blessed Virgin granted me the favor. If you wish to be included too, I shall be happy to admit you. The only condition is that, for the rest of your life, you say a Hail Mary every day — possibly at Mass and, preferably, at the Consecration."

I don't know what the others made of this proposal, but I myself accepted it joyfully because of the very high esteem I had then acquired for Don Bosco. As far as I can remember, I have never missed my daily Hail Mary for that intention. However, with the passing of years, a doubt came to my mind which I once asked Don Bosco to clear up. On January 3, 1882, as I was passing through Turin on my way to the Jesuit novitiate at Chieri, I obtained an audience with Don Bosco, who received me very warmly. When I told him I was about to become a

Jesuit, he said, "I am delighted to hear it! When I learn that someone enters that Society, I am as happy as if he were joining the Salesians."

Then I said to him, "With your permission, I'd like to ask you to clarify a matter I have much at heart. Father, do you remember preaching a spiritual retreat at the Bergamo seminary?"

"I certainly do!"

"Do you recall telling us of a grace you asked of Our Lady?" I reminded him of his words and of the condition he had stipulated.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I have always said that Hail Mary and will always say it, but you spoke of thousands of *boys*! I'm afraid I'm no longer one of those lucky ones!"

Without hesitation, Don Bosco replied, "Keep on reciting the Hail Mary, and we shall be together in heaven." After receiving his holy blessing and affectionately kissing his hand, I left with joy and the hope of one day being really with him in heaven.

If this can bring glory to God and honor to Don Bosco, I promise that I'm ready to confirm it by oath.

Your humble servant,

Father Stephen Scaini, S.J.

What follows is from Father Bonetti's chronicle:

Don Bosco returned from Bergamo on February 9 [1861]. He was awaited with trepidation by a few, with great joy by the rest. As it was Saturday, he hastened to warn those who had fallen prey to the devil. The following day he disclosed that some boys had already approached him and others he would send for, but that still others kept running away as soon as they spotted him. During the day he met some of these boys and asked, "Well, what happened?" The poor fellows broke down and went to confession.

Sunday, February 10. This evening four or five of us were with Don Bosco in his room while the rest of the community was watching a play. I (John Bonetti) asked him how he could see things from a distance. He replied, "It's like having telegraph wire stretched from my head to wherever my thoughts take me. All I have to do to set up communications is to think of whatever I want to know, and I immediately see what is going on. For instance, I am now here in my room. Well, if I so wish, I can see a boy in the porticoes."

"How?" we insisted. "It's hard to understand."

“That’s because you can’t catch on to my tricks!” And so he laughed off our attempts. Then, looking at us lovingly and pressing us to him, he said, “You are fortunate indeed because you are young and still have time to do many wonderful things for God and gain many merits for heaven, but I (*and he said this with emotion*) am already old and will soon have to die and go empty-handed to the Lord.”

In reply, one of us remarked, “Father, you can’t say that. You are working without rest day and night. You can’t say you are empty-handed!”

“Well,” he replied, “what I do, I am bound to do. I am a priest, and even if I gave my life I wouldn’t be doing more than my duty.”

“If that is so,” we replied, “it’s better not to become a priest.”

“Oh, no!” he corrected us. “Suppose God makes you clearly understand that it is His will? Would you resist? You can’t. You must obey. However, I console myself with the thought that God is very merciful. If, when we shall appear before Him, we can say, ‘We have done what You have commanded,’ we shall hear those consoling words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; because you have been faithful over a few things, I will place you over many. Enter into the joy of your Lord.’” [Matt. 25, 23]

February 17. Today, Sunday, Don Bosco said: “This time the Oratory is driving the devil bankrupt. We can say he is utterly defeated. True, he never gives in, he will attack again and again, and he will tackle us one by one (which means that each of us must be on guard), but he has just suffered a trouncing the like of which he has probably never received from such a group before. I tell you candidly that the effect of that dream is something that has no counterpart in history. It is something unheard of, foolishness in the eyes of the world, but the height of wisdom before God. No matter how long the Oratory lives on, it will perhaps never again witness such an experience. *Deo gratias!*”

We then urged him to write his dream, but he replied, “I can’t, for two reasons. First, there are things concerning myself and others which I am not free to reveal. Second, many things would not be understood. What I will do is write the theological discussions of the first two nights. I will leave out the actual moral cases and jot down just the principles. As for what happened the third night, I shall certainly not write anything. Whatever can be recorded to God’s greater glory, I will disclose privately.” He then told us of something that had happened to him that very day:

“One boy was still afraid to make his general confession. I sent for

him with the message that, even if he did not want to make his confession to me, he should come because I had something to tell him for the good of his soul. He still refused, until a good friend tactfully took him by the hand and led him to my room. Breaking through the crowd of boys waiting for confession, he asked me, 'Do you want me?'

"'Who are you?' I asked in reply.

"'I am so and so.'

"'Good! Listen now! Since you do not want to make your confession to me, I'll just tell you what you have to confess. I don't mind in the least if you go to some other priest. In your mind now, go back to such and such a year, and recall this sin and that!' I told him everything. The poor boy was stunned. 'I might as well make my confession to you right now,' he said. 'I don't want to tell these things to anyone else.'

"'In that case,' I said, 'come tomorrow evening. I have much to do now because it's Saturday and I have no time. Come tomorrow between five and eight and we will clear up everything.' He did so and went away so happy that it was a joy to see him."

Don Bosco told this to three or four persons only, not to all.

That evening he gave the "Good Night":

"So far," he said, "I've told you of your past life. Now I'll have something to say to each one of you privately concerning your future and the enemies you must guard against. Noteworthy things which are said and done in our house should be kept within the house. If they are known to outsiders, they may be looked upon as fables. But we believe that when something is helpful to souls, it must certainly come from God and cannot come from the devil. I have an exceptional piece of news to give you: the devil has been badly beaten in this house and, if we keep this up, he will be totally defeated."

We will here mention something which happened repeatedly at the Oratory. At times, boys going to confession to Don Bosco did not properly examine their consciences or needed help to overcome their shame or to unravel their spiritual difficulties. Sometimes they merely sought the easier way out. In these cases, instead of beginning their accusation, they would say to Don Bosco: "Please, Father, you tell my sins." And Don Bosco would tell each one all he had done with surprising accuracy. Hundreds of witnesses can bear this out — among them Father Davico and Father Belmonte. It happened, too, that Don Bosco occasionally would find the sac-

risty thronged with boys waiting for confession. He would take a look at them and then say to one or another, "You may go to Communion." He knew their consciences were clear. The boys themselves went away happy, convinced that Don Bosco had read into their hearts. Often, we ourselves, on our way to the altar to say Mass, had difficulty in crossing the sacristy through a crowd of kneeling boys waiting their turn for confession. When we returned after Mass, the sacristy was empty, and Don Bosco was preparing for Mass.

Many times too, while he was hearing confessions, something extraordinary would occur. He would spot a boy kneeling in a far corner. Overlooking the others, he would beckon him to approach. Surprised by the invitation, the lad would do so and make his confession ahead of the rest. A diligent observer who enjoyed his companion's confidence found that in all these cases the penitents had been hesitant about going to confession.

Sometimes, along with spiritual health, Don Bosco also restored physical well-being, as we gather from Father Ruffino's chronicle:

In 1861 an Oratory boy named Rebuffo, broken in health for the past twelve months and tormented by violent headaches and stomach and liver troubles, was forced to drop out of school. Feeling very dejected, he was advised by a friend to write a note to Don Bosco. He tried to, but, unable to put a few lines together, he again turned to his friend and asked him to write for him. The note follows:

[No date]

Very Reverend Father,

My illness seems to get worse the more medicine I take. On top of that, I am upset by having to interrupt my studies so long.

I am convinced that, if you wish, you can cure me at once. Have pity on me then and, if I am not worthy of such a great favor, at least comfort me, Father. Some time back, I noticed you had something on your mind to tell me. Please, Father, do not keep me in suspense any longer. Tell me clearly what you think of me, and I shall be tranquil.

Forgive me, dear Father, for presuming to speak to you like this, but you yourself inspired me to do it. For this reason I hope you will grant my prayer.

Two days later Don Bosco called him to his room, heard his con-

fession, and, after exhorting him to place his confidence in Dominic Savio, blessed him. The boy's pains did not abate; rather, his headaches became worse than ever. Don Bosco then suggested, "Tomorrow go to school and to dinner with the others, and start a novena to Dominic Savio."

As soon as Rebuffo left Don Bosco's room, all his pain ceased. He carried out Don Bosco's suggestion and has been healthy and happy ever since.

We shall add a few more items of Father Bonetti's chronicle:

Don Bosco was grateful to God for having made him an instrument of His favors to the Oratory. However, since certain evidently supernatural gifts, above all his virtues, won him the deep esteem of his boys and outsiders, he would often remark: "I am indifferent to either praise or blame. If people praise me, they only tell me what I should be; if they blame me, I am told what I really am."

February 18 marked the start of the Lenten catechetical instructions in the festive oratories. On the 22nd, the nosegay he gave the boys was to speak Italian rather than their own dialect until Easter, saying he was sorry that they were no longer using their beautiful national language.

February 25. Don Bosco promised to give us a tip every evening [till the end of the month]. He began with this one: "The strongest, most effective means to avoid repeating sin is to carry out your confessor's suggestions."

February 26. "The best time to ask and obtain favors from God is the time of the Elevation." For this reason, Don Bosco desired that vocal praying, singing, and even organ music should cease [during that time].

February 27. "The best, simplest, and easiest way to assist at Holy Mass is that suggested by St. Leonard of Port Maurice. Divide the Mass into three parts. From the beginning to the Elevation meditate on Our Lord's Passion; from the Elevation to Communion, on our own sins and the sorrow we should feel for them; from Communion to the end, on the resolution to sin no more."

This evening the [Superior] Chapter of the Salesian Society met to consider the application of Father Joseph Rocchietti, son of the late Peter of Turin. The votes cast were all favorable, and the new member was admitted to the Society.

Father Rocchietti had returned to the Oratory because his health had apparently improved.

CHAPTER 64

Excerpts from the Oratory Chronicles (Continued)

DON Bosco had promised to tell the boys their future if they asked for it. Though there is much to say on this subject, we will limit ourselves to three instances which occurred during these days.

To the cleric John Turchi, Don Bosco said, “Look, if you stay with me, you will never want for anything. All you will need to do is obey. If you leave, you will be very sorry!” After giving him some norms of conduct, he added, “You’ll have to travel a great deal. . . .”

After Don Bosco’s death, our good friend Father John Turchi personally told us of this prediction, adding, “I did indeed travel — first to Bologna and Rome, and then to France, Austria, Bavaria, England, and Scotland. As for sorrows, I certainly had very heavy ones after leaving the Oratory.” He said this while yet unaware of the many sufferings still awaiting him. After obtaining his doctorate in letters, he spent several years tutoring children of noble families. Later he taught rhetoric in several seminaries and became director of a boarding school. Finally, various reasons compelled him to seek a chaplaincy at Our Lady of Consolation Shrine in Turin. On becoming ill, he had to retire to the Little House of Divine Providence.

Father Ruffino’s chronicle has this entry:

February 10 [1861]. Don Bosco said today to young Francis Dalmazzo: “You will live forty-nine years; you will don the clerical habit and remain at the Oratory. After Don Bosco’s death, you will become a canon.”

Dalmazzo was born July 18, 1845 and died March 10, 1895 as rector of the Catanzaro seminary. A few weeks later, Don Bosco surprisingly foretold his own future, as we gather from Father Ruffino's notes:

Don Bosco said to some of us, "When times are again peaceful and the Church is free, I will go to Rome with ten boys, and then I will sing my *Nunc dimittis*."

"Will you stay in Rome?" they asked him.

"No, I will return."

This prophecy was verified to its last detail when he went to Rome in March, 1887, for the consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart, as we shall later narrate.

In 1887, times could well be said to be peaceful and the Church free, in comparison with the oppression felt in 1861. For instance, Bishop Gallo of Avellino, arrested at Naples on February 26, 1861, was forced to undertake a long, disastrous journey by land and sea to Turin, where he joined Philip Cardinal De Angelis, then under house arrest in the residence of the Vincentian Fathers. Both had to remain there until 1866 because their presence in their own dioceses annoyed the government.

Those were very sad days for the Church. More than seventy bishops had been removed from their sees or imprisoned; countless priests had been jailed; sixty-four priests and twenty-two monks had been shot. In December 1860, Commissioner Gioachino Pepoli suppressed religious orders and confiscated church properties in Umbria, while Commissioner Valerio did likewise in Marche. In February 1861, the same destruction was being wrought in the kingdom of Naples by Pasquale Mancini who enforced the 1855 law suppressing religious orders. Seven hundred and twenty-one monasteries and convents were closed down, about 12,000 religious — men and women — were dispersed, and the properties of 104 collegiate churches were confiscated. Sicily was temporarily exempted from these plunderings because an uprising by the people was feared. Finally, on March 31, 1861 all cemeteries were removed from church jurisdiction.

On March 17, 1861, Turin broke out into a colorful frenzy of

celebrations, music, and parades. The revolutionaries were beside themselves with joy because Victor Emmanuel II had been proclaimed king of Italy. On March 25 Camillo Cavour declared in Parliament: "Rome must be Italy's capital because Italy without Rome is unthinkable."

Father Ruffino's chronicle continues:

Don Bosco wrote to Pius IX, but his news was far from consoling. He informed the Pope that it would be solely through the special grace of Our Lady if he were not forced to leave Rome. On March 7, Don Bosco notified the cleric Francis Vaschetti at Giaveno: "A terrible storm is brewing over the Oratory." He then added that the thorns they would have to tread on were two "M's" and one "R" — *Malattie* [Sicknesses], *Moralità* [Morals], and *Rivalità* [Rivalries].

On March 4, from Fossano where he was staying for reasons of health, Don Bosco wrote to Father Alasonatti, "Things are not going well at the Oratory, especially for some boys whose names begin with 'F.' Tell Chevalier Oreglia, Father Rua, and Turchi that we shall have to tread on thorns for a while but shall later gather most fragrant roses."

To Canon Rosaz, who had invited him to preach at Susa, Don Bosco sent the following reply:

Fossano, March 15, 1861
1st Year and 2nd Day of the Kingdom of Italy

My dear Canon,

A little patience is good for everybody. I have some stomach trouble and cannot preach. I have left Turin for a few days, but I have not improved much. If you wish, I will find a substitute to give the sermon on the Holy Childhood, but if you can find someone right there, do so *in nomine Domini*.

For the present, God's will be done. I'll be happy to oblige some other time. I may come, but not to preach. May the Lord keep us all in His holy grace.

Your affectionate friend,

Fr. John Bosco

After Don Bosco's return from Fossano, Father Ruffino's chronicle continues as follows:

During all recreation periods Don Bosco is busy telling each boy privately what enemies he is to guard against. He told me, "Your enemies will be bad counselors."

Don Bosco has beheaded (as he likes to say)¹ Costamagna and four others; he has invited them to join the Salesian Congregation.

April 7. Today, eleven-year-old Lawrence Quaranta of Vernate died at the Oratory.

On the previous Christmas Eve Don Bosco had announced that within a few months several of his pupils would be dead. Thus the first "M," that is, *Malattie* [Sicknesses], was coming to pass as he had told the cleric Vaschetti [on May 7]. A few days later another pupil was to die.

Meanwhile Paravia Press had printed the April issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled *Edifying Examples for Youths* — a collection of stories about people from various walks of life. . . . The May issue, *The Church*, was by Monsignor Louis Gaston de Ségur. . . .

While Don Bosco worked untiringly, a few of his dedicated sons got together during this year, 1861, to record for posterity the most important words and deeds of their beloved father. In previous years several boys and young clerics, especially [Dominic] Ruffino and [John] Bonetti, had jotted down fairly extensive reports of what they had seen and heard. Now at this meeting they intended to examine and evaluate these reports and see to it that this important, useful project would continue. In a preliminary meeting Ruffino summed up and recorded their intentions as follows:

Don Bosco's outstanding brilliant gifts, his extraordinary experiences which we admire to this day, his unique guidance of young people along virtue's arduous paths, and his grand plans for the future are indications to us of some supernatural intervention; they portend a glorious career for him and for the Oratory. All this lays a strict duty of gratitude upon us; we are bound to see to it that nothing concerning Don Bosco is allowed to fall into oblivion. We must do all we can to record everything for posterity, so that one day, like a blazing torch,

¹ See Vol. III, pp. 94f; Vol. IV, p. 295. [Editor]

it may illumine the whole world for the salvation of youth. This is the goal of the following commission: Father Victor Alasonatti, Father Michael Rua, Father Angelo Savio, Chevalier Frederick Oreglia of Santo Stefano; the clerics John Turchi, John Cagliero, John Baptist Francesia, Celestine Durando, Francis Cerruti, John Baptist Anfossi, Francis Provera, John Bonetti, Charles Ghivarello, and Dominic Ruffino.

At this first meeting, the clerics Charles Ghivarello, John Bonetti, and Dominic Ruffino were appointed to be the chief reporters.

At the second meeting, held March 3, 1861, the following officers were elected: Father Michael Rua, *President*; John Turchi, *Vice-President*; Dominic Ruffino, *Secretary*. John Cagliero, John Baptist Anfossi, and Celestine Durando were absent. At this meeting a draft of Don Bosco's dream of December 28 [1860]² was read. All agreed on its essential points but recommended clarification of some details. After scheduling another session for April 1, the meeting was adjourned.

Signed:

Fr. Michael Rua

[Monday] April 1. The meeting opened at 2 P.M. with a quorum of eight members. The minutes of the previous meeting were read and approved. There followed a report of incidents occurring on January 31 and February 10: the prophecy during the "Testamentino" lesson,³ the cure of Rebuffo,⁴ and Don Bosco's tricks.⁵ The report was approved. The meeting adjourned and the next was scheduled for Saturday evening.

[Monday] April 8. The meeting opened at 2:30 P.M. with thirteen members present. The first part of Don Bosco's dream⁶ of April 3, 4, and 5 was read and approved after a few corrections and additions. It was decided to ask Father John Borel⁷ for information on the Oratory's early years.

[Wednesday] May 1. The meeting opened at 1:30 P.M. with eight members present. John Turchi, whose task it was to research incidents of the Oratory's beginnings, read the dream of "The Twenty-Two

² See pp. 478ff. [Editor]

³ See pp. 492f. [Editor]

⁴ See pp. 500f. [Editor]

⁵ See pp. 497f. [Editor]

⁶ See the next chapter. [Editor]

⁷ See Vol. I, pp. 341f. and the Index of Vol. II. [Editor]

Moons”⁸ and the appearances of Don Bosco’s dog “Grigio.”⁹ Both drafts were approved and the meeting was adjourned.

[Tuesday] May 7. The meeting opened at 1:30 P.M. with seven members present. The draft of the first half of the dream of May 2¹⁰ was read and approved.

In other meetings the draft of the second half of the dream of May 2 was read, corrected, and approved. The members then went on to evaluate the very brief chronicle of John Turchi which we quoted in the previous volumes along with the Ruffino and Bonetti chronicles. We can therefore be certain of the authenticity of the reports of these trustworthy witnesses. In the course of years, others took up and continued this work, inspired by their love for Don Bosco and an equally intense love of truth. Thanks to them, without fear of rebuttal we can now, when speaking of Don Bosco, make our own the words of the sacred historians: “Are not these things written in the book of the words of the days. . . ?” [3 Kings 15, 7]

⁸ See Vol. V, pp. 243f. [Editor]

⁹ See Vol. IV, pp. 497-502. [Editor]

¹⁰ See Chapter 67. [Editor]

CHAPTER 65

A Dream: Hiking to Heaven

WE shall now narrate another inspiring dream of Don Bosco which occurred on the nights of April 3, 4, and 5, 1861. "Its striking details," Father Bonetti remarks, "will aptly convince our readers that this is such a dream as God now and then graciously sends to His faithful servants." We shall report it here as detailed in Bonetti's and Ruffino's chronicles.

"After night prayers on April 7," they wrote, "Don Bosco mounted the little rostrum to give the 'Good Night' and spoke as follows:

I have something very strange to tell you tonight — a dream. It's only a dream, so do not give it more importance than it merits. Let me first tell you, though, that I am quite honest with you, as I would like you to be honest with me. I keep no secrets from you, but what is said within the family should be kept in the family. I don't mean to imply that it would be a sin to tell others, but even so I'd rather you didn't. Talk about it all you want, and laugh and joke to your heart's content among yourselves, or even with those few who may — in your opinion — benefit spiritually from it.

This dream has three parts because it lasted three nights. This evening I'll tell you only the first part, leaving the rest for other nights. Surprisingly, on the second and third night I resumed the dream at the very point I had left off when I awoke.

PART ONE

Since dreams come while sleeping, I too was asleep. A few days ago, having to go out of town, I passed by the green-clad hills of Moncalieri.¹ I was deeply impressed. Possibly this charming scene came back

¹ A suburb in the hills overlooking Turin. [Editor]

to my mind, stirring a desire to go hiking. As a matter of fact, that's what I decided to do in my dream.

I seemed to be with my boys in a vast plain which stretched out to a massively high hill. As we were all standing there, I suddenly proposed a hike.

"Yes, yes!" they all cheerfully shouted. "Let's go!"

"Where to?" we asked one another undecidedly. While we looked hopefully at each other for suggestions, someone abruptly blurted out, "Let's hike to heaven."

"Yes, yes, to heaven!" the cry arose on all sides.

We started off, and after a while we reached the foot of the hill and began climbing. A magnificent view soon unfolded before our eyes. As far as we could see, the hillside was dotted with trees and saplings of all kinds — some small and tender, others tall and vigorous, none thicker than a man's arm. There were pears, apples, cherries, plums, vines, and other fruit trees. Amazingly, each tree had some flowers just blossoming and others in full bloom, some fruits just forming and others lusciously ripe. In other words, each tree showed the best of each season at one and the same time. The fruit was so plentiful that the branches sagged under its weight. Surprised at this phenomenon, the boys kept asking me for explanations. To satisfy their curiosity somewhat, I remember saying, "Well, it's like this. Heaven is not like our earth with its seasons. Its climate is always the same, embodying the best of every season. It is very mild and suitable for every tree and plant."

We stood entranced by the beauty surrounding us. The gentle breeze, the calm, and the fragrant air about us left no doubt that this climate was ideally suited to all kinds of fruits. Here and there, the boys were plucking apples, pears, cherries, or grapes while slowly climbing. When we finally reached the top of the hill, we thought we were in heaven, but in reality we were quite far from it.

From this vantage point we could see, beyond a vast plain, an extensive plateau and, in its center, a very lofty mountain soaring straight up to the clouds. Many people were determinedly struggling up its steep sides, while on its summit stood One inviting and encouraging them to go up. We also spotted some persons descending from the top to help those who were too exhausted to continue the steep climb. Those reaching the top were greeted with vibrant cheers and jubilation. We understood that paradise was at that peak, and so we started downhill toward the plateau and mountain.

After covering a good part of the way — many boys were running

far ahead of the crowd — we were in for quite a surprise. Some distance from the foot of the mountain the plateau held a big lake full of blood. Its length would extend from the Oratory to Piazza Castello. Its shore was littered with human limbs, fractured skulls, and remnants of corpses. It was a gruesome sight, a veritable carnage! The boys who had run on ahead stopped in their tracks terrified. Being far behind and having no inkling of what was ahead, I was surprised to see them stop with horrified looks on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted. “Why don’t you keep going?”

“Come and see!” they replied. I hurried over and gazed upon the grim spectacle. As the others came up, they too took in the scene and immediately became silent and dispirited. Standing on the banks of that mysterious lake, I sought a way across, but in vain. Just in front of me, on the opposite bank, I could read a large inscription: *Per sanguinem!* [Through blood!]

Puzzled, the boys kept asking one another: “What does all this mean?”

Then I asked someone (who he was I can’t remember) for an explanation, and he replied, “This is the blood shed by the very many who have already reached the mountain’s summit and are now in heaven. It is the blood of martyrs. Here, also, is the blood of Jesus Christ. In it were bathed the bodies of those who were martyred in testimony of the faith. No one may enter heaven without passing through this blood and being sprinkled by it. It guards the Holy Mountain — the Catholic Church. Whoever attempts to attack her shall drown in it. The torn limbs, mangled bodies, and broken skulls dotting the shore are the gruesome remains of those who chose to fight the Church. All have been crushed to bits; all have perished in this lake.”

In the course of his explanation, the mysterious youth named many martyrs, including the papal soldiers who died defending the Pope’s temporal power.

Then, pointing eastward to our right, he showed us an immense valley four or five times the size of the lake. “Do you see that valley?” he asked. “Into it shall flow the blood of those who will pass this way to scale this mountain — the blood of the just, of those who will die for the faith in days to come.” Seeing that the boys were terrified by all they saw and heard, I tried to encourage them by saying that, if we were to die martyrs, our blood would flow into that valley, but our limbs would not be tossed about like those of the persecutors.

We then hastened to resume our march, skirting the shore of the lake. At our left stood the hill we had come down from; at our right

were the lake and mountain. Where the lake ended, we saw a strip of land dotted with oaks, laurels, palms, and other trees. We went through it in search of a trail to the mountain, but only came across another vast lake. Floating in its waters were dismembered human limbs. On the shore stood an inscription: *Per aquam!* [Through water!]

“What does all this mean?” the boys again asked, mystified.

“This lake,” someone replied, “holds the water which flowed from Christ’s side. Small in quantity then, it has increased, is still increasing, and will keep increasing in the future. This is the baptismal water which washed and purified those who climbed this mountain. In this same water all who must still climb will have to be baptized and purified. In it must be cleansed all those who want to go to heaven. There is no other way to paradise than through innocence or penance. No one can be saved without being cleansed in this water.” Then, pointing to the dismembered limbs, he added, “These are the remains of those who have recently attacked the Church.”

Meanwhile, a number of people and some of our own boys, too, were swiftly darting across the lake, skimming over the waters without wetting the soles of their feet. We were astonished at this, but were told, “These are the just. When the souls of the saints are freed from their bodily prison or when their bodies are glorified, they not only can tread lightly and swiftly over water, but they can also fly through the air.”

Hearing this, all the boys, eager to cross the lake like the other people, looked at me inquiringly. No one, however, dared attempt it.

“For my part, I don’t dare,” I replied. “It would be rash to believe ourselves so just as to be able to cross the lake without sinking.”

“If *you* don’t dare, we dare even less,” they all exclaimed.

Continuing on our way, always skirting the mountain, we reached a third lake as large as the first, full of flames and more torn human limbs. On the opposite shore an inscription proclaimed: *Per ignem!* [Through fire!]

While we were observing that fiery lake, that same mysterious person spoke again and said, “This is the fire of the charity of God and His saints. These are the flames of love and desire through which all must pass if they have not gone through blood and water. This is also the fire with which tyrants tortured and consumed so many martyrs. Many are they who had to go through it before climbing the mountain. But these flames will also serve to reduce their enemies to ashes.”

Thus for the third time we were seeing God’s enemies crushed and defeated.

Wasting no time, we advanced past the lake and came upon a fourth one, even more frightening, shaped like a huge amphitheater. It was full of dogs, cats, wolves, bears, tigers, lions, panthers, snakes, and other fierce monsters eager to pounce upon anyone within their reach. We saw people stepping over the heads of these raging beasts. We also saw boys fearlessly following them and suffering no injury.

I tried to call them back, shouting as loudly as I could: "Stop! Can't you see that those beasts are just waiting to devour you?" It was useless. They didn't hear me and kept treading upon the monsters' heads as if they were on firm, safe ground. My usual guide then said to me: "Those beasts symbolize the devils, the dangers and snares of the world. Those who step over them unharmed are the just, the innocent. Don't you know what Holy Scripture says? 'They shall tread upon the asp and the viper; they shall trample down the lion and the dragon.' [Cf. Ps. 90, 13] It was of such souls that David spoke. And doesn't the Gospel say: 'Behold, I have given you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you'?" [Luke 10, 19]

We still kept asking one another: "How shall we cross over? Do we have to step over these wild beasts too?"

"Yes, let's go!" someone told me.

"I don't dare!" I replied. "It would be rash to believe ourselves so good as to be able to tread safely over these fierce beasts. Do as you wish, but not I."

"Then we won't try it either," the boys concluded.

We left that place and came upon a vast plain crowded with noseless, earless, or headless people. Some, moreover, had no limbs, others had no hands or feet, and still others had no tongue or eyes. The boys were simply struck dumb at such an odd sight. A mysterious person explained: "These are God's friends. To save their souls, they have mortified their senses and performed good works. Many lost parts of their bodies in carrying out harsh penances or in working for God or their fellow men. The headless ones are those who in a special manner consecrated themselves to God."

While we were pondering these things, we could see that many people, having crossed the lake, were now ascending the mountain.

We also saw others, already at the top, helping and encouraging those who were going up, giving them joyous, hearty cheers of welcome as they reached the top. The handclapping and cheering woke me, and I found myself in bed. This ended the first part of the dream.

The following night, April 8, Don Bosco again spoke to the boys, who couldn't wait to hear the continuation of the dream. He began by repeating his prohibition to put their hands on one another or move around the study hall, and added, "If one has to leave the study hall, he must ask his monitor's permission." By now the boys were becoming restless. Smiling upon their upturned faces, Don Bosco briefly paused and then went on thus:

PART TWO

You will remember that at the bottom of a deep valley, near the first lake, stood another lake yet to be filled with blood. Well, after seeing all I have already described and going around that plateau, we found a passage taking us into another valley, which in turn opened into a large, wedge-shaped plaza. We entered it. Wide at the entrance, it gradually tapered into a trail at its other end near the mountain. At this point the trail was wedged between two huge boulders so close together that only one person at a time could squeeze through. The plaza was filled with cheerful, happy people, all heading for the narrow mountain trail.

"Could that be the trail to heaven?" we asked one another. As the people reached it and squeezed through single-file, they had to pull their clothes tight, hold their breath, and discard whatever they carried. This sufficed to convince me that surely this was the way to heaven, for I remembered that, to get there, one must not only rid himself of sin, but also give up all worldly ties and desires. "There shall not enter into it anything defiled," says the Apostle John. [Apoc. 21, 27] We stood briefly watching that scene. Then we did a very foolish thing. Instead of trying to squeeze through the trail, we turned back to see what was happening in the valley past the entrance of the plaza. We had noticed a great crowd of people far off, and we were curious to know what went on there.

We started off on a boundless stretch of land and were faced by the odd sight of people and many of our boys yoked to various kinds of animals. "What can this mean?" I mused. Then it flashed across my mind that the ox is a symbol of laziness, and I understood that those boys were lazy. I clearly recognized them. They were habitually indolent, sluggish in their work. So I said to myself, "It serves you right! Stay where you are! If you don't want to work, that's just where you belong!"

I saw others yoked to donkeys, carrying loads or grazing. These were the stubborn boys who obstinately resist suggestions and orders. Other

lads were paired with mules and horses, reminding me of what Holy Scripture says: "He has become like the horse and the mule which have no understanding." [Ps. 31, 9] These were the boys who never give a thought to their souls. Such empty heads!

Still others were feeding with pigs. Like them, they grunted and wallowed in the mire. These were the boys who feed on earthly pleasures by gratifying their lower passions. They are far from their heavenly Father. What a sad spectacle! They reminded me of what the Gospel says about the prodigal son being reduced to that sad state "by loose living." [Luke 15, 13]

Finally, I saw a multitude of people — and some of our boys too — cavorting with cats, dogs, cocks, rabbits — animals symbolizing thieves, scandal-givers, braggards, and spineless individuals who don't have the courage to stand up for their religious beliefs. We now realized that this valley represented the world. I took a good look at each of the boys, and then we moved on to another very large area of that boundless plain. The ground sloped so gently that we did not even notice it at first. A little way off there seemed to be a flower garden, and we decided to look at it. We first came across most beautiful red roses. "How gorgeous!" the boys shouted, running to pluck a few. But they were disappointed! Though full-blown and colorful, those roses were rotten inside and gave off an extremely foul stench. Fresh-looking violets were there too, but when we picked a few we saw that they also were blighted and smelly.

We kept going and came to several charming groves of trees laden with luscious fruit. They were truly enticing orchards. A boy ran up to a tree and plucked a large pear. A more beautiful one would be hard to find. Yet, as soon as he bit into it, he flung it away in disgust. It was stuffed with clay and sand and tasted awful. "How can this be?" we asked.

One of our boys, whose name I well remember, replied, "Is this all the world can give us? It's a worthless sham!"

While we wondered where we were headed for, we became aware that the road was sloping, though ever so slightly. One boy remarked, "We're going downhill. It's no good!"

"Let's take a look, anyway!" I replied.

Meanwhile, a vast multitude of people overtook us and kept going down the road in coaches, on horseback, or on foot. The last-named group kept jumping and running about, singing and dancing or marching along to the beat of drums. The merrymaking was beyond description.

“Let’s wait a while and see before going along with them,” we decided.

Presently a couple of boys noticed some individuals in the crowd who seemed to be directing various groups. They were handsome, well dressed, and quite gracious in manner, but it was obvious that their hats covered horns. That vast plain, then, symbolized our wicked, corrupt world so well described by the Holy Spirit: “Sometimes a way seems right to a man, but the end of it leads to death.” [Prov. 16, 25]

Then and there a mysterious person said to us: “See how men almost unknowingly fall into hell.” At this I immediately called back the boys who had gone ahead. They ran to me, crying, “We don’t want to go down there!” Still shouting, they kept running back to where we had come from, leaving me alone. When I finally caught up with them, I said, “You’re right. Let’s get out of here, or we too shall fall into hell before we realize it!”

We wanted to return to the plaza from which we had set out and finally get started on the trail to the mountain. Imagine our surprise when, after a long walk, we saw no trace of the valley leading to heaven, but only a meadow. We turned this way and that, but could not find our bearings.

“We have taken the wrong road!” someone cried.

“No, we haven’t,” replied another.

While the boys were arguing, I woke up. Thus ended the dream on the second night.

Before sending you to bed, though, I must tell you one more thing. I do not want you to give any importance to this dream; just remember that pleasures which lead to perdition are deceitful; they are not pleasures at all! Remember also to be on guard against bad habits which make us so similar to beasts and deserving of being yoked with them. Guard especially against sins that turn us into unclean animals. It is, indeed, most unbecoming for a man to be brought down to the level of beasts, but it is far more unbecoming for a creature made to God’s image and likeness, an heir to heaven, to wallow in the mire like swine through those sins which Holy Scripture labels “loose living.”

I told you only the highlights of my dream — and briefly too — because to narrate it as it was would take too much time. As a matter of fact, last night too I gave you but a hint of what I saw. Tomorrow night I will tell you the rest.

On Saturday² night, April 9, Don Bosco continued the narration of his dream:

² An oversight! April 9, 1861 was a “Tuesday.” [Editor]

PART THREE

I would rather not tell you my dreams. In fact, the night before last I had no sooner started my narration than I regretted my promise. I truly wished I had never said a word at all. However, I must confess that if I kept these things to myself I would feel very uneasy. Narrating them, in fact, is a great relief. I will therefore continue with the last part of the dream. Let me first say, though, that the past two nights I had to cut short many things which were better left unsaid, and I left out others which could be seen but not described.

After taking in all the scenes I mentioned, after seeing various places and ways through which one may fall into hell, we were determined to get to heaven at all costs, but try as we might, we always strayed off and came upon new sights. Finally we hit upon the right road and reached the plaza; it was still crowded with people striving to go up the mountain. If you remember, it gradually tapered into a very narrow trail wedged between two lofty boulders. Just beyond them was a rather long, very narrow, railless bridge spanning a frightful gorge. As soon as we saw the trail, we all shouted, "There it is! Let's go." And so we did.

Some boys immediately began running, leaving their companions behind. I wanted them to wait for me, but they had got it into their heads to arrive there first. On reaching the bridge, however, they became frightened and stopped. I tried to urge them to advance bravely, but they refused.

"Go ahead," they replied. "You try it first, Father! The bridge is too narrow. If we miss one step, we're through!" Finally one boy mustered enough courage to attempt the crossing; another followed him and then the rest. Thus we reached the foot of the mountain.

We looked for a trail but found none. We walked around looking for one, but our search was hindered on all sides by boulders, crags, ravines, and briars. The climb looked steep. We knew we were in for a hard time. Nevertheless, we did not lose heart and eagerly began to work our way up. After a short but very exhausting climb with hands and feet, occasionally helping one another, the obstacles began to decrease until we finally found a trail and were able to climb more comfortably.

Eventually we reached a spot on the mountainside where a great many people were suffering such horrible and strange pains that we were filled with compassion and horror. I cannot tell you what I saw because it's too distressing and you could not bear it. I leave this out entirely.

We saw also very many people climbing the mountain on all sides. As they reached the summit they were greeted with loud cheers and applause by those who were already there. We could also hear a truly heavenly music, a most melodious singing, which encouraged us all the more to keep climbing. While we ascended, a thought struck me, and I said to the boys near me, "Isn't this funny? Here we are on our way to heaven, but are we alive or dead? What about the judgment? Or have we already been judged?"

"No," they replied laughingly. "We are still alive."

"Well," I concluded, "alive or dead, let's get to the top and see what's there!" And we quickened our step.

By dint of perseverance we finally got close to the summit. Those already there were getting ready to greet us, but, as I looked behind to see if the boys were following, I found to my great sorrow that I was almost alone. Only three or four boys had kept up with me.

"Where are the others?" I asked, somewhat upset.

"They stopped here and there," was the answer. "Perhaps they will come up later!"

I looked down and saw them scattered about the mountain trail, hunting for snails, picking scentless wild flowers, plucking wild berries, chasing butterflies and crickets, or just resting on some green patch under a shady tree. I shouted as loud as I could, waved to them, and called them by name, urging them to hurry up and telling them that this was no time to rest. A few heeded me, so that now I had about eight boys around me. All the others turned a deaf ear, busy with silly trifles. I had no intention at all of going to heaven with only a few boys, and therefore I decided to go down and get after those lazy fellows. I told the boys near me to wait and then I started down.

As many boys as I met, I sent up the mountain. I urged, exhorted, reprimanded, even jabbed and shoved, as needed.

"For heaven's sake, go up," I kept saying. "Don't waste time on trifles!"

In the end, after reaching nearly every one of them, I found myself almost at the scarp of the mountain which we had climbed with so much effort. Here I stopped some boys who, exhausted and discouraged, had given up the ascent and were on their way down. As I turned to resume the climb with them, I stumbled against a stone and woke up.

Now that you have heard the whole dream, I ask two things of you. First, don't tell it to outsiders, because they would only make fun of it. I tell you these things just to please you. Talk about this dream among

yourselves all you want, but remember that it is only a dream. Secondly, please don't come to ask me if you were there or not, who was or wasn't there, what you were or weren't doing, if you were among the few or the many, where I saw you, or similar questions, because then we would have a repetition of last winter's commotion.³ For some this could be more harmful than useful, and I don't want to disturb your consciences.

I only tell you that, if this had not been a dream but reality and we had died then, of the seven or eight hundred boys we have here, very few would have made it to heaven — perhaps only three or four.

Now, lest you get me wrong, let me explain this rash statement. What I mean is that only three or four would make it *straight to heaven* without having to go through purgatory. Some might have to spend only a minute there; others, perhaps a day; still others, several days or weeks; nearly all, at least a short time. Now would you like to know how to avoid that? Strive to gain as many indulgences as you possibly can. If you rightly carry out these practices of piety to which indulgences are attached and gain a plenary indulgence, you will go straight to heaven.

Don Bosco gave no private explanation of this dream to any of the pupils and said very little otherwise on the various meanings of the things he had seen. It would not have been easy. This dream, as we shall show, portrayed a variety of tableaux: the Oratory as it was and as it would be; all the boys who were there now or would come later — each with his moral traits and his future; the Salesian Society — its growth, vicissitudes, and destinies; the Catholic Church — her persecutions and triumphs; and other events of general or particular interest.

With tableaux so bewildering in their vastness and interaction, Don Bosco simply could not thoroughly describe everything he had so vividly seen in his dream. Besides, discretion dictated — and duty required — that some things be kept secret or disclosed only to prudent persons to whom such a revelation might be comforting or serve as a warning.

In narrating to his boys the various dreams of which we shall have occasion to speak in due time, Don Bosco only told them what was best for them, since this was the intent of Him who gave

³ A reference to the aftermath of the dream about the boys' states of conscience. See Chapter 62. [Editor]

these mysterious revelations. Occasionally, however, because of the deep impression he had received, in an effort to choose his subject matter, Don Bosco hinted vaguely at other incidents, things, or ideas. Occasionally these seemed incoherent and unrelated to his narrative, but strongly suggested that he was holding back much more than he told. Such is the case in his narration of the hike to heaven. We shall attempt to throw some light upon it both by quoting a few words we heard from Don Bosco and also by making a few comments of our own. However, we submit them to the readers' judgment.

1. Seemingly, the hill Don Bosco met at the start of his hike is the Oratory. Its verdure suggests youth. There are no old trees there, large and lofty; rather, youth's blossoms are ever flowering, and flowers and fruit blossom and ripen in every season. Such is the Oratory, or such it should be. Like all of Don Bosco's works it is sustained by charity, which Holy Scripture describes as a garden blessed by God, yielding precious fruits of immortality, similar to Eden's garden, where stood also the tree of life.

2. The mountain climbers are prefigured in the man described in Psalm 83, whose strength comes from the Lord. In this valley of tears he — and many others too — resolved to climb steadily to the summit of the mountain, to the tabernacle of the Most High, that is, to heaven. [Cf. Ps. 83, 6] Our Lord, the lawgiver, will bless them, fill them with His grace, and help them to grow in all virtues until they see God in the heavenly Jerusalem and are eternally happy with Him.

3. The lakes seemingly sum up the history of the Church. The countless severed limbs scattered about the shores are the remnants of persecutors, heretics, schismatics, and rebellious Christians. From certain expressions of Don Bosco in his dream we gather that he saw events both present and future. The chronicle remarks: "Speaking privately to a few about the vast valley near the lake of blood, Don Bosco said, 'That deep valley is to be filled especially with the blood of priests, perhaps very soon.'"

The chronicle continues: "During the last few days Don Bosco paid a visit to Cardinal De Angelis who said to him: 'Tell me something to cheer me up.'"

“‘Very well, I will tell you a dream.’

“Don Bosco then began to narrate his dream, but with more details and remarks. When he came to the lake of blood, the cardinal became serious and sad. Don Bosco cut his account short, saying, ‘That will be all for now!’

“‘Go on,’ said the cardinal.

“‘Not now,’ Don Bosco repeated, and then passed on to more cheerful topics.

4. The straight, narrow pass between the two boulders, the narrow wooden bridge (Our Lord’s Cross), the self-assurance of a man of faith that he can cross it, the peril to which a man exposes himself in so doing if he does not have the right intention, the various obstacles before the mountain trail becomes passable — all this, if we are not mistaken, may refer to religious vocations. The people in the plaza may be boys called by God to serve Him in the Salesian Society. In fact, all those waiting to start on the trail to heaven looked happy and content and enjoyed themselves. This would indicate mostly young people. As for the climbers who had stopped in their ascent or were turning back, could this not suggest a cooling in following one’s vocation? Don Bosco’s own interpretation of this incident could indirectly allude to vocations, but he did not deem it wise to elaborate.

5. On the slope of the mountain, just past the initial obstacles, Don Bosco saw people in pain. Father Bonetti’s chronicle offers this explanation: “Several asked him about this privately, and he replied, ‘This place symbolized purgatory. If I had to preach on this subject, I’d just describe what I saw. It was simply frightful. There were all kinds of torments. I will only say that I saw people crushed under presses, hands, feet and heads sticking out all around, eyes bursting from their sockets. These people were so badly squashed and crushed that the sight was truly blood-curdling.’”

We shall conclude with an important observation which can apply to this and other dreams which we shall narrate. In these dreams or visions, as they may be called, there nearly always appears a personage who acts as Don Bosco’s guide or interpreter. Who can he be? This is the most amazing and consoling part of these dreams, but Don Bosco kept it in his heart.

CHAPTER 66

Excerpts from the Oratory Chronicles (Continued)

THE events of the past three months had not affected the Oratory's usual tranquillity and cheerfulness, thanks in part to the diversion offered at frequent intervals by sacred festivities, lively recreations, wholesome carnival amusements, stage plays, and other pastimes. Through the sacrament of Penance, the momentary and salutary worries of many pupils were turned into a lively joy that made pastimes more enjoyable. Don Bosco himself kept providing new ones for them. We shall now draw again from Father Ruffino's chronicle:

April 11, 1861. After much memorizing and rehearsing under the skillful coaching of the cleric John Baptist Francesia, the students staged a Latin comedy written by the distinguished Jesuit, Father Louis Palumbo, who also composed the Latin invitation to classical-minded benefactors.

A copy is still extant [and we shall report it in the Appendix].¹

As we can see, then, Don Bosco wisely made sure that his youngsters did not yield to depressing fears [of their eternal salvation]. He never ceased administering spiritual remedies to those in need, but always at the right time, in the right measure, and in so fatherly a way that they unfailingly proved beneficial. Father Ruffino's chronicle goes on as follows:

On April 12, Don Bosco lingered a while, as was his habit, for a

¹ See Appendix 16. [Editor]

chat with his beloved clerics. One of them asked, "How is it that Quaranta's death² made no impression on the boys?" Don Bosco replied, "I did not in the least try to make an impression because there was no need to. Several boys would only have fallen prey to serious scruples unless I kept a close check on them. Had I wanted to make an impression, I would have draped the church doors in black and displayed the body for all who wished to pay their respects. I could also have had the various grades recite the Office of the Dead in church, but since no request was made for special prayers, I thought it better to let things be."

"Indeed," one of the clerics remarked, "after you told us your dream on New Year's Eve, there was no further need of anything. That dream did plenty of good in the house."

"Yes, the dream and its aftermath," Don Bosco went on, turning to the speaker, "because many things that I could not say publicly, I disclosed privately. Often a boy I sent for would not come, and, when I eventually chanced upon him, I would ask, 'Why didn't you come? Why keep that snake (and I would name the sin) in your heart?' This would bring a blush, a sob, and 'When can I come for confession?'"

Another cleric expressed his surprise at the ease with which so many boys concealed sins, even when they had their choice of several confessors.

"Not all confessors," Don Bosco replied, "have the skill, experience, and means to search consciences and flush out the foxes that gnaw at the heart. A priest may be an excellent confessor for adults, but not for boys. For the fruitful confession of young people, a priest would find it helpful to go to them, mingle with them, come to know their inclinations, and even, on occasion, make an examination of conscience for them. A confessor for boys should be able to see the relationship between their misdeeds and their character flaws. He must, because boys do keep things back in confession. Indeed they do. Their two great enemies are shame and fear of losing their confessor's esteem. At the beginning of the year a new boy once came to see me and asked, "Do they make priests here?"

"Yes!" I replied.

"I don't want to be a priest. Will I be forced to become one?"

"Far from it! On the contrary a pupil is allowed to study for the priesthood only after he has given clear signs of a vocation. Without them he will not be permitted to don the clerical habit."

"All right, I'll stay on condition that I won't be forced to become a priest."

² See p. 505. [Editor]

“Don’t worry, nobody will force you if you don’t have a vocation.”

“Even if I had it, I wouldn’t want to be forced.”

Some time later he said he wanted to go to confession to some unknown priest at the Monte dei Cappuccini Church or at Our Lady of Consolation Shrine. I said, “You may go with a companion, but on one condition.”

“What is it?”

“That you tell the priest this and that.” And I told him his sins.

The boy was amazed and gasped, “Those are just the sins I was ashamed to confess! Now I may as well confess them to you.”

Just now we are scarcely halfway through the school year, and he is one of the most keenly intent on becoming a priest.

Meanwhile, under the spell of the last dream,³ a few boys applied for admission to the Salesian Society, as we gather from the following minutes of the Superior Chapter:

On April 16, 1861, the Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met to consider the admission of the following: Joseph Reano of Foglizzo, son of Philip; Hyacinth Perucatti, son of Joseph, of Villa San Secondo; Thomas Louis Jarach, son of Charles Louis; Alexander Fabre of Caselle, son of Louis. All were unanimously admitted to the observance of our rules.

These young men were prompted to join the Salesian Society solely by their concern to save their souls, acquire merits, and cooperate in the moral regeneration of youth. It could not have been otherwise, for Don Bosco always spoke of the soul. For instance, at the “Good Night” on April 17, 1861, he spoke as follows:

King Charles of France, besieged by the English army, gave no thought to the war and tranquilly relaxed in his palace. His troops lost battle after battle, whole regions fell into enemy hands, and his kingdom was as good as lost. In such peril, his generals sent a distinguished officer to rouse him from his inertia, make him realize the gravity of the situation, and spur him to a last-ditch defense. When the officer called at the royal palace, he was made to wait two or three hours because the king was busy relaxing. Finally, the king received him courteously, but instead of asking him about the military situation,

³ See Chapter 65. [Editor]

he began to talk about hunting and parties and ended by inviting him to a game of cards.

The officer stared at his sovereign dumbfoundedly. "Haven't you heard me?" the king insisted. "What's on your mind?"

"Your Majesty," the officer replied, "I am stunned! I never saw a person go to his ruin so merrily!"

My dear children, the same can be said of many people whose conscience is loaded with sins, and yet who think of nothing but having fun while hell yawns beneath them.

Two days later, another Oratory death alerted those who might have needed a warning. Father Ruffino's chronicle reads:

On Sunday, April 21, feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph, at half past three in the morning, nineteen-year-old Charles Maffei of Buttigliera d'Asti died after a two-day illness which affected his spinal cord.

On December 24, 1860, Don Bosco had said, "Within a few months some of you will be no more. . . . I know of one . . . but he doesn't give it a thought."⁴

Maffei's death was unexpected. As at Quaranta's death, Don Bosco made no hasty remark or allusion to fulfilled predictions, and the boys' peace of mind was not disturbed in the least. A few young clerics, though, impressed by these two deaths and aware of Don Bosco's poor health, began to fear for his life and urged him to take care of himself and cut down on his work. In trying to convince him, one of them said, "Wouldn't it be better for you to work less and live perhaps ten years longer, rather than wear yourself out and die prematurely?"

"Yes," Don Bosco replied, "but how can you be so sure that by working less I will live ten years longer? As long as I can, I want to use all my energies for God's glory and the salvation of souls. I have no intention of ruining my health. I just intend to do all I can."

That same evening, after exhorting both students and artisans to offer up the customary suffrages for Maffei's soul, Don Bosco went on, "I have something on my mind that I'd rather not say, but I must. Some boys have been here since the start of the year, and yet they are almost total strangers to me. I don't like it. There are two extremes in this house: some boys are always around me, and others not only never come near but, as soon as they see me, they disappear. This grieves me because a father wants to see the children he loves. In my case, there is more than fatherly love. I wish and ardently yearn to save your souls.

⁴ See p. 468. [Editor]

I long to see those boys in order to have a word with them. To speak frankly, some boys need to straighten out their consciences, but I cannot get to them. I send for them and they refuse to come. Must I threaten? It is not that I want boys hanging around me during recreation. Indeed, I prefer them to go and play the whole period. I just don't want them to run away when I meet them. When I come into the playground, let it not happen again that, while a crowd swarms to me, four or five boys I particularly want to see are nowhere in sight. They run too, but in the opposite direction. . . . Let this suffice. I have a lot more to tell you but cannot in public. Good night."

After the boys retired to their dormitories, the members of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met in conference. The four new confreres — [Joseph] Reano, [Hyacinth] Perucatti, [Louis] Jarach, and [Alexander] Fabre — were presented to the assembly. Don Bosco gave a talk on charity, especially toward the young. Speaking about charity in general, he said, "Let us so conduct ourselves that anyone we are dealing with may leave us satisfied. Let us make friends with everyone who speaks with us. We must strive to increase the number of our friends and lessen that of our enemies. We must do good to all. Therefore let us be courteous with strangers; rich or poor, they expect it. In fact, those who are quite poor expect it more than others.

"As regards young people, our charity must show itself in kindness. It must never be said of any of us, 'He is strict and tough!' No, never should our pupils think that way of us. If we have to reprimand someone, let us call him aside and kindly help him to see his error, his disgrace, his own loss, or his offense to God. If we do otherwise, a boy will hang his head at our harsh words, even tremble in fear, but he will always try to avoid us. Such a reprimand will do little good. Should we catch a silly boy in some wrong-doing, we might, at worst, take him by the arm and say frankly, 'Can't you see the wrong you are doing? Don't you realize you deserve to be punished? Suppose I take you to the superior?'

"Above all, let us practice charity among ourselves too. If you have something against a companion of yours, get it off your chest right away without fear; do not hold a grudge. You may say something unwise, but it's a lesser evil. Say it and be done with it."

Don Bosco's words always had a salutary effect on his young clerics. On leaving his room, one would exclaim, "I will always stay with Don Bosco!"

"I too," echoed others.

One day these young clerics met Canon Michelangelo Vacchetta⁵ in town. "Why are you staying down there at Valdocco with Don Bosco?" he asked them.

"Because we want to," they replied.

The imprint that Don Bosco's training gave them singled them out from other seminarians. One day, while walking down Corso Valdocco by St. Aloysius Hospital, Canon Caesar Ronzini⁶ noticed the cleric John Garino across the street and beckoned him to come over. "What can I do for you, Canon?" the young cleric asked.

"Nothing in particular. I only wanted to know if you are one of Don Bosco's clerics."

"Yes, I am."

"I thought so! Good! I'm glad I guessed right. Whenever I meet a cheerful-looking, respectful, open-hearted cleric, I know he must be one of Don Bosco's. So far, I've never missed." Canon Ronzini was a great admirer of Don Bosco.

During the last few months, these good clerics, especially the upper-classmen, tried unsuccessfully to get a picture of Don Bosco. Pencil and brush balked at the task. Our good father's features always turned out altered and unrecognizable. They took him to a photographer, but even he could not succeed, although Don Bosco was, outwardly at least, cooperative. It was very odd! One day, when this was mentioned in his presence, he remarked, "If taking my picture would help souls, I would be all for it. Otherwise, I don't see any need for it." Souls were all he cared for!

Monday, April 29. The spiritual retreat starts today at 3 P.M. Father [John] Ciattino, the pastor of Mareto, will preach. He is very interesting and always full of fun. A boy made the resolution — and kept it — to observe total silence. The retreat will end on May 2.

Before the retreat began, Don Bosco sent for Francis Ghivarello and Joseph Dalmazzo, who were at home, so that they could make it too. They came and did not want to go home anymore.

At the "Good Night" on April 28, Don Bosco told the boys, "We are about to start this retreat in order to chase the devil out of here for good. Generally speaking, the devil already has a hard time here because everybody is kicking him out, but there are a few behind whose backs he can still hide. However, he can't hide in front of them."

During the retreat's two full days, Don Bosco nearly always heard confessions for three or four hours at a stretch before noon and for

⁵ See Vol. V, p. 32. [Editor]

⁶ See Vol. IV, p. 136. [Editor]

almost six hours in the afternoon. At the last sermon on May 1, after invoking divine blessings upon the king and members of Parliament for strength in peace and war, the preacher gave the boys the usual final blessing. However, when he tried to pull the pulpit crucifix from its stand, it would not come off. He then addressed himself to possible sinners in the audience who refused to be converted and so were responsible for his being unable to lift the crucifix in benediction over them. He pleaded with them to show themselves so that he could come down from the pulpit, kneel at their feet, and beg them in Jesus' name to be converted. He ended by saying that these sinners could still go to confession that evening or the next morning. This rhetorical flair made an excellent impression. When later questioned privately, the preacher confided that he had deliberately made believe that he could not lift the crucifix out, and that he had tried this on other occasions with great effect. "For those who love God, all things work together unto good." [Rom. 8, 28]

Father Ciattino also spoke of Don Bosco and made the boys realize God's favor in entrusting them to a priest so renowned for holiness. He also remarked how future generations of boys would envy their lot in having lived with Don Bosco.

"His reputation for holiness," Canon John Baptist Anfossi wrote, "grew apace with his works. It stemmed from his most exemplary life, his heroic virtues, and his charisms. How often I have seen priests and prominent people kneel at his feet for a blessing!"

Father Felix Reviglio observed: "Whenever I called on him, I noticed a new manifestation of virtue which convinced me that the just man daily advances in perfection until the hour of his eternal recompense."

This was especially true of his humility which shone even in the smallest actions, as we see from this entry in Father Ruffino's chronicle:

On May 4, 1861, a distinguished gentleman called on Don Bosco to recommend a boy. His words made it clear that he believed the Oratory to have been founded by an illustrious bishop to whom Turin should naturally feel grateful. In conclusion, he said that he had come to recommend a lad to Don Bosco in the hope that he was allowed to accept pupils. Don Bosco listened quietly and made no effort to set him

right, handling the case as though he really had to refer the request to a superior.

The gentleman left in satisfaction and complete admiration for the amiable way he had been received. Self-love would have prompted many a person to speak up in a case like this, but for Don Bosco this was but one of countless examples of his humility that we ourselves witnessed. It could not have been otherwise with a priest who was thoroughly imbued with the thought of death and eternity. He never lay down to sleep without first reciting the *Miserere*.

At this time Don Bosco's reputation for sanctity had already spread throughout Italy. John Villa declared: "I became aware of this reputation in 1862 while I was stationed at Osimo with the Tenth Infantry Regiment. One day I heard a priest — a nephew of the vicar general — speak of Don Bosco as of a holy priest. Around this time, too, another young priest, Father Salvatore, asked me what Don Bosco's secret was in winning young people's hearts so effectively. He even suggested that I ask Don Bosco. I did ask him shortly after my return to Turin on leave, and Don Bosco replied: 'There is no secret. If that good priest loves God, he will do better than I.'"

Because of his reputation, priests — newly-appointed pastors especially — frequently called on Don Bosco for advice on the spiritual direction of their parishioners. In 1867 he gave this norm to a pastor, Father Calandra: "Look after the young, the sick, and the old." This priest had been recently assigned to the parish of Boves in the Cuneo diocese, from which the former pastor had been driven out by his parishioners, and the bishop felt quite uncomfortable in sending him to this difficult parish. When Father Calandra called on Don Bosco for advice, the latter gave him the above-mentioned norm and added that he should linger with children when meeting them in the streets, pat them, and tell them to give his regards to their parents, that he should greet old people first, call them "Papa" or "Mama," and inquire after their health, and that he should visit the sick regularly and solicitously and provide the poor with what they most needed. Father Calandra carried out these suggestions and soon became the idol of his parishioners. In 1888 he told us that they had given him the hand-

some sum of 1,200,000 lire for the construction of a church, hospital, kindergarten, and rest home for the aged.

Great indeed was Don Bosco's reputation for holiness and wisdom, the fruit of his apostolic zeal. The government also recognized his merits as well deserving of the help of civil society and through Minister Miglietti gave the Oratory a subsidy of four hundred lire.⁷

⁷ We are omitting the routine notification of the granting of the subsidy.
[Editor]

CHAPTER 67

A Dream: The Wheel of Eternity

“**T**HE wise man’s heart,” we read in Holy Scripture, “knows times and judgments; for there is a time and a judgment for everything. Yet it is a great affliction for man that he is ignorant of what is to come; for who will make known to him how it will be?” [Eccl. 8, 5-7]

That Don Bosco knew when to toil and when to pause and explain, that he was not ignorant of things past and future concerning his mission, is further proven by the unswerving dedication inspiring the chronicles of Father Ruffino and Father Bonetti and the memoirs of Bishop John Cagliero, Father Chiala, and others who were privileged to hear Don Bosco’s words.

With remarkable accord, they report another dream in which Don Bosco saw the Oratory and its beneficial results, the spiritual condition of his pupils, their vocation — as Salesian priests or brothers or as laymen in the world — and, lastly, the future of his budding congregation.

Don Bosco’s dream occurred during the night of May 1, 1861 and lasted about six hours. At dawn on May 2, he arose and jotted down the dream’s highlights and the names of some of the various people he had seen in it. He narrated it after night prayers on three successive nights from the little rostrum in the porticoes. The first night, May 2, he spoke for nearly forty-five minutes. The introduction, as usual, seemed somewhat obscure and strange for reasons we have already explained ¹ and for others we shall soon give.

After announcing his topic, he continued:

¹ See pp. 482f, 493f, 518ff. [Editor]

This dream concerns the students only. Very much of what I saw simply defies description. I seemed to have just started out of my house at Becchi on a path leading to Capriglio, a village near Castelnuovo. I wanted to see a field belonging to my family in a little dale behind a farmstead called "Valcappone." As a boy I had often worked there. The field was very sandy and its yield barely equaled the taxes on it. As I was nearing it, I met a man in his forties, of average height, sun-tanned, and with a long, well-trimmed beard. He wore a tunic reaching to his knees and fastened around his waist, and a white beret. He seemed to be waiting for somebody. He greeted me cordially, like an old acquaintance, and then asked, "Where are you going?"

"To a nearby field of mine," I answered. "And what brings you around here?"

"Don't be so curious," he replied. "You don't have to know that."

"Very well. Will you at least tell me your name? You seem to know me, but you are a stranger to me."

"You don't have to know that, either. Just come along with me."

I followed him and after a few steps saw a large fig orchard. "Look at those figs!" the man exclaimed. "Aren't they luscious? Go ahead, help yourself!"

Taken aback by the sight, I replied, "That's funny! There never were figs here before!"

"There are now!" he replied.

"But this isn't the season for figs! They can't be ripe."

"But some are! If you want to pick them, hurry because it's getting late." I did not stir and so my friend insisted: "Hurry, don't waste time because it will soon be dark."

"Why do you rush me? Besides, I don't want any. I like to look at them and give them away, but I personally don't care very much for them."

"In that case, let's go on. But remember what St. Matthew's Gospel says about great events menacing Jerusalem: 'From the fig tree learn a parable: When its branch is now tender and leaves break forth, you know that summer is near.' [Matt. 24, 32] It's all the nearer now that the figs are already beginning to ripen."

We resumed our walk and came to a vineyard. "Perhaps you care for grapes," the man said. "Take some!"

"Not now! In due time I'll pick them from my own vineyard."

"But you have grapes right here!"

"Not now!"

"Can't you see how ripe they are?"

"I can hardly believe it. This isn't the season for grapes!"

"Hurry because it's getting dark. You can't afford to lose time."

"What's the hurry? It will be soon enough if I get home before dark."

"Hurry, I say, because night is coming."

"So what? Morning will follow!"

"You are wrong. There will be no morning!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that night is coming."

"What kind of night? Are you trying to say that I have to pack up for eternity?"

"I repeat: Night is coming! You haven't much time left."²

"Tell me, at least, if it will be very soon."

"Don't be so curious. *Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*. [Don't try to know more than is good for you.]"

"That's what my mother used to say about nosy people," I thought. Then I said aloud: "All right, but I still don't want any grapes!"

So we continued along the road and soon came to my field. My brother Joseph was there loading a wagon. He greeted us both, but, seeing that the stranger ignored him, asked me if he was a schoolmate of mine.

"No," I answered. "I never saw him before."

My brother then turned to him. "Would you please tell me your name?" There was no response. In amazement my brother again asked me, "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He won't tell!"

We both again pleaded with the stranger to identify himself but he kept repeating, "*Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*. [Don't try to know more than is good for you.]"

My brother gave up and left us alone. The stranger then turned to me and said, "Would you like to see something unusual?"

"Certainly!" I replied.

"Would you like to see your boys as they are now and as they will be in the future? Would you want to count them?"

"Very much so!"

"Come here then."

From I don't know where he pulled out a strange contraption housing a large wheel and set it on the ground.

² At this time Don Bosco was forty-six. When he died, he was over seventy-two. Toward the end of 1858 (see p. 56), Don Bosco told the boys that he could not expect to live beyond fifty, but that their prayers could obtain an extension. And God in His goodness did as He had already done once before in 1846 (see Vol. II, pp. 381-387). [Editor]

“What’s this wheel?” I asked.

“The wheel of eternity,” he replied, and, seizing the handle, he gave it a spin.

“Now, you try it,” he said.

I did so.

“Look inside.”

I looked and saw a large lens encased in the wheel. The lens was about five feet in diameter, and its edge bore the inscription: *Hic est oculus qui humilia respicit in caelo et in terra.* [This is the eye that sees the lowly things in heaven and on earth.]

I immediately looked through the lens. What a sight! All the Oratory boys stood there before my eyes. “How can this be?” I said to myself. “I have never before seen anyone around here and now the place is full of boys. Aren’t they in Turin?” I carefully examined the whole contraption; only through the lens could I see anybody. I looked at the stranger in amazement. After a few moments, he ordered me to turn the handle once more. Something startling happened: the boys were separated into two groups: the good and the bad; the former beaming with joy, the latter — not many, thank God — a sorry sight. I recognized them all. How different they were from what their companions believed them to be! Some had tongues pierced through with holes, others had pitifully squinting eyes, and still others had ugly sores covering their heads or worms gnawing at their hearts. The longer I looked, the more I grieved for them. “Can these possibly be my boys?” I asked. “What can these strange ailments mean?”

“I will tell you,” the stranger replied. “Pierced tongues symbolize foul talk; squinting eyes indicate a lack of appreciation of God’s graces by setting earthly things above the heavenly. Sores on the head show that they neglect your advice and cater to their own whims; worms symbolize evil passions gnawing at their hearts. There are boys, too, who do not want to hear your words lest they have to put them into practice.”

At a nod from him, I spun the wheel again and pressed my eyes to the lens. Four boys bound with heavy chains came into view. I looked at them carefully and recognized them. I asked the stranger what that meant. “That shouldn’t be hard to figure out,” he replied. “These are the boys who pay no attention to your advice. If they do not mend their ways, they run the risk of ending up in jail and rotting there for their crimes.”

“Let me jot their names down lest I forget,” I said, but the stranger objected, “You don’t have to! Their names are in this book.”

I noticed then that he carried a notebook. At his word I gave the

wheel another turn and looked. This time I saw seven other boys, defiant and distrustful, their lips padlocked. Three were also clamping their ears shut with their hands. Again I wanted to write their names down, but again the stranger firmly forbade it.

Painfully amazed to see those boys in their predicament, I asked why their lips were padlocked.

"Can't you see it for yourself?" the stranger replied. "These are the boys who refuse to tell."

"Tell what?"

"They won't tell, that's all!"

I understood then that he meant confession. These are boys who, even when questioned by their confessor, will not answer or will answer evasively or contrary to the truth. They say "no" when the answer should be "yes." My friend then went on: "Do you see those three clamping their hands over their ears? Aren't they a sorry sight? Well, they are boys who not only do not tell their sins, but even refuse to listen to their confessor's advice, warnings, and orders. They hear your words, but pay no heed to them. They could unplug their ears, but won't. The other four boys, instead, listened to your exhortations and warnings but did not put them into practice."

"How can they get rid of that padlock?" I inquired.

"*Ejiciatur superbia e cordibus eorum,*" he replied. [Let pride be cast out of their hearts.]

"I will speak to these boys," I went on, "but there is little hope for those who willfully shut their ears." That stranger then advised that whenever I say a few words by way of sermon, half those words should be on making a good confession.

I promised that I would. I don't mean to say that I will carry out that injunction to the letter because I would make myself tiresome, but I will do my best to impress the importance and need of good confessions upon all and as often as possible. In fact, more people are eternally lost through bad confessions than in any other way because even the worst people occasionally do go to confession. There are very many, however, who make bad confessions.

When, at the stranger's command, I gave the wheel another turn, I was horrified to see three boys gripped from behind by three husky monkeys armed with horns. Each beast gripped its victim's throat by its forepaws so tightly that the boy's face became flushed and his blood-shot eyes almost popped out of their sockets. Moreover, the beast's hind legs and long tail bound the boy's thighs and legs so as to almost

completely immobilize him. These were boys who go through a spiritual retreat and still remain in mortal sin, guilty especially of impurity, of a serious offense against the Sixth Commandment. The devil chokes them to keep them from speaking when they should; he makes them blush to the point of losing their heads so that they no longer realize what they are doing. A false shame then overwhelms them and leads them to perdition. The devil has them by their throats so tightly that their eyes seem to pop from their sockets, and they can no longer see their miserable condition and the way to get out of their horrible mess. A senseless fear and repugnance keep them from the sacraments. The devil grips their thighs and legs to make it impossible for them to take a step in the right direction. So strong are their bad habits that these boys become convinced they can no longer help themselves.

I assure you, my dear boys, that I wept at that sight. I wanted to rescue those unfortunate lads, but as soon as I drew away from the lens I could see them no more. I also wanted to take down their names, but my friend would have none of it. "It's unnecessary," he kept saying, "because they are all written down in this notebook."

Grieved by this sight beyond words, I tearfully turned to my companion, sobbing, "How is this possible? How can these boys be in such miserable shape after I lavished so much care on them in confession and out of confession?"

"*Labor, Sudor, Fervor*," was his scrambled, mumbled reply.

"I didn't quite get it," I said. "Please speak more clearly."

Again he muttered, "*Labor, Sudor, Fervor*."

"It's no use," I said. "As long as you keep mumbling, I can't make out what you are saying."

"Are you making fun of me?" he asked.

"Not at all! I just can't understand you."

"Listen, you know your grammar. Just pay attention: *Labor* — comma; *Sudor* — comma; *Fervor* — period. Do you get it now?"

"I get the words," I replied, "but what's the message?"

"All right, I'll make it clearer: *Labor in assiduis operibus* [Constant hard work]; *Sudor in poenitentiis continuis* [Incessant, painstaking mortification]; *Fervor in orationibus ferventibus et perseverantibus* [Fervent and persevering prayer]. For these boys, however, your sacrifices, no matter how great, will be of no avail. You will not win them over, because they do not want to shake off Satan's yoke of slavery."

Meanwhile I kept staring through the lens, fretting and thinking, "How is this possible? Are those boys really doomed, even after a

spiritual retreat? Were all my sacrifices, efforts, sermons, suggestions, and warnings to no avail? Were all their promises a sham? What a letdown!"

These thoughts utterly disheartened me. My friend noticed it. "How proud and conceited you are!" he chided me. "Do you expect your boys to be converted just because you work for them, to respond to your cares just because you love them? Do you perhaps think that you love, work, and suffer more than Our Blessed Savior? Do you expect your words to be more effective than His? Do you preach better than He did? Do you believe you have been more loving and anxious for your boys than Our Lord was for His Apostles? Aren't you aware that they lived constantly with Him, endlessly benefited from all kinds of graces and favors, heard His admonitions and precepts, and witnessed His divine example? Shouldn't all this have effectively spurred them to saintly lives? Didn't He do all He could for Judas? And yet Judas betrayed Him and died impenitent. Are you better than the Apostles? Didn't they carefully choose seven deacons? They chose but seven and one of them went astray. Are you surprised and upset if among five hundred boys a few will not respond to your care? Are you so conceited as to expect that none of your boys will turn out badly and be lost? How proud can you be?"

These words silenced me, but for all that I still felt very much disheartened.

"Cheer up!" my friend went on. "Turn the wheel again and see how generous God is! See how many souls He wants to give you! Look at all those boys."

I peered again into the lens and saw a very large number of boys totally unknown to me.

"I see them," I remarked, "but I don't know any of them."

"Well," he replied, "the Lord will give you all these boys to make up for the fourteen who do not cooperate with you. For each one of them He will give you a hundred!"

"Poor me!" I exclaimed. "The Oratory is full already. Where shall I put them?"

"Don't worry. Right now that's no problem. Later, He who sends them will make room for them."

"I'm not too worried about that," I said. "My greatest worry is feeding them!"

"Don't worry about that either! The Lord will provide."

"In that case, I am quite happy!" I replied in deep relief.

Delightedly I kept looking at those boys, studying the features of very many so as to be able to recognize them if I ever met them.

Thus ended Don Bosco's talk on the night of May 2, 1861.

Don Bosco resumed his story on the following night, concisely and vividly. Through the lens he had also seen the vocation of each of his boys. However, he did not disclose any names and postponed to a later account the questions he had put to his guide and the latter's answers concerning symbols and allegories of the dream.

The cleric Dominic Ruffino was nevertheless able to gather a few names confidentially from the boys themselves to whom Don Bosco had more privately manifested what he had seen about them. Ruffino recorded the names in 1861 and gave us the list. To make our narration clearer and avoid repetitions, we shall insert names and explanations, mostly in non-dialogue form, while still reporting the chronicle word by word. Don Bosco resumed his narration on May 3, as follows:

I was rejoicing to see so many new boys when the stranger, still standing by his apparatus, asked me: "Would you like to see something even more delightful?"

"Certainly!" I replied.

"Then give the wheel another turn."

I did and peered through the lens. I saw the boys separated into two groups, some distance apart, in a broad area. At my left I could see a vast field, in which all sorts of vegetables were growing, and a meadow lined at its edge with a few rows of wild vines. The first group of boys was working this field with spades, hoes, picks, shovels, and rakes. They were broken up into squads, each with a foreman. The whole group took orders from Chevalier Oreglia³ who was busy handing out tools and prodding sluggish workers. Farther away, near the edge of the field, I saw other boys sowing seed. A second group was working on my right in a vast field covered with golden wheat. A long trench separated this field from other fields which stretched out as far as the eye could see. All the boys were busy harvesting — bundling into sheaves, piling them, gleaning, carting, threshing, sharpening sickles, and handing them out.

³ Frederick Oreglia, a late vocation, came to the Oratory in 1860, became a Salesian in 1862, but left in 1869 to join the Society of Jesus. [Editor]

Some boys were also playing guitars. I assure you, it was quite a scene. Nearby, in the shade of ancient trees, were tables laden with food; a little further off, one could see a gorgeous garden with all kinds of flowers in full bloom. The two groups of boys symbolized different vocations: the lay state and the priesthood. I did not know this at the time, and so I asked, "What's the meaning of all this?"

"Can't you see it yet?" he replied. "Boys tilling the soil are those who work for themselves alone. They are not called to be priests."

I understood then that this applied to the artisans.⁴ In their state of life they only think of saving their own souls and feel no special obligation to work at saving the souls of others.

"And the second group?" I asked. But then it dawned on me that these boys were called to be priests. Now I knew who were called to the priesthood and who were not.

As I watched very interestedly, I noticed that Provera⁵ was handing out sickles. I took this to mean that he might become the rector of a seminary, a religious community, or a house of studies; perhaps he might become something even more important. I observed that not all the reapers received their sickles from him. The boys who did are those who are destined to join the [Salesian] Congregation. The others, instead, are to become diocesan priests. The sickle symbolized the Word of God. Another detail: Provera did not readily give a sickle to all who asked. Some he just ordered to take either one or two morsels of food. The first morsel signified piety, the second knowledge. James Rossi⁶ was sent to take one. The boys had to report to the cleric [Celestine] Durando⁷ who was in the little grove setting tables and serving the reapers — the task of those who are particularly destined to promote devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament. Matthew Galliano⁸ was busy serving beverages. Costamagna,⁹ too, asked for a sickle, but was first sent by Provera to pick two flowers from the garden. The same happened to Quattrococo. Rebuffo¹⁰ was promised a sickle on condition that he first pick three flowers. Olivero also was there.

Meanwhile, all the other boys were scattered here and there in the

⁴ At the Oratory boys were divided into two groups: students and artisans. The former received an academic education; the latter learned a trade. [Editor]

⁵ See p. 157, footnote 9. [Editor]

⁶ A lay teacher at the Oratory. See Vol. V, pp. 365, 495. [Editor]

⁷ Durando was ordained a priest in 1864, became a member of the Superior Chapter of the Salesian Society in 1865, and served in it until his death in 1907. [Editor]

⁸ Perhaps the name is misspelled. See pp. 7, 121. [Editor]

⁹ See p. 153, footnote 14. [Editor]

¹⁰ See pp. 357, 500, 506, 571. [Editor]

wheatfield, some working abreast with larger or narrower rows to cultivate. Father Ciattino, the pastor of Maretto, was using a sickle he had received from Provera. Francesia and Vibert were cutting wheat. So too were Hyacinth Perucatti,¹¹ Merlone,¹² Momo,¹³ Garino,¹⁴ and Jarach¹⁵ — an indication that they would save souls by their preaching if they persevered in their vocation. Some reaped more than others. Bondioni was cutting wheat like mad, but how long could he last? Others hacked at the wheat with all their strength but cut nothing. Vaschetti¹⁶ took hold of a sickle, began to cut, and went at it zestfully until he found himself working in another field. He wasn't the only one, either. Some sickles were dull or blunted or in such poor condition that they actually did more harm than good.

Dominic Ruffino had a long row to take care of. His sickle was very sharp, but blunted at the point, signifying lack of humility and an ambition to outdo his companions. He went to Francis Cerruti¹⁷ to have his sickle fixed. The latter had been given that task, a symbol that one day he would become a teacher and instill knowledge and piety into students. Hammering, in fact, is the task of those charged with forming priestly candidates. Provera handed the blunted sickles to Cerruti and the dull ones to Rocchiatti¹⁸ and others — an indication that they would one day form priestly vocations to piety. Viale¹⁹ came up for a sickle and picked out a dull one, but Provera made him take one he had just sharpened. I also saw Rinaudo servicing farm tools.

While all this was going on, Fusero²⁰ was tying sheaves. This meant that his task would be to keep souls in God's grace, particularly the souls of those called to the priesthood. In other words, he would one day form young clerics.

Others were helping him; among them I saw Turchi²¹ and Ghivarello.²² This meant that they would work especially in setting consciences right, as, for example, in hearing confessions, particularly of priests or priestly candidates.

¹¹ See pp. 150, 154, 523. [Editor]

¹² See p. 431 [Editor]

¹³ See p. 293. [Editor]

¹⁴ See p. 262, footnote 3. [Editor]

¹⁵ See p. 159. [Editor]

¹⁶ See pp. 218f, 293, 362, 426, 548. [Editor]

¹⁷ See p. 110, footnote 6. [Editor]

¹⁸ See p. 56. [Editor]

¹⁹ See p. 431. [Editor]

²⁰ See p. 117. [Editor]

²¹ See p. 257, footnote 1. [Editor]

²² See p. 157, footnote 8. [Editor]

Others were loading sheaves on a wagon symbolizing God's grace. Converted sinners must climb upon this wagon in order to make a start on their way to heaven. When the wagon was fully loaded, oxen — a symbol of strength and perseverance — started pulling it. Some boys led them, following Rua. This means that Rua's task will be to lead souls to heaven. [Angelo] Savio²³ trailed behind, gleaning ears of wheat or sheaves which fell from the wagon.

Scattered about the field were John Bonetti,²⁴ Joseph Bongiovanni,²⁵ and others, busily gleaning. Their task will be to rescue obstinate sinners. Bonetti, especially, is called by God to seek such unfortunate people.

Fusero and Anfossi²⁶ were preparing sheaves for threshing. Perhaps this suggested a teaching career. Others, like Father Alasonatti, stacked them; they are those who administer finances, watch over the observance of rules, and teach prayers and hymns — in short, those who materially and morally contribute in directing souls to heaven.

One strip of land had been cleared and smoothed out for threshing. John Cagliari,²⁷ who had just gone to the garden for flowers and had handed them out to his companions, betook himself to the threshing area, still holding a little bouquet of flowers. Threshing grain symbolizes God's call to instruct the common people.

Far off, black columns of smoke were rising to the sky. Some boys had gathered cockle and were burning it outside the field. This symbolized those who would remove the bad from the good as directors of our future houses. Among them I saw Francis Cerruti, John Baptist Tamietti,²⁸ Dominic Belmonte,²⁹ Paul Albera,³⁰ and others, who are now studying in the lower Latin grades.

All the above scenes kept unfolding simultaneously. I saw some boys in that crowd hold lighted lanterns, though it was broad daylight. Evidently they were destined to be beacons, giving good example to other workers in the Lord's vineyard. Among them was Paul Albera, who,

²³ See p. 109 footnote 1. [Editor]

²⁴ See p. 31, footnote 9. [Editor]

²⁵ See p. 181. See also Vol. V, pp. 82, 313, 499f. [Editor]

²⁶ John Baptist Anfossi, an orphan, entered the Oratory at the age of thirteen in December 1853 (see Vol. IV, pp. 467f). He became a Salesian in 1862 and was ordained a priest in 1864. Later on, he joined the diocesan clergy but remained always devoted to Don Bosco. [Editor]

²⁷ See p. 12, footnote 6. [Editor]

²⁸ Tamietti entered the Oratory in 1860, donned the cassock in 1863, was ordained in 1873, and filled important positions in the Salesian Society. As Don Bosco had told him, he died in 1920 before completing his 72nd year. [Editor]

²⁹ See p. 234, footnote 7. [Editor]

³⁰ See p. 24, footnote 7. [Editor]

besides carrying a lamp, also played the guitar. This means that not only will he guide priests, but he will also encourage them to persevere. It suggested, too, some high post in the Church.

Amid so much hustle and bustle, however, not all the boys were busy. One fellow was holding a pistol, an indication that he was inclined to a military career, though he was as yet uncertain. Others just stood about idly, watching the reapers, with no intention of joining them. Some looked undecided; being too lazy for action, they couldn't make up their minds. Others instead ran for a sickle, but a few of these did nothing on reaching the field. There were also some who swung the sickle wrongly. Molino³¹ was one of them. These are boys who always do the opposite of what they should. Quite a few others kept roaming about or picking wild grapes, denoting those who waste their time in tasks not pertaining to them.

The boys tilling the soil in the field at the left were also an odd sight. While most of those sturdy lads worked very diligently, a few were using their hoes the wrong way or only pretending to work. Some knocked the blade off the handle at every blow. The handle symbolized the right intention.

I also observed artisans reaping wheat and students hoeing. I again tried to jot down some notes, but my guide would immediately show me his notebook and stop me. I could also see that very many boys stood idly about because they couldn't make up their minds. Instead, the two Dalmazzo brothers,³² Primo Gariglio, Monasterolo, and many others seemed determined to make a decision one way or the other. I saw some quit hoeing to go and do some reaping. One boy was in such a hurry that he forgot to get a sickle. Shamefacedly, he went back for one, but the person in charge refused to give it to him despite his insistence. "It's not time yet!" he told him.

"Yes, it is!" the lad insisted. "I want it now!"

"Not now!" was the reply. "First go to the garden and pick two flowers."

"All right," he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders. "I'll pick all the flowers you want."

"Two will do!"

He ran to the garden but, on getting there, realized he had not asked which two flowers he should pick. He rushed back to ask.

"Pick the flower of charity and that of humility," he was told.

"I've got them already."

³¹ See p. 431. [Editor]

³² Francis and Joseph Dalmazzo. See pp. 453, 526. [Editor]

"You only *think* you have them!"

The boy fumed, clenched his fists, and raged.

"This is no time for a tantrum," the one in charge told him, and he absolutely refused to hand him a scythe. The lad bit his fists in rage.

After this I stopped looking through the lens, which had enabled me to learn so much. I felt stirred, too, by the moral applications my friend had suggested. I again asked for a few more explanations. The stranger repeated: "The wheat field is the Church; the harvest is the fruit reaped; the sickle is the tool — the Word of God especially — to harvest the fruit. The dull blade means lack of piety; the blunted point signifies lack of humility. Leaving the field while reaping means leaving the Oratory and the Salesian Society."

The following night, May 4, 1861, Don Bosco concluded his narrative. The first part had shown him the Oratory pupils, especially the students; the second indicated those who were called to the priesthood. The third part was a succession of visions: the Salesian Society in 1861, its prodigious growth, and the gradual disappearance of the first Salesians and their replacement by others. Don Bosco spoke thus:

After I had leisurely taken in the richly varied harvest scene, the obliging stranger said, "Now give the wheel ten turns and look."

I obeyed. Marvelously, those very lads whom I had patted as children a few days before were now virile, bearded men, some with greying hair.

"How could this happen?" I inquired. "That man was a mere youngster the other day!"

My friend answered, "Don't be surprised! How many turns did you give the wheel?"

"Ten."

"Then they are all ten years older. We have gone from 1861 to 1871."

"Oh!" Through that mysterious lens I saw new places, new houses of ours, and many pupils in the care of my dear Oratory boys, now priests, teachers, and directors.

"Give the wheel ten more turns, and we shall reach 1881," the stranger told me. I complied and peered into the lens. Now I saw only about half the boys I had seen before. Nearly all were grey-haired, a few stooping.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Gone into eternity," he replied.

This striking loss grieved me considerably, but I was consoled by the sight of an immense tableau of new and unknown regions and a multitude of boys led by teachers unknown to me but pupils of my first boys, some already mature in years.

I gave the wheel ten more turns and then saw only one-fourth of the boys I had seen but a few moments before. They were much older and white-haired.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“Gone into eternity. This is now 1891.”

I then beheld a very touching sight. My toil-worn priests were surrounded by boys I had never seen; many were of a different race and color.

I turned the wheel ten more times. I could only see a few of my first boys, tottering and bent with age, gaunt and thin. Among others I remember seeing Father Rua, so old and haggard as to be hardly recognizable.

“What about all the others?” I asked.

“Gone into eternity! We are now in the year 1901.”

I saw many houses of ours, but none of my old Salesians. The directors and teachers were all unknown to me. The multitude of boys kept growing, as was the number of houses and personnel.

“Now,” the stranger said, “turn the wheel ten more times, and you will see things that will both cheer and sadden you.” I complied.

“Nineteen hundred and eleven!” my friend exclaimed.

My dear boys, I saw new houses, new boys, new directors, and teachers dressed differently from us. And what about my first Oratory boys? I searched and searched through the great multitude and could find only one of you, white-haired, bent with age. Surrounded by boys, he was telling them about the Oratory’s beginnings and repeating things he had learned from Don Bosco, while pointing out to them his picture hanging on the parlor wall.³³ And what about the first pupils and superiors that I had just seen as old men? . . .

At a nod from the stranger, I again gave the wheel several turns. All I could see was a vast solitude, with nobody in sight. “Oh!” I gasped. “There is nobody here! Where are all the cheerful, lively, strong boys that are at the Oratory with me right now?”

³³ Most probably this white-haired Salesian was none other than Father John Baptist Francesia who was 73 in 1911. Practically up to his death in 1930 at the age of 91, he daily showed up in the playground and experienced delight in chatting with the boys and telling them about Don Bosco, as we ourselves were privileged to see and hear from 1923-24 to 1927-28. [Editor]

“Gone into eternity! Remember that a decade goes by with every ten turns of the wheel.”

I figured that I had given the wheel fifty turns and that around 1911 the boys that are now at the Oratory would all be gone into eternity.

“Now,” the stranger said, “would you like to see something really startling?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Watch! Give the wheel as many turns counterclockwise as you did clockwise.”

I did so.

“Now look!” the stranger cried.

I saw an immense crowd of boys of countless nations, features, and tongues. So vast was the throng that I could single out only a small fraction with their superiors.

“I don’t know any of them,” I said to the stranger.

“Still,” he replied, “they are all your sons. Listen. They are talking about you and your first boys, their superiors, now long dead, and the teaching you and your first sons handed down to them.”

Again I looked intently, but on removing my gaze from the lens, I saw the wheel begin to spin by itself so fast and so noisily that I awoke and found myself in bed, exhausted.

Now that I have told you all these things, you may think that Don Bosco is an extraordinary man, a great man, a saint, no doubt! My dear lads, before you entertain such foolish notions about me, feel absolutely free to believe or not believe these things and to make whatever you want of them. I only ask that you do not make fun of them, whether among yourselves or with outsiders. Bear in mind, though, that Our Lord can manifest His will in many ways. Sometimes He makes use of the most unsuitable, unworthy instruments, as when He made Balaam’s donkey speak and even used Balaam himself — a false prophet — to foretell many things concerning the Messiah. Such may be the case with me. I warn you, then, not to follow my example blindly. What you must do is to pay close attention to all I say because that at least, I hope, will always be in accordance with God’s will and helpful to your souls.

As for what I do, never say, “Don Bosco did it and so it has to be good.” Examine it first. If you see it is good, do likewise, but if it were, perchance, bad, beware of imitating it. Don’t! [Good night!]

CHAPTER 68

A Dream: The Wheel of Eternity (Continued)

FOR this dream's effect on the Oratory we shall rely on the testimony of witnesses. Canon [Hyacinth] Ballesio in his [funeral] oration, *Vita intima di Don Bosco*, after adding details of this dream and the two preceding ones ¹ — details not found in the Bonetti and Ruffino chronicles — went on to say:

Don Bosco lived for us. Even his very scanty sleep was crowded with thoughts of his children as he dreamed of them. Were they dreams or visions? He called them dreams, but we were convinced that they were nothing less than visions. I remember the dream in which he saw his boys, numbering more than four hundred students and artisans, in various poses symbolizing their spiritual condition. He narrated it on successive evenings after night prayers so vividly and forcefully that it rang forth like a prophecy. In this dream he saw some pupils resplendent with light, others with a heart full of pure gold, and still others with hideous, horrid features or looking like animals with hearts full of clay. He had seen youngsters surrounded, besieged, or assailed by wild animals typifying temptations, dangerous occasions, and sins. Don Bosco told us this dream with simplicity, gravity, and fatherly affection, giving it maximum importance. Its impression on all of us was unique and most wholesome. One after another we each went to him to learn in what condition he had seen us. To our astonishment, everyone had to admit that what Don Bosco had seen was true.

The effect of this dream on the boys' conduct was so great that the most powerful spiritual retreat scarcely could have equaled it. All these extraordinary things which I mention cannot be explained by Don

¹ See pp. 478-482, 508-518. [Editor]

Bosco's natural insight or the knowledge he derived from his confidential talks with the boys or from his co-workers' reports. Don Bosco's words and actions were such that, under the circumstances, we who were no longer children could see no rational or plausible explanation other than to accept the fact that these were heavenly charisms. Considering just this dream or vision, how could he have otherwise seen and remembered so unerringly the spiritual condition of each of his four hundred pupils? Among them were newcomers who had recently arrived at the Oratory and others who had never gone to confession to him; yet, on hearing Don Bosco's vivid, intimate description of their souls, of their inclinations, and of their most secret doings, they had to admit that what he said was true.

Bishop John Cagliero wrote:

I was there in 1861 when Don Bosco narrated the dream of "The Wheel of Eternity," in which he had seen the future of the fledgling Salesian Congregation. He told us about these dreams after consulting Father Cafasso, who advised him to keep giving them importance *tuta conscientia*, for he judged them to be for God's greater glory and the good of souls. Don Bosco disclosed this to us, his closest co-workers, some years before Father Cafasso's death.

The boys' attention to his words was surprisingly impressive. On his part, Don Bosco unerringly and unhesitatingly would privately tell each one who asked him — and very many of us did — what he was doing in the wheat field and what it meant. It took Don Bosco three consecutive evenings to relate this dream, which we discussed among ourselves and with our beloved father for quite some time, convinced that it had given him a clear knowledge of the Oratory's future and that of the Salesian Congregation. Privately, in the company of his closest co-workers, he delighted in repeating the description of the golden wheat ripening in that mysterious field and the various poses of the reapers and of those who were handing out the sickles. He also assured us that, contrary to expectations, our Congregation, despite great opposition and persecution, would be approved, survive, prosper, and extraordinarily expand to the astonishment of many good, prudent people who thought otherwise. All these things I have repeatedly heard from companions and from Don Bosco himself.

In regard to the three pupils who had monkey-like creatures on their shoulders, Father Francis Dalmazzo testified under oath:

I remember well that, in speaking of these boys, Don Bosco said that if they wished to know more, they were to ask him. More than fifty pupils, disturbed by their conscience, did so, but Don Bosco told each one, "It's not you." Later, in meeting those three boys in the playground at different times, he warned them of their miserable condition. One was a classmate of mine, and he confidentially told me of his astonishment at Don Bosco's knowledge. On the other hand, I have had personal proofs of Don Bosco's discernment of hearts, because time and again he revealed my own interior state to me without my saying a word. I also had similar proofs from my companions who candidly admitted that, despite their silence on serious sins in confession, Don Bosco had unerringly pointed them out to them.

Concerning the four boys whom Don Bosco had seen in chains, we came to know about one of them through Father [John] Borel.

In 1866, while ministering in the city jails, he came across a convict, an army deserter named B . . . who asked him to get him a copy of *The Companion of Youth* from Don Bosco and to give him this message: "Do you remember telling me that in the dream of 'The Wheel' you saw me in chains? Well, I was one of those four boys. Fortunately, I have committed no crime. I just couldn't stand army life and took off." Don Bosco visited him and brought him the prayer book. Aside from the dream, he had predicted other matters to this lad when, on finishing secondary school at the Oratory, he had come to say good-bye to Don Bosco and had told him that he intended to enter religious life.

"Stay with us," was the advice of Don Bosco, who had previously tried to persuade him to remain. "Here you will find all you desire." However, the youth was determined to go.

"All right," Don Bosco concluded, "you may go. You will join the Jesuits and you will be dismissed. Then you will try the Capuchins, but you will not succeed. Eventually, after a lot of trouble, you will be hungry and come back here."

This made no sense at the time, for the youth's family was wealthy and prominent. Yet Don Bosco's prediction was literally fulfilled. The boy first joined the Jesuits and then the Capuchins, but he could not adapt himself to their rules and after a while had to leave. Many years later, after squandering his patrimony, he

showed up at the Oratory in a miserable condition. He stayed there for a time but then, driven by wanderlust, left. All these details he told us himself. He was still living in 1901.

Meanwhile, since May 4 clerics and pupils had continued to crowd around Don Bosco to find out whether he had seen them among the tillers or the reapers and to learn what they were actually doing, and he obliged. We have already reported many of his replies as we narrated the dream. Several had all the earmarks of genuine predictions.

Don Bosco had seen the cleric John Molino, sickle in hand, idly watching those who were reaping; he then had walked to the ditch surrounding the field, leaped across it, and, throwing his hat away, run off. Molino asked Don Bosco for an explanation. "You will study not five but six years of theology," Don Bosco replied. "Then you will give up your clerical habit." The cleric was shocked by this seemingly strange and unlikely reply, but future events proved the truth of Don Bosco's words. This cleric actually did study theology for six years — four at the Oratory and two at the Asti seminary. Then, after the spiritual retreat preparatory to his ordination, he went to San Damiano d'Asti, his native town, for one day ostensibly to settle some business; once there, he lay aside his cassock and never returned.

The cleric Vaschetti was considered one of the main pillars of the Giaveno junior seminary, and indeed he was. When Don Bosco revealed that he had seen him leap over the ditch and quit, he replied somewhat peevisly, "You *must* have been dreaming!" Actually, at that time it had never entered his mind to leave Don Bosco. Later, however, he did withdraw, for he was free to do so. As a priest, he one day called on Don Bosco, and the latter reminded him of his prompt but filial outburst.

"I remember," Vaschetti answered. "You were right!"

Then Don Bosco added, "God wanted you here. Anyway, I hope He will help you with His grace. However, you will have your problems." God did assist Vaschetti, who did much good as a pastor.

The cleric Joseph Fagnano originally had no intention of asking Don Bosco what part he had played in the dream. Having recently

come to the Oratory from the Asti seminary and being wary by temperament, he was somewhat skeptical about the whole thing. However, having been urged by his companions, he too asked Don Bosco what he had seen of him through that lens. Don Bosco replied, "I saw you in the field, but you were so far away that I could hardly recognize you. You were working among naked men."

Fagnano did not attribute much significance to these words, but they flashed back to his mind years later as, on the feast of Mary Help of Christians, he was stranded on the shores of the Strait of Magellan, surviving on mollusks for two days, because stormy seas prevented the ship that he was to board from entering the harbor. Later he found himself working among naked Indians ² in Tierra del Fuego, his mission field.

To Angelo Savio, Don Bosco said that he had seen him, too, in far distant regions.³ To Dominic Belmonte he said, "You will give God glory with music." Then he added a word which instantly made a deep impression upon him. However, no sooner had he stepped away from Don Bosco then he immediately forgot it, and no amount of effort could bring him to recall it. Don Bosco had also seen him leading a wagon drawn by five mules. He worked most successfully, first as a teacher and general assistant at Mirabello, then as a teacher at Alassio, as prefect and, later, as director at Borgo San Martino, and as director and pastor at Sampierdarena. In all these places he also taught music and added splendor to the liturgy. Finally [in 1886] he became Prefect General of the Salesian Society and director of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Always and everywhere he enjoyed the love and full confidence of both confreres and pupils. We read in the chronicle:

Don Bosco also told Avanzino about his part in the dream, adding,

² Father Fagnano was a member of Don Bosco's first missionary expedition to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in 1875. (*See* Vol. XI, p. 349) He was later appointed Prefect Apostolic and died in Santiago, Chile, on September 18, 1916. [Editor]

³ Savio went to South America in 1885 at the age of fifty. He covered the whole of Patagonia on horseback and opened schools in Chile, Peru, and Paraguay, proving himself an untiring, zealous missionary. After a short respite in Italy, he went to Ecuador in 1892 to open a new mission, dying there on January 17, 1893 on an exploration trip. [Editor]

"This is what God wants you to do." Avanzino did not disclose the work for which he seemed destined because it was not to his liking, but later he told his friends, "Don Bosco bared things to me which I had never revealed to any living person."

To G . . . too Don Bosco said, "You should be a priest, but you lack three virtues: humility, charity, and chastity." He added, though, that he had not been called to get his sickle from Provera. Ferrari, a boy who kept saying that he wanted to be a priest, never went to ask what part he had played in the dream, though many were pressing him to do so. He ridiculed the whole thing, but eventually he found himself cornered. Don Bosco told him that he had seen him in the wheat field and that, despite repeated exhortations to pick more flowers, he had started harvesting wheat very briskly; when he was through, and had turned back to look at his work, he found nothing.

"What does that mean?" the lad asked.

"It means that if you don't mend your ways and if you continue to follow your whims instead of letting yourself be guided, you will end up as an unfrocked priest or religious."

The Oratory boys, however, were not satisfied merely with personal communications. They wanted more detailed, public explanations of the dream and a clarification of certain points which they had not fully understood. Their curiosity kept them in suspense and had to be relieved. These boys were unconstrained, bright, and studious, and their questions could have posed a difficult problem for anyone unsure of the truth of what he was saying. But Don Bosco had no fear of being caught in contradictions. The chronicle continues:

On the evening of May 4, Don Bosco allowed everyone to ask questions, as he too wished to explain whatever part of the dream was still unclear to them. There were a good number of questions at the "Good Night" on May 5.

"What does 'night' mean?" they inquired.

"That death is drawing near. *Venit nox quando nemo potest operari,*' said Our Lord." [Night comes when no one can work — John 4, 9] The boys took this as a hint he was giving them that perhaps his end was near. After a brief painful silence they asked whether there was any way by which they could prolong his life. "Yes," he replied. "First,

I should stop having these dreams because they sap my strength; secondly, people who stubbornly persist in evil should stop forcing Our Lord, in a manner of speaking, to have to use such drastic measures to make them give up sin.”

“How about the figs and grapes?”

“The figs and grapes, partly ripe, partly unripe, show that certain events preceding the ‘night’ have already come to pass and others are still due. Those which have already taken place I will tell you in due time. The figs especially symbolize great events which will soon take place at the Oratory. I could tell you much on this score too, but I had better not just now. I’ll tell you later. I will add that the ripe figs, taken as a symbol for boys, can signify that they are ripe either for God’s service or for eternity.”

We shall here assert our belief that some figs must have been bitter and that for this reason Don Bosco did not pick them, though he justified his refusal with a pretext. The prophet Jeremiah described a vision of his in these words: “The Lord showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. . . . One basket contained excellent figs, the early-ripening kind. But the other basket contained very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.” [Jer. 24, 1-2] The first basket symbolized those who had repented of their transgressions and had earned God’s mercy; the second represented those who would be exterminated by God because of their impenitence. “I will make them like rotten figs, too bad to be eaten,” says the Lord. [Jer. 24, 18]

As reported in Ruffino’s chronicle the questioning went on:

“What did those monkey-like creatures on the boys’ shoulders symbolize?”

“The demon of impurity,” Don Bosco replied. “When this demon wants to enslave someone, he does so behind his back to hide the ugliness of this sin and make it appear to be a mere nothing. These demons throttle their victims when they attempt to confess their sins. The significance of eyes bursting from their sockets is that anyone possessed by the demon of impurity no longer sees the things of heaven. My dear boys, remember those three words: *Labor* [Hard work], *Sudor* [Constant mortification], and *Fervor* [Fervent prayer], and you will be able to overcome this demon.”

“And how can the padlock be removed from the mouth?”

Don Bosco repeated what the stranger had said: “*Auferatur superbia de cordibus eorum.*” [Let pride be cast out of their hearts.]

Questions were asked about the work each boy was doing in the field and its meaning.

“What else could you tell us about the wheat field?” one boy asked.

“Those who were working there have a priestly vocation. Now I know which of you should study for the priesthood and which should not. Do not think, though, that all those tilling the soil were totally excluded from harvesting, or vice versa. Among the harvesters there were some artisans. I recognized them and shall assign them to study. I also saw one of you asking for a sickle, but the one in charge refused to give it to him because he still lacked some virtues. If he will acquire them, it will be a clear sign that the Lord is calling him. It will be up to him not to make himself unworthy of that call. But both tillers and harvesters were doing God’s will and were on the path of salvation.”

“What did the food and the flowers represent?”

“There were some who wanted to harvest, but Provera would not give them a sickle because they weren’t as yet good enough for that. He would tell them: ‘You still lack a flower’ or ‘You need two flowers. You must eat more food. . . .’ These flowers symbolize charity, humility, or purity, while food stands for study or piety. After these boys picked flowers or ate their food, they went back to Provera and got their sickles.”

Don Bosco was also asked about what he saw at every tenth turn of the wheel, especially in regard to the growth of the Salesian Society. “There was,” he answered, “a long interval at every tenth turn of the wheel to give me time to examine thoroughly every detail of those scenes. From the very first few turns I saw the [Salesian] Congregation already formed and well established, along with a great number of confreres and pupils in different houses. New scenes appeared at every turn of the wheel. Many boys I had seen before were no longer present; others had aged; still others were new to me. The boys’ number kept growing rapidly and enormously.”

Some boys were struck by the fact that the mysterious stranger had said: “You will see things that will gladden you and others that will sadden you.” They asked him whether at every tenth turn — that is, every tenth year — he had seen them doing the same kind of work, holding the same office, or conducting themselves in the same way. Were they better or worse than in the previous decade? Don Bosco did

not want to answer this question. Nevertheless, he sighed, "It is sad and discouraging to see what one goes through in a lifetime. If, as a boy, I had foreseen what I have gone through these last few years, I would have been disheartened."

The boys also expressed their astonishment at the number of houses and hospices which Don Bosco claimed he would have one day. At this time the Oratory was his only house. "You will see, you will see!" he replied.

Thus Don Bosco spoke familiarly to the whole community. Certain things, however, he disclosed only to his young clerics. For example, he told them that two of those he had seen in the wheat field would become bishops. This news spread through the Oratory like wildfire and stirred up a great deal of talk. Since Don Bosco refused to say more, the boys tried guessing and evaluated all their clerical companions. Eventually they settled on John Cagliero as probably one bishop and Paul Albera as the other. These rumors flew about the house for a long time.

Thus reads the witness of Ruffino's chronicle. We can add that nobody then thought of James Costamagna,⁴ and he himself was very far from suspecting that God had a mitre in store for him. The chronicle goes on:

Don Bosco had said that he would assign the artisans he had seen harvesting or gleaning to study. In fact, immediately after narrating the dream, he invited Craverio to become a student, and the boy was delighted. Don Bosco did the same with an apprentice shoemaker of Giaveno. "I saw you harvesting," he told him, "but you didn't look very enthused about it." A third lad, a bookbinder, received the same invitation, but Don Bosco has not as yet disclosed his name.

In his dream Don Bosco saw another artisan, a tailor, weeding the wheat field. The lad himself had confided to the cleric Ruffino that his past conduct had not been quite up to par, but in a short time he became a model of piety and virtue. He was strikingly humble. After he had become a student, it happened on two occasions that, through an error of similarity of names, his weekly conduct mark was entered as *bene* [good] and *fere optime* [almost excellent] instead of *optime*.⁵ In similar cases even the best pupils would point out the error, but this lad was not in the least upset. To those who were surprised by his inaction and

⁴ See p. 153, footnote 14. [Editor]

⁵ See p. 475. [Editor]

urged him to have the matter rectified, he replied, "I deserved that mark!" He did nothing to have it changed, thus indicating his willingness to forfeit a prize given at the end of the year to all who had received *optime* every week.

Meanwhile, the month of May, so happily ushered in, was drawing all minds and hearts to heavenly things. One day, as a teacher was speaking of paradise during class, young [Dominic] Parigi⁶ became so fascinated that his companions had to shake him to bring him back to reality.

Don Bosco himself strove to instill a tender and deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin into his pupils, teaching them to cherish Her as a most loving mother and to invoke Her as a most powerful protectress.

We will here quote a passage from Father Bonetti's *Cinque Lustri di Storia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales* [The History of the First Twenty-Five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales].⁷ He wrote:

We shall now mention the main public and private devotions held at the Oratory in the month so dear to Our Lady's devotees. Every morning we gathered in the Church of St. Francis de Sales. After a hymn to the Blessed Virgin, we listened to a short reading from a book by Don Bosco. The service ended with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. During the morning, the confessional was thronged with pupils eager to purify their souls. So many went to Communion that every day seemed to be a general Communion day. During the different recreation periods, boys kept slipping into church to pray at Our Lady's altar. Many spent a considerable part of their playtime praying or reading a devout book on Mary. Moreover, the young clerics and best students daily made it their task to narrate edifying stories to various groups in order to explain Our Lady's prerogatives, virtues, and mercies, increase the number of Her devotees, and enkindle a filial love for Her in their hearts.

After supper, before night prayers, in the playground or in the porticoes, many spent their playtime singing Mary's praises and vying with each other to extol Her — the one who, after God, filled our minds and hearts during that entire month. All the pupils — both students and artisans — strove to surpass one another in conduct in order to have

⁶ See pp. 158f, 402, 571. [Editor]

⁷ See p. x. [Editor]

the joy and honor of presenting the Queen of Heaven with a beautiful wreath of excellent conduct marks at the end of the month.

As an added act of devotion to Her, each dormitory set up a little altar with Her picture or statue, flowers, and lights. The pupils themselves undertook the expenses: the artisans with their token wages, the students with whatever spending money they had. After night prayers, before they got into bed, the young cleric in charge would gather them around the little altar and alternately recite with them seven Hail Marys in honor of Mary's Seven Joys or Sorrows. Then they all would joyfully go to bed, feeling that they had dutifully greeted their heavenly Mother and invoked Her blessing.

On Sundays and on the last day of Mary's month, a young cleric was appointed to give the boys a short address in honor of Our Lady, preparing himself in this way for his future priestly ministry under the auspices of the one who is rightly called "Queen of Apostles."

The Lord blessed these acts of devotion and made them fruitful. Without question, piety and morality were never more flourishing than during this month. Never were the artisans more diligent and hard-working, the students more attentive and cooperative, or the superiors more cheerfully aided in their efforts. This proved beyond doubt that religion is the foundation and most effective factor in a sound education. Charity, zeal, and kindness on the part of superiors always succeed in winning the pupils' minds and hearts, removing them from evil, attracting them to virtue, and making them good Christians and upright citizens. Indeed, in the training of the young, prevention is far more desirable than repression. The year 1861 typified the Oratory's golden era. Don Bosco's successors may well pray that it will return and spread to all present and future Salesian houses.

We shall now return to the chronicle:

The boys' goodness was a direct result of Don Bosco's efforts, but these gradually overtaxed his strength. Still, on the evening of May 7 [1861] he took upon himself the burden of teaching the boys the correct way of singing the hymn *Noi siamo figli di Maria*. He sang it through himself and then had the boys repeat it.

Questioned by them on his health, he answered, "Had it been my duty to advise someone in my state of health, I would have told him to go to bed and see a doctor. Personally, though, I could not take this advice because doctors would most likely have plied me with all kinds

of medicines and bloodletting and would have forced me to rest — all the more so because my main trouble is a rush of blood to the stomach. Doctors make a great deal of fuss over such things.”

After the boys went to bed, he said to the priests and clerics who accompanied him to his room: “I never stop to think that death may cut my plans short, and yet I do everything as though it were the very last thing I will ever do. When I start a new undertaking, I know that perhaps I shall not be able to finish it, but I don’t worry. I will do all I can, even if this should be my last day. I always work as if I had many years to live.”

At six o’clock on Sunday evening, May 12, after the church services, Don Bosco called his co-workers to a meeting and addressed them as follows: “In our last conference ⁸ we spoke of charity — that charity which is common to all and which aims at increasing friends and diminishing enemies. But there is another, far superior kind of charity for us to practice. We must imitate Our Lord who *coepit facere et docere*. He first acted and then taught. Therefore, let us first practice charity by working for our eternal salvation in overcoming ourselves and subduing our pride. If we should find some article of the rules or some duty or task irksome, let’s not lose heart. Let’s overcome that feeling for Our Lord’s sake and for the reward which awaits us. Thus we shall become truly obedient. All in all, religious life is based on this saying of Our Lord: ‘If any man wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’ ” [Luke 9, 23]

After the conference, the clerics pressed around him and anxiously inquired about his health. “As my special practice to honor Our Lady,” he replied, “I had planned to rise promptly at the first stroke of the bell and then work until 6:45, but so far I have not succeeded. I wanted to start last Friday because I seemed to feel better. I got up at the set time, but my eyes began paining me so much that I couldn’t do a thing. On the following day, the same thing happened, and this morning I had to stay in bed till late.”

During these days some pupils whose conduct had been steadily unsatisfactory either were dismissed or left of their own accord. At the “Good Night” [that same Sunday, May 12], Don Bosco said: “Novenas and triduums are always fatal to some pupils. I can’t recall a single instance when someone or other did not leave the Oratory. We are now only halfway through the Pentecost novena and four boys have already departed. Father Rua, can you tell me the reason?”

⁸ See pp. 525f. [Editor]

“I think it’s because of the special prayers we offer up for the good of the house,” Rua replied. “The Lord answers these prayers by ridding us of troublemakers. Novenas act like a purge.”

“Correct,” Don Bosco remarked. “The Lord is singularly kind to us. He has already put forth His hand and singled out those who are gone. He has also pointed out a few others who are still in the house. I spoke to them in God’s name and asked them, ‘Are you willing to come to your senses and do better from now on?’ But they would not. Poor boys! Tomorrow, meanwhile, to honor Mary, let us examine ourselves to see how we have shown our gratitude for God’s favors in the past and how we should show our gratitude for them in the future.”

CHAPTER 69

Heavenly Protection

[A]T about this time, May 1861, Don Bosco decided to enlarge the Oratory's residential quarters by erecting a three-story building on the area fronting the Filippi house. To this effect, he signed a contract with Charles Buzzetti on May 15.]¹

However, it seemed fated that the start of every new expansion project of the Oratory should be marked by some mishap.² The boys' good conduct and the superiors' zeal for their moral and spiritual welfare were perhaps intolerable to Satan, and, God permitting, he sought fierce revenge. Our narration is accurately drawn from the reports of John Bonetti, Dominic Ruffino, Joseph Reano, Peter Enria, and other witnesses. Peter Enria wrote:

On May 15 [1861], before sending us to bed, Don Bosco said, "Pray that you will always be ready for death, because you know that it may well come at any moment. Mishaps — a fatal fall, a mugging, a drowning, a heart attack, a stroke of lightning, and other things of this kind — occur every day. If we are prepared, we need not fear death, no matter how and when it comes." It would appear that Don Bosco had forebodings of impending disaster because he made us recite three Hail Marys as protection against mishaps during the night.

After the "Good Night," the boys retired to their dormitories. The St. Aloysius dormitory, located on the top floor, partially above Don Bosco's rooms, was occupied by about sixty artisans and was supervised by the cleric John Bonetti. May devotions were being held in this dormitory, too, and before getting to bed, all knelt by

¹ This paragraph is a condensation of the original text and leaves out irrelevant details of construction. [Editor]

² For past mishaps, see Vol. IV, pp. 353ff; Vol. V, pp. 342f. [Editor]

Our Lady's shrine, adorned with flowers and lights, and recited seven Hail Marys, as on other evenings, in honor of Mary's Seven Sorrows. Then Bonetti, by some inspiration or other, told the boys, "Let's now recite three more Hail Marys for the Blessed Virgin to keep us from harm." Surprised by the novelty, the boys prayed devoutly.

That night Don Bosco could not make up his mind to go to bed. He went up to his room reluctantly and sat at his desk to do some writing; then, unable to keep it up because his eyes were aching, he paced the room. Finally, at about eleven, he went to bed. No sooner had he fallen asleep than he felt his hair being torn off and his head mercilessly pricked, without his being able to help himself. Shortly after midnight, as all were soundly sleeping, a violent storm broke out, accompanied by roaring thunder and lightning. Joseph Rossi and Joseph Reano were in a room that was separated from Don Bosco's quarters by only a small library. At about 12:30 A.M., Rossi, still awake, woke up Reano. "Listen!" he said to him.

"Don't be scared!" Reano replied. "Just close your eyes and go to sleep." And, turning over, he went back to sleep again.

Barely fifteen minutes later, a terrifying blast of thunder shook the whole house; it was followed by a blinding flash which seemed to engulf the house in flames; then there was eerie darkness and a dismal stillness. Some moments later, Don Bosco's bell broke the silence. Reano and Rossi started up and exclaimed, "Something must have happened to Don Bosco!" They threw on their clothes, lit a lamp, and dashed into his room.

Meanwhile, Don Bosco had gone through quite an ordeal. Lightning had struck the chimney of his room, cracking the wall, loosening the fireplace, knocking down his bookcase, overturning his desk, and, finally, hitting his iron bed, lifting it three feet into the air and slamming it against the opposite wall in a blinding flash, followed by pitch darkness. The impact threw Don Bosco on the floor where he lay dazed for a few moments, thinking that he had plunged a floor below into the study hall. He sat up, drained of strength, and began probing with his hands. Bricks, stones, and plaster were all around him. Staggering to his feet, he groped his way about, afraid of falling into a hole or of being buried under a crumbling wall.

Providentially, after a few steps, his hands touched the little framed picture and holy water font which hung on the wall above the head of his bed. Certain then that he was in his room, he pulled the bell cord against the wall and startled Reano and Rossi. Then he wrapped himself in a blanket and sat on his bed, waiting for aid. He was worried about the boys who were sleeping above his room, and he recommended them to the protection of the Blessed Virgin.

Rossi and Reano were afraid that he had been injured, but he was smiling and tranquil as he reassured them, saying, "Look and see what's in the middle of the room." He had heard a heavy thump and wanted to know what it was. Reano looked and saw five or six bricks, black with soot, which had broken off from the chimney. After briefly telling the two young men what had happened, Don Bosco joked as usual: "How rude of the lightning! It burst in uninvited, toppled my room upside down, and flung me and my bed clear to the other side! This must not go unpunished! We shall have to give it detention — right, Rossi?"

Meanwhile, the artisans' dormitory, directly above, had fared even worse. Lightning had struck the southern end, toppling two chimneys and tearing away a portion of the roof, thereby opening the room to the elements. As tiles, bricks, and plaster rained down on the beds, the dormitory turned into a bedlam of screams, groans, and prayers, accompanied by panicky cries for help and a blind rush for the doors.

As the thunderbolt struck, the cleric Bonetti leaped from his bed in terror, lit the night lamp which had gone out, and went from bed to bed to give what help he could. Seeing that some boys were covered with debris and that one lad, Julius Perroncini, seemed to be dead, he immediately sent another youngster, James Ballario, to call Don Bosco. Reano's report, handed on to John Bonetti, continues:

As Don Bosco was still talking to me and Rossi, there was a furious knocking at the door. I opened it and there stood Ballario, out of breath and gasping.

"Reano," he cried, "tell Don Bosco to come upstairs quickly! We've been hit by lightning! The roof caved in and a lot of boys were killed!"

Don Bosco overheard him indistinctly. He called and asked what had

happened. When I told him, he exclaimed in a heartrending voice: "Oh, my God! But it is Your will, O Lord, and I adore Your decrees!" Then he said to me, "Run up quickly and tell me what has happened."

I rushed upstairs. I could immediately smell sulphur, and I heard screams, groans, and cries on all sides. Two thirds of the ceiling had collapsed on the two rows of beds in the long dormitory. As I ventured toward the far end, things looked even worse. Some boys' faces were bleeding, and others lay stunned by the electric shock. One lad, Modesto Davico, had been burned a bronze color; another boy, John Vairolati, a shoemaker and excellent trombone player, lay unconscious, propped up by two lads who were dashing water on his face in an attempt to revive him. He seemed to be dying. Heedless of the commotion, other boys lay still as if they were dead.

I dashed back to tell Don Bosco, who had meanwhile dressed. Unperturbed, he immediately went up to the dormitory. A boy met him on the steps.

"Lightning hit us," he said. "About thirty boys are dead."

"It can't be," Don Bosco replied. "Go and look again!"

In a few moments he was back, saying, "Only seven or eight are dead!"

"Check again," Don Bosco replied. By this time he was in the dormitory, calmly and smilingly allaying fears. "Don't be afraid," he said. "We have a good Father and a good Mother in heaven watching over us!"

His presence, like that of a consoling angel, relieved the boys. Those who were on their feet ran up to him, and with them he went from bed to bed. Things were not as bad as at first was feared. The boys had suffered mostly scratches and shock. He called for water and vinegar, and he himself gave first aid. On reaching Vairolati, who was still unconscious, he called his name loudly two or three times. The poor fellow, who until then had neither opened his eyes nor uttered a word, awoke, sighed deeply, and feebly called, "Don Bosco!" He shortly regained full consciousness and joined his companions.

Don Bosco moved on to Perroncini who lay on his bed, apparently lifeless. Fearing that he had been electrocuted, no one had yet dared to shake him for fear of discovering that he was dead. Bringing the lamp closer to the boy's face, Don Bosco saw that it had been bruised and that a wooden sliver had pierced his right cheek, protruding under the lower eyelid. He tried to extract it with his fingers, but he could not get hold of it. He then asked for a pair of scissors and managed to pull it

out. The "dead" boy stirred and, thinking he was being teased by some companion, punched Don Bosco, exclaiming, "Let me sleep!" The joy of hearing him was indescribable. Don Bosco and the boys broke into a hearty laugh out of sheer delight, now being sure that such an awful disaster had claimed no victims.

First aid to the injured took an hour or so. Seeing that everyone was safe, Don Bosco sighed a grateful *Deo Gratias*. "Let us thank Our Lord and His Most Blessed Mother with all our hearts!" he said. "They shielded us from grave danger. Can you imagine what would have happened if fire had broken out? All of us might have perished." Then and there all knelt down at Our Lady's little altar and recited the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

It was only two in the morning but nobody cared to go back to bed, and so they went down to church with Don Bosco, leaving Father Alasonatti to look after the injured and take care of things. Father Rua said Mass and all the artisans went to confession and Communion. At five, when the bell rang for rising, the boys in the other dormitories were surprised to see the artisans in the playground, and they hastened down to find out what had happened.

"Didn't you hear anything last night?" the artisans asked.

"No! What happened?"

They had slept through the storm without hearing a thing. While telling them of the night's trying experiences, the artisans kept repeating, "If we are safe, it's because last night we prayed to Our Lady and She protected us!"

As Don Bosco finished hearing confessions, the students came in for Mass, which he himself said at about seven. Communion could have been called general. "It was a moving spectacle," Canon Anfossi told us. Afterward the clerics went up to Don Bosco's room to make sure that he was all right. He received them with his usual smile. "It's the third time," he said, "that lightning has tried to get me. The first two times I suffered bad effects. I could hardly do any reading or writing without becoming drowsy. To get over it, I had to take long walks. But I fear that last night's shock will be much more harmful to my health. And yet, I told the lightning not to be so rude!" Then he added, "This is one of the greatest favors Our Lady has ever obtained for us from Our Lord."

This fact became all the more evident as he later surveyed the damage. The dormitory ceiling was made of plastered rush matting held by wires nailed to boards. The lightning had melted the wires. Hence,

entire sections of matting had fallen over the beds, but no serious harm had been done. Benefactors and friends came to see the damage during the day and were amazed that no one had been killed. They departed extolling God's goodness and Our Lady's protection.

At recreation after dinner, while the clerics and students crowded about Don Bosco in the porticoes, he described what had happened and jokingly remarked, "That lightning was very ill-mannered! It shook us so hard that it almost pulled our limbs apart. Its sound effects were even worse. Such a lot of noise and all out of tune!"

Canon Anglesio, too, was amazed that no one had been seriously hurt. Congratulating Don Bosco on their good fortune, he remarked, "The devil has paid you a compliment by declaring you his enemy. I am more pleased with this than if men had heaped gifts upon you."

Anticlerical papers which reported the accident delighted in stating that there had been a number of fatalities. On May 18 [1861] *La Gazzetta del Popolo* had warned Don Bosco that he had better stop giving so much scandal with his backward ideas and should rather strive to be more Italian. Hardly concealing its pique for its failure to have the Oratory closed down the year before³ and remaining true to its innate vulgarity, on [Monday] May 20, 1861 it published the following account:

On the night between Monday and Tuesday of last week, lightning struck — guess where? — precisely on that hotbed of hapless fellows whom Father Bosco (the modern Loriquet, famous for his *Storia d'Italia* oozing love for Austria)⁴ gathers from the countryside and trains according to his ideas in order to fill the country with bigots. One of those poor fellows died and others were wounded. Had this happened in a boarding school of liberals, the priests would now be crying, "God's hand has struck!" Regarding that hand with a little more respect, we will never accuse it of homicide.

[Years later] Bonetti made the following comment in regard to that account:

We shall simply remark that the "liberal" *Gazzetta del Popolo* published these lines in Turin six days after the event — that is, after it had ample opportunity to verify the facts. But lying is a way of life for certain newspapers, and their tools are blasphemy and calumny. As for the insults it lavished on the Oratory, we are now in a position to reply

³ See pp. 310, 332. [Editor]

⁴ See Appendices 10, 11, and 12. [Editor]

that today those "hapless fellows" and "bigots," whom Don Bosco guided into a trade, profession, or studies, are respectable citizens who are proud of the education they received. They are businessmen, lawyers, teachers, army officers, and exemplary priests. Quite a few, heedless of comfort and of risk, are zealous missionaries in Patagonia where, as true benefactors of mankind, they carry faith and civilization to savage tribes. We will further point out that a number of those "hapless fellows" have attained the highest ecclesiastical and civil offices. Hence we have good reason to believe that "God's hand" was with us that night and thereafter. We consequently invite *La Gazzetta* to show in all sincerity "a little more respect" for that hand and admire its wondrous deeds.

On May 19, Pentecost Sunday, a few days after the mishap, a solemn *Te Deum* was sung at the Oratory in the presence of the day boys and many benefactors. However, the mishap had prompted some members of the staff to suggest that a lightning rod be installed over the building.

"Yes," Don Bosco replied, when they mentioned it to him. "We will place a statue of Our Lady there. She protected us so well that we would be very ungrateful if we now sought recourse to other means."

On one other occasion that year, Her protection was clearly evident. Construction had gone on so briskly under Charles Buzzetti that by November, except for the basement which was to be used as a wine cellar, the new building was ready. One day, as four workmen were dismantling the scaffold, a large section of the basement vault near the stairs collapsed. Caught in midair astride a small beam, one workman managed to crawl to safety on a window sill. Another happened to be in a corner where the vault stood firm; the third one was saved by a beam which landed just above him and, resting against the wall, acted as a shield; the fourth was buried under the debris. At the thunderous crash, all hurried to the spot. Everybody feared that the fourth workman had been killed. With great trepidation they began lifting the debris, but contrary to all expectations and thanks to Mary's evident protection, the man was only bruised.

"Don Bosco also had rushed there," John Baptist Anfossi told us, "but upon hearing from Charles Buzzetti that there were no fatalities, he smilingly commented, 'The devil has again tried to

stick his tail into our business! Never mind! Let's keep going without fear!"

Some nights after this reverse, Don Bosco had a dream which reminded him of another he had experienced in 1856 when a similar mishap had occurred.⁵ At that time he had seemed to be in his room deeply worried about that catastrophe. Canon [Lawrence] Gastaldi⁶ had come in and said, "Don't worry simply because a building collapsed!"

Don Bosco had stared at him in surprise. The canon had returned the stare and had repeated, "Don't worry simply because a building collapsed. Two more will be built: one for those who are well, and one for those who are sick." Don Bosco never forgot that dream and its promise. He was convinced that in due time the Oratory would have an adequate infirmary — large or small — for the care of his sick Salesians and boys.

He constantly regretted the necessity and grave inconvenience of sending some of his sick co-workers or boys to the city hospitals. True, the hospital management, doctors, nurses, nuns, and chaplains did their best to preserve a moral atmosphere, but the immorality and irreligion of certain patients were still a cause of scandal. We will just cite the case of a young boy named Enria who died in 1886 at St. John's Hospital [in Turin]. The patients who were nearby teased him with lewd jokes and loose talk to which the good lad tried to pay no attention. When he told them that he didn't know what they meant, they all burst into guffaws. More coarse laughter and jeers met his request for the Last Sacraments. "I'm not bothering you," he finally retorted. "Why don't you leave me alone?" Even after he had received the Last Sacraments and his end was near, they blasphemously continued to taunt him: "You have prayed to God and you have been good. Now see how He listens to your prayers! You will die like everybody else! Like everybody else you will rot in a grave! What good was it sending for a priest?"

The lad did not reply but, sinking rapidly, asked the nurse, "Please have someone read the last prayers for me. Tell my brother

⁵ See Vol. V, pp. 342f. [Editor]

⁶ The future archbishop of Turin. At this time, and until he became archbishop in 1871, he was a close friend of Don Bosco. See Vol. III, pp. 406ff. [Editor]

(he was employed in that hospital) that I am dying!" As there was no one to whisper a prayer to him and his brother was a long time in coming, he clasped the crucifix and began the *De Profundis*, expiring before he could finish this psalm.

In view of this and similar incidents, Don Bosco was convinced that he needed an infirmary of his own, but since this project could not then be realized, he entrusted its execution and timing to Divine Providence. When the new addition under construction was completed, he had the following scriptural verses inscribed on the walls of the new portico facing east:

I. *Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam, et portae inferi non praevalerunt adversus eam.*

You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt. 16, 18)

II. *Viam aquilae in coelo, viam colubri super petram, viam navis in medio maris, et viam viri in adolescentia.*

The way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent upon a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, and the way of a man in youth. (Prov. 30, 19)

III. *Nemo adolescentiam tuam contemnat; sed exemplum esto fidelium, in verbo, in conversatione, in charitate, in fide, in castitate.*

Let no man despise your youth; but be an example to the faithful, in speech, in conduct, in charity, in faith, in chastity. (1 Tim. 4, 12)

IV. *Ossa eius implebuntur vitiis adolescentiae eius et cum eo in pulvere dormient.*

His bones shall be filled with the vices of his youth; and they shall sleep with him in the dust. (Job 20, 11)

V. *Bonum est viro cum portaverit jugum ab adolescentia sua.*

It is good for a man to bear the yoke from his youth. (Lam. 3, 27)

VI. *Confiteberis vivens, vivus et sanus confiteberis et laudabis Deum et gloriaberis in miserationibus illius.*

Give thanks while you are living. While you are alive and healthy you shall give thanks, and shall praise God, and shall glory in His mercies. (Sir. 17, 27)

VII. *Et baptizabantur ab eo in Jordane, confitentes peccata sua.*

And they were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matt. 3, 6)

CHAPTER 70

Excerpts from the Oratory Chronicles (Continued)

IN describing the effects of the lightning bolt that struck a dormitory and the accident that occurred during the construction of a new wing at the Oratory, we strayed somewhat from a chronological sequence which we shall now resume.

The sicknesses announced by Don Bosco on March 7 of this year ¹ were now taking their course. Two, as already narrated, ² had been fatal. Let us now return to Father Ruffino's chronicle:

On May 17 [1861], Holy Viaticum was brought to a boy named Pavesi, but, thanks to his strong constitution, he rallied and recovered fully after a long convalescence.

Toward the end of May, a few cases of conjunctivitis occurred; by June it became an epidemic that lasted through July. In this emergency Don Bosco contrived an eyewash that unflinchingly cleared away the trouble within three days. The main feature was the way it was to be applied. While bathing one's eyes at bedtime, the patient had to say: "Holy Mary, pray for me!" Another remarkable thing was that when Don Bosco first started to apply this remedy, he sometimes suggested that the recipient say with filial confidence: "Holy Mary, pray for me right now!" In such cases the patient's eyes would immediately water profusely, and in less than fifteen minutes they would be completely cured. Now, however (at the beginning of July), he no longer suggested asking for an immediate cure. Generally the patients recovered within three days. I too witnessed this fact and heard Don Bosco confirm it. Evidently Our Blessed Mother was looking after Her children's health.

¹ See p. 504. [Editor]

² See p. 505. [Editor]

To Don Bosco's persistent and sufficiently grievous ailments was now added this eye trouble. Nevertheless, in a spirit of penance he left his cure to God and refrained from using the remedy he was suggesting to others.

We definitively know of his infirmity from his own words reported in the chronicle:

One evening in June [1861] Don Bosco told the clerics, "I was in my room and could not work because my eyes were aching. Eventually I fell asleep, and in a dream I saw a cleric who said, 'I want to quit studying for the priesthood.' I replied to him, 'I meant to suggest this to you myself, but before you do so, pray that the Lord will show you His will.' The cleric then seemed to leave my room and I awoke. He is not one of those who have already left the Oratory. He is still here!"

That cleric got Don Bosco's message and made a serious effort to do better.

We have already mentioned the clerics' repeated but unsuccessful attempts to have a photograph taken of Don Bosco.³ Father Ruffino's chronicle has this entry:

May 19 [1861]. Today, Pentecost Sunday, Francis Serra, an Oratory boy, took a daguerreotype of Don Bosco — first alone, then in a group with [Louis] Jarach, [Rinaudo] Costanzo, [Alexander] Fabre, Bracco, and [Paul] Albera, and lastly with over fifty pupils around him. Two days later he photographed him again in the act of hearing confessions. The closest penitents were [Joseph] Reano, [Paul] Albera, and [Charles] Viale; many others stood in the background, preparing themselves. Don Bosco had consented only after Serra's endless entreaties. These photographs, however, were strictly for the Oratory, and Don Bosco forbade the making of other prints. [Bartholomew] Bellisio⁴ copied them in pencil sketches.

Photographing Don Bosco was marked by interesting and surprising particulars which provided the boys with some subject matter for conversation and amusement. Father John Bonetti wrote:

³ See p. 526. [Editor]

⁴ Bellisio, an artist, had been at the Oratory since 1850. See Vol. II, p. 416; Vol. IV, pp. 331ff; Vol. V, p. 10. [Editor]

I was told that [on this occasion] Don Bosco, ignoring all pleas, firmly refused to have his picture taken. At this point, the cleric John Cagliero, a senior student, went down on his knees before him and begged him on behalf of all to do them this favor. He told Don Bosco that all would feel terribly disappointed at not having his picture if he should die. Don Bosco relented, but before posing he said to Serra, "I want you to know that I have already yielded three or four times to the insistent pleas of several families in Turin and allowed myself to be photographed, but no picture has ever yet been satisfactory. Recently I went with several boys to Mr. Dubois, the best photographer in town. Both he and his assistants took pictures, but in vain. They were embarrassed since such a thing had never before happened to them. I laughed and said, 'My friends, I'll tell you something. If you want to take my picture, you must first make a good confession. Otherwise you'll never succeed.' They thought I was joking and laughed. Yet, after more than an hour of vain attempts, they had to give up. Therefore, I'll tell you the same thing. If you are in God's grace, go ahead. If not, you'll only be wasting your time."

Serra got to work and took one picture, but it did not turn out very well; the second and third were excellent. At this the boys all shouted, "Serra is in God's grace! Serra is in God's grace!"

On one occasion, when Don Bosco was photographed with a crowd of boys, he told them, "Those with a muddled conscience had better hide, or they will turn out ugly!"

Thus, even while joking, Don Bosco strove to impress on his pupils' minds the grave misfortune of being in the state of sin, which disfigures the soul even when it dwells in a handsome body. "At about this time," Father Ruffino wrote, "he briefly narrated this dream":

I seemed to be with a few boys in a meadow at Castelnuovo, discussing what gift to send Pope Pius IX on his name day. Suddenly, from the direction of Buttigliera, we saw a gigantic pine, unbelievably large and tall, sail horizontally through the air toward us. Then it straightened itself vertically, reeled, and seemed about to crash on us. In terror, we blessed ourselves and were about to flee for safety when abruptly a withering wind arose, totally disintegrating the tree amid thunder, lightning, and hail.

Shortly afterward, another pine, not quite as large, came sailing through the air in the same way and from the same direction, until

it hovered over us. Then it began to float down. In a state of panic, and fearful of being crushed to death, we dashed off again, repeatedly making the Sign of the Cross. The tree dropped close to the ground and then rested in midair, its branches brushing the ground. As we gazed, a light breeze stirred and dissolved the pine into rain.

Unable to grasp the significance of this, we were all distraught when someone (whose identity I still remember) said: "*Haec est pluvia quam dabit Deus tempore suo.*" [This is the rain which God will give in due time.] Someone else (whose identity I no longer remember) added: "*Hic est pinus ad ornandum locum habitationis meae.*" [This is the pine which will bring beauty to My dwelling.] He even gave the scriptural reference but I can't remember it.

I believe that the first pine stood for the persecutions and the storms which afflicted those who were faithful to the Church, whereas the second symbolized the Church herself, which will descend like a refreshing rain upon them.

To our knowledge, Don Bosco did not elaborate on this dream. Without searching for other possible interpretations, we shall venture a comparison. This colossal pine, no less than three hundred and thirty feet in diameter and hovering erect above the earth, recalls to our minds the tree seen by Nabuchodonosor and described by Daniel. Its top reached to the skies, and its far-flung, thickly leaved branches made it look like a forest from a distance. It symbolized overpowering might, proud defiance, rebellion against God, and extermination of His servants. And yet, annihilated by God's wrath, it vanished from the earth. A blistering, violent wind withered its branches, a storm battered it about, and fire consumed it to ashes.

The second pine, lofty and hardy, though not quite as huge as the former, symbolized, perhaps, not so much the Church in general, as some choice segment of the Church, such as a religious congregation — the Society of St. Francis de Sales, for example. This is suggested by the locale of the dream — Castelnuovo,⁵ by the horizontal — rather than vertical — position of the pine, symbolical of humility, and by the scriptural verse: "The glory of Lebanon shall come to you: the cypress, the plane, and the pine to

⁵ Don Bosco's birthplace — Becchi — was within the township of Castelnuovo. [Editor]

bring beauty to My sanctuary, and glory to the place where I set My feet.” [Isaiah 60, 13]

Indeed, at the Oratory, May was proving to be quite an exciting month. The dream of “The Wheel of Eternity” was still arousing new resolves for God’s service. “On May 20 [1861],” Father Ruffino wrote, “Don Bosco said after night prayers, ‘I would be very pleased if each one of you, as an indication of the effect of Mary’s month, would promise two things in writing — one to God, the other to me — and then would sign that paper and give it to me. I will do the same. I will promise something to God, and I will tell you what it is; I will promise you something, too. I’ll reveal it to some privately and to others publicly. This is not an order. You don’t have to do it, but I’ll be very pleased if you do.’ ”

Meanwhile the number of those generously offering to work with Don Bosco for a few years on behalf of the Oratory boys kept increasing, as we can see from the minutes of the Chapter:

On May 21, 1861, the Chapter met in Don Bosco’s room to consider the admission of two applicants: Father John Ciattino of Portacomaro — the pastor of Mareto in the Asti diocese, whose application had been already presented at the meeting of May 12 — and Anthony Tresso of Front (Turin), son of Francis. Father Ciattino was unanimously accepted, but only as a tertiary (i.e., co-operator) because just now he cannot be a full member. Tresso received only one negative vote.

On June 3, 1861, the Chapter met again. After invoking the aid of the Holy Spirit, it proceeded to admit three new members: [Rinaudo] Costanzo of Busca, son of Joseph; Dominic Parigi of Chieri, son of Octavius; Francis Rebuffo of Genova, son of the late James. The first two were unanimously accepted; Rebuffo received one negative vote. All were admitted to the practice of the rules.

Parigi was sixteen; the other two boys were fifteen. In Father Ruffino’s chronicle we read the following:

On the very day of the saintly Father Ciattino’s reception into the [Salesian] Society, his friend, Father [Matthew] Barbero, the pastor of Villa San Secondo, happened to be at the Oratory. He remarked to Don Bosco, “The drought is threatening our crops. Help us to get rain.”

“When you get home,” Don Bosco replied, “have your parishioners

make a novena. In the morning, have prayers and adoration to the Most Blessed Sacrament; in the evening, schedule devotions in honor of Mary Most Holy. Tell your parishioners: 'Don Bosco has promised us rain if we make a novena. Let's see how good his promise is.' Of course, you must say it in a light mood, but then — quite in earnest — insist that they commit no sin, at least during this novena."

"That's not so easy," Father Barbero replied. "How will I know if the people have carried out your suggestion? Your condition looks like a subterfuge. Two hundred people may be avoiding sin, and shall the lot of them suffer because of a few who do sin?"

"Yet," Don Bosco insisted, "to commit sin is tantamount to an open rejection of the favor or to a total denial of having received it."

"All right, I'll do as you say, but if we get no rain, will you at least come yourself and tell us what went wrong?"

"I agree. I'll come and smell out the sinners."

As soon as the pastor returned to the village, he opened the novena with a short sermon about what Don Bosco had said. The rain came before the novena was over. It was to this village that Don Bosco planned to take his boys the following fall.

A few days before Father Barbero's visit to the Oratory, Don Bosco had made this suggestion to a friend of his who was going to Becchi: "Tell those people to pray to Mary with all their hearts and to say the rosary every evening, lest a hailstorm soon ruin their crops."

Convinced by past experience of the truth of such a warning, the villagers complied. Meanwhile, Don Bosco continued to popularize the title "Help of Christians" which came to be known as the name of Don Bosco's Madonna. His 1860 Almanac, *Il Galantuomo*, had publicized for the first time: "May 24: *Feast of the Blessed Virgin, Help of Christians.*" In 1861, under the same date, the reading was: "*Feast of the Most Blessed Virgin Under the Well-Merited Title 'Help of Christians, Auxilium Christianorum!'*"

Thus *Letture Cattoliche*, whose lot it was to extol the glories and favors of Mary Most Holy, Help of Christians, had the honor of being the first of all popular almanacs to mark unfailingly every year the day of that solemn observance. The June issue, *Victorina and Eugenie*, or *Courtesy and Charity*, related the story of courtesy as a fruit of charity. . . .

The last days of Mary's month were enlivened by religious services and a stage play, as we learn from Father Ruffino's chronicle:

On May 23 [1861] a repeat performance of the Latin comedy *Minerval* was staged.⁶ The Latin invitation⁷ to benefactors was again written by Fr. [Louis] Palumbo [S.J.].

On May 26, Father John Turchi sang his first Mass. At a testimonial dinner, complimentary addresses were delivered and a bouquet of flowers offered to the newly-ordained priest. Toward evening, after Vespers and Benediction, music, ovations, fireworks, and balloons crowned the celebration.

The solemn closing of Mary's month also brought its consolations. A student named B . . . told a priest-friend of his about a personal incident — one of those which have become routine at the Oratory. The priest in turn narrated it to the [then] cleric Ruffino:

One day, Don Bosco took this pupil aside and asked him, "Have you been to confession?"

"Yes, Father. I went to Father so-and-so."

"Did he give you absolution?"

"Yes, Father!"

"Impossible! It can't be!"

"He did! Don't you believe me?"

"No, because you didn't confess everything!"

"But I did!"

"You didn't!"

"Do you think you know better than I?"

"I'm not saying that, but I know you did not tell everything — for example, this and that!"

"Well, I was ashamed. . . ." And he went off, muttering, "Don Bosco always knows everything."

But Don Bosco did not forget him. One day, taking him aside again, he said, "Come along. I want to help you put your conscience in order."

"But I don't dare make my confession to you."

"You won't have to confess anything. I'll do it for you." Accordingly, he told the boy in detail whatever he had formerly failed to confess, and he only had to answer 'yes' to be absolved. His joy surpassed anything that he had previously experienced. Now he is one of the happiest boys [at the Oratory].

⁶ See Appendix 16. [Editor]

⁷ See Appendix 17. [Editor]

CHAPTER 71

A Dream: The Handkerchief of Purity

TURIN'S Corpus Christi procession had always been a majestic pageant of splendor enhanced by the attendance of king and cabinet, senators, deputies, and civil and military authorities. This year, however, all these dignitaries refused their dutiful homage to the Most Blessed Sacrament. The reason? Retaliation.

Constitution Day, traditionally observed on the second Sunday of May, had now been transferred by law to the first Sunday of June. In church services the clergy had always taken part in these festivities, but this year, almost to a man, they refused to do so because this celebration had now taken on an entirely different character — Italian unification at the expense of the Pope who had been the victim of untold vexations. Angered by this refusal, Count Camillo Cavour — who was then premier — sent out a circular around the middle of May forbidding all government officials to take part in the annual procession of the Blessed Sacrament. At the same time, Count Cavour, just past fifty, who had recovered from some minor ailments and was enjoying excellent health, used all the resources at his command to emphasize and boost the new national holiday. As the one who had engineered and brought about Italy's unification, he was about to receive its first honors and most resounding praise from both high and low, but God disposed otherwise.

On the eve of Corpus Christi, May 29 [1861], after a stormy session in the Chamber of Deputies during which he was repeatedly addressed in violent language, Cavour retired to his palace where

he suffered a heart attack, although several bloodlettings seemed to give him some hope of recovery.

The procession on the following day saw no military bands, no salvos, no royal family, and no government officials carrying the canopy. "There were only church dignitaries," wrote Canon [Hya-cinth] Ballesio. "Senators and deputies were replaced by hundreds of Oratory boys devoutly escorting the Most Blessed Sacrament. Don Bosco had obtained permission for them to take part in the procession, wanting them frankly and openly to practice their faith. Their exemplary conduct and melodious, devout singing amazed and edified the bystanders and greatly pleased God. Members of Turin's aristocracy and all the city's Catholic associations did their part, too, in honoring the Blessed Sacrament."

On Sunday, June 2, while civic celebrations were held throughout the kingdom, Cavour moaned in his bed, having been brought to death's door by a second, more violent heart attack.

From Father Ruffino's chronicle we quote the following:

At the "Good Night" on June 3, Don Bosco followed up his previous exhortations to pray for the dying premier. "This coming Thursday we shall make the Exercise for a Happy Death," he said. "I want all of you to make it well, because there is one who will not be able to make it again."

On Thursday, June 6, in the octave of Corpus Christi and on the anniversary of the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament that had taken place in Turin in 1453,¹ Count Cavour passed into eternity at the very hour of that great wonder — a truly thought-provoking coincidence! He had reached the summit of the social ladder, and now the Almighty was abruptly sending him to his grave, hardly six months after he had exclaimed in the Chamber of Deputies: "Do you know what will happen in Europe within the next six months?" It was a veiled promise that within that time he would have taken possession of Rome. Unfortunately, within that time he had disappeared from this world's stage without having made the slightest reparation for the harm he had done to the Church.

At the Oratory that day, the Exercise for a Happy Death had been marked by general Communion. At the "Good Night" Don Bosco announced Cavour's death, remarking, "We must indeed feel pity for

¹ See Vol. IV, pp. 404f. [Editor]

Count Cavour. In his last moments he did not have one sincere friend of his soul. Let us hope, however, that through the intercession of St. Francis de Sales — a relative on his mother's side — God may have touched his heart in time and had mercy on him."

The boys, meanwhile, remembered the prediction Don Bosco had made toward the end of 1860.² Those who heard him believed then — and still do — that he had foreseen Cavour's death. Cavour's funeral was held on the evening of June 7 with the greatest pomp. As the cortege wound its way, the sky darkened and a downpour drenched the mourners. Senators and deputies, justices, army officers, and civil authorities who had boycotted the Corpus Christi procession were now forced to walk in foul weather behind a coffin.

On that same evening, at the "Good Night" Don Bosco spoke of the preciousness of the soul. "There are some here," he said, "who, despite the efforts already made to lead them back to the right path, do not want to be converted. I will wait a while longer and then I shall be forced to name them publicly." This meant that if they proved dangerous to their companions they would be dismissed. This was the second thorn Don Bosco had mentioned on March 7 of this year, the second of the two "M's" — *Moralità* [Morals].³

One of those boys very rarely went to the sacraments. Late one Saturday afternoon, however, he went to confession to Don Bosco in the apse of the church, behind the main altar. The confessor's chair and the penitent's kneeler were in back of the altar. A little distance from them was the stand used by the cantor who intoned Sunday vespers. Kneeling about this open confessional, a number of boys were preparing themselves, awaiting their turn. As soon as this boy knelt beside him, Don Bosco clearly saw his miserable spiritual condition. After listening to his confession, he asked, "Is there anything else?"

"No, Father!"

"Perhaps there might be. Think hard."

"I have nothing else!" the boy replied.

"Have courage, son. Tell me everything."

The boy turned a deaf ear and kept silent. At that moment Don

² See p. 457. [Editor]

³ See p. 504. [Editor]

Bosco saw a hideous ape on the choir stand opposite him. It came down among the boys, then sprang on the lad's shoulders and, clutching his throat, thrust its snout between Don Bosco's face and that of the boy. Don Bosco shuddered with fright. With tears of pity in his eyes he again asked the lad, "Have you really nothing else to confess?" But under that demon's evil spell, the boy boldly answered, "No, nothing else!"

"But, son, how is that possible?" Don Bosco insisted. Then tensely he added: "See what's on your back!" And he shrunk back from that repulsive beast. Moved by Don Bosco's tears and words, and feeling a weight on his back, the youth turned around. With a muffled cry of terror he burst into tears and, holding Don Bosco by his cassock, begged, "Please, stay! Do not leave me!"

"If you want me to stay, tell me everything," Don Bosco replied. The poor fellow took courage, put his arms around Don Bosco, and, while the monster disappeared, sincerely confessed everything.

Don Bosco related this incident one evening to a few clerics — among them Ruffino and Bonetti who recorded it. They were deeply impressed because they remembered the dream of ["The Wheel of Eternity"] a few months back concerning three boys with monkey-like creatures at their throats.⁴

Gradually news of this incident spread about. When asked, Don Bosco prudently and discreetly told the entire community of the repulsive apparition, and in this case, as in similar ones, he surrounded the incident with different circumstances. Occasionally, he would even present as a recent occurrence an incident that may have actually occurred years before. In any event, the name of the boy in this incident could never be revealed. With the passing of time, the incident itself was considered by some people to be a mere tale. Forty-four years later, however, a proof of its authenticity came up most unexpectedly.

In September 1904, Brother Edmund, a Christian Brother, was in Turin attending a Catholic Youth Congress. During the sessions he met a number of Salesians — among them Father [John Baptist] Francesca⁵ and Father Louis Blanco,⁶ a missionary in Argentina —

⁴ See pp. 534f. [Editor]

⁵ Fr. Francesca died in Turin in 1930. [Editor]

⁶ Fr. Blanco died in Santiago, Chile, in 1956. [Editor]

and talked with them about Don Bosco, whom he had known in 1850. He told them that he had seen him gathering boys in Piazza Emanuele Filiberto, and that he himself had frequented the Oratory and witnessed over seven hundred boys lined up for confession. Ten or fifteen priests were at their disposal, but most boys preferred Don Bosco. He also observed that, after those protracted confessions, a glass of wine was offered to Don Bosco for refreshment, but he never took it. Brother Edmund then went on to praise Don Bosco's approach in helping boys to make fruitful confessions, and he asserted his belief that God assisted him in that priestly ministry with singular favors. Then, as a proof, he narrated the above-mentioned incident. Astounded, the Salesians asked him how he knew about it.

"I heard it at Parma," he replied, "from the boy himself (and he mentioned his name). For three or four years he had been ashamed to confess a grave sin."

However, at the Oratory, together with a few souls in great need of help, here were many beautiful ones. On Monday, June 10, after the boys had gone to bed, Don Bosco was pacing the porticoes with a few clerics. Ruffino and Bonetti were there, and they enriched their chronicles with what he then said. We report it as follows:

"How many wonderful things I could tell you!" he said.

"Please tell us!" all exclaimed.

"Right now we have boys here who have been favored by God with special gifts. This is a proof of the Lord's presence. During Communion, one boy, who is considered one of the finest, though others apparently seem more virtuous, saw a globe which filled the entire church and then gradually shrank to the size of a hazelnut as it hovered in midair above the ciborium. Then it grew a bit again, shrank, and finally disappeared. I asked him whether he knew its meaning. 'No,' he replied. 'What do you think of it?'

" 'I don't know either,' I answered.

"As you see," Don Bosco went on, speaking to the clerics, "I gave this disclosure no importance. The boy saw that globe on June 2; Cavour, world-renowned for power and fame, died on June 6. We could interpret the whole thing thus: Just as Cavour was about to fade away [by death], swollen [with pride] he raised himself even above the

Blessed Sacrament, and then collapsed and disappeared. We could give it another interpretation: The globe might portend a rebellion against the Church, but, as the Church seems about to be crushed, the rebellion disintegrates and frightened onlookers find no trace of it. From afar, the rebellion seems a mighty one, but then it dwindles into nothing and disappears.”

The clerics asked who the seer was, but Don Bosco would not say. Instead, he went on: “At the Elevation, another boy saw Our Divine Savior crucified. At first, Our Lord was most handsome, majestic, and vigorous, but He soon showed extreme pain and became pitifully thin. The boy then seemed to see all his companions lovingly gathered around Him to offer food and refreshment, while solicitously asking Him what had caused His pain and wasting away. ‘My dear children,’ Jesus replied, ‘this is the will of My Eternal Father!’ The vision then vanished. What pleased me most was that the boy artlessly jotted the whole thing down just as he remembered it. I asked him if he knew what it all meant, especially Our Lord’s wasted-away condition, but he replied that he didn’t. He seemed inclined to believe, though, that it might point to a famine (material or spiritual) which would come about, perhaps, in a few years. But the most obvious explanation is that Jesus is now suffering through His Church.”

Some clerics interrupted Don Bosco, asking: “Who is this boy?” However, Don Bosco again declined to answer and went on, “There is a third boy, whom I had already seen, in the dream of the fourteen tables, among the very few who still retained their baptismal innocence. Our Lady enjoys talking to him and tells him different, secret future events. At times, when I want to know something about the future, I recommend myself to him — although cautiously, so as not to arouse his pride. He asks Our Lady and then tells me in all simplicity. The same thing happens when I need a particular favor. We have several such pupils. It is a very unique situation and I wonder how it will all end, because illusions are not to be ruled out. However, one thing is certain: Mary loves us. I’ll tell you of another boy, too. I cannot explain it! Before the Easter holidays, he kept asking me to let him spend them at home. I was not inclined to let him go, but he begged again and again, saying that he wanted to be present at his pastor’s death. I finally agreed. When he told his parents why he had come home, they wrote to ask whether their son had left the Oratory with that silly idea already in his head. Their pastor was well. To everybody’s surprise, however, a few days later he became ill, received the Last Sacraments, and died.”

Don Bosco's accounts astonished us [the chronicle continues] and again, more insistently, we pestered him to tell us the names of these privileged souls living in our midst. His only answer was, "In cases like these, we really must exclaim, 'You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to the little ones. . . . For such was Your good pleasure.' [Matt. 11, 25-26] Knowledge and good will cannot account for these things. The Lord dispenses His gifts according to His pleasure to whomever He wills. As for me, I better value a virtue, which is constant, than these charisms. These signs of predilection are very dangerous, especially if frequent, unless one is on guard against temptations to pride. God resists the proud and gives His grace to the humble. These privileged souls may read or hear a sermon about the visions and other supernatural phenomena of a saint's life. People who have not been so favored will be stirred, but these privileged souls will remain totally unimpressed — with the added danger, rather, that they may think, 'This is nothing much. I have received such favors myself.' There will be trouble, then, because humility is gone. God help them if they attribute these favors to their own merits and boast of them even a little!

"A few years ago one of our boys claimed to have seen Our Lady while he was sick in bed and to have learned many things from Her. He gave various proofs. For example, he knew which of his schoolmates had been to confession and which had not. As this happened on a Saturday evening, he sent the latter to confession.⁷ Another proof of his vision's genuineness was the good conduct he began to lead after he recovered. Later, however, he became careless, and his conduct deteriorated to such an extent that we had to send him home. However, it is evident that we have received — especially this year — many proofs of God's goodness to the Oratory. All these facts show that the Lord reigns in our house, that He protects and defends us, and that He grants us success in all that we do. Woe to us if we fail to show our appreciation!"

He then went on to speak of the above-mentioned visions. Replying to a question, he said, "I have never been favored with visions concerning the Blessed Sacrament, except for the multiplication of the Communion Hosts. That was really a wonder to marvel at!"

"Did that really happen?" a cleric asked.

"Yes, it did! One morning in 1854 I was saying the Community Mass

⁷ This case has some similarity with one described in Vol. V, pp. 476ff. There is no proof, however, that Don Bosco was referring to it. [Editor]

because I was the only priest in the house. After consuming the Precious Blood I began to give Holy Communion to the boys. There were but ten or twelve Hosts in the ciborium. Since only a few boys came to the altar rail, I did not think it necessary to break the Hosts. Then a great number of others kept coming and filled the altar rail three or four times. I'd say that some fifty boys received that morning. After making one round or so, I was about to return to the altar and break the Hosts when, to my surprise, I noticed that their number apparently had not decreased. Therefore, I continued to distribute Communion. When I came to the last boy, I was astonished to find but one particle left, and I gave it to him." Then Don Bosco repeated, "Inexplicably, I had seen those Hosts multiplying!"⁸

At this point, Father John Bonetti's chronicle comments:

These words of Don Bosco prove two things: (1) the multiplication of the Hosts was a reality; (2) from his narration of this fact — which he repeated to others on other occasions — as well as from certain other expressions of his, we must conclude that at other times too he had received similar favors which have remained undisclosed. However that may be, I must confess that this half-hour conversation with Don Bosco was spiritually more fruitful to me and to my companions, as they candidly declared, than a ten-day spiritual retreat. The next day we did our best — with caution — to get at least some leads to the identity of these privileged boys, but in vain. However, through a friend in whom the boy who had seen the globe had confided, I came to know his name. I wrote it down but kept it to myself. It was my proof that Don Bosco was telling the truth.

At the Oratory virtue was not ostentatiously flaunted. Remarkably, this atmosphere of spirituality, this steady succession of wondrous incidents and dreams with all the hallmarks of the supernatural, these predictions of death and revelations of consciences — all of which seemingly should have inflamed the imagination — never produced visionaries, religious fanatics, bigots, weaklings, or superstitious believers among the thousands of Oratory boys. There, an order of things was being unfolded which, founded on genuine piety, was openly willed by God. Father Paul Albera and many others firmly shared this opinion.

⁸ For another similar multiplication, *see* Vol. III, pp. 311f. [Editor]

[Father Bonetti's chronicle continues:]

On June 16, Don Bosco gave the boys the spiritual nosegay to pray for the grace of repentance for those with the big ape on their shoulders — boys so few in number that he could hardly speak of them in the plural. Then, at the "Good Night" on June 18, he told the following little story, or dream of sorts, as he called it on another occasion. His style of narration, however, was always such as to prompt Ruffino to apply to Don Bosco what Baruch had said of Jeremiah: "[He] dictated all these words to me as if he were reading them, and I wrote them down with ink in the book." [Jer. 36, 18] Don Bosco spoke thus:

On the night of June 14 I had no sooner fallen asleep than I was startled by a heavy blow on the bedstead, as if someone had struck it with a board. I jumped up and immediately thought that it was lightning. I looked about but found nothing unusual. Convinced that I had most likely been dreaming, I again tried to sleep. Hardly had I begun to doze when a second blow startled me again. This time I got out of bed and searched everywhere — under the bed, under the desk, and in the corners of the room — but I found nothing amiss. Commending myself to God's safekeeping, I blessed myself with holy water and slipped into bed. It was then that my mind began to wander and I saw what I am going to tell you.

I seemed to be in our church pulpit, about to start a sermon. All the boys were seated at their usual places, looking up and waiting, but I had no idea what to preach about. My mind was a complete blank. For a while I stood there dumbfounded and dismayed. Never had anything like this happened to me in all my years of ministry. Then suddenly the walls and boys disappeared, and the church turned into an immense valley. I was beside myself and could not believe my eyes. "What's this?" I questioned. "A moment ago I was in the pulpit in church and now I am in a valley? Am I dreaming? What's happening to me?"

I decided then to get going, hoping to meet someone and find out where I was. After a while, I came to a stately palace. Its many balconies and broad terraces beautifully harmonized with the building and landscape. In front of the palace there was a large plaza. In a corner, at the right, a large number of boys were crowding around a lady who was handing out handkerchiefs, one to each boy. On taking theirs, the boys walked up to the terrace and ranged themselves along

the parapet. Drawing close to the lady, I heard her say to each lad as she gave him a handkerchief, "Do not unfold it when it's windy, but if you are surprised by a wind, turn at once to the right, never to the left."

I keep looking at those boys, but then and there I did not recognize any of them. When all the handkerchiefs had been distributed, the boys were all lined up on the terrace in complete silence. As I watched, one boy took out his handkerchief and unfolded it. Others followed his example and soon all had them out. The handkerchiefs were very large and exquisitely embroidered in gold. On each, lengthwise, there was written in gold: *Regina virtutum* [Queen of virtues].

Suddenly a soft breeze came out of the north — that is, from the left; gradually it grew stronger, then it became a wind. Immediately some boys folded their handkerchiefs and hid them, while others turned quickly to the right. Others, instead, left them exposed and flapping in the wind. Meanwhile the disturbance gained force while ominous clouds gathered overhead and darkened the sky. Lightning flashed as thunderous, frightening rumbles rolled across the heavens, followed by hail, rain, and snow. Unbelievably, many boys still kept their handkerchiefs flapping in the storm. The hail, rain, and snow battered them mercilessly. In no time they were riddled with holes, torn beyond recognition.

I was stunned, not knowing what to make of it. However, I was in for a still greater shock. As I got closer to those boys for a better look, I recognized every one of them. They were my own Oratory boys. I hurried up to one and asked, "What in the world are you doing here? Aren't you so-and-so?"

"Yes," he replied, "I am." And then, pointing to several others, he added, "So-and-so and so-and-so are here too!"

I then went over to the lady who had distributed the handkerchiefs. Several men were around her.

"What does all this mean?" I asked them.

The lady herself [hearing my question] turned to me. "Didn't you see the inscription on those handkerchiefs?" she asked.

"Why yes, my lady," I replied. "*Regina virtutum.*"

"Do you understand now?"

"Yes, I do!"

All those boys exposed their purity to the wind of temptation. Some, on realizing the danger, immediately fled. Those are the boys who folded and hid their handkerchiefs. Others, taken by surprise and unable to fold their handkerchiefs, turned to the right. These are the boys who promptly have recourse to prayer when in danger and turn their

backs upon the enemy. Others, instead, kept their handkerchiefs open to the full blast of temptation and fell into sin.

Saddened by this sight and the realization that so very few of my boys had kept themselves pure, I nearly lost heart and burst into tears. When I was able to control myself again, I asked, "Why did even raindrops and snowflakes riddle the handkerchiefs? Aren't they symbols of venial sins?"

One of the men replied: "Don't you know that where purity is concerned *non datur parvitas materiae* [there is no matter that is not considered to be grave]? Nevertheless, don't be downhearted. Come and see."

He moved to the balcony and, signaling to the boys with his hand, shouted, "Right about face!" Nearly all obeyed, but a few did not budge. Their handkerchiefs were torn to shreds. I noticed, too, that the handkerchiefs of those who had turned to the right had shrunk and were covered with patches. They had no holes but were pitifully shapeless.

"These boys," the lady explained, "had the misfortune of losing purity, but they regained God's grace through confession. Those few who did not stir are those who persist in sin and perhaps will go to perdition." Finally, she said to me: "*Nemini dicito, sed tantum admone.*" [Tell no one in particular, but give only a general warning.]

Father Ruffino's chronicle continues:

On that very day [June 18, 1861], God had rewarded Don Bosco's zeal by bringing him a lost sheep. While he was in the playground chatting with the boys, a man came up and asked to speak to him privately. Together they went up to his room. Once inside, the man said, "I am a priest. I left my parish to serve under Garibaldi. I was tricked into apostasy and became a Protestant. But I am unhappy, and I have always been so since I went astray. I could never stifle my remorse of conscience. Now I am in a miserable state, both physically and spiritually. I would like to return to my bishop, but. . ."

Don Bosco had known of this priest. "Don't worry," he said. "The bishop knows all about you and will gladly receive you. Have you any carfare?"

"Not a penny!" He opened his coat. "Look," he said. "See what I'm wearing — a chemise. This is what my friends put on my bed last Saturday for me to wear. They knew that I was unhappy, and perhaps they intended this to be a parting insult."

Don Bosco gave him carfare and a shirt. Before leaving, the poor priest asked for a book.

"Gladly," Don Bosco said, "but right now all I can give you is a breviary."

"That's what I want. No one will ever realize how unhappy are those who go astray!"

Apparently this priest, in reparation for his past defection, disclosed the plans of the Protestants in Florence, and Don Bosco promptly passed the information on to the archbishop, who replied as follows:

Florence, June 28, 1861

Very Reverend and dear Father,

On her return to Florence, Marchioness Villarios immediately brought me your most welcome letter of June 18. Your promise to pray and to have your boys pray for me shows your goodness and has truly consoled me. I am in a most difficult and burdensome position and do need your prayers in these turbulent times.

Perhaps the papers have slightly overplayed what happened during the octave of Corpus Christi. *La Nazione* — our most despicable city paper — especially slandered me and forced me to refute their assertions. As I was returning home after the [Corpus Christi] procession, someone shouted insults at me. Nevertheless, I received lively demonstrations of loyalty and affection from many of my faithful. What I deplore most is the impudence and malice of some who broke up a demonstration of love for the Blessed Sacrament and intimidated crowds of good people who were escorting Our Eucharistic Lord with lighted candles. This sacrilegious irreverence pains me greatly. May God in His infinite mercy enlighten and forgive those profaners.

I am very grateful for the information you have given me about Protestant proselytizing, and especially for your suggested counter-measures. Attempts at undermining my people's faith have been going on for the past ten years: at first secretly, and for the last two years quite openly. But, thank God, these proselytizers are daily losing ground. They have gained only the scum of the populace, and even some of these have begun to return to the Church's bosom. I believe that if we are watchful, and if priests keep united to their bishops, the efforts of these false evangelizers will come to naught. As regards the clergy, I have had my share of sorrows. At the beginning of this month I have already had to penalize a number of priests who had banded together with unholy

intentions. Fortunately they heeded the warning, except for thirteen who chose rather to be suspended — mostly ex-religious or priests of other dioceses who had taken up residence here and do not enjoy a good reputation.

If you come to Florence, as the above-mentioned marchioness led me to hope, we will discuss these matters more fully. I earnestly wish to make your personal acquaintance. You are welcome to be my guest at any time.

Meanwhile I wish you plentiful heavenly favors, and I pray that the Lord will bless ever more abundantly your apostolic labors and your charitable institution.

Yours devotedly,

✠ Joachim, *Archbishop of Florence*

CHAPTER 72

A Regrettable Rift

THE July [1861] issue of *Letture Cattoliche* entitled *Sunday Rest* . . . demonstrated the moral, physical, and social need of such an observance everywhere. . . .

Meanwhile, in preparation for the feast of St. Aloysius Gonzaga in June, Don Bosco had ordered the printing of four thousand pictures of this Saint. There is an excellent description of this celebration in a letter of Chevalier [Frederick] Oreglia to a boy named Severino Rostagno who had been an Oratory pupil only a few months because of poor health. Don Bosco and the superiors had been very considerate with him; in fact, Chevalier Oreglia often took him out for walks, but boarding school life did not suit him. Severino loved to play with smaller boys or stroll with superiors or adults, seldom associating with his peers. After his return home to Pinerolo, his classmates fondly kept writing to him. Up to 1891, his mother still cherished these letters — among them the one from Chevalier Oreglia which we shall now report:

July 1, 1861

Dear Severino,

I usually think well of everyone, but your long silence gives me second thoughts about you. If you have been well, I find it hard to believe that you have not written — I wouldn't say necessarily to me, but to anybody in the house. I really fear that you are quite ill. Whatever the case, both your companions and I are anxious to have an answer. Most likely you too would like to hear how we are getting on at the Oratory, so I'll do my best to bring you up to date.

As for the daily routine of students and artisans, there is nothing new, except for a small change in the afternoon timetable to give the boys a rest and postpone recreation and study to later periods in the evening.

What will somewhat interest you, I think, is how we kept the feasts of St. John the Baptist and St. Aloysius Gonzaga. We celebrated the first on its actual day, June 24, but we put off that of St. Aloysius to the 30th. On the feast of St. John the Baptist¹ the boys gave Don Bosco a clock for the church tower. When you return, you won't have to ask for the time because you'll hear it strike the hours. But it cost a lot and the boys have not yet paid for it in full. Luckily, they have a year to take care of that. If you should come across some admirer of Don Bosco among your friends, ask him to give the poor boys a hand. (I am just joking.)

At the Community Mass, Communion was general. Then, at breakfast, all the boys — day and resident — as well as those of the other festive oratories, were served coffee and milk, fruit, bread, and salami. Twenty-five gallons of milk barely sufficed. Later, Don Bosco himself sang the solemn high Mass. Then followed a banquet (a modest one, as befits the poor) with music, poems, and toasts. After dinner, we had fun with piñatas and with other games until it was time for afternoon church services, at which Don Bosco was again the celebrant. The choir and orchestra performed as in the morning. After Benediction, we had refreshments and, later in the evening, fireworks, balloons, rockets, poems in Don Bosco's honor, and gifts, especially from the festive oratory boys and benefactors. In short, dear Severino, it would have been a perfect day if you had been with us too. We went to bed at eleven, tired but happy. Don Bosco especially was really exhausted.

I shall pass over the St. Aloysius celebration because time and paper would fail me. Several distinguished guests came to enhance the feast. The vicar general of Turin said the Community Mass, at which there were over seven hundred Communions, the vicar capitular of Asti sang the solemn high Mass, preached, and gave Benediction, and the count of Collegno was the "prior"² of the festivities. He provided breakfast for the more than one thousand boys who came to Mass. Then there was a very good dinner with music and poems, as on the feast of St. John the Baptist. In the evening we held a lottery with prizes for all, and then there were fireworks and countless balloons. There was such a large assemblage of guests and other people — mostly parents and relatives

¹ Don Bosco's name day. *See* p. 12, footnote 5. [Editor]

² *See* p. 65, footnote 3. [Editor]

— that our boys were nearly lost among them. The celebration ended shortly after ten with night prayers. On this occasion, too, we missed you. Your friends asked for you several times, which means that distance does not separate or divide those who love one another in the Lord.

This is the little I can tell you of our celebrations which, though not appealing to the worldly-minded, are cherished by those who are imbued with the spirit of this house and appreciate pure, holy joy. I hope you enjoyed what I have told you. We often speak of you, pray for you, and hope to have you again with us soon. Don't you forget to pray for us. Remember me especially to Mary, Refuge of Sinners, particularly by offering up for me the Hail, Holy Queen at the end of the rosary.

May the Lord help you to carry your cross and lighten it. I should be very happy if He would give me part of it, but I probably am unworthy and might not be able to carry it with resignation. Mercifully, Our Lord spares me many acts of impatience.

Your companions, especially the most devout ones, those closest to you in the Lord, wish to be remembered to you. Don Bosco and all the superiors likewise wish you resignation in your present condition and confidence in the future. I say good-bye with all my heart. Please give my regards to your mother. Yours in Jesus and Mary,

Frederick Oreglia

The school year was now drawing to a close. As foretold by Don Bosco,³ the third thorn, symbolized by an "R" [Rivalry], was coming to pass in the wake of the other two thorns, *Malattie* [Sicknesses]⁴ and *Moralità* [Morals].⁵ Because of Don Bosco's direction, administration, and wisely-chosen personnel, the Giaveno junior seminary was doing exceedingly well. The number of pupils, their good conduct, and their excellent examination results during the school year 1860-61 were very gratifying.

"Between the Oratory and the Giaveno seminary," Canon [John Baptist] Anfossi wrote, "there was a continual exchange of teachers and assistants. We considered Giaveno as forming one unit with the Oratory. Several times I took boys there myself. Likewise, the cleric

³ See p. 504 [Editor]

⁴ See p. 505. [Editor]

⁵ See pp. 576ff. [Editor]

Celestine Durando was sent to supervise both midyear and final examinations, and once Francis Cerruti did the same.”

As the acknowledged superior of that seminary,⁶ Don Bosco paid two visits to the students. He could rightly claim them as his own for many reasons, and they in turn welcomed him as their beloved father. During those visits which proved real triumphs for him, he preached, gave the “Good Nights,” conducted the Exercise for a Happy Death, and heard the confessions of all. The boys never seemed to tire of crowding around him for a word of advice. Indeed, Giaveno was fast becoming a genuine nursery of priestly vocations.

However, all this great affection and praise for Don Bosco hurt Father Grassino’s feelings.⁷ Before long he became jealous and decided to make himself independent of Don Bosco by having himself recognized as the only superior of the junior seminary. Self-confident and trusting that it would continue to prosper, he took it upon himself to deal directly with the chancery, inasmuch as he knew someone there who would second his plan. Accordingly he went to Turin and, under the guise of paying his respects to his ecclesiastical superiors, in his own name and without a single word to Don Bosco, he handed to them the seminary records as well as the pupils’ financial and scholastic roster and the terms of their admission. Having been well received by one of the chancery officials, who took no account of the slight thereby given to Don Bosco, he returned again and again to report on Don Bosco’s directives, words, or actions. His assertion that the Giaveno seminary should not be considered dependent on the Oratory played in his favor. By this show of zeal for diocesan interests, he hoped to remove a thorn from his side — Don Bosco — and in due time to win a good parish for which, in all fairness, he possessed the necessary qualifications.

His desire for independence, however, was thwarted by the impossibility of finding suitable personnel. Hence he did not openly break with Don Bosco. Rather, he thought it the better part of valor to disguise his aims and try to entice the Oratory clerics who were at the seminary to leave Don Bosco for good. Those who seemed

⁶ See pp. 418f. [Editor]

⁷ See p. 419. [Editor]

responsive received preferential treatment; those who remained faithful to Don Bosco or seemed unlikely to abandon him were given all the burdensome tasks and cold treatment. Father Grassino, of course, gave no reasons for his actions, but the difference of treatment was so glaring that pupils and domestics alike could not help noticing it. Discontent and distrust began making headway into the seminary.

Don Bosco was aware of these plans and intrigues, but what pained him most was that he no longer received full cooperation in forming these boys according to his principles. Taking advantage of the fact that the clerics [Francis] Vaschetti and [John] Boggero had come to the Oratory for his name day, he called them to his room on the night before their return to Giaveno and lengthily discussed with them plausible pretexts to recall them to the Oratory. He ended up by saying: "Since Father Grassino no longer shares my views, let him and the provicar find their own personnel."

The two young clerics returned to Giaveno, and Vaschetti informed the rector of what Don Bosco had said. Father Grassino immediately hurried to the Oratory to avert the danger of being left without a staff. He tried to justify his actions, apologized, and seemed receptive to Don Bosco's advice. On the same day, however, he called on the provicar [Canon Alexander Vogliotti] to complain of Don Bosco's pretentiousness in imposing on him a system of education which, in his opinion, was unsuited to the times and potentially quite harmful, and he concluded by saying that Don Bosco's interference hindered his free exercise of authority as rector of the seminary. He succeeded in persuading the provicar to keep Don Bosco from recalling Vaschetti and Boggero. He also intimated that the simplest way to get personnel was to force the clerics who belonged to the diocese of Turin to leave Don Bosco and the Salesian Society.

Father Grassino returned to Giaveno, convinced of his diplomatic victory, and told Vaschetti and Boggero, who were anxiously awaiting the decisions taken in their regard, that he had had a long talk with Don Bosco. Shortly before, Vaschetti had told Boggero, "I hope that matters will be settled without our being recalled to the Oratory."

“Was anything decided about us?” Vaschetti asked.

“I spoke of you and of the Society you belong to with Canon Vogliotti,” Father Grassino replied. After a few more words, though, perhaps fearing he had already said too much, he abruptly stopped.

“And will Don Bosco keep sending us assistants next year?” the clerics queried again. The rector only smiled.

Meanwhile, on July 5, the cleric Boggero, feeling very depressed, wrote to Chevalier Oreglia and gave him a full description of what we have narrated:

It looks as though things are not shaping up well for me. I believe that the rector and some clerics have formed a tight clique and shut me out. I am away from the Oratory, without a friend to confide in. . . . Were I to express a doubt, hope, or anything at all concerning our Society, I am sure that it would be reported to the rector. . . . This is the situation I am in. . . . I don't even dare mention the least need because I don't know what to make of the rector's ambiguous conduct.

He ended the letter with these words:

I would have written all this to Don Bosco on the same evening that Father Grassino returned from Turin — as Don Bosco himself had told me to do should anything develop — but I did not feel up to it. I was afraid to cause him too much pain. But if you think that Don Bosco ought to know these things, please tell him everything. However, ask him to be cautious in whatever steps he may take lest I get in trouble with Father Grassino or Canon Vogliotti. I am afraid that I won't have a chance to get away from here very soon because both the provicar and the rector have stated that just now both Vaschetti and I are necessary.

Chevalier Oreglia handed this letter to Don Bosco, who hastened to console Boggero with this short, cherished note: “Be very prudent and patient and resigned to God's will. Trust in Him.”

Fortunately nothing leaked out to outsiders. In fact, some Oratory clerics went to Giaveno in August for their health, and [John Baptist] Francesia and others vacationed there for a few weeks as if it were their own home. The rector, however, indirectly and subtly kept trying to entice them away from Don Bosco by holding

out hopes for a guaranteed lucrative diocesan career with the help of diocesan officials.

Father Grassino had not called on the chancery for quite some time when Don Bosco went there to discuss the regrettable difficulties he had encountered with the Giaveno seminary. He found the provicar deeply concerned by Father Grassino's suggestions and by his fear that Vaschetti and Boggero might be pulled out. In fact the canon hastened to declare that those two clerics were necessary for the seminary's good running. Courteous as always, Don Bosco did not contradict him, but he proved to him that other clerics could replace them, if necessary. There followed an exchange of ideas whose gist transpires from the following letter of Don Bosco to the canon:

Turin, September 3, 1861

Very Reverend Canon,

I am enclosing a list of Oratory clerics, from which you may choose as many as you need for Giaveno. As regards the reason given me yesterday why the Oratory and the Giaveno junior seminary should not be considered as one and the same unit — namely, to avoid the possibility that the staff will be labeled “Jesuit” and the teaching “Jesuitical” — I feel duty-bound to ask you not to be taken in by this sort of twaddle. Both the good and the malevolent know very well that those two words are hallmarks of a sound moral education. Just recall what the seminary was last year and think of what it is now. All the men we sent from here agreed to go only when they were assured that the Giaveno seminary would form but one unit with the Oratory.

You might do a little research and find out how many pupils came directly from here or through our recommendation, and how many were sent there by others. You would then realize that there are a great many people who are not frightened by the words “Jesuits” and “Jesuitical.” You also said that, generally speaking, clerics from other dioceses should preferably be sent back to their own bishops. This is the exact opposite of what the bishops are doing or trying to do. If they have some good prospects with us, they do all they can to keep them here. I can easily prove this fact: Francesia belongs to Ivrea, Cerruti to Vercelli, Durando to Mondovì, and Provera to Casale. They are all excellent teachers. If

they had been recalled to their own dioceses, I would lose their help, and they might perhaps not be doing as much good elsewhere.

You may feel that I am lecturing you, but that is far from the truth. I only want to tell you what I regard as more conducive to God's greater glory. Nor do I want you to think that I am anxious to meddle in Giaveno's affairs. The exact opposite is true. I have more than enough to do here in Turin. It is my sincere desire that you will take over and keep up what has been so wonderfully begun at Giaveno. You know very well that for the last twenty years I have always worked for the good of our diocese. This I still intend and hope to do for the rest of my days. I have always recognized God's voice in that of my ecclesiastical superior.

Forgive this prattle of mine and accept my best wishes for every blessing from heaven on you.

Yours devotedly,

Fr. John Bosco

Prior to this, Don Bosco had been at the mountain solitude of St. Ignatius' Shrine for his spiritual retreat and had taken along Chevalier Frederick Oreglia. On July 18, the latter wrote to Father [Victor] Alasonatti as follows:

Don Bosco tells me that hopefully he will write to you tomorrow. The air here seems to brace him up and restore his strength. . . . A thousand greetings to all our dear boys from both of us, especially from Don Bosco. The boys are our favorite topic whenever we are together. In truth, it seems such a long time to me since I saw them last. Ask them to pray for our dear Don Bosco's health, for my conversion, and for the spiritual betterment of their companions, especially of our dear confreres. I interpret Don Bosco's mind in asking you to restrain those who are carrying their zeal for study too far — our teachers included, and especially the cleric Cerruti for whose health I very much fear.

Remember me particularly to my patients. I regret my inability to cure them. . . .

Kindly give my regards to the main superiors: Father Rua, Father Savio, Father Turchi, and Father Rocchietti. I recommend myself to their prayers.

[A few days later] Don Bosco also encouraged and admonished

his pupils with a letter to be read by Father Alasonatti or Father Rua to all the boys:

St. Ignatius' Shrine, July 23, 1861

My dear boys and sons,

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us.

I have been away only a few days, my beloved children, and it seems months since I have seen you. You are indeed my delight and my joy, and I lack both when I am away from you.

Father Alasonatti has told me that you have been praying for me. I thank you. I, too, remember you to the Lord every morning at Holy Mass. I want to tell you that I have spent most of my time with you; I have observed, generally and particularly, all you are doing and thinking. As regards specific things — some of which, I am sorry to say, are serious — I will speak to those concerned, as needed, upon my return. As for the rest, I am very pleased, and you, too, have good reason to be pleased.

However, one very important thing must be corrected — the far too hasty way in which you recite the community prayers. If you want to do me a real favor, something pleasing to God and beneficial to you, strive to keep an even pace in your prayers, distinctly pronouncing each word without slurring syllables.

This, my beloved boys, is a suggestion that I ardently desire to see carried out at my return. In three days I shall be with you again, and, God willing, I will tell you many things I have seen, read, and heard.

May God give you health and grace, and may He help us to be one in heart and soul in loving and serving Him all the days of our life. Amen.

Your friend in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco

P.S. I would like to have written also to Father Turchi, Rigamonti, Placido Perucatti, Bagnasacco, Stassiano, and Cuniolo, but time did not permit. I'll talk to them [when I get back].

“On his return from St. Ignatius' Shrine,” Ruffino's chronicle reports, “Don Bosco told the boys that while there he had seen all those boys who were not fit to remain at the Oratory.” This in-

sight led him to a correct evaluation of pupils whose outward deportment outwitted the superior's discernment. Firmly he would send them home and thus remove stumbling blocks from the community. "When a pestilent man is punished, the little one will be wiser; and if he follows the wise, he will receive knowledge." [Prov. 21, 11]

Academic awards were made at the Oratory near the end of July. As on several previous occasions, Professor Thomas Vallauri presided, and he then sent this gracious little note to Don Bosco:

[Turin] July 30, 1861

Reverend and dear Father,

Since you deserve the first prize, I take this opportunity to beg you to accept complimentary copies of a few works of mine. Wish me well and pray for me.

Your devoted servant,

T. Vallauri

The Oratory school year 1860-61 proved most fruitful in priestly vocations. Thirty-four pupils were found to have the necessary physical, intellectual, and moral qualifications to don the clerical habit.

CHAPTER 73

Noteworthy Incidents

THOSE Oratory boys who subscribed to *Letture Catto-liche* took with them on their summer vacation the August issue, entitled *Life of the Holy Martyrs Marius, Martha, Audifax, and Abachum* . . . by Father John Bosco. . . . Then at home they received the September issue, *A Biographical Sketch of Michael Magone*,¹ *Pupil of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, lovingly written by Don Bosco himself . . . and reviewed in *L'Armonia* on November 15 [1861]. . . . Finally, in October, upon their return to the Oratory, they found a third booklet by Don Bosco, *The Pontificate of Saint Dionysius*. . . . At the same time, Dominic Savio's biography — also by Don Bosco — was being reprinted [with an Appendix listing favors received through his intercession]. . . . One can hardly imagine how popular those booklets were. Hundreds of thousands of copies were printed. In Tuscany, especially, Don Bosco's first works² had practically become textbooks. Professor Pera, superintendent of the area's schools, particularly of Pisa and Leghorn, once told Don Bosco, "In teaching Italian to school children, I use your biographies of Dominic Savio, Louis Comollo, and Michael Magone. I usually tell them, 'In these little books you can learn true, simple Italian. I don't want you to struggle with big words and high-sounding, difficult phrases that keep you running to a dictionary. That's for advanced study. It's better for you just to learn a simple way of expressing your thoughts.'"

We now draw again from Father [Dominic] Ruffino's chronicle:

¹ See pp. 4-7, 27f, 30f, 44, 58, 60-65. See also Vol. V, pp. 487-491. [Editor]

² See Vol. V, pp. 472f. [Editor]

August 4 [1861]. To mark my name day, Don Bosco told me, "Before your next name day you will experience something very consoling, something very saddening, and something very distressing."

Ruffino was from Giaveno. He was consoled by the thriving success of the junior seminary, he was saddened by Don Bosco's forced withdrawal from its direction, as we shall see, and he was distressed by a nearly fatal illness.

A few evenings later, Don Bosco was in the dining room, surrounded by a good many boys who were staying for the summer and a few clerics whose conduct was not altogether satisfactory. He talked for some time about the Oratory's beginnings and told them a few episodes to make them laugh. Then, suddenly becoming serious, he remarked, "If the few who are not doing too well would always remember the Oratory's early times, they would certainly strive to be worthy of the very extraordinary favors God has bestowed on us!" He also exhorted them not to cater to self-love when offended, not to be resentful or jealous, and not to be upset if others held higher positions of authority. Don Bosco knew from experience of the harm done to communities and individuals by certain dissensions.

One evening some time later, as the cleric Paul Albera, who had accompanied Don Bosco to his room on his return from town, was helping him with his coat and hat, Don Bosco said, "You are young, but you will see strange things: for example, two religious making their meditation on their knees, side by side, in the church, or chanting the Divine Office in the apse, or even kneeling for Communion at the altar rail. And yet, though they can't stand each other, they can reconcile hatred with Communion, slander with prayer."

On another occasion he told some clerics, among whom was Joseph Reano, "Fear and flee those who, though not openly lax in morals, criticize anything conducive to a more perfect observance of the rules and of prayer, and do not even spare the authority, orders, or admonitions of superiors." Then he added that, human frailty being what it is, a good cleric had to expect to be criticized by the bad and still find strength to rise above the situation with pity.

In August [1861] Don Bosco went to Montemagno for the feast of the Assumption, and also to acknowledge a most cordial invitation of Marquis Fassati who lived there in a magnificent castle. The marchioness' name was Maria Assunta [Mary assumed into heaven], and Don Bosco felt bound in gratitude to greet her personally. Her children, Emmanuel and Azelia, were very fond of him too and eagerly awaited his arrival.

Don Bosco left by train on the 14th and was due at Asti at half past two, in time to make connections with the Montemagno stagecoach. On the train he entered into small talk with a businessman sitting beside him. Gradually the conversation turned to the press, both good and bad, and its influence on faith and morals. Won by Don Bosco's friendliness, the man remarked, "Father, what you said fits me perfectly. I must go to confession."

"Very good! Come to the Oratory and you'll be welcome."

"That's rather difficult. It might be quite a while before I can do it, because I am on my way to Genoa and my business takes me to other cities as well."

"In that case, why not do it right now?" Don Bosco exclaimed. Then, after a look at his watch to check how much time he had between train and stagecoach, he went on: "We have twenty minutes for your confession."

"What if you miss the coach?" the man asked.

"Don't worry. I can always take the next one."

"Very well, then. Let's do it that way."

At that moment the train was pulling into the Asti station. Don Bosco got off and was greeted by the station master whom he had met before. Seizing the opportunity, Don Bosco asked for a private room to transact some business with a friend. The station master readily obliged. After some preliminaries, the businessman made his confession, which lasted longer than anticipated and caused Don Bosco to miss his stagecoach. As he had to be in Montemagno that evening, he asked the owner whether another carriage could be readied for him and was told that it would take two hours. During all this time, a friendly looking young man, who was soon joined by several friends of his, stood a little distance away, observing matters. On noticing Don Bosco's disappointment at the

unexpectedly long delay, they walked up to him, remarking sympathetically, "Patience, Father!"

"Yes, I know, but I wish that I had something to do."

"There are many ways to while away the time," one said. "Why not read a book?"

"Or go sightseeing!" said another.

"Or chat with us!" said a third.

"Or give us a sermon!" suggested a fourth.

"A sermon?" Don Bosco echoed. "This is no place for sermons, but I know what I could do."

"For example?"

"Hear confessions!"

"Whose?"

"Well, yours to start with!"

A burst of laughter met his words.

"To think of it, that wouldn't be a bad idea!" they exclaimed. "You know how it is. We don't worry too much about the soul. We have other things on our mind, some not even fit to mention here. . . ."

"Well, then, why not do something about it right now?" Don Bosco replied. "If you want to make your confession, I am ready." His look was far more eloquent than words.

"Why not?" one of them replied, and his remark was soon echoed by the rest.

"But perhaps you are only joking. Maybe you don't really mean it!"

"We surely do!"

"All right, then. Make up your mind to be done with the devil and leave the rest to me. You'll be glad you did!"

"Where can you hear us?"

"Come with me!"

Going to a nearby inn, quite deserted at that hour, Don Bosco rented a room, prepared the young men with a short talk, heard their confessions, and dismissed them happy and content. By that time the carriage was ready.

At Montemagno he had the good fortune to meet Countess Charlotte Callori, who from then on became an outstanding benefactress of Salesian works.

A few weeks later, when Marchioness Fassati came to Turin, he gave her a letter for her young son Emmanuel, who had placed all his confidence in him:

Turin, September 8, 1861

Dear Emmanuel,

While you are enjoying the country air with Stanislaus, I am paying you a visit with this little note that I feel I owe you.

I have a proposal for you. You are old enough and know enough to make your First Holy Communion. Wouldn't Easter Sunday be a great day for that? What do you say, dear Emmanuel? Ask your parents what they think about it. I would like you, though, to start preparing for that at once by being especially good in your conduct:

1. By obeying your parents and superiors promptly, exactly, and gladly.
2. By doing your chores, particularly your school duties, punctually and willingly.
3. By thinking highly of all acts of devotion. Therefore, make the Sign of the Cross well, kneel reverently when praying, and assist devoutly at religious services.

I would really like to hear from you about my proposal.

Remember me to Azelia and Stanislaus. Keep smiling, all of you. God bless you all. Pray for me. You especially, dear Emmanuel, be a credit to me with your good conduct.

Your friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Seemingly new dangers were threatening the Oratory during these months. On September 4 [1861] Don Bosco called a meeting of the Salesians and briefly but pointedly urged them to be very cautious about politics. [Celestine] Durando, who was then away from the Oratory, was briefed about this talk by Father [Angelo] Savio with this letter:

Turin, September 5, 1861

Dear friend and brother in Jesus Christ,

We are all well and happy here as usual. For the past two days I have

been toying with the idea of writing to you on some pretext or other, but I no longer need a pretext because Don Bosco has explicitly charged me to brief you on what he said yesterday at a meeting of all the members of the Salesian Society.

Times are becoming dangerous, he said, and we must be most prudent in discussing politics. We must never let slip any critical remark on the government because informers are everywhere and we can trust nobody. It is risky to criticize the repression of insurrections and the yearnings for the annexation of Rome. When questioned, we must keep to generalities. If we are forced to answer, we should say, 'I'm against bloodshed,' 'I am for peace,' 'I wish the Pope would be left in peace,' and similar expressions. He also urged us not to be afraid to carry out our religious duties or practices of piety, not to omit our prescribed prayers and our morning meditation, and not to be cowed by what others may think or say. We must always, regularly and everywhere, frequent the sacraments and strive to instill in others detachment from earthly things.

He then told us that, in carrying out our duties, we should reach the point where the mere presence of only one of us should be a guarantee that all is going well, and that all danger of evil is forestalled. Moreover, he demanded that we tell him or his representative about any pupils who are unworthy to stay at the Oratory because of morals or lack of piety. Finally, he warmly urged that we look upon our Society as a chain of which each member is a link which must keep joined to the others by charity, prayer, and the Salesian spirit. All I have written so far is *ex officio*.

I close by assuring you that we will forward the proofs of your *Donato*³ as soon as we get them.

Yours affectionately,

Fr. Angelo Savio

Besides urging a prudent reserve in talking about politics, Don Bosco also recommended self-control in other circumstances while judging events or people. *Beatus qui lingua sua non est lapsus*. [Happy is he who sins not with his tongue — Sir. 25, 8] On one occasion, for example, he was sitting at table with many priests. One of them, a jolly fellow quite skillful at sleight-of-hand tricks,

³ An elementary Latin grammar authored by Durando, entitled *Il Nuovo Donato, ossia Principi della Grammatica Latina*. It was called "Donato" after Aelius Donatus, a famous 4th-century Roman grammarian and teacher. [Editor]

would set a little cane on his thumb and, by moving it up and down, make it sound like a trumpet accompanying his singing, to everyone's amazement. Soon, however, he passed from humorous ditties to verses from the Book of Job that are recited in the Office of the Dead. Worse yet, he parodied the sacred words. Don Bosco had heartily laughed at his first antics, but now he laughed no more. The other guests, however, merrily kept laughing and applauding the comedian. Presently one of them, noticing Don Bosco's severe look, asked him, "Don't you like it?" All eyes were turned on Don Bosco.

"Tell me," he replied: "What would St. Francis de Sales say if he heard Holy Scripture thus profaned? He once chided his own doctor for inappropriately, though not unbecomingly, quoting Scripture."

Father Michael Rua declared:

On one occasion, Don Bosco, the cleric Anfossi, and I were having dinner with the pastor of Crocetta — a suburb of Turin — and many other guests. One of them began to run down the cathedral canons and the vicar general, saying, among other things, that the only reason they chanted the Divine Office in choir was to receive the fruits of their benefice and other payments. Don Bosco let him talk for a while and then turned to him. "You are very unfair, I must say," he reprimanded him. "Can you prove that even one of those canons is prompted by such motives? Even if it were true of one, two, or even more, do you really believe that they are incapable of higher motives as well? Don't forget the advice of St. Francis de Sales: If what our neighbor does can be viewed in a hundred ways — ninety-nine bad and only one good — we should judge it only from that good one."

Father Francis Dalmazzo testified:

Don Bosco was visiting a family who spoke disparagingly of Bishop [Thomas] Ghilardi of Mondovì. Without arguing, he took up the bishop's defense by relating several praiseworthy incidents to illustrate his great virtue and charity, thus silencing the bishop's critics. He followed the same system when he had visitors or guests who freely expressed unfavorable opinions of churchmen or other persons. He would opportunely point out a good quality of those being maligned, and if the

speaker persisted in his course, he would interrupt, saying, "Either speak well of your fellow men or say nothing at all."

If the backbiting came from superiors or persons over whom he had no authority, he neatly steered the talk to some other topic. If he could not, then he frankly took up the defense of those being maligned by pointing out the injustice of running down anyone who was absent and could not defend himself.

He often chastised backbiting, calling it one of the Oratory's worse enemies. Time and again, the nose-gays he gave the boys concerned its avoidance.

Malicious gossip grieved him more than other things. If he saw or learned that his prohibitions in this regard were not observed, he did not allow the transgressor to escape without a severe reprimand. He never let slip words or gestures which could in any way injure the good name of others. Rather, he enjoyed pointing out real merit, in word or writing, whenever he found an occasion to do so. Such a sense of justice also ruled his thoughts. He never allowed himself to judge others unfavorably unless the facts were such as to indicate clearly evil and notorious deeds. Even then, he would attribute failings to ignorance, human frailty, and imprudent counselors rather than to bad will. Meanwhile, he kept reminding himself of St. Paul's saying, *Qui stat videat ne cadat*. [Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall — 1 Cor. 10, 12]

Father Ruffino's chronicle reads:

September 10 [1861]. Today I said to Don Bosco, "I remember that on June 3, in announcing the forthcoming Exercise for a Happy Death, you urged us to do it well because one of us would not do it again. [Who was he?]"

Don Bosco replied, "It won't be long before I'll be able to tell you. He was at the Oratory when I spoke that way, but not even then did he make the Exercise for a Happy Death. However, there is more to say: in a dream I saw the boys making it, but several were missing from church, including him. He was outside sewing a shroud.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I am sewing a sheet to wrap myself in," he replied.

"Why don't you join your companions? They are in church making the Exercise for a Happy Death!"

"I won't make it anymore!"

This boy had left the Oratory and had been unheard of since, but Ruffino's question and similar questions from other clerics and boys, as we shall see, make it clear that Don Bosco could not risk making such predictions unless he were sure of what he was saying, since the hundreds of boys who heard him would not forget.

Don Bosco's prediction of sicknesses⁴ was again fulfilled in September, as we gather from Father Ruffino's chronicle: "Louis Pellissone is critical. He has already received the Anointing of the Sick." However, he recovered.

Meanwhile, Don Bosco had been vainly waiting for Archbishop Fransoni's reply to a letter of his, requesting permission to have a number of his boys anticipate the required diocesan examination they had to take before donning the clerical habit. He had probably made this request so as not to have to recall his pupils from their summer vacations at considerable expense. He had also asked for a subsidy. The archbishop's reply finally reached him while he was at Vercelli.

Lyons, September 15, 1861

My dear Don Bosco,

Your letter of July 22 arrived only yesterday with a bundle of other mail from Turin. Naturally, at this date nothing can be done about anticipating an examination scheduled for August 19. However, irrespective of this delay [in the mail] I would not have been able to grant your request. The Cottolengo students also had to take their examinations according to the diocesan schedule. If I were to start making exceptions, I would have no end of trouble.

As regards a subsidy, you know that I have been deprived of my revenues and so can do little. Still, I realize that my blessing alone cannot keep your work going; therefore, you may call on my banker, Mr. Piaggio, whom I have already notified. Pray and have others pray for me.

Sincerely yours,

✠ Louis, *Archbishop of Turin*

Don Bosco was in Vercelli for the consecration and dedication of St. Mary Major, a parish church raised to the rank of basilica.

⁴ See p. 504. [Editor]

The parishioners had generously responded to the appeal of Fr. John Momo, their pastor, for its restoration. Work had started in the middle of April under the direction of Count Edward Mella, a distinguished artist, and had been completed by the middle of September. The new basilica retained the title of the old church, a title no less famous for its glorious Christian history than for its pagan antiquity. Bishop Anthony Gianotti of Saluzzo was the consecrating prelate.

A handbill with a hymn by Professor John Baptist Chionetti in honor of Archbishop Alexander d'Angennes of Vercelli carried the following announcement:

September 15, 1861

Consecration and Dedication of the Church

Solemn Vespers will be sung this afternoon with organ accompaniment by Maestro Felice Frasi. His Excellency the Archbishop and the consecrating bishop will preside. The inaugural sermon will be preached by the scholarly and beneficent Father John Bosco who is so greatly deserving of the gratitude of civil society and of the Church.

Don Bosco had been invited to preach by the pastor, Father John Momo. After dictating his sermon to Father Rua, Don Bosco left for Vercelli on September 14. As we have already seen and will see again, this trip, too, brought out his meek disposition. Among his fellow passengers were two priests. While they conversed, Don Bosco kept working on the life of a pope he was writing [for *Letture Cattoliche*]. After discussing seminary life and priestly formation in general, the two priests spoke of Don Bosco's Oratory, remarking that the clerics there could not possibly do justice to their study of theology because they were always busy supervising the boys. Consequently, the Oratory could produce only inferior priests. Not knowing that their fellow passenger was Don Bosco, they asked him, "Isn't that so?"

Don Bosco replied that he thought otherwise, adding, "Do you know Don Bosco? Have you ever been at the Oratory? His clerics do justice to their studies. If you want proof of this, ask about their grades at the seminary."

Just then the train pulled in at the Vercelli station, where a small crowd was waiting for the archbishop and for Don Bosco. As the latter looked out of the window some people spotted him and called out: "Don Bosco! Don Bosco!" Both priests were highly embarrassed and bowed to him as he got off the train. Don Bosco excused them by saying that they had been ill-informed. Later, they came to the Oratory to apologize and recommend pupils to Don Bosco.

On September 15, Don Bosco preached on the glories of Mary to which the newly-restored basilica was a lasting monument. Both prelates and congregation were so pleased with his sermon that Archbishop d'Angennes asked him to preach again on the following two days, telling him not to worry about the topics because they themselves, the two prelates, would suggest them in due time. And so they did, but they delayed until it was about time for Don Bosco to ascend to the pulpit. The bishop of Saluzzo selected the first sermon topic, and the archbishop of Vercelli chose the second — respect due to sacred places.

CHAPTER 74

The 1861 Yearly Outing

AT the beginning of October [1861], the Oratory pupils who were entitled to the yearly outing to Becchi were even more thrilled than usual because, some months before, Don Bosco had announced that this year's excursion would be one that they would long remember.¹ He had said nothing more, and of course the boys were tingling with curiosity. At the start of Our Lady of the Rosary's novena on September 27, groups of boys began getting ready to depart. One lad, who later earned several academic honors, kept a diary of the entire trip, and we will record it faithfully, filling in details and incidents about which we learned from other participants, and adding scattered comments of our own. The diary states:

On October 3, a group of five, including me, was scheduled to set out for Castelnuovo. Father Alasonatti had given to us, as well as to the others who were to follow, the pocket money that we had deposited with him. At eight o'clock, after Mass and breakfast, we said good-bye to Don Bosco and our friends and started out. At Pino Torinese we stopped for water. At Chieri, Canon [Francis] Calosso invited us to dinner. Then, after a little sightseeing, we prayed at Louis Comollo's grave at St. Philip Neri Church and also visited a schoolmate of ours. Later, after a snack at Canon Calosso's, we went to the crossroads to wait for Don Bosco. As soon as we spotted him, Chevalier Oreglia, and Paul Albera, we ran to meet them and went with them to Chevalier Mark Gonella's. After a tour through his magnificent botanical garden, three of us returned to Canon Calosso's and the rest remained there for the night. Before going to bed we all said our rosary and night prayers.

¹ For previous outings, *see* pp. 143-154 and Chapter 55. [Editor]

Next morning, Friday the 4th, at six-thirty, we heard Don Bosco's Mass in Chevalier Gonella's lovely chapel, and at eight we left. After we had passed through Riva di Chieri, Don Bosco began a conversation on a variety of subjects — personal incidents, ways to test and maintain the voice, the sacrament of Penance, and other topics. At Buttigliera, the pastor, Father Joseph Vaccarino, invited us to a mid-morning snack. Pupils from the Oratory who were home on vacation came to greet Don Bosco and walked with us a good distance on the road to Becchi where dinner was waiting for us. We then strolled through the meadows facing Buttigliera, and at sunset we caught sight of our actors approaching from that direction. Shortly afterward, a bell called us to novena services. After supper we sang sacred hymns and other songs until it was time for night prayers.

Next morning, October 5, we got up at seven and sauntered out singly and silently to breathe the fresh morning air in the nearby woods. After Mass, the usual cheerful hustle and bustle began, with joking, laughing, running, playing, and walking to the nearby farms to buy nuts, milk, or grapes. After dinner, we formed groups; some went toward Montafia, while others journeyed toward Morialdo to meet Don Bosco who had gone to Castelnuovo to invite Father Cinzano to Becchi. Still other boys stayed home to rest under the trees, while a fourth group headed toward Buttigliera to meet the choirboys and band. When they arrived, they were greeted by applause, congratulations, and banter. Soon a bell summoned all to the chapel for the Litany of Our Lady, *Tantum Ergo*, and Benediction. After supper came night prayers and a few words of advice from Don Bosco; then we all went to bed, dead tired from hiking.

Sunday, October 6, was a splendid, sunny day. The eight o'clock Mass was marked with many Communions. At nine, the drum announced solemn high Mass. Later that afternoon, after a very enjoyable dinner, the drum again called all to Vespers, which were attended by large crowds from neighboring villages. Then balloons were released into the sky, and a play followed on a stage adorned with rustic ornaments and lanterns. Don Bosco's neighbor, Mrs. Damevino, put lights in her windows, and her yard became a fireworks stage while the band played a serenade. After the crowds left, we had supper, sang, played for about an hour, and enjoyed a pantomime while waiting for Don Bosco who had accompanied Father Cinzano part of the way to Castelnuovo. After night prayers, Don Bosco gave us the usual instructions for the morrow, and thus ended a most enjoyable day.

The following morning, October 7, after Mass, all church objects were stored away for the next year and Don Bosco briefed us on our deoprtment while on the road. Then the band played a good-bye song for Don Bosco's brother Joseph and we started off for Villa San Secondo [by way of Castelnuovo and Mondonio. Here we made a visit to Dominic Savio's grave and then went on to Pica . . . where we were triumphally welcomed by the whole village].² Don Bosco introduced us to the pastor, Father Matthew Barbero. Then, after supper, night prayers, and a few words from Don Bosco, we were taken to various private homes for the night.

[On Tuesday, October 8, Don Bosco said the Community Mass and gave a short sermon to the large congregation of villagers. A solemn Mass was later sung at a tiny neighboring shrine. In the afternoon there were Vespers, a procession, and Benediction; in the evening a stage play and delightful skits were given until eleven. During the day, the boys had a chance to stroll about the village and meadows.]

Next day we sang a requiem Mass for the deceased villagers [and the rest of the morning was spent in free activities. After dinner, at about two in the afternoon, we left for Alfiano by way of Cossombrato. All along the way people flocked to greet us]. Noticing the striking candor of one youngster, Don Bosco called him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Louis. I come from. . ."

"Would you like to join us?"

"Yes, but who are you?"

"Do you know your pastor?"

"I served his Mass this morning."

"Well, ask him to come and see me tomorrow at the rectory in Alfiano. I want to speak to him about you. And you'll come with him, won't you?"

"What's your name?"

"Just tell your pastor that a priest from Turin wants to speak to him about you."

The pastor came and the boy went to the Oratory, eventually becoming a priest and a zealous pastor in the Casale diocese.

At sunset, every group recited the *Angelus*. Shortly afterward, we arrived at Alfiano where the whole village was waiting to greet us. The bells rang, and in a few moments the church was crowded for Bene-

² The material in brackets here and elsewhere throughout this chapter is a condensation of the original text. [Editor]

diction. [After supper, the boys gave a stage play and entertainment until about eleven. Then, after a hymn to Our Lady, the village joined us in night prayers.]

Next day, Thursday, October 10, at dawn, we sang a solemn high Mass, followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. After breakfast, the boys were allowed to walk around the neighboring areas in small groups, and an hour or so later the drum sounded for departure. We thanked the pastor, asked God's blessings on him, and left.

Passing by the Castello di Merli [Blackbirds' Castle],³ Don Bosco told us how he had gotten lost near there in 1841⁴ and had found shelter in that castle. . . .

We were now climbing a steep hill topped by the famed Shrine of Our Lady of Crea, which was cared for by the Franciscans. This was to be one of our stops. Don Bosco had arranged with the diocesan economer, Canon Joseph Crova, the legal owner and a resident of the monastery, for a snack for all the boys. However, through a misunderstanding or forgetfulness because of his age, the economer believed that all we wanted was dinner at the Casale seminary, and so he had gone there to see that things were ready.

As they were ascending, Don Bosco sent word around that he had something interesting to say. As the boys closed in together, he began telling the story of this shrine, thus making their ascent more pleasant.

At about two in the afternoon we reached the plaza fronting the shrine. While the band played a tune, Don Bosco, tired and perspiring, walked toward the rectory to tell Canon Crova that he had arrived.

"He's out!" replied the housekeeper who had come to the door at the sound of the band.

"He told me he would be here," Don Bosco said.

"I'm sorry, but he went to Casale this morning to meet a priest from Turin."

"I am that priest."

"You are Don Bosco? Dinner is ready for you and your boys at Casale."

"That won't help us now. The boys are hungry. Do you think you could somehow. . . ."

"Impossible! For two or three people, I could scrape up something, but not for a hundred!"

Don Bosco returned in deep concern to the plaza, wondering how to

³ See Vol. II, pp. 397f. [Editor]

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24ff. [Editor]

provide for his boys. He knocked at the monastery door, but nobody answered. The monks had been repeatedly insulted by ungodly merry-makers who sometimes came to picnic in those beautiful surroundings, and they had locked themselves up as in a fortress.

Though the boys were tired and covered with dust, Don Bosco told them to go to the church and sing a hymn to Our Lady. . . . [Soon several monks showed up, among them Father Guardian. After telling him who they were and where they had come from, Don Bosco asked permission to give Benediction and also explained his predicament. Father Guardian suggested that, after Benediction, the boys should visit the various chapels which portrayed the mysteries of the rosary and other scenes, while the monks prepared some food for them. And so it was done.]

At four, after a few songs, a visit to Our Lady's altar, and a prayer for the monks, the boys thanked them and resumed their march with Don Bosco to Casale. The stifling heat and dusty road made everybody dreadfully thirsty. . . . [We reached Casale that evening at nine, having walked some thirteen miles. Our band played a tune under the bishop's windows, and then we went to the seminary where, dead tired, we just dropped to the floor. After an excellent dinner we went to bed. Next morning, October 11, Don Bosco let us sleep until eight-thirty. We heard Mass at nine, ate breakfast, and then gathered in the chapel at ten where Bishop Calabiana prayed with us and permitted us to venerate a relic of the true Cross. Afterward he himself personally gave us a conducted tour of the cathedral.

At noon we went back to the seminary for dinner. Don Bosco had given us permission to do some sightseeing in town, but it began to rain, and so we were forced to stay indoors. Later we sang at Benediction offered by the bishop.]

In the evening we provided a much appreciated entertainment in the seminary auditorium for the bishop, clergy, and distinguished guests. Its main features were a drama — *The Two Sergeants* — a complimentary address to the bishop, and a musical composition written by the cleric John Cagliero — *L'Orfanello* [The Little Orphan Boy]. This was the first time that it had been sung.

[The following day, October 12, the bishop said Mass and preached to us. After breakfast, he suggested that a guide take us sightseeing. Later, after thanking the bishop and receiving his blessing and a medal of Our Lady of Crea, we marched in ranks to Mirabello, about five miles away, stopping briefly at San Germano for refreshments. At Oc-

cimiano we were met by many people who had come from Mirabello, anxious to see Don Bosco. At Mirabello we were warmly welcomed by the pastor and his assistants and by the cleric Provera's father who had arranged accommodations for all.

On Sunday, October 13, feast of the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin, a solemn high Mass was sung in the public square to accommodate a crowd twenty-thousand strong. Afternoon services consisted of Vespers, a procession, a sermon by Don Bosco, and solemn Benediction. The festivities ended with fireworks and the release of balloons.

On Monday, October 14, we sang a solemn requiem Mass for deceased parishioners and then visited three of our schoolmates and the nearby Capuchin monastery. The day ended with a stage play attended by a record crowd.]

On Tuesday, October 15, we rose at six-thirty and went to the Capuchin monastery for Mass and the Exercise for a Happy Death — a wholesome practice of piety which Don Bosco never omitted during these excursions. He seemed to imitate Job who, at the close of a celebration, would send for his sons and sanctify them by offering holocausts lest they had done wrong and displeased God.

The Capuchins came out to meet Don Bosco who immediately went to the sacristy to hear confessions. Several townsmen and youngsters had accompanied him, wishing to join us in our devotions. There were many confessors, and all of us went to confession and Communion. Later, Don Bosco told us, "I am pleased with you!"

[After breakfast and recreation in the monastery garden, we were shown the irrigating system of the orchard and the meadows. Then, at ten, the band played a selection, and we said good-bye to those good religious. After lunch at Mirabello, we set off for Lu where we arrived about two, welcomed by the local clergy and the townsfolk.]

Meanwhile, Don Bosco had spotted a boy in the crowd. Coatless and barefooted, he had run up to the square to see what all the commotion was about. When Don Bosco got near him, he stopped and studied his face. "What's your name," he asked the boy.

"Quartero."

"Would you like to come to Turin?"

"I'd love to. That's why I ran here!"

"Come along and I will have hobnails put into your shoes." All the bystanders laughed, for the lad was barefooted. Arrangements were made with his parents, and Quartero came to the Oratory. He excelled in conduct and diligence, eventually becoming a highly esteemed curate

in his own native town and later a very zealous pastor. . . . In the evening we returned to Mirabello.

On Wednesday, the 16th, we had Mass at the usual hour, sang the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, and had Benediction. After breakfast, Don Bosco sent us along country roads with the band at our head to cheer the farmhands in the fields, who had hardly expected such a surprise. Meanwhile, Don Bosco was negotiating with Mr. Provera about the school planned for Mirabello.⁵ To this effect he accepted the land and the building which now lodged us. Before parting, they reached definite conclusions on the layout. . . .

In the evening we staged a comedy. . . . At the "Good Night" Don Bosco briefed us for the following day and gave us some spiritual advice. This was to be our last night in Mirabello.

[On Thursday, the 17th, our choir gave a final demonstration of its excellence by singing the Litany of Our Lady and a magnificent *Tantum Ergo* at Benediction after Mass. Lunch was early. After thanking the Provera family, the pastor, and friends, we set off for Valenza where we arrived after nine. Rather Spartan-like lodgings for about sixty of us had been prepared in the mansion of Count De Cardenas by his farm manager. Seeing how uncomfortable our accommodations were, Don Bosco quietly left his room after his hosts had gone to bed and joined us, sleeping on straw.

On Friday, October 18, after our usual practices of piety and an excellent breakfast, we visited the count's huge wine cellars and then went into town for sightseeing. After a fine dinner, we thanked the count and walked to the railroad station for a free trip to Villafranca d'Asti where we arrived at eight, numb with cold. After supper, though tired, we staged a few skits and sang for the pastor and parishioners.

Saturday, October 19, was the last day of our outing. We sang Mass and had Benediction, and at nine-thirty we boarded the train for Turin. By noon, with the band at our head, we were marching through the Oratory gate, welcomed by the whole Oratory.]

This outing had taken Don Bosco through the dioceses of Turin, Asti, Casale, and Alexandria. Everywhere he had picked up boys who gave good promise of a priestly vocation, and he had also enthusiastically promoted *Letture Cattoliche*. On the way he had readied the November and December issues. . . .

⁵ See p. 429. [Editor]

CHAPTER 75

Helping Priestly Vocations

UPON his return to Turin, Don Bosco was faced with a large debt that he owed to his contractor. While he was wondering where to turn, a providential suggestion solved his problem. Near Turin lived a very wealthy old priest who had a reputation for miserliness. Having an uncle in that town, the cleric Francis Dalmazzo suggested that Don Bosco and he visit this relation together and, while there, call on the old priest. They did so in October.

The priest was delighted to see Don Bosco and listened as he described his work and needs. Don Bosco said nothing extraordinary, but he spoke so convincingly about paradise and God's rewards that the priest felt deeply moved, his eyes welling with tears. He went to his safe, scooped up two handfuls of gold coins — about five thousand lire — and emptied them into Don Bosco's hat. When the townsfolk heard of this from the cleric Dalmazzo, they considered it nothing short of a miracle.

Meanwhile new pupils were flocking to the Oratory. On October 24, Chevalier [Frederick] Oreglia wrote to young Rostagno ¹ who was ill at Pinerolo: "Since you are still an Oratory boy, I will tell you that this year the number of boys may come close to six hundred. You may imagine how much work this will entail for Don Bosco and Father Alasonatti. Don Bosco wishes to be remembered to you and exhorts you to be patient and persevering in doing good."

Very many pupils were taken in gratis, and others were accepted at two-thirds or half the rate. The way Don Bosco notified people

¹ See p. 587. [Editor]

of these reductions was frequently charming. For example, in accepting a boy named Audagnotto, who eventually became a priest and the private secretary to Archbishop Gastaldi, he wrote on October 23 to Father Balladore, pastor of Beinasco: "Have at least ten lire raised *inter notos et amicos* [among acquaintances and friends] for young Audagnotto. The other two-thirds of the boarding fee will be taken care of by yours truly."

While busy with new pupils, Don Bosco did not lessen his lively interest in the success and future of youngsters of the dioceses of Asti and Turin who were anxious to enter diocesan seminaries. Likewise, he solicitously looked after those who had already donned the clerical habit and wished to continue their studies at the Oratory. On their behalf he wrote to Canon [Anthony] Sossi, capitular vicar general of Asti, in these terms:

Turin, October 25, 1861

Very Reverend and dear Canon,

For several weeks now I have been toying with the idea of taking a trip to Asti, but my work forces me to keep putting it off. Therefore, I'll briefly jot down what I wanted to tell you verbally.

The cleric [Charles] Viale, for whom you were paying a two-month fee even during the summer, has gone home for reasons of health, and I credited your payment to the deserving cleric [Joseph] Fagnano. He spent his summer vacation here and, unless you object, would like to stay on. If crediting your payment to his account should create a problem, patience! I'll provide for Fagnano myself. However, I make bold to seek a full scholarship for him; his conduct and diligence amply make him worthy.

As regards the Asti seminarians who took examinations for donning the clerical habit this year, here is all I know about them: Bossetti and Ferraris are now in their first year of philosophy and are still wearing civilian clothing; Ciattino goes to Asti; Galletti, of Cunico, has as yet told me nothing; the two brothers will don the cassock in Villa San Secondo and need your charity. Their father is full of good will, but he cannot pay. I plan to ask twenty-five lire monthly for each of them, and I will provide the rest myself with the help of Divine Providence.

Then we have another dear boy from Viarigi named Lawrence Preda, who has been promoted with honors to Rhetoric II. I have kept him

here gratis for the last three years because his parents can do nothing at all for him. He is most deserving in talent and piety, and he, too, wishes to don the clerical habit. He needs everything; if you can contribute twenty lire monthly, I will do my best to help him along.

I respectfully ask all this so as to be able to help the Asti seminarians to reach their goal. There are some twenty-five other pupils of your diocese who wish to become priests, but since they are not yet in Rhetoric II, I shall presently depend on Divine Providence.

I recommend myself and my poor boys to your prayers. Wishing you every blessing, I am,

Your friend,
Fr. John Bosco

Six other Oratory boys of the diocese of Turin had passed their examination for donning the cassock, and since they had achieved their immediate goal, Don Bosco now recommended them to Canon Vogliotti:

Oratory, October 27, 1861

Very Reverend Provicar,

George Gallini of Chieri keeps begging me to ask you for a reduction in his seminary fees. The information that I have concerning his diligence and conduct is good. Help him as you deem best in the Lord.

The other young clerics here at the Oratory are anxiously waiting for me to tell them to what extent you will help them with their seminary fees. Please favor me with a word of reply. I would come to see you personally, but these days I have little free time at my disposal.

Ever yours,
Fr. John Bosco

He likewise intended to continue his fatherly care of the Giaveno seminary. In writing to Archbishop Fransoni, however, while giving him news of the festive oratories, he also mentioned the rivalries which marred that seminary's direction. The archbishop replied as follows:

Lyons, October 23, 1861

My dear Don Bosco,

I am enclosing a letter for the pastor of Villa San Secondo. Please forward it.

Your report on the prosperous state of affairs at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and at the St. Aloysius Festive Oratory was very gratifying. Though not to the same extent, what you wrote about improvement at the Guardian Angel Oratory since Father Rua took charge gives me sufficient reason to rejoice. The Lord be praised! Of course, it is most deplorable that Protestants should make headway among Catholics. But more painful than the apostasy of adults — who are practically out of the Church already — is the perversion of the young who are brought up as Protestants without knowing it, and will later raise Protestant families. This is the kind of growth which must worry us most. As of now, though, I cannot believe they number 6,650. It may be just a boast of theirs. If they were to include all the atheists, their number would be even larger, but the latter have no use for religion and would not be Catholics even if Protestants did not exist.

I was deeply grieved by what you wrote about the Giaveno seminary. Last year's news was indeed most consoling, and the un hoped for number of pupils confirmed it. The new rector was portrayed to me as excellent. Was he one whom you yourself chose? If not, I fear he is the person who on his own tried to cut himself from your "indirect care," as you call it. No one mentioned to me what the provicar said on this matter, and it pains me to hear it now. All things considered, you may be right, and the provicar may be too. But I don't dare ask him to explain, because last year, when I saw that we could no longer save that seminary and I had nothing to suggest, I ended up by leaving the matter entirely in their hands. Often enough I find myself in similar painful situations; I express my opinion, but afterward I do not keep track of what is being done. In my present situation, since I cannot exercise my authority directly, I am forced to leave the responsibility for management in the hands of others, with the result that I must keep my hasty self in check.

Concerning the Society of St. Francis de Sales, I was informed that its rules had been returned to you with some important observations — as, for example, "Upon whom is the Society to depend?" — so that you could amend and complete them. I think I was told afterward that you had made some concessions, but that many notable defects were

still to be rectified. Prudence requires that I look into this matter as soon as possible.

As regards *Letture Cattolice*, I have provided a one-year subscription (1861) for the pastor of Vedées, which is located in the Protestant canton of Vaud where many Catholics live.

Please remember me to all your priests. God bless you and your boys.

Sincerely yours,

✠ Louis, *Archbishop of Turin*

Don Bosco had complained to the archbishop but, generous as ever, he did not stop sending pupils with signs of a priestly vocation to the Giaveno seminary, and, preferably, he sent those who could afford to pay a full fee. He also allowed the clerics Dominic Bongiovanni and Bessa to help the cleric Boggero in supervising the boys. In addition, [Charles] Ghivarello and [Dominic] Ruffino were on hand to help out with teaching.

By the end of October, 1861, the cleric [Francis] Vaschetti tells us that, thanks to Don Bosco, the Giaveno junior seminary had an enrollment of two hundred and sixteen pupils; in the following months the number rose to two hundred and forty, thus straining sleeping facilities. Garrets and storage rooms had to be prepared for use as dormitories. The prospectus for the school year 1861-62 announced that the seminary course of studies was a complete one, since it included both humanities and rhetoric. Each class had its own resident teacher, chosen, as in the previous year, with the approval of Don Bosco. The cleric Vaschetti taught humanities, while bearing the burden of almost the entire administration in his post as prefect and procurator.

CHAPTER 76

Noteworthy Incidents (Continued)

DON Bosco had cherished an ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus during these years, as we gather from a letter of a noble lady — Elizabeth Seyssel-Sommariva, a convert to Catholicism:

Florence, October 28, 1861

Very Reverend Don Bosco,

Thank you for your most welcome letter which reached me very promptly. All I can say is: May God reward you for it. . . . I was fondly hoping to see you here, but Countess Pernati tells me that it will be hardly possible for you to come. Do come, though, if you can at all, for the sake of those souls whom you could help so much. Come and stir up zeal to save so many poor boys; come and stamp out blasphemy. For God's sake, come to Florence!

I am doing my best to spread your books among our countryfolk also. I am very grateful for the courage you rouse in me by reminding me of a heavenly crown. . . . I strongly fear Divine Justice because I feel that I have lost many heavenly graces for myself and others. Nevertheless, I trust indeed in the mercy and love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus — my favorite devotion, which you inspired in me even before I became a Catholic. However, my [spiritual] needs are great — not mine only, but also my husband's and children's. . . . Besides, I still have a brother in schism — Michael. Please recommend him to his archangel and say a Mass for him.

[Elizabeth Seyssel-Sommariva]

Classes had now resumed at the Oratory. The teaching faculty

of 1861-62 was the same as for the previous year: Francis Provera for Latin I, John Anfossi for Latin II, Celestine Durando for Latin III, Francis Cerruti for Humanities, and John Baptist Francesia for Rhetoric. Tirelessly and diligently they pursued their own studies while diligently carrying out their teaching assignments. One of them once remarked to Don Bosco that he did not have one free moment during the whole day. Don Bosco's reply, repeatedly heard by John Bonetti, was, "How consoling it is in the evening to find oneself tired and worn out because the whole day was spent in work for God's glory and the salvation of souls!"

Concerning the pupils, Don Bosco's first directive to superiors and teachers was to educate the boys to retain their love of family and to gladden their parents while acquainting them with the joyful, salutary system used at the Oratory. In his own hand he left us a concise outline of his ideas, which we shall here report:

Every teacher should see to it that his pupils periodically write home about:

1. School subjects, study periods, tutoring, present and future progress, Gregorian chant, music, etc.
2. Recreation, walks, and the like.
3. Practices of piety: prayer, meditation, sacraments, the "Good Night," spiritual reading, rosary, duty to pray for parents and benefactors.
4. Celebrations: choir and band, which they hope to join, dramatics, etc.
5. Sundays and holy days: rising time, tidiness, church services, topics of sermons, activities before night prayers.
6. Things that please or displease, reasons for putting up with disagreeable things, impossibility to learn without studying, avoidance of idleness.
7. Oratory: description of the church, dining room and meals, numbers of boys and assistants.
8. Turin: let the teacher tell about Our Lady of Consolation Shrine, St. Lawrence Church, the equestrian monument of Emmanuel Philibert in Piazza San Carlo, the pillar in Our Lady of Consolation Square, the reason why the area of the Oratory is called "Valdocco."
9. Winter: outdoor and indoor temperatures, gas lighting, heating, etc.

At about this time too, material assistance came to the Oratory in the form of surplus army clothing and subsidies — one of three hundred lire from the king, and one of six hundred lire from the Ministry of Justice, whom Don Bosco had petitioned.¹

This year Latin I was an overly large class of two hundred pupils taught by Francis Provera. The young cleric, overjoyed at the approval of plans for a Salesian school in his native Mirabello, often remarked, "I am simply too happy. I must get ready for some cross because Our Lord usually blends joy with suffering." In fact something did happen which seemed to portend a crucial test, a painful struggle. Though attaching no importance to it, he narrated it to his companions one morning at breakfast:

Last night I had a very strange dream. I'll tell it to you just for fun. I seemed to be out in a meadow reading a book when suddenly a horrible monster loomed before me. As I leaped to run away, it jumped on me, as quick as lightning. I had only a stick, and I struck it with all my might on its head, its back, and wherever I could reach. For a moment, I thought I had at least knocked it senseless, and so I turned to get away. Immediately the monster regained its strength and again lunged at me in an attempt to bury its fangs into my chest. I was scared to death but again managed to knock it unconscious, though I found it harder because I was tiring. To my horror, the monster attacked me again and again. Though ready to drop, I fought back for fear of being torn to pieces. Soaked with perspiration, breathless, and thoroughly exhausted, I prayed to God and the Blessed Virgin. I woke up as I was shouting, "Mary, help me!" Was I relieved to find myself quite safe in bed! Yet I was really exhausted and in a cold sweat. Then, when I tried to push the blankets down to feel more comfortable, I felt as though my hands were bound. I was almost afraid that, after all, there might be some truth to my dream and I had been hurt, but then I remembered that I had wrapped my rosary beads around my hands and felt quite happy about it. I even laughed and said to myself, "I understand! To beat that monster I need a rosary, not a stick."

When someone mentioned this dream to Don Bosco, his only comment was, "You will see!"

¹ We are omitting these routine petitions and favorable replies. For similar ones, see Vol. IV, pp. 191f, 223f; Vol. V, pp. 348, 350f, 622ff. We are also omitting a petition for a subsidy to the St. Paul's Society. [Editor]

Holy Scripture tells us that, God permitting, holy Job was stricken with misfortunes and a most horrible malady by Satan, who wanted to make him turn against God. Does not this dream point to something similar? What followed seems to support this view. A few days after the start of the school year, Provera felt sharp pains in his chest and came down with fever. Since he himself kept a record of his illness and its strange circumstances, we will here report what he himself wrote and complete it with a few oral additions of his own:

On the evening of November 10, 1861, I felt so weak that I had to go to bed. I had pneumonia and indigestion, and my phlegm was tinged with blood. The doctor tried bleeding me several times, but to no avail. In fact, my condition worsened, so that by noon of the next day he listed me as critical and suggested that I receive the Last Sacraments. Father Rua was attending me. He again applied leeches and then went to call Don Bosco, who came to see me for the fourth time that day. It was about six in the evening.

“Poor Francis!” he said jokingly. “Shall we recommend you to Our Lady and to Dominic Savio?”

When I answered in agreement, he suggested that I say an Our Father with all my heart. He knelt for a few moments in prayer, stood up, placed his hand over me, and blessed me. Then he said, “Look, you can either go to heaven or be cured. Which do you choose? Would you tarry a little longer in this world and increase your merits by suffering, or would you rather have us issue you a passport for heaven? Which will it be?”

For a moment I kept silent because I needed time to think. Then calmly I replied, “I have to think this over! Please give me two hours and kindly see me again tonight before you go to bed. By then I’ll have made my decision.”

At this Don Bosco remarked, “I see that you are not too keen on leaving your body and the Oratory. Very well, we will hold the passport up this time. Are you happy now?”

“I didn’t make up my mind yet,” I rejoined. “I only asked you to be kind enough to come for my answer tonight.”

“What need is there to think it over?” Father Rua remarked, surprised at my not opting at once for heaven. But Don Bosco continued, “Well, life is always desirable. Anyway, let’s leave everything in God’s hands.

‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!’” Then, bending down, he whispered, “Don’t worry! I will come again before supper to see if you wish to make your confession; then, if necessary, we will bring you Holy Viaticum after night prayers.” He exhorted me to be resigned and tranquil and then concluded aloud, “Think it over and let me know your decision.”

I immediately began to think that presently my conscience was tranquil and I had the opportunity of receiving the Last Sacraments and all the comforts of our faith with Don Bosco’s assistance. If I chose to die at some other time, would I have all these advantages? What would my spiritual condition be then? But the scales were tipped by this thought: “If Don Bosco promises me heaven, I am sure to get there!” I decided to ask for heaven.

While I was thus deliberating, Chevalier [Frederick] Oreglia walked in, and Father Rua told him what had just occurred between Don Bosco and me. Hearing of my hesitation, he remarked smilingly, “Had I been in your place, I would not only have prepared for death but have jumped out of bed to meet it.”

“I still can’t understand,” Father Rua remarked, “why you didn’t choose heaven at once! Why hesitate?”

“Now I know better,” I replied. “I can’t wait for Don Bosco to tell him of my decision. In fact, I wish you would let him know that I accept the passport.”

At suppertime Father Rua gave Don Bosco my message, but he replied, “It’s a trifle too late! He missed his chance. Now he will have to suffer for several more years.”

Father Rua did not return to give me Don Bosco’s reply, but I was indescribably happy with my decision. Already I was planning to recommend superiors, parents, and companions to Our Lady. In my thoughts I was beginning to enjoy the thought of being ushered into heaven by angels. Though I was very sick, the two hours between six and eight went by like a flash. When the bell rang [at eight] for supper, I anxiously waited for Don Bosco, but in vain. Then I began to worry, thinking, “Don Bosco did not come to hear my confession as he promised he would do. Perhaps, seeing me so hesitant, he went to his room and arranged with Our Lord that I should get well and live. That would be terrible! What a blunder I made in not seizing my chance at once!” I remained on edge until ten, when Don Bosco came to see me. Immediately I exclaimed, “Don Bosco, I want to go to heaven!”

“It’s too late, my dear boy,” he replied. “Now you’ll have to be

patient. You will get well again and will live a little longer. Brace yourself for a good deal of suffering.”

“Poor me,” I groaned, saddened by those words. “I had already made other plans, but now they are all wrecked. Is there no way to grant my wish?”

“We would have to undo what has been done, and I wouldn’t go along with that. Nevertheless, you must not worry. I have asked Our Lord to let you live so that you may win souls for Him. Let us now leave things entirely in His hands.”

He blessed me again, uttered a few more comforting words, and left. Just as I was previously most certain of dying, now I was equally certain of recovering and living.

The next morning I received Holy Communion with devotion. I felt better and was out of danger. When the doctor arrived at the Oratory, he asked Father Alasonatti: “At what time did he die?”

“Whom do you mean?” Father Alasonatti replied, for two of us were gravely ill.

“The cleric,” the doctor added.

“He feels better.”

“You mean — in heaven!” the doctor exclaimed.

“No! Go and see for yourself. We might say that he is convalescing.”

“Impossible! He was sick enough to die ten times over.”

A week after I had taken to bed, the same doctor declared me completely cured. All I needed was to regain my strength, and I soon did. Then I went back to my work.

A year later, in July 1863, Don Bosco gave me another proof of his power with God. As I lay gravely ill, he came to visit me and found me distressed.

“Do not worry about anything,” he said to me. “Leave your physical and spiritual welfare in my hands. Keep your mind at ease.” Since I trusted him to the limit, his words comforted me so much that during my sickness, when troublesome thoughts came to my mind, I had only to recall his words to regain peace of mind.

Cleric Francis Provera

Provera recovered also from this second illness, but Don Bosco’s prediction was to be fulfilled. Some time later, caries in the ankle opened a wound. Frequent stabs of pain necessitated several operations, with the result that as long as Provera lived, he was never free

from pain. He had to use crutches and rest his knee on a wooden leg. Nevertheless, this did not keep him from discharging his duties as prefect in the boarding schools of Mirabello, Lanzo, Cherasco, and the Oratory. Until his death in 1874, he rendered invaluable services to the Salesian Society. His unalterable patience amid so many painful trials often caused people to compare him with holy Job.

During these years, on the same two occasions when Don Bosco gave a message to each cleric and pupil, Provera received two personal notes from him. The first was worded thus: "*Provera: Omnis patientia in terris thesaurum in coelo tibi comparabit.*" [Patience on earth will store a treasure in heaven for you.] The second read: "*Provera: If you wish to fly high, start from the bottom. Humilitas est totius aedificii spiritualis fundamentum.*" [Humility is the foundation of the whole spiritual edifice.]

Such then were the very heavy crosses which were to gain Provera great merits before God. In 1861, however, only the first part of Don Bosco's prophecy was to be fulfilled, and so he was able to resume his teaching. His confreres, too, were glad to see him restored to health and able to attend the conferences of the Salesian Society with them in Don Bosco's room.

[We now shall proceed to other matters and draw from Father Bonetti's chronicle:]

On November 20, 1861, Don Bosco spoke to the confreres about the doubts some were having as to whether to remain in the Congregation. He gave the following advice: "Should the devil tempt anyone to leave the Congregation, and should anyone feel uneasy on that account, let him seek counsel neither from outsiders who, being uninformed, may advise against God's will, nor from those who — in modern terms — are rather 'liberal.' Let the advice come from those who are more fervent and zealous. In other words, let him seek advice from his superior. Ask God first to make you discern His will, and then be assured that the superior will advise what is best for your soul. After you have received his advice, do not pester him or show reluctance, because then the superior, to be rid of trouble, may let you have your way, even though it is opposed to God's will."

On Thursday, November 21 [at the "Testamentino" lesson], after the

clerics had recited a few verses of the New Testament, Don Bosco said, "If you want to be Don Bosco's true sons, bear in mind that you are no longer to live for your families or for material interests, but you must be of God and for God. You must give up your possessions, your parents, indeed your own selves. Whoever can measure up to this is the happiest man in the world; he will be a disciple of Jesus Christ, God's true child. God will bless him and fill his heart with divine love." Then, to corroborate his words, he told us of a vision St. Teresa had after praying that God would fill her with His Love: "She was shown a sack, the lower half of which was filled with gold and the rest with clay. The Saint immediately tried to get to the gold, only to realize that she would first have to get rid of the clay. She started throwing it out and observed that an equal amount of gold immediately replaced it. She understood, then, that if she wanted her heart to be filled with God's love, she would first have to rid it of earthly thoughts and affections. All Christians must do likewise — and let's be frank about it — especially those like us who are called to so sublime a state."

Don Bosco's gentle invitations, meanwhile, slowly kept increasing the ranks of his followers. His prudence counseled against haste. We read in the Chapter minutes:

On November 23, 1861, the Chapter of the Society of St. Francis de Sales met to consider the application of Emmanuel Diatto, son of Michael, of Sanfrè. After an invocation of the Holy Spirit, votes were cast and the candidate was admitted by a majority vote.

Don Bosco's persuasive words efficaciously helped new pupils to lay foundations for a fruitful school year. On November 28, as Father Ruffino relates, Don Bosco spoke to the boys as follows:

We dream when we sleep. Therefore, while I was sleeping, I found myself in church with all the boys. As Mass began, many red-robed, horned devils began circulating among the boys, trying to catch their attention with toys, books, delicacies, scenes of home, and whatever each boy had a particular liking for. Every lad had a little devil at his side trying to distract him from the Mass. Little devils were perched on some boys' shoulders, petting and stroking them. As the bell signaled the Elevation, the boys bowed their heads and the devils disappeared. How-

ever, those lads who had devils on their shoulders turned their backs to the altar instead of adoring. After the Elevation, every devil was back at his job.

I believe, my dear boys, that this dream showed me all the distractions you are subjected to by the devil at Mass. The fact that some demons did not vanish at the Elevation means that those boys were in mortal sin. The devil no longer has to distract them; they are his already. He just keeps caressing them. Those boys can no longer even pray.

At the start of the school year, it was to be expected that restlessness after a summer vacation, the desire for freedom, and homesickness would affect some boys. Such an instance is mentioned in Father Bonetti's chronicle:

Two boys who were idolized by their wealthy families refused to adjust to Oratory life. They arranged to transfer to a fashionable boarding school that allegedly served five-course dinners and three-course suppers and allowed attendance at dances, plays, and other such amusements. Don Bosco had tried to persuade these two boys to remain, but to no avail. When they came to say good-bye, he told them, "Bear in mind that all the fun you are looking forward to will never make you happy. Remember that you have a soul to save. If you save it, it will be safe forever; if you lose it, it will be lost forever. May God be always with you!"

When telling the clerics about this in the evening, he concluded: "How will two fourteen-year olds, brought up among so many temptations, turn out?"

Certainly they could not turn out as so many other boys brought up in the holy fear of God. Such was the case with three youngsters sent to the Oratory by Bishop [James] Gentile of Novara who, in a letter dated November 23, rejoiced at the success they would undoubtedly achieve under Don Bosco's guidance. The same bishop brought to his attention a priest named Father Ferrabuco who had disobeyed church law by unlawfully seeking and obtaining a benefice from civil authorities. The prelate begged Don Bosco to exhort that priest in his charity to reconcile himself to the Church.

CHAPTER 77

Year's End, 1861

IN December Don Bosco finished *Il Galantuomo, Lombard-Piedmontese Almanac for the Year 1862* — a supplement . . . to the January issue of *Letture Cattoliche*, entitled *Seven Sundays in Honor of St. Joseph*.

Meanwhile, the feast of the Immaculate Conception was celebrated at the Oratory on December 8 with customary devotion and solemnity. Before Vespers that day, Don Bosco formally fulfilled the promise he had made in May.¹ At the top of the pediment fronting the St. Aloysius dormitory, near the spot hit by lightning,² there now stood a lovely cement statue of Mary Immaculate. Vested in surplice and stole, Don Bosco ascended the solid scaffold set up by the contractor, Charles Buzzetti, and, surrounded by a circle of clerics, solemnly blessed it. From the scaffold platform — certainly the tallest pulpit in the world — he very briefly but earnestly exhorted the boys standing below to always honor and love God's Mother and to rely upon Her protection. He ended by intoning the hymn *Lodate Maria*, which the boys took up with indescribable love and enthusiasm, vying with the band in filling the air with sweet harmony in praise and thanks to Our Heavenly Patroness.

On that day, [Louis] Jarach, Constantius Rinaudo, [Joseph] Mignone, and Murra received the clerical habit. Bishop [John A.] Gianotti of Saluzzo and other ordinaries had authorized Don Bosco to bless and give the clerical garb to these and other subjects of

¹ See p. 564. [Editor]

² See p. 559. [Editor]

theirs residing at the Oratory. Paul Albera had received the cassock at None, on October 29, from his own pastor, Father Abrate. [A week later] the Salesian Society also gained new members. The Chapter minutes read:

On December 15, 1861, the Superior of the Society of St. Francis de Sales gathered his chapter and, after invoking the Holy Spirit, asked the members to vote on the applications of the student Louis Do, son of the late John, of Vigone, and of the cleric Joseph Mignone, son of Felix, of Mazze. Both received favorable votes and were admitted into the Society.

During the Christmas novena, another lad who was not a good example to his companions left the Oratory on his own. Having come in 1861, R. . . had constantly kept away from confession. For instance, if on going down the stairs he spotted Don Bosco coming up, he would turn back at once, run through the corridor, and dash down another stairway. Not once could Don Bosco corner him, regardless of all his efforts and those of good companions whom he had used to persuade the boy to go and talk with him.

On Christmas Eve this lad took sick, and during the night he became delirious, shrieking that devils were trying to drag him out of bed. His terrifying screams resounded through the house. Then, in a fit of ever more chilling terror, he began to tell a most revolting tale. He awakened all the boys with his screams. The cleric Joseph Bongiovanni, who was in charge of the dormitory, ordered them to plug their ears. By the next morning R. . . 's fever had abated a little. When he was told what he had said in his delirium, sick as he was, he ran home and was never again seen or heard of. Dominic Belmonte was one of the witnesses of this fact.

Immediately after Christmas, according to Ruffino, Don Bosco became ill with erysipelas and was bedridden for several days. On the last day of the year, however, he felt better, and that evening, against everybody's advice, he decided to get up. He came down from his room and mounted the little rostrum to give the annual New Year's *strenna*.³ Father Bonetti's chronicle records the "Good Night" as follows:

³ See p. 479, footnote 4. [Editor]

I decided to come down to see you and speak to you tonight, because I knew that I would otherwise have to wait until next year. (*Laughter*) The year 1861 is past. Those who spent it well will rejoice; others may feel sorrow and repent, but they will never get this year back again. *Fugit irreparabile tempus*. [Time flies irreparably.] On the last night of each year, I usually give my sons a few suggestions for the new year. Here is what I recommend for the year 1862.

Do your utmost to hear Holy Mass devoutly; urge others to do the same. This year I very seriously want you to take this suggestion of mine to heart, because I really mean it. Great disasters loom over us. Holy Mass is *the* great means to appease God and avert His chastisements. Let us therefore carry out the wholesome advice of the Sacred Council of Trent — let us always keep ourselves in the state of grace so as to be ready to receive Holy Communion when assisting at Mass, and thus more fully share in this august Sacrifice.

Let everyone do his best to fulfill the duties of his state with diligence. Those who have authority in the house — for example, monitors in the dormitory, study hall, workshop, or dining room — should set the example. Let them diligently carry out their duties. While urging this of those who share authority, I cannot neglect to recommend that their charges show them obedience and submission. If you comply with this, all will go well and we shall enjoy a peaceful, tranquil year. I wish the artisans success in mastering their trade so that they may earn an honorable living by their work; I also exhort them to pay closer attention to their spiritual welfare. I wish the students success in acquiring earthly knowledge without harm to the knowledge of heavenly things.

What wish do you offer Don Bosco? I think I see a keen desire in your hearts that I have a long life. I cordially accept this wish of yours, and in turn I wish you, too, a long, happy life. But can I assure you that this wish of mine will come true for all of you? I doubt it. Perhaps the end of 1862 may find all of us alive. On this very evening a year ago we were saying that not all of us might be in this world tonight. Martino was then with us, and he too was wondering, "Who knows who will die?" The thought was far from his mind that he would be the one, but he was. He almost managed to reach the end of the year, but around December 26 he had to leave for eternity. Maffei, Quaranta, and Roggero are gone too. Last year there were fewer of us, and yet four have departed. Now that we are more numerous, can we presume that we will all be here a year from today? Let us all keep prepared so that, should death come unexpectedly, we may be ready to leave for eternity.

What I have said so far is for all in general. In past years, though, on this night I have made it a point to give each one also a personal *strenna*. Shall I do so this year? Yes, I shall, but in a way that the Oratory has never seen since its beginning. This is a unique, extraordinary thing, but I cannot tell you anything about it until tomorrow. Pray for my intention, and you will see that it was worth praying for. I will tell you everything tomorrow night. Now, go to bed and sleep well.

This talk of Don Bosco brought the year to a close, but his words on the last night of 1861 prompted him to speak on New Year's Day, 1862.

God's glory and mercy, Mary's goodness, and the salvation of souls were the constant topics of his talks to the humble and to the great. His voice re-echoed that of the whole universe: *Dies diei eructat verbum et nox nocti indicat scientiam*. [Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge. — Ps. 18, 3]

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

A SERMON BY DON BOSCO ON OBEDIENCE

(See Chapter 1, footnote 5)

Anyone who wants to learn an art or trade has to go through an apprenticeship. As the saying goes, “No one is born a master.” And so, one who wants to be a good bricklayer must first patiently be a hod carrier for two or three years before he can use the trowel and build houses that will not cave in on their dwellers. The same is true for one who wants to be a cabinetmaker. Were he at once to start on wardrobes, desks, or dressers, he would only waste time, tools, and material, and end up making a mess. This applies to us also. We Christians must learn to become *good* Christians. To achieve this goal we must first of all — each according to his own state in life — obey God, the Pope, and the Church’s sacred ministers. Therefore, I will speak about obedience.

Obedience comes from the Latin *ab audientia*, “a thing heard.” When we hear the command of a superior and carry it out, we perform an act of obedience.

Let’s now go a step further. What is the *virtue* of obedience? St. Thomas Aquinas, greatest of theologians and author of many beautiful writings, says: “Obedience is the virtue which makes us ready to carry out the order or the will of a superior.”

Is this virtue infused into our soul at Holy Baptism? No, because it is not one of the theological virtues whose object is God exclusively. Obedience is a moral virtue which, with the help of God’s grace, we can acquire by our own efforts, namely, by the repetition of acts of obedience.

How many kinds of obedience are there? Five: divine, ecclesiastical, civil, domestic, and religious.

“Divine obedience” means obeying God. Clearly, we must first obey God because He is Creator of heaven and earth, King of kings, absolute Master of all men and things. God commands us to honor Him alone as God, and we must obey Him; God commands us not to take His Holy Name in vain, not to blaspheme, and we must obey Him; God

commands us to sanctify Sundays and holy days, and we must obey Him; and so on. We must obey Him by keeping all the Ten Commandments, which tell us what God wants of us.

“Ecclesiastical obedience” means that we must obey Holy Mother Church, for Our Lord said to St. Peter: “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church.” [Matt. 16, 18] That same God who gave St. Peter the power to loose and to bind has also given him the power to make laws for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. After God, therefore, we must obey the Pope, who is the successor of St. Peter. We must obey the Church and keep her precepts, that is, hear Mass on Sundays and holy days, abstain from meat on Fridays and Saturdays, go to confession at least once a year, receive Holy Communion at Easter, and so on with the other precepts.

“Civil obedience” means obeying our sovereign, but only in temporal matters. Thus, for instance, we must obey him by paying taxes, using duty stamps on legal documents, and so on in all matters concerning civil laws. If, however, civil authorities presume to dictate in religious matters without the Church’s consent, we should refuse to obey. That would be an instance where we should give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. Never are we to obey the government if it means disobeying God by breaking His laws or the laws of the Church, the spouse of Jesus Christ and His representative on earth.

“Domestic obedience” is obedience due to one’s parents, masters and superiors, and others in authority. A son must obey his parents because they stand first after God. A servant or an apprentice should obey his master, because he takes the place of father and mother. Likewise, everyone must obey superiors because they must watch over him. In all matters of obedience, however, we must submit only in things which do not contradict the law of God or the Church. Thus, if your father or mother or anyone in authority were to command you to do something evil, you would no longer have to obey; indeed, you would sin by obeying. Heaven help that father or mother who would be so wicked as to lead a child into evil. Woe to that son who obeys, knowing that what is commanded is sinful!

As for “religious obedience,” I will pass it by since you are neither Trappists nor Franciscans.

I must also say something about the “object” and “subject” of obedience. Don’t be frightened by these big words; I will explain them. The “object” of obedience is the thing which is commanded. I repeat, should anything sinful be commanded, even by an angel — an impossible

supposition — we must refuse to do it. A few days ago, for instance, an employer said to one of his young apprentices, “Do you want to make some easy money? I’ll teach you. I must pay you eight *soldi* a day, right? Well, I’ll pay you six and give you two on the side for yourself. If Don Bosco asks you to turn in your pay, you can say that I gave you only six.” Tell me, now: Should that boy obey? No, because it is sinful. As a matter of fact, that boy did not obey, and this taught his dishonest master a good lesson.

The “subject” of obedience is the person who commands — one who has authority over him who is expected to obey. Every time a superior commands, we are bound to obey. One who is equal or inferior to you cannot order you to obey.

You might ask, “Is obedience a great virtue?” Yes, indeed! St. Gregory the Great says that obedience is closely linked to all other virtues and guards them all. *Est virtus quae omnes virtutes inserit, insertasque custodit.* It guards them lest they ever be lost again. Obedience is the most acceptable virtuous act we can offer to God because our liberty, our free will, is God’s greatest gift — and that is what we sacrifice by obeying, by bending our free will to that of another.

But if obedience is to please God, it must be given freely. One who obeys grudgingly or through fear of punishment cannot please God, because God does not like things done by force. As a loving God, He wants things done for love’s sake. Therefore, when commanded anything, let us put our hearts into it and obey promptly. The Lord will then be with us. When King Saul was about to battle the Philistines, the prophet Samuel told him to go to the battlefield and wait for him there. He clearly warned him not to attack until he, Samuel, had arrived to offer sacrifice. Saul went and waited, but Samuel was not coming. Meanwhile, the enemy was advancing, and Saul’s soldiers were falling back, since they could not engage in battle before the sacrifice. Seeing that his troops were beginning to break up, Saul ordered a victim to be made ready. Then, usurping the priestly office, he offered the sacrifice himself. Hardly had he done so when Samuel arrived.

“How dared you do this?” he asked Saul.

“I had to,” Saul replied. “The Philistines were pushing our men back and you were not here to offer the sacrifice.”

“You did wrong,” replied Samuel. “I commanded you to wait for me and you did not. You did wrong!”

Remember, my dear boys: whenever an order is given, obey. To show you how Our Lord rewards obedience even in this world, I will tell you

a fine story from the life of St. Benedict narrated by St. Gregory the Great. This holy founder once sent Placidus (one of his disciples whom he taught the way to heaven) to draw water from a nearby river with a pail. Unfortunately, the young monk either slipped or was knocked off balance by the heavy pail and fell into the river, where he was at the current's mercy. St. Benedict saw the mishap from his window and immediately sent another disciple, Maurus, to rescue him. Accustomed to prompt obedience, Maurus ran to the river, dashed over the waters as if on solid land, quickly seized his companion by the hair, and drew him to safety without as much as wetting his feet. St. Gregory tells us that Maurus was not even aware that he had walked over water and risked drowning. See then, my dear boys, how God rewards prompt obedience.

Appendix 2

FEAST OF ST. ALOYSIUS AT THE ORATORY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

(See Chapter 2, footnote 10)

Now and then we have our days of peace and serenity, such as soothe our hurts and fill us with heavenly joys and ineffable hopes. True, they come in a flash of light, but since their memory is indelible, we can invoke and savor them long after their passing. At the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Valdocco, June 29, sacred to the memory of SS. Peter and Paul, is also the day set to honor the angelic youth, St. Aloysius Gonzaga.

In Turin and other congested urban areas, sorrow and joy, misery and wealth, vice and virtue are in constant sway, in God's mysterious and adorable designs. Real love is not expressed in empty words or looks; simple and genuine as faith, love drives one even into self-sacrifice to benefit the suffering and bring physical and spiritual relief. Provident laws and elaborate measures of human wisdom fall short if not fed by the flame burning in the hearts of those who have fully grasped Calvary's lesson of divine love. Hence, I cannot bide my peace as hostility and ridicule, rising from perversity and prejudice, are hurled at the

Catholic clergy, who have always and everywhere undertaken vast works of charity.

I mention but one example. A humble priest of our own city, relying solely on Divine Providence, devised a plan of harboring as many boys as he could find roaming the streets — jobless, destitute, ignorant of their heavenly origin and their priceless heritage as children. Squarely facing mounting difficulties, he used up his own scanty possessions, carried on bravely, and came to see his dream realized at least in part — a reward for his steadfastness. Restless youngsters flock about him, docilely listen to his kindly voice, and reverently follow his advice. His first shelter — a ramshackle shed to protect against inclement weather — slowly expanded into more livable quarters like the proverbial mustard seed. His little family of boys soon grew beyond two hundred, for whom God has cared as for the birds of the air. Next to this hospice is a little church where these homeless lads shed tears at the feet of their heavenly Mother, tears more pleasing than incense or perfume, tears that turn into a shower of heavenly blessings for their benefactors. Here boys get suitable academic or vocational training; they receive all they need to grow up as upright citizens, a boon and honor to their families. The results of this work, already so abundant when we would scarcely even hope for them, are their zealous director's well-deserved, advance reward. For some of these boys, home life was perhaps drab, troubled by squabbles, misery, grief, or lack of a mother's love and warmth. This priestly apostle saw the orphan, hugged him to his bosom, and gladly took him into his Oratory. Its many alumni are now dedicated, zealous religious, priests and missionaries, servicemen, honest, hard-working craftsmen, and exemplary parents. All are a credit to the loving care bestowed on their young pliable minds and to their own prompt acceptance of the sweet yoke of the Lord.

Among the year's festivities there is one they most look forward to and welcome with real joy — the feast of their patron, St. Aloysius Gonzaga. The day is prepared long in advance with vocal and instrumental music rehearsals, while budding poets extol their Saints glories. By the time of the feast's vigil, tapestries adorn the church, cornices glitter with golden fringes, decorations cover the walls, the altar wears its most splendid apparel, and the whole church is filled with lights, flowers, and harmony. Masses begin at dawn and continue through the morning, while endless numbers of boys receive the Bread of Angels. Voices and organ mingle to uplift the souls of worshipers and fill them with untold delight. Prayer and play follow each other; then there is a

solemn Mass and Vespers, with a eulogy of the Saint and an imposing procession in which his statue is carried by a select group of devotees. Two lines of boys march quietly and recollectedly while the band alternates its strains with their singing. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament crowns the religious celebration.

Then, after nearly a day of divine worship, the hour comes for delightful entertainment. Youngsters pour into the large playground. From a balcony, lottery numbers are called out as they cheer and wave free tickets. Lucky winners pick their prizes from a thousand items tastefully displayed, while the rest keep hoping with eager expectation. But spectators are already gathering elsewhere. Lights go on, the orchestra strikes up a tune, the curtain is drawn and, behold, Don Bosco's boys, now actors, present drama and farce with incredible ease, life, and skill. You see the harlequin with his jests and mimicry, the noble lord, the aged, faithful servant, and even the opera singer. The audience applauds frantically and would wish to stay the hands of the clock, but, like everything else, the play comes to an end.

As evening deepens into night, the sudden hiss of rockets draws all faces upward as bright flashes illumine the darkness with a burst of multicolored, slowly lowering lights. Presently a balloon is released and rises into the air amid general applause. Words cannot tell of the joy shining from youthful faces, the delight of parents and relatives, the orderliness of the proceedings, and the painstaking care of Don Bosco and his co-workers to make this family feast splendid and memorable.

To us adults, who must face a world where lips laugh but hearts ache, where only too often pleasure is swiftly replaced by boredom and deep-seated remorse, how enviable are these simple, innocent joys! How I wish that those who vainly and hypocritically preach democracy to the four winds, who make of popular gullibility a pedestal for their ambition and covetousness, might have witnessed this celebration in the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, this magnificent school of virtue. They would have learned how religion — aiding both individual and community — ennobles the mind and the heart and lifts them, as it were, to undreamed of heights of heroism.

At the Valdocco Oratory, there reigns a holy, active brotherliness that binds all in affection — because all have been redeemed by the same Divine Blood — and equally protects, comforts, and educates everyone.

To this apostle of the youth of Turin, to this humble priest who has

multiplied in our midst the examples of St. Philip Neri and of St. Vincent de Paul, we owe endless thanks as to an outstanding benefactor of humanity. His glory is our heritage; to uphold and proclaim it is our civic duty.

Count Victor Camburzano, *Congressman*

Appendix 3

PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINE OF
OUR LADY OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

(See Chapter 4, footnote 6)

On [Sunday] July 12 [1858], the boys' and girls' sodalities of Our Lady of the Countryside parish celebrated the feast of the Holy Name of Mary. A vast assemblage of people received Communion and attended the morning and evening services. As always, their devotion was most edifying, but this year it was even more so, due to the inspiring singing of the boys of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, directed by the untiring, zealous Father John Bosco. Their angelic voices drew tears of joy from many in the congregation; all highly praised the excellent singing.

The following Thursday another devout celebration was held in the same church when Father John Bosco said Holy Mass for some eighty pupils. The religious in charge of the shrine were deeply edified to see all of them receive Communion devoutly. Afterward, Father Prior graciously treated the youngsters to a simple breakfast.

Appendix 4

A SERMON BY DON BOSCO ON ST. CECILIA

(See Chapter 6, footnote 7)

Under Emperor Alexander Severus the Church suffered severe persecution. To avoid capture, Pope Urban I took refuge in the catacombs

in an area three miles from Rome. Catacombs are underground cemeteries where martyrs were buried and also where Christians hid when persecuted.

During the pontificate of Urban I there lived a young lady belonging to one of the noblest families of Rome. Her name was Cecilia. She was secretly a Christian, while all her relatives were pagans. She was very fond of music and played the organ — an instrument different from the one we now know. *Cantantibus organis, Caecilia Domino decantabat.* To the accompaniment of the organ Cecilia sang God's praises, desiring nothing more eagerly than to give herself to Him, and praying, "May my heart be ever immaculate, that I be not confounded!" This maiden had consecrated herself to Jesus Christ, vowing virginity all her life.

Her parents, however, had decided to marry her to a noble youth named Valerian. When Cecilia learned of this, she was very disturbed, and she thought of ways to foil the plan. She kept to her rooms, shunned amusements, and sought comfort in reading the Holy Gospels which she always kept close at hand. She never ceased praying for assistance in her predicament. One day, she felt suddenly full of courage and inspired to abandon herself with unwavering trust to her beloved heavenly Spouse, Jesus. "I am happy and tranquil," she exclaimed. "I know what I shall do!"

Meantime her wedding day was approaching. When Valerian came to visit her, she drew him aside and said to him: "Valerian, I have a secret to tell you."

"Go ahead and tell me," Valerian eagerly replied. "You can trust me."

"First promise that you will never tell."

"I give you my word."

Then Cecilia went on:

"Valerian, I have consecrated myself to a heavenly Spouse. Were you to sully my purity, the angel that is ever at my side would immediately slay you."

"You have an angel guarding you, you say? I can't see him."

"Would you like to?"

"Very much so!"

"Then you must first believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God, who, in order to save us, came down from heaven and shed His Blood for us. You must believe that there is but one God, Creator of heaven and earth and of everything in them, and that this God rewards the good

and punishes the wicked. Afterward, you must be washed in purifying waters, and only then will you be able to see my guardian angel."

Valerian had never heard of Jesus Christ, but he was very eager to see Cecilia's angel. "To whom must I go to be purified?" he asked.

"You must take the Appian Way and go three miles out of the city. There you will meet beggars. Ask them: 'Where is the venerable old man?' Follow them; they will take you to him. After you have been purified, come back and you will see my angel."

Valerian did as he was told. "Venerable old man" was the Christians' name for the Pope lest the pagans discover his hideout. Valerian arrived at the three-mile marker and there found a group of beggars, who were not beggars at all, but Christians in disguise.

"Where is the venerable old man?" he asked.

"Follow me," one of them answered.

They walked a short distance to the opening of a cave concealed by a clump of trees and hanging branches. Lifting these, the guide led Valerian into a dark passage, lit a lamp, and then went on along a narrow corridor. After a few turns, they descended a steep flight of stairs which took them into the depths of the earth. Here the catacombs started, stretching for miles and miles. In this place Christians were wont to bury the glorious confessors of the faith.

Valerian advanced through that corridor from which scores of others branched off. The guide's lamp cast dim light on the tiered, recessed tombs along the walls. Engraved on the marble slabs that sealed them were the emblems of the Christians' martyrdom.

"This one," explained the guide, "was beheaded; that one was torn by wild beasts in the amphitheater; that other was slowly burned to death; this one had molten lead poured down his throat . . ." Thus he went on enumerating the various instruments of torture — the scourge, the gridiron, the cross by which those martyrs had been made witnesses to Jesus Christ. It was in these glorious cemeteries that Christians held their assemblies, celebrated their rites, and often also lived day and night.

On seeing these trophies of Christian heroism which he could not yet fully appreciate, Valerian was horrified, and all but fainted. "Alas," he kept saying to himself, "what a place to have stumbled into!" Nevertheless, he braced himself and walked on. He finally arrived at a fairly large, temple-like chamber, into which several corridors converged. Here was an altar, many lighted lamps, and a cluster of Christians assisting at the sacred rites. The guide at once led Valerian to Pope Urban, who

was seated on a raised armchair, surrounded by his clergy. The Pope's benevolent features and his serene, kindly look comforted Valerian considerably. The Pope, noticing this stranger who still seemed bewildered, made him feel at ease by amiably and kindly asking him what had brought him there.

"I am Cecilia's bridegroom," he answered. "She told me that an angel stands at her side to guard her and that to see him — as I desire — I must first come to you and be purified."

Deeply moved, Pope Urban knelt in prayer, followed by the crowd. Suddenly there appeared a venerable old man of majestic and noble bearing. Overawed at this unexpected experience with the supernatural, Valerian fell to the ground. Who was this heavenly personage? It was St. Paul the Apostle, who had come to comfort Urban in his tribulations and to encourage Valerian.

"Rise, Valerian, and be of good heart!" St. Paul said to the latter.

Though a brave soldier, Valerian still trembled like a leaf. Hearing his name called, he raised his head a little, looked at the mysterious personage, and finally stood up. St. Paul then gave him a book, saying: "Take and read." Valerian opened it and read: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God omnipotent, Creator of heaven and earth; one Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ."

"Do you believe these things?" St. Paul asked.

"Yes!" Valerian replied. "I believe them with all my heart."

"If you do, then you may be baptized, and when you return to Cecilia you will be able to see her angel." After saying this, the Apostle vanished.

Pope Urban baptized the new convert, clothed him in a white robe, and, since it was just about dawn, sent him, thus garbed, back to Cecilia.

When Valerian arrived at her palace, he found there many clients who had come to wish the master good day and receive his bounty. Without trouble from the servants, Valerian walked in and made directly for the chamber of the holy virgin. He stopped at the door, drew the curtain a little aside, and beheld an astonishing sight — Cecilia kneeling in prayer and a resplendent angel standing at her side, filling the room with light. The beauty of his countenance, the splendor and wealth of his apparel, and his multicolored wings defied description. The upper part of his wings showed a marvelous, superhuman interlacing of plumes, while the lower part sparkled with colors like a rainbow.

At such a sight Valerian hesitated at first, but then, as if getting used to heavenly visitors because of his recent experience in the catacombs,

he took courage, went in, and knelt at the angel's side, who thus stood between him and Cecilia. He wished to join her in prayer, but he could hardly concentrate, dazzled as he was by the splendor of the angel. Presently the latter produced two most beautiful crowns of roses and placed them on the heads of Cecilia and Valerian, saying: "Receive these heavenly crowns and keep them fresh with the purity of your hearts and holiness of life. Your prayers have been heard. Confidently ask for whatever you wish, and it shall be granted you."

At this Valerian said: "I ask for the conversion of my brother Tiburtius."

"Granted!" the angel replied. And he vanished.

At the same time Tiburtius' steps were heard approaching; in a few moments he entered the room. "What fragrance!" he exclaimed. "What flowers have you got? I have never smelled the like before!"

"No wonder," Valerian replied. "This fragrance is not of earth. Only a few moments ago, an angel placed a crown of heavenly roses on our heads."

"Crown of roses? I can smell the fragrance, but I can't see the flowers. Where are they?"

Cecilia then said to him, "If you wish to see our crowns, you must first believe that there is but one God, Creator of heaven and earth, and that this God sent us His only Son Jesus, who founded a religion totally pure and holy. Then you must be purified by a water capable of cleansing your soul from every stain."

"What? Is there yet another God more powerful than the gods of Rome?"

"Oh, Tiburtius," Valerian exclaimed. "I am surprised that, intelligent as you are, you still believe that our idols have any power! They are man-made!"

"What you say is true, Valerian. But who will give me that soul-cleansing water?"

"A venerable old man called Urban."

"What? Urban? The one whom people call the Christians' Pope?"

"The very one."

"I will have nothing to do with him. If the Praetorians were to find me out, they would put me to death. Besides, such horrible things are said about Christians?"

"Rotten lies, my dear Tiburtius. Urban is a good man. In all my life I have never met a more amiable, a more simple, and yet a more learned person. Go and speak to him, and you will not regret it."

"Am I to believe that perhaps you too . . . Oh, no, I can't believe

it! . . . As for myself, I am young, I want to enjoy life . . . Aren't you aware that death hangs over anyone who deals with Christians? No! I will never go to Urban."

"Listen, Tiburtius: this fear of yours would be quite reasonable if we had only this life to live, if everything ended with death. However, I must tell you that our soul is immortal, and that the all-powerful God who has created heaven and earth has also created a paradise where an inexpressible happiness will be forever the lot of those who love and serve Him in this life. But you must also know that there is a place of eternal torment after death for those who refuse to know, adore, and serve God in life."

"And who can assure me of another life?"

Here Cecilia took up the argument. Well educated as she was, she proved from reason, revelation, and the pagan philosophers themselves the existence of a future life, the eternal happiness that awaits the good, and the equally eternal misery into which the wicked shall be plunged.

Tiburtius, intelligent and good at heart, moved by the grace of God, saw the truth and embraced it. Unafraid of death, he exclaimed: "Tell me where I can find Urban. I'll go to him at once. I too want to gain eternal happiness."

"I will take you to him," said Valerian. "I assure you, Tiburtius, that after this purification, you will experience a joy never before felt, such as no human mind can ever conceive."

They went to the catacombs. Tiburtius was baptized and he, too, saw the angel.

Appendix 5

REGULATIONS FOR DRAMATICS

(See Chapter 8, footnote 3)

1. The purpose of dramatics is moral entertainment, instruction, and education.
2. On each occasion, the stage manager must inform the director of the house and reach an agreement with him about the play to be given, the performance date, and the choice of cast.

3. Preferably, actors are to be chosen from among the best pupils, but at times others may be chosen as an encouragement.

4. Members of the choir or brass band should not be chosen for plays, but they may present short numbers during intermissions.

5. As far as possible, craftsmasters should not take part in dramatics.

6. Plays should be amusing and relaxing, but always instructive, moral, and short. An overly long play, besides requiring longer rehearsals, generally tires the audience and spoils the play's overall effect.

7. Plays depicting violence and brutality must be avoided. Somewhat forceful scenes may be tolerated, but expressions that are hardly Christian, and all uncivil, vulgar words, must be deleted.

8. The stage manager must be present at all rehearsals, which, if held at night, must end by ten o'clock. He must see to it that all retire immediately, without chatting idly and disturbing those already in bed.

9. The manager should have the stage ready on time, so as to avoid working on the feast day itself.

10. It is his duty to see that costuming is inexpensive and modest.

11. He should arrange beforehand for musical selections during intermissions.

12. Without a just reason, he must allow no unauthorized persons on the stage, much less in the dressing rooms. He should see to it that the actors do not engage in private conversation during performances and that the strictest modesty is observed at all times.

13. Performances are to be scheduled so as not to disturb the ordinary timetable. If any change is necessary, it should be arrived at by a prior understanding with the superior.

14. Actors should not have a supper party of their own. Prizes or a show of esteem and praise should not be given to those endowed by God with talents for elocution or vocal and instrumental music. They are already sufficiently rewarded by the free time given them and the special training they receive.

15. The manager should also make sure that damage is not done to properties, props, and costumes in setting up or clearing the stage.

16. He should keep the dramatics library stocked with plays and materials adapted to our schools.

17. If necessary, the manager shall have an assistant who can also be a prompter.

18. He should insist that actors avoid affectation in voice, speak clearly, and be natural in gestures. This comes easily if parts are memorized.

19. Let us be convinced that short intermissions and declamation of suitable excerpts from good authors should be an outstanding and delightful trait of our stage performances.

Fr. John Bosco, *Director*

N.B. If necessary, the manager may ask a teacher or an assistant to coach his pupils and prepare them for a skit or play.

Appendix 6

FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, 1859

(See Chapter 10, footnote 4)

On Sunday, January 30, the Oratory will celebrate the feast of its patron, St. Francis de Sales.

The reigning Supreme Pontiff, Pius IX, grants a plenary indulgence to all who, after going to confession and Communion on that day, shall visit this church and pray for the needs of Holy Church.

(Decree of September 28, 1850)

TIMETABLE

Morning

Masses at Frequent Intervals, Confessions and Communions

8:00 — General Communion

9:00 — Recreation

10:00 — Solemn High Mass Sung by the Oratory Pupils

Afternoon

1:00 — Various Activities

2:30 — Solemn Vespers, Sermon, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament

4:00 — Lottery

5:30 — Awarding of Prizes to Fourteen Students

6:00 — Special Entertainment

Appendix 7

A GOSPEL HOMILY BY DON BOSCO

(See Chapter 12, footnote 12)

My dear boys,

This morning I shall comment on this Sunday's Gospel — quite suited to you — rather than continue with the lives of the popes, particularly of the successor of Urban I, whose achievements I have finished narrating.

Listen to today's Gospel. Our Lord Jesus Christ went up a very high mountain. Then, realizing that not all the people would be able to follow Him, and wishing His heavenly words to reach everyone, He came down to the plain again. In that neighborhood lived a man sick with leprosy — a most repulsive and contagious disease. The poor wretch, driven from the city, unwanted by relatives and friends, and totally destitute, was forced to live in the fields as best he could, hated and shunned by all. When he heard of the great miracles Jesus was working on the mountain, he could not wait to go and beg Him for a cure, but just then news reached him that Jesus was coming down to the plain. Overjoyed, he waited for Him. On seeing the crowds preceding Him, he stepped forward and, as they parted, he threw himself at His feet and adored Him. *Et veniens adorabat Eum.*

Note, here, dear boys, that the leper "adored" Jesus. This shows that this man believed that Jesus was true God, for to God alone is adoration due. We do not adore the saints, the angels, or the Virgin Mary. We only respect them, venerate them, and beg them to intercede with God for us. God alone we adore! Certainly Jesus — always so compassionate to the suffering and so kind even to sinners — seeing the poor man kneeling before Him, must have gently questioned him about his home and parents, his sufferings, and perhaps also his soul. But the Gospel is silent on this. It tells us only that the leper broke out into these words: "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean!" What wonderful faith! "Lord!" he said. He at once acknowledged Him as Lord of lords, King of kings, Master of all things. "If You will, You can make me

clean!" He did not say: "If You ask Your Eternal Father, He will hear Your prayer and heal me!" No, he only said, "If You will, I shall be healed!"

Jesus saw that the poor man's heart was well disposed — He wants the heart! Wishing therefore to grant his prayer and reward his faith, He said, "I will! Be you made clean!" He did not say, "I want you to be made clean," but "I will!" and then issued the command: "Be you made clean." Jesus had hardly spoken these words when the sores that covered his whole body were instantly healed. Imagine how happy he must have felt and how heartily he must have thanked Our Lord.

Before dismissing him, Jesus said to him: "Go, show yourself to the priest." By this He meant: "True, I have cured you, but you must present yourself to the priest; otherwise you will be sick again." You must bear in mind that, at that time, those who were stricken with leprosy were declared unclean by the priest and had to keep away from towns and villages until they were cured. And even then, before returning to their families, they first had to present themselves to the priest in order to be declared clean again and be readmitted to society.

Now, my dear boys, listen to the meaning of this story. Leprosy is a picture of sin. It makes our souls so loathsome that God no longer looks on us as His own: He has to banish us, isolate us from His other children. The soul in mortal sin is truly disgusting and hideous in His eyes. How can one free himself from this leprosy? "Show yourself to the priest," the Lord said. If we wish to be freed from sin, to be cured of this most repulsive disease of the soul, we must go to the priest, to whom God has given the power to cleanse us. Could not Our Lord have simply told that man: "Be you made clean," without adding that he should show himself to the priest? Most certainly! Yet, He did not, in order to show us that, though He could forgive us without our having to present ourselves to a priest, He will not do so unless we go to a priest and sincerely confess our sins. Some people say, "Our Lord does not have to ask one to go and tell his sins to a priest, for He can forgive us without that." If these people were here present, I would say to them, "The Lord could just as well make the wheat shoot up from the ground at once, ripe and clean, and make it go of itself into barns without the farmer's work." Of course He could! He is omnipotent. Out of nothing He has made all that is on earth and in the heavens; by one word, He has filled the sky with the countless, vast, magnificent stars we admire on a clear night. Couldn't He make the wheat grow completely ripened and go straight into storage by itself? Of course He could. Why doesn't He? Ask Him. He will tell you!

I assure you that if you want to rid yourselves of your sins, the only way is to go to confession. God will forgive you any sin, provided you are truly sorry and confess it humbly to His appointed minister, the priest.

Finally, Jesus forbade the leper to mention his miraculous cure to anyone. Let us admire Jesus' humility in not wanting such an astonishing miracle to be known. This is a good lesson for us! No sooner have we done some little good than we want others to know and to praise us for it. And if it goes unnoticed, we take good care to draw their attention to it, that they may think us good and worthy of their esteem. Jesus did not act this way. He was satisfied to have His Heavenly Father know all the good He was doing. So must we also do. We are not to do good in order to be seen and praised by men, but only to please God. As much as we can, we ought to conceal from other people's eyes whatever little good we get done. If we can't succeed in this, then let us be on our guard against vain complacency and pride, for this would undo before God whatever good we have done.

Appendix 8

CONFERENCES TO THE BLESSED SACRAMENT SODALITY

(See Chapter 15, footnote 1)

First Conference

The Prophet Isaiah had foretold that at Our Lord's coming the mountains would be shaken and the most hardened hearts would be inflamed with love. And so it came to pass. But now, were Jesus to look down from the kingdom of the blessed to this earth of ours, He would see that the fervor which should hopefully have endured and grown ever more intense to the end of time has rather in the main turned lukewarm. The ancient patriarchs and Jews longed to see the Messiah; they sighed for His coming and the blessings He would bring. We now possess Him; we have Him really present in our churches where we can adore Him, receive Him in our hearts, converse with Him, and ask Him for anything, since He is Master of all. But how do

we treat Him? To shake ourselves out of our indifference and ingratitude, let us ask ourselves two questions: 1. What is Jesus doing for us in the Blessed Sacrament? 2. What must we do for Him?

In the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus keeps giving us the deepest example of humility — a most necessary virtue. True, His whole earthly life was an unending self-abasement. But the cave of His birth and His bed of straw were offset by the angels' song and by a bright star announcing His birth to the Magi who at once set off to adore Him. If we see Him despised, insulted by the scribes and Pharisees among the crowds, we also see Him working astounding miracles wherever He goes; if we see Him hanging on the Cross, we also see the heavens joining in His agony — the sun is darkened, the earth trembles, and the dead rise. The whole of creation, tempest-tossed, mourns the death of God-made-man. But in the Most Blessed Sacrament, we see nothing to suggest even faintly the awful presence of a God, omnipotent and inexorably just as He is infinitely good and merciful. Why? For love of us, to remain with us almost as our equal, to teach us humility. And yet, were He to let a ray of His majesty shine through, who could ever stand it? But then, were He to do so, what merit would we have? Merit stems from faith; if Jesus showed Himself openly on our altars, we would lose the merit of faith. Instead, by concealing Himself as He does, He lovingly offers us an easy way to gain merit by believing His words — the words of a Divine Friend.

But now, what sort of faith does He find in us? What are we to think of our indifference to such a God's love? Some enter the church thoughtlessly, not bothering to genuflect to the tabernacle, contenting themselves with just a slight bow; some even do reverence as did those Jews who blindfolded Him and knelt in mockery! My dear boys, when you enter the church, look at the tabernacle. Though you do not see Him, Jesus is truly there. Revive your faith; reflect that there dwells the God in whose presence legions of angels tremble and multitudes of saints kneel and adore.

Let me ask you another question: What does Our Lord do in the Blessed Sacrament? Endlessly He prays to His Eternal Father on our behalf and withholds the chastisements that our sins deserve. If nowadays we do not see or hear of such frightful punishments as once befell the Jewish people, it is not because our sins are fewer or less outrageous! You are aware that today has its evil men too. Who is it that unceasingly holds back Divine Justice every day, every moment? None other than Our Lord Jesus Christ! In the Sacrifice of the Mass

He again offers Himself for us as a victim upon our altars. At the sight of His sacred wounds, the destroying angel sheathes his sword . . .

Second Conference

Last time I told you what Jesus does for us in the Blessed Sacrament. Let us now see what *we* ought to do for Him. Jesus in the Most Holy Eucharist continually humbles Himself, immolates Himself, prays for us. In grateful return we should repay His humiliations with a lively faith, His sufferings with ardent love, His continual prayers on our behalf with perfect sorrow for our sins.

First of all, so great a God remains hidden — as it were, annihilated — under the appearances of a little bread and wine. This ought to be an incentive for us to believe more firmly that He is the God of love, abasing Himself for love's sake alone, for the love of us who love Him so little. And yet, how many heretics there are who dare to deny His real presence because they see no outward signs of His divinity. These people would presume to see His divine features and to hear the harmonies of the blessed spirits who eternally form a crown around Him. Let these people know that whoever rejects Our Lord's word shall be condemned and will never see His face. They are unconcerned, ungrateful wretches, stiff-necked followers of those faithless Pharisees who, unable to deny the miracles Jesus wrought in their presence, explained them away by attributing them to the devil's power!

Thus, then, my Divine Savior, do men requite Your self-abasement? My Jesus, truly there are some so ungrateful as not to acknowledge You. But many others too there are, such as these Your dear children, who believe with all their hearts that You are really and truly present in the Blessed Sacrament. Yes, they believe You are the Son of the Eternal Father, of the Living God, the Absolute Master of all creation. They believe You are the true Son of Mary, of whom You willed to be born to rescue us from the bondage of the infernal enemy . . .

Secondly, my dear boys, how we envy those blessed times of the ancient Church when the fervent champions of Jesus Christ so stood out for their love of Him. Would that those times return! The deep love of early Christians for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is a matter of history. Not for one moment did they forget Calvary and the Cross. How reverently, devoutly, and adoringly they knelt in His presence, visited Him, assisted at the renewal of His sacrifice, and received Him

in Holy Communion! Tears of joy flowed from their eyes, sighs of ardent love rose from their breasts, ecstatic rapture beamed from their faces! Holy virgins and innocent children sang their hymns to the Lamb, as do the angels of heaven, and longed for the moment of their union with Him. With Jesus in their hearts, for His sake alone, they went forth, noble heroes, to face a glorious martyrdom and render thanks with their blood for the Blood He had shed on the Cross for them. But, alas, when I turn my eyes from them to today's Christians, what a difference! What laxity, coldness, and lack of mortification! What else can ever kindle love's fire in our hearts, if all that Jesus has done and suffered for us cannot do it?

Lastly, Jesus' ceaseless prayers for us ought to move us to show Him grateful, perfect sorrow. Who will not reproach himself for acts of irreverence or countless distractions in his past life? For Communions made coldly, indifferently, perhaps only for secondary motives? Who knows, perhaps even at times for renewing Judas' betrayal by sacrilege, while Jesus has ever been so good, so compassionate toward us.

Let us all reflect a bit on our treatment of Jesus in the past, and resolve from now on to warm our hearts with a more lively faith as we acknowledge the many humiliations this good God of ours had to undergo for our sake; to inflame our heart with a more fervent love for the insults Our Lord had to endure in the Most Blessed Sacrament from His ungrateful children; and to rouse ourselves to sincere repentance for sin, to gratitude for the prayers He offers to His Eternal Father on our behalf . . .

Appendix 9

REGULATIONS OF ST. JOSEPH'S SODALITY

(See Chapter 15, footnote 8)

I. *Purpose.* This sodality aims at promoting God's glory and the practice of Christian virtues, especially among the artisans of the Oration of St. Francis de Sales.

II. *Membership.* Membership is open to the Oratory catechists, to artisans, craftsmasters, and assistants, and to all who will meet the following conditions.

This sodality is governed by a president, a vice president, and a secretary, appointed by the superior of the house.

III. *Conditions for Membership.*

1. An application must be submitted to the president.
 2. The applicant must have already made his First Communion.
 3. He must have given evidence of good behavior for at least two months.
 4. He must be considered acceptable by the officers and by the superior of the house.
 5. He must be acquainted with sodality regulations and promise to observe them.
 6. He must pass a two-month probation before being formally accepted.
 7. On the day of his reception, he will receive the sacraments and be given a blessed medal of St. Joseph with a certificate of membership.
- N.B. All are exhorted to wear this medal devoutly, in order to gain the many indulgences attached to it.

IV. *General Regulations.* The members of this sodality, trusting in the powerful help of their great patron, St. Joseph, promise:

1. To observe diligently all the rules of the house.
2. To obey their superiors faithfully and give them unlimited confidence; to edify their companions by good example and charitable, timely advice, encouraging them to do good and to avoid evil.
3. To strive with all charity, always and everywhere, to prevent quarrels and disagreements among companions.
4. To avoid vigorously and to prevent firmly, either personally or through others, bad talk and everything offensive to modesty.
5. Never to be idle, but to endeavor to be properly busy at all times.
6. To practice fearlessly their faith by freeing themselves of vain, imaginary fears.
7. To mortify their external senses so as to keep themselves pure and chaste in thought, word, and deed in imitation of St. Joseph, who was the first to vow his purity to God and merited to be chosen guardian of purity personified — Our Lord Jesus Christ.

V. *Particular Regulations.* Though no special prayers are prescribed, the following practices of piety are recommended:

1. To receive the sacraments every week, or at least every other week.

2. To honor our patron in a special manner on his feasts, such as his holy espousal (January 23), his holy death (March 19), and his patronage (3rd Sunday after Easter). It would be most praiseworthy to prepare for these feasts by a novena of Holy Communions in his honor.

3. To perform some special practice of piety each day of the month of St. Joseph, to which non-members may also be invited.

4. As true devotees of St. Joseph, to receive the sacraments on all solemn feasts of the year.

5. Should any member fall sick, the president will mention the fact at the next meeting so that special prayers may be offered up for him.

6. Should the sick member need nightly assistance, the president shall appoint two members to perform this charitable service. Should the need continue, the members will give their service in turn, two at a time, subject to the superior's approval.

7. In case of death, the members, with the approval of the director of the house, will attend the funeral and escort the body to the cemetery. Each member will receive Holy Communion for the repose of his soul. At the next meeting, instead of other works of charity, the rosary will be recited for him.

N.B. For tranquillity of conscience, we wish to declare that the above regulations do not of themselves bind under pain of even venial sin, except in matters already commanded or forbidden by the commandments of God or of the Church.

V. *Regulations for the Meetings.*

1. Meetings are to be held weekly under the president's chairmanship. While waiting for all the members to be assembled, someone will read aloud the life of St. Joseph or some other edifying book.

2. Meetings will open with an invocation to the Holy Spirit and the roll call of members and applicants.

3. Devotion to St. Joseph, imitation of his virtues, spreading of good books, and whatever else may further the members' spiritual and material well-being will be the topics of the weekly meetings.

4. Applications of prospective members will be presented at the meetings. The officers will state their opinions, but it rests with the

president, while taking into consideration the views of others, to accept the new member or defer decision on the matter.

5. As a rule the meetings will be short and conclude with a *Pater, Ave, Gloria*, and a prayer in St. Joseph's honor.

6. A monthly account shall be given to the director of the house on the meetings, the growth or loss of membership, the observance of regulations, and the sodality's progress.

Appendix 10

LA GAZZETTA DEL POPOLO

(See Chapter 21, footnote 2)

A New Père Loriquet

Who hasn't heard of the notorious French history by Père Loriquet¹ in which even the best known and commonly discussed events were distorted very Jesuitically and grotesquely *ad maiorem Botteghae gloriam* [for the greater glory of the Pope's shop]?² No one would have thought that some day even Père Loriquet could be outdone, but now the word "impossible" — already deleted from French vocabularies — must also disappear from our own. But for other more pressing items, we would have published this tidbit somewhat sooner. Besides, it was desirable that matters should ease up a little for our Minister of Education whose department has been swamped with extra work after the annexation of new territories to Piedmont. After all, he may have to look into this matter.

The miracle of outdoing Père Loriquet was performed by Father John Bosco in his *Storia d'Italia* for secondary schools.

Of course, no one would quarrel with Don Bosco for writing a most dreadful book, but we have it from reliable sources that he wrote it

¹ Jean Nicholas Loriquet, S.J. (1767-1845) — a French historian — entered the Reims seminary in 1778, was imprisoned during the French revolution, and only in 1814 was able to join the Jesuits. His *History of France* (1814) aroused violent opposition from anticlericals, who accused him of having distorted history. He became their favorite target.

² A derogatory anticlerical expression widely used in Italy. [Editor]

specifically for use as a textbook. The cover informs us that it is sold for the benefit of the St. Aloysius, Guardian Angel, and St. Francis de Sales oratories. Since it is a textbook, the matter becomes more serious and justifies the time and trouble needed for a close look at this work's bias. Leaving aside the beginnings of Italian history and even Don Bosco's *sui generis* coverage of the events of 1821 and 1831, which — according to him — aimed “at making one republic out of the whole peninsula,” we shall come immediately to the events of 1847 . . .³ Since we have heard that this fanciful opuscle is actually used as a textbook in certain schools of our city, we thought it our duty to alert the Minister of Education. Maybe this will suffice. It would be intolerably outrageous for our fatherland and for truth and honesty to permit the spreading in our schools of such shameless historical travesties as are found in the *Storia d'Italia* for secondary schools by this new Père Loriquet.

Appendix 11

L'ARMONIA

(See Chapter 21, footnote 4)

We have greeted with well-deserved praise the publication of the thrilling and spirited *Storia d'Italia* for secondary schools by Father John Bosco, but we are not the only ones to have done so. Other periodicals extolled this work, which is so very valuable in safeguarding our youth from that permanent conspiracy against truth which has paraded as history for the past three centuries.

Lest some attribute our favorable comments — at least partially — to partisan spirit, we deem it opportune to report the judgment of a critic totally above suspicion — Niccolò Tommaseo himself. We shall quote in full his article on Don Bosco's *Storia d'Italia* as it appeared in *L'Istituto*:

“If a book's excellence were to be measured by its real usefulness, we would have a much more accurate gauge than the one commonly used by literary critics. Unavoidably, they would have to reverse or

³ We are omitting these details of Italian history because they are of minimal interest to our readers. [Editor]

at least temper many a verdict tainted by servile admiration or arrogant contempt. Here is an unpretentious book that scholars and harsh historians would perhaps hardly dignify with a look; nonetheless, it can teach history far better than certain other renowned works.

“Teaching experience is not of itself sufficient in preparing textbooks for the young, but it is certainly a great help and rounds out other necessary skills. This is even more true of compendiums, which in their genre must thoroughly cover their topic and avoid cutting corners or presenting a mere skeleton. The unpretentious book of Father John Bosco offers well-selected and lucidly presented highlights of Italy’s entire history. Mindful of his fellow Piedmontese, he also brings out events more closely connected with the history of Piedmont, setting an example to teachers to illustrate less known, remote incidents by others more recent and known. It should be a foregone conclusion, therefore, that teachers must know how to adapt textbooks — even good ones — to their pupils’ needs. No matter how dramatic a book’s narration, teachers should know how to further enliven it and draw practical conclusions suited — with reason — to each pupil’s need.

“Order and clarity of presentation — notwithstanding a mass of material — stem from Don Bosco’s serene mind and instill a pleasurable serenity into the youthful readers. Clarity is also enhanced — in my opinion — by his assembling, in a distinct chapter, general considerations about religion, institutions, customs, and usages. Some eighteenth-century historians failed in this because their procedure was to weave such considerations into the narration itself to make it fast-moving and lively. I am not saying that every single consideration of a general nature should be severed from the description of events; it might make both parts imperfect. What I mean is that historians of more remote centuries — on this point an example to all of us — used to treat of mankind’s customs either as an introduction to their histories or as a comment on events therein described. This method benefits both memory and intelligence, especially of the young. To do otherwise would necessitate needless repetition for an adequate exposition of what pertains to the native character of national groups.

“I will not pass over the fact that, in some case or other, the author could have availed himself more often of the results of historical research by giving greater attention to his sources; I will not say that all his reflections upon events are beyond dispute, or that all the events happened exactly as described, but I must add that not a few of the overexalted findings of modern critique are themselves still open to

question, and very often concern circumstances unessential to the intrinsic truthfulness of history. I will also add that most of the author's conclusions or reflections seem to me in accordance with genuine progress and sound morality. In an almost familiar, conversational tone with his young readers, he wisely looks at public events from the point of view of individual morality which is better known and more directly salutary.

“Trying to turn children into statesmen by having them pass judgment on the destiny of empires and the reasons why this or that decisive battle was won or lost is pedantry. It is not always innocent either, because it accustoms inexperienced minds to pass judgment — at somebody else's prompting — upon things they do not understand; it also creates a false conscience in them and fails to train them to apply reasonably the teachings of history to their daily lives. In contrast, truly great historians and famous poets of the past delighted in bringing out the private person concealed under the symbol or — as it were — the mask of the public figure; in the citizen and in the prince they made us see father, son, and brother. This gives rise to the greater value of the historical and poetical work of the ancients, over and above their wisdom and usefulness.

“Many historians and poets of today, instead, start off with an ax to grind. They pursue this purpose relentlessly, bending and twisting events and consequences, bringing themselves and their set ideas to the fore on every possible occasion, stubbornly showing only their point of view, and repeatedly presenting it in different forms *ad nauseam*. They are neither historians nor poets but simply importunate declaimers. And it does not even dawn on them that history — as well as the whole of nature — is, so to speak, a great parable proposed by God. To attempt to draw from it only a single application is to drain the inexhaustible richness of truth and impoverish the divine concept.”

Appendix 12

LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA

(See Chapter 21, footnote 6)

Nowadays Don Bosco's name is in itself a guarantee of the quality of his writings zealously geared to the education of youth, on whose

behalf he has been working for so many years with praiseworthy endeavor.

His *Storia d'Italia* particularly deserves acclaim. With rare discernment the author has managed to condense diligently in only 518 pages the main events of our country's history. We do hope that many other superficial or slanted histories of Italy will soon give way to Don Bosco's work. May it become the textbook for our youngsters who are about to begin studying the history of our most beautiful land.

Appendix 13

TWO LETTERS BY DON BOSCO

(See Chapter 22, footnote 3)

Turin, December 16, 1859

To Baron Feliciano Ricci des Ferres, Cuneo

My dear Baron,

Divine Providence will not fail to help us all. Since your letter makes it clear that it is imperative for the boy Magliano to be taken in at once, I have decided to give priority over more than a thousand other applicants and to make room for him on the first Monday after the Epiphany [January 9, 1860]. Kindly notify Chevalier Ferraris to this effect and tell him that, as President of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, he owes me a few Hail Marys in payment for the admission of his protégé.

I set no rate; I will only say that this house is in grave straits. I therefore recommend it to your charity, my dear Baron, and to that of Chevalier Ferraris and of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

You will soon get the books you generously ordered, if you have not as yet received them.

I in particular, dear Baron, wish you the holy virtue of patience. I recommend myself and my large family to your devout prayers.

Yours devotedly,

Fr. John Bosco

A few days later Don Bosco replied to another distinguished friend as follows:

Turin, December 21, 1859

My dear friend in the Lord,

Try as I may, it is simply impossible to make room for more boys in this already crowded house. Moreover, I sent a number of boys last summer to my brother Joseph in the country. I must now take them back as soon as I can make room, because he has nothing they can do there in the winter and they will only become idle and lazy. As you see, it can't be helped. I will ask the Lord to assist you and the boy's mother so that the salvation of his soul may be provided for.

God bless you and your many activities.

Your devoted friend,

Fr. John Bosco

Appendix 14

REGULATIONS FOR VISITORS

(See Chapter 43, footnote 4)

1. Pupils are not allowed to talk to outsiders without their superiors' explicit permission. They may not be called to the parlor more than twice a month, and then only on weekdays from 12:30 to 2 P.M.
2. Pupils are not allowed outside the premises with their parents or others.
3. Pupils may not receive wine or cordials, nor may they keep money in their possession. Money must be deposited with Father Prefect, who will return it as needed.
4. All incoming and outgoing parcels must be handled by the door-keeper.
5. No smoking or eating is allowed in the parlor.
6. Visitors must leave promptly when visiting time is up.
7. Visitors are not allowed in the dormitories.
8. Visitors may see the pupils only in the parlor. They are not allowed in the playgrounds without express permission.

Appendix 15

ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS FOR THE YEAR 1860-61

(See Chapter 56, footnote 1)

Artisans

1. They must be full orphans.
2. Twelve to eighteen years old.
3. Poor and uncared for.

Students

1. They must have completed the elementary grades and want to complete secondary school courses.
2. Have the necessary intellectual and moral qualities.
3. Undergo a two-month trial period during which board and tuition will be twenty-four lire monthly, subject to reduction to suit one's circumstances.

General Norms

1. Pupils are strictly forbidden to keep money. They must deposit it with Father Prefect, who will return it on request according to need.
2. Fees must be paid quarterly in advance.
3. The school will supply an iron bed and straw mattress. Other bedding and clothes must be provided by parents or guardians unless they can show their inability to do so.

Appendix 16

INVITATION TO A LATIN PLAY

(See Chapter 66, footnote 1)

*Sacerdos Bosco Xaverio Provana Equiti a Collegno Salutem Dicit.
Latina prodit in scenam fabula, quam agent
Qui domi Sancto Francisco dictae, scholas
Celebrant. Minerval dicitur: nam ut possit
Magistro discipulus Minerval solvere
Quod obliguriit cum a patre acceperit,
Furtum facere cum sociis inducit animum.
Illam apud nos alumni agent, die
Prima post decimam mensis; de prandio
Secunda hora. At pauci spectatores erunt;
Sed qui paucis placere student, illi optimis
Placent. Deinde satis multi erunt si tu adsis
Qui ex paucis es; fac igitur intersis. Vale.
Augustae Taurinorum, quarto idus April A.D. MDCCCLXI.*

Greetings from Don Bosco to Chevalier Xavier Provana of Collegno.

A Latin play is to be staged by pupils of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. The play is entitled "Minerval" [fees paid to a teacher] because it tells the story of a pupil who squanders his father's money and then plans a theft with his companions in order to pay his school fees. Our pupils will present the play on April 11, at two in the afternoon. The audience will undoubtedly be small, but whoever strives to please a few is pleasing the best. Our audience will be large enough if you — who are one of the few — will attend. Do us, then, the honor of your presence. Fare you well!

Turin, April 10, 1861

Appendix 17

INVITATION TO A LATIN COMEDY

(See Chapter 70, footnote 7)

*Sacerdos Bosco Equiti ampl. Xaverio Provana in Domino salutem.
Minerval quod placuit, refertur denuo
Multorum oratu. Dabitur mensis huius
Die vigesima tertia a prandio,
Ad aedem Sancti Francisci nomine dictam,
Secunda hora. Scheda haec erit tibi tessera,
Quam ostendes, ut fiat spectandi copia.
Quum exspectarem paucos venere plurimi:
Nunc plurimos exspecto: ne faxis sint
Pauci. Si primum interfuisti, pervelim
Te iterum adesse: hinc tibi placuisse fabulam
Intelligam. Sin abfuisti, te rogo
Ut nunc saltem adsies. Te ergo exspecto.*

Vale.

Augustae Taurinorum, XIII Calendas Iunii, anno MDCCCLXI

Don Bosco greets the illustrious Chevalier Xavier Provana. *Minerval*, a charming comedy, is to be staged again by popular demand. It will be presented on the 23rd of this month, at two in the afternoon, at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. This note will serve as your admission ticket. At its premiere, I expected only a few, and crowds came. Now I expect crowds; see to it that there shall not be only a few. If you were present at its premiere, I very much desire to see you again. By this I will know that you like the play. If you missed it the first time, please at least come now. I shall expect you. Fare you well!

Turin, May 20, 1861

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ABBREVIATIONS

D.B.	Don Bosco
D.S.	Dominic Savio
I.C.	Immaculate Conception
I.C.S.	Immaculate Conception Sodality
L.C.	Lecture Cattolice
M.H. of C.	Mary, Help of Christians
S.C.	Salesian Congregation

A

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