



Dear Friends,

The bulletin has been absent for several months as materials were being prepared for publication. Fr. Lenti has done original research which has been now been divided into five segments which will take us all the way to February. Then the plan, Fr. Arthur informs me, is to start on the history of the rectorate of Don Rua. Once we have finished the series we are hoping to unite it into a book on Don Rua to be jointly published in English and Spanish. The Regional Formation Center in Quito has already expressed the desire to publish the Spanish version.

Again I want to express my thanks to Fr. Arthur for his contribution to our knowledge of Don Rua, and to Fr. Horacio Macal who has done the translation into Spanish.

Gael E. Sullivan, SDB  
Don Bosco Hall at Berkeley  
Institute of Salesian Spirituality

**Father Michael Rua,  
Prefect General of the Society  
and Don Bosco's Acting-Vicar  
(1877-1884)**

**by Arthur J. Lenti, SDB**

After mid-seventies, certainly by 1877, Fr. Rua's contribution to the Society's life and work loomed larger and more important, as with the passing years Don Bosco, fully relying on Fr. Rua's fidelity and ability, placed on his shoulder ever greater burdens of government and administration. In reality, if not officially, Fr. Rua stood at Don Bosco's side as Vicar, and for good reasons.

In the special investigation of the Bosco-Gastaldi conflict ordered by Rome in 1914-1918, during the process of beatification,<sup>1</sup> Bishop Giuseppe Re of Alba, as cited by Fr. Peter Stella, gave the following testimony:

After Don Bosco's death on January 31, 1888, I learned from the Salesian Father Julius Barberis that for *ten years prior to that date* [italics mine] the responsibility for the government of the Pious Salesian Society actually rested on Fr. [Michael] Rua's shoulders. Don Bosco would in fact refer to Father Rua all priests and young men who applied to him for advice.

Bishop Re learned the reason for Don Bosco's quasi-retirement from authoritative sources for he adds:

I also learned from Cardinal [Gaetano] Alimonda [of Turin] that, according to a report made to him by Dr. [Giuseppe] Fissore, Don Bosco suffered from progressive paralysis (*paralisi progressiva*) caused by a slow sclerosis (*ossificazione*) of the brain.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This special investigation, which goes by the name of "secret little process," was instigated by Archbishop Gastaldi's fiscal lawyer, Emmauele Colomiatti. In an attempt to derail the cause Colomiatti accused Don Bosco of complicity in the writing of defamatory pamphlets against the archbishop, for which see below.

<sup>2</sup>Cited by P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol,



In view of the above (if factual) Fr. Rua, prefect general of the Society, naturally stepped in as Don Bosco's acting-vicar as early as 1878—unofficially, but practically so in reality. In 1884 (as related in the first paper of this Ongoing Formation

III: *La Canonizzazione* (1888-1934) (Roma: LAS, 1988), 179-180, from *Positio super dubio...*, *Summarium ex officio*, 135. Stella describes this disease by citing medical dictionaries. — Archbishop Cardinal Alimonda, Gastaldi's successor, was a great friend of Don Bosco; he visited and comforted him during his final illness. — Dr. Giuseppe Fissore was the head physician who attended Don Bosco through that illness.

series) Pope Leo XIII, shocked by Don Bosco's advanced physical deterioration, acted to place at Don Bosco's side an official Vicar with right of succession in the person of Fr. Michael Rua.

In the paragraphs that follow we shall briefly describe Fr. Rua's activity as Don Bosco's acting-vicar prior to his official appointment in 1884.

First, a word on the death of Fr. Rua's mother, who passed away just as he was assuming the position of Don Bosco's *alter ego*.

### 1. The Passing of Giovanna Maria Ferrero (Mrs. Rua, 1800-1876)<sup>3</sup>

In a previous paper we saw that Mrs. Rua accompanied her son Michael on his appointment as director of the first Salesian school at Mirabello. There she governed the house as mother to those young people. She was 63 years old at the time. When, two years later, her son was recalled to Turin to replace Fr. Victor Alasonatti as prefect at the Oratory, she opted to stay on at Mirabello, where her help was much needed and where she remained until the school was transferred to Borgo San Martino in 1870.

She then returned to Turin and, as Mamma Margaret had done years before her, she devoted the last years of her life to the service of the much larger family of the Oratory.

The circumstances of her death are not recorded (apparently Fr. Rua left no memoir on the subject). But it is known that she died at the age of 76 on June 21, 1876 (feast of St. Aloysius).

Her funeral was celebrated in the church of Sts. Simon and Jude, her original parish. The whole community of the Oratory, led by her grieving son, followed the hearse to her final resting place. Her burial, like Mamma Margaret's, was a burial of the poor, a simple grave in a common lot of the public cemetery. On July 21 a solemn month-mind Mass was celebrated at which, most of boys, boarders and day pupils, received Holy Communion and offered prayers of suffrage for her soul.

In a letter of July 27 to his half-brother Anthony, director of the gun factory at Brescia and the only other surviving Rua of the family, Fr. Rua writes:

"I hope you will continue to pray for her... Let us always remember her and the good example she has left us. And in order that you may always have a reminder of her presence I am enclosing two prints of the photographs that were taken of her."

<sup>3</sup> Auffray, *Rua-It* (1933), 128-130; Auffray-Klauder, *Rua-En*, Typescript (1940), 127.

In a subsequent letter to Anthony, Fr. Rua describes his mother's extreme poverty, and the few things she left behind.

The money in her strongbox amounted to 58 lire and 50 centimes.<sup>4</sup> Her few jewelry items, thought to be gold and worth perhaps 40 lire, turned out to be gilded silver and of very little value. The furniture would fetch no more than 80 lire all told, but it is hardly salable because of its age and poor condition... In view of the above, I am sending you 70 lire, which you might divide among your children. They would thereby have a souvenir of their dear grandmother. But please do as you see fit.

This is vintage Fr. Rua—the ever the painstaking and conscientious “accountant!”

### 2. Fr. Michael Rua Don Bosco's Alter Ego

In the preceding paper we spoke of Fr. Rua activity as visitor-inspector of the Salesian foundations in Piedmont and Liguria. For each inspection Fr. Rua entered a fairly stereotyped report in his Notebook. At the end of his brief visits, he would hold a conference with the community, and later he would address a letter of evaluation and advice to the director in question. Such letters did not survive with the exception of the one to Fr. Lemoyne, director at Lanzo, dated March 10, 1875. It is a frank, detailed evaluation of actual conditions in that Salesian school. The text of this letter was given in the preceding paper, but it is repeated here as germane to our brief discussion of the monthly circular letters that follow below. Fr. Rua writes as follows.<sup>5</sup>

March 10, 1875

Dear Director:

This letter aims at conveying to you the impressions I brought back with me after visiting your school. I assure you that I left highly satisfied with the outcome of the examinations, the demeanor of the clerics as well as the behavior of the boys. May the Lord continue to bless you and help you grow ever better. However, I did notice some things that could be improved:

1. The altar cloths on some of the altars were not too clean.

2. I learned that the day students have no Mass on weekdays, whereas it would certainly be very desirable to have it, as is the practice here [at the Oratory], at

<sup>4</sup> At the time (1870s), the Lira may have been worth 1/5 of a US dollar (20 cents).

<sup>5</sup> This strongly critical letter, not found in the Notebook, is edited in Braidó, “Rua Visitor,” *RSS* 16 (1990), p. 116-117, transcribed from *IBM XI*, p. 336-337 (poorly translated in *EBM XI*, p. 314-331). [Correct the reference to *IBM XI*, 530-531 that Braidó gives in *RSS* herewith above].

Varazze, Alassio, and other places.

3. You have hardly any classes in sacred ceremonies whether for the clerics, the altar boys, or the boys in general. You should insist with the one in charge that this be done on a regular basis: if he cannot do it all himself, get some one to help him.

4. Also, the teaching of religion in the high school is very limited, yet it is the most important branch of knowledge.

5. You have no classes in Gregorian chant, so much desired and insisted upon by our good father, Don Bosco.

6. Your evening class is no longer in keeping with what Don Bosco would want, namely that everyone take part in it. If you want to hold it before supper, as we agreed at the fall conferences, then supper may be delayed by half-an-hour or three-quarters of an hour, and put off to 8 or 8:15 P.M. This evening class, open to all, would offer the opportunity of teaching the prayers to those who do not know them, of teaching the boys to serve Mass (not everyone at your place knows how), of preparing boys for first Communion, etc.

7. I saw the need that you have putting the various youth associations (St. Aloysius, Blessed Sacrament, Altar Boys, etc.) on a sound basis, grading the boys [by their age] as to membership.

8. The coadjutor brothers need to have some one be with them often at night prayers and address a few words specifically for them as a Good Night.

8a. It would also be desirable that, if possible, clerics have classes more frequently, especially in philosophy.

9. As we said during the conference, it might be very beneficial to clerics if they came together at least once a day under the guidance of a priest, the ones for meditation, the others for spiritual reading.

10. All the cells of the clerics should be reduced by two feet (0.60 m.), apart from the bed, by using rods for the curtains like the many you already have in place.

11. Reading during meals is too frequently neglected. It is important to teach the manner of putting time to good use, even by taking advantage of time that is spent eating dinner.

12. I observed that in various classes there is a failure to test [pupils] on a monthly basis, and that in some classes even the “decuries” are non-existent.<sup>6</sup> Each month the grades of each class must be entered by “decuries” in the general register—to be kept in the custody of the Director or the Prefect.

13. One would like to see in the young people a

<sup>6</sup> In ancient Rome’s military practice the soldiers were organized, for better discipline and management, in groups of 10 (“decury”), of 100 (“century”), etc. led by a “decurion,” a “centurion,” etc. In like manner, the nineteenth-century classroom was organized in groups of 10 (“decuries”) led by “decurions” appointed or elected.

greater desire to make progress in their studies, for their own benefit.

14. You lack several registers, and I shall see that you get them.<sup>7</sup>

Dear Director, many of the things I have mentioned are for your subordinates to look after. Nevertheless, it is your responsibility to keep abreast of everything and to be the mover of everyone’s activity. You are the head, the Prefect is the arm; and the two of you are the eyes and hears that must see and hear everything that goes on.

May the Lord bless you abundantly, together with —  
Yours affectionately, Father Rua  
*Prefect of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales*

These inspections ceased with the first General Chapter (1877) as well as with the subsequent division of the Society into “inspectorates” (provinces), presided over by an “inspector” (provincial).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, as prefect general and acting-vicar, Fr. Rua continued to take a personal interest in the religious observance of individual communities and their directors. He presided at the General Conferences of directors that had been held periodically since the mid-fifties, and that also ceased in 1877. This provided him with the opportunity to reconnect and to continue the dialogue on religious observance initiated in the earlier visits-inspections of 1874-1876.

### **3. Fr. Rua’s Monthly Circulars to Directors of Salesian Houses**

In spite of the prospective establishment of provinces and provincials, the directors remained responsible to the General Council. Fr. Rua reminded them of that fact through regular monthly circular letters. These circulars were handwritten—with the heading, date, greeting and signature being in Fr. Rua’s own hand. Normally the body of the letter was by a secretary, with appropriate marginal or interlinear annotations

<sup>7</sup> The 15 registers and their norms are listed as follows: (1) Register of Masses; (2) R. of conduct of seminarians and lay brothers; (3) R. of the young people’s conduct and monthly achievement in studies; (4) R. of postulants; (5) R. of yearly enrollment; (6) R. of boarders’ and personnel’s fees; (7) R. of boarders’ deposited money; (8) R. of goods store; (9) R. of invoices received; (10) R. of expenses; (11) R. of drawing accounts. (12) R. of offerings; (13) R. of wardrobe of lay brothers on entering; (14) R. of sums owed to individual providers. (15) Manual or handy notebook to mark transactions periodically to be entered into the appropriate register. Fr. Rua promises to make the needed registers available (Braido, “Rua Visitor,” *RSS* 16 (1990), 141-147)

<sup>8</sup> Such restructuring was dictated by the expansion of the Society beyond Piedmont and Liguria and other parts of Italy, and to nations of Europe and South America.



by Fr. Rua himself. The body of the letter was in the form of a questionnaire covering the principal areas of religious life and administration.<sup>9</sup>

From 1881 on, the monthly circular letters to directors contained a printed questionnaire, signed by Fr. Rua. The nine questions regarding the running of the house and school were the following:

1. How many boarding students have you? — 2. How many day pupils? — 3. How is the students' conduct generally speaking? — 4. What is the health situation among the boarders? 5. How many Masses have been said during the past month for my intention (intention of the undersigned, Fr. Rua)? — How many Mass intentions did you receive? — 7. Have all the required reports been completed? — 8. Has the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death been made as prescribed? — 9. Have the two monthly conferences been held as prescribed?<sup>10</sup>

On this subject, Fr. Amadei (without giving date or reference!) transcribes a note by Fr. Rua to Fr. Joseph Lazzerio lamenting the fact that this director of the Oratory never took the trouble of responding to the questions asked:

It is regrettable that you never comply and never fill out the monthly questionnaire. The excuse you bring, that I being on the scene can obtain first-hand information, won't wash with me. The various questions are formulated expressly to force directors to keep well informed of what goes on in the house they direct. So, take up your pen with courage, and take the trouble of replying to my questions—past and future!<sup>11</sup>

To liaise specifically with the newly established foundations in Argentina and Uruguay, from 1876 on Fr. Rua corresponded regularly with acting-provincials Frs. Francis Bodrato and James Costamagna. A number of these monthly circular letters, some times running to many numbered paragraphs, are in the hand of secretaries but signed by Fr. Rua; others on the contrary are in Fr. Rua's hand in their entirety. An example of this latter type is the circular letter in 11 numbered paragraphs addressed to Fr. Costamagna.<sup>12</sup>

Turin, November 21, 1880

<sup>9</sup> Desramaut, *Rua-Cahiers* I, 98; Amadei, *Rua* I, 305. See for example Fr. Rua's monthly letters to Fr. Lazzerio, director of the Oratory, in *FDRM* 3909 C12 - 3911 D5.

<sup>10</sup> Desramaut *Rua-Cahiers* I, 99. For a printed template of this questionnaire see *FDRM* 3910 B1. It is entitled: "Report – from the House of (*the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*) – for the month of.... 188...."

<sup>11</sup> Postscript in Fr. Rua's hand, circular letter Rua – Lazzerio, May 27, 1884, transcribed in Amadei, *Rua* I, 306.

<sup>12</sup> *FDRM* 3976 E2-4, Cf. Desramaut, *Rua-Cahiers* I, 98.

1. & 2. (Number of Masses offered; surplus intentions to be sent to Turin).<sup>13</sup>

3. Accept in advance our good wishes for the upcoming retreats. Please let me have information on all participants in each retreat, if it's not too much trouble.

4. What's more important, in fact necessary, is that you send me information on all those that will don the clerical habit. For this purpose, please fill out the questionnaire in the "delegation document" that I am enclosing.

5. Also send us, if you can, a brief note on the personnel after their [initial] formation. This will be helpful for their inclusion in the General Directory. Make sure the surnames [last names] are spelled clearly and correctly.

6. In the event that Fr. Milanesio has not yet left for Patagonia, give some further thought to the advisability of such a transfer, since his presence in the house of Boca seems important. Don Bosco himself has some doubts regarding the advisability of a transfer, unless this is meant to be a temporary arrangement.

7. With regard to the request from San José peninsula, I cannot give you a reply, since the matter has not been discussed in Council. However, you may send someone to investigate and report, if it's not too much trouble.

8. With regard to Zaninetti's application for perpetual profession, Don Bosco leaves it up to the local house council to judge and decide.

9. Now regarding your requests for directives: — (1) [Q:] You state that one needs permission at least from the provincial before one accepts to serve on the City Council. [R:] I cannot give you a directive in the matter because I am not familiar with the circumstances. — (2) [Q: regarding building or restoring premises to let.] [R:] It seems inappropriate to build or restore premises just to offer them for rent or lease. For such a transaction the permit from the Rector Major is required. — (3) [Q: regarding the establishment of a mutual aid society.] [R:] It appears that the establishment of mutual aid societies is possible and appropriate if their purpose is religious. But this should happen only after a start in a foundation has been made, since such a venture is designed to help the work's development, and not of itself to have priority. In any case, the provincial's agreement should be sought.

11. [10.] When Fr. Cagliari returns, I hope to be able to discuss with him [legal and social aspects pertaining to] the acquisition and management of properties and immovables. In these matters we must ward off difficulties and dangers.

<sup>13</sup> All circular letters by Fr. Rua to provincials in Argentina and Uruguay open with brief inquiries about Masses offered and surplus Mass intentions.

12. [11.] Don Bosco is postponing his trip to Rome, and therefore also the matter of the parish priest of Flores is delayed. Let's be patient.

Happy and Holy Christmas! Happy ending and Happy New Year! Happy and holy vacation! May you advance in holiness through the upcoming spiritual retreats!

So long, dear friend! Remember me to all our friends, and say a prayer for—

—Yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary,  
Fr. Michael Rua

P.S.: Please do me the favor of delivering without delay all the letters herewith enclosed. But read the one addressed to Fr. Pignolo, then seal it and deliver it to him.

Desramaut adds that Fr. Rua's insistence on having information on the condition of the houses sometimes elicited reports that caused him much grief and worry. Replying on September 4, 1879, Fr. Bodrato (provincial) reported four instances of sexual child abuse: two at San Nicolás de los Arroyos (Argentina) and two at Villa Colón (Uruguay).

In this connection, he exclaims, "Fr. Chiara has betrayed us."<sup>14</sup> Replying to Fr. Bodrato, Fr. Rua writes, "Of Vergnano, of Foligno, of *Chiara*, of Farina, of Comollo, etc. what's the news?"<sup>15</sup>

Again writing to Fr. Rua on March 18, 1880, Fr. Bodrato laments the "hasty marriage" of a certain Brother who had been "deceiving everybody;" and he pleaded, "For God's sake, please, do not send us individuals that are morally unreliable!"<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Father Rua a Moderating Voice in the Bosco-Gastaldi Conflict.

Here we deal selectively with Fr. Rua's role in the conflict (between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi) that continued and intensified after the approval of the Salesian Constitutions in 1874.<sup>17</sup> But even before that date the Archbishop had shown his displeasure for personal reasons. For example, in a letter of August 27, 1873 to Fr. Rua Don Bosco says that the Archbishop's niece [Lorenzina Mazzè de la Roche] had heard some

<sup>14</sup> Fr. Bodrato does not indicate what Fr. Chiara's betrayal may have been, unless it was connected with the child abuse just mentioned.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of November 13, 1879, *FDRM* 3976 D2, postscript 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Rua-Cahiers* I, 99.

<sup>17</sup> For a description of the conflict between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi after the approval of the Salesian Constitutions in 1874 see A. Lenti, *Don Bosco — History and Spirit*, Vol. 6 (Rome: LAS, 209), pp. 271-378 (Ch. 6 and 7).

criticism of him at the Salesian school of Alassio while vacationing in the area, and had written to her uncle, who had reacted unfavorably.<sup>18</sup> Also the Archbishop suspected Don Bosco of having abetted disgruntled diocesan priests to write to Rome against him.

Generally speaking, the previous Archbishop Riccardi di Netro's grievances against Don Bosco for the latter's "irregular" practices were taken up with greater intensity by his successor, Archbishop Gastaldi. For example, the Archbishop was very demanding (in the way of preparation) before admitting candidates to ordination, Salesian candidates included. In this and other matters the Archbishop suspected Don Bosco of currying the favor of Pius IX and of his secretary of state, Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, much to his chagrin. In one of his laconic letters to Fr. Rua Don Bosco inquires: "What about our ordinations? Are we experiencing any difficulty on the Archbishop's part?"<sup>19</sup> To make matters worse, whenever possible Don Bosco would seek to have his candidates ordained by some other friendly bishop.

On various occasions throughout the conflict Fr. Rua would have to deal with the Archbishop and the men of his chancery. But, as Fr. Desramaut remarks, "Unlike two of his confreres in Don Bosco's entourage (Gioacchino Berto and Giovanni Bonetti), Fr. Rua did his best to smooth out difficulties. He never lost his self-control, but he calmly explained, presented his reasons, or simply kept silent."<sup>20</sup>

#### 5. Fr. Rua's and Archbishop Gastaldi's Chancery

In the Salesian biographical tradition, the personnel of the Archbishop's chancery (especially Canons Thomas Chiuso and Francis Maffei) are cast in the role of cunning enemies. On the contrary, Fr. Rua's letters to them that are preserved in the Salesian Archive show without any exception that they dealt with one another in terms of genuine mutual friendship.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Motto, *Epistolario* IV, 152-153.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Motto, *Epistolario* IV, 562.

<sup>20</sup> Desramaut, *Rua-Cahiers* I, 102.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. letters in *FDRM* 3938 as follows: [Fr. Rua to Canon Chiuso], November 15, 1872 (C2); February 17, 1875 (C4-5); *October 25, 1875* (C6-7); [Fr. Rua to Theologian Maffei] November 4, 1877 (C8-10); After the reconciliation between Don Bosco and Archbishop Gastaldi enforced by Pope Leo XIII and signed on June 1, 1882: [Fr. Rua to Canon Chiuso], August 14, 1882 (D2); September 9, 1882 (D3); December 23, 1882 (D4); February 27, 1890 (D5). — Invariably the style of these letters is that of genuinely close friendship: (1) The familiar "tu" (you) is used throughout; (2) The initial address is equally familiar: "(My) Dearest Theologian;" "Dearest (and Most Reverend) Canon;" (3) The closure is no less

Fr. Rua's letter of October 25, 1875 to Canon Thomas Chiuso is a good example.<sup>22</sup>

October 25, 1875

My dearest Theologian,

[1] Please be good enough to convey my apologies to His Grace for not replying sooner to the sheet that dear Theologian Maffei sent us on order from the Archbishop. Both Fr. Savio [the administrator] and Don Bosco have been absent, and I did not know what to reply. This past Saturday, however, I had a chance to talk with Don Bosco, and am now able to respond to your inquiry. Please convey it to His Grace.

[2] The plans about which you inquired by your welcomed letter have not yet been submitted to City Hall for a definitive approval; nor are we thinking of proceeding with to the work at this time, since we must first meet several requirements demanded by the [City] government before we are in a position to begin.

[3] In any case, before beginning the plans will be submitted to the Archbishop so that we may have his wise comments, and he may see on his part what needs to be done.

[4] Accept my heartfelt regards and good wishes and convey the same to Theologian Maffei. Please kiss for us the hand of His Grace, always dearest and most revered in the Lord, and believe me, in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Your Affectionate Friend,  
Fr. Michael Rua

A comment on the references and content of paragraphs two and three of the above letter will clarify its historical context. Specifically, paragraph two refers to the church of St. John Evangelist planned by Don Bosco, and paragraph three by the mention of Archbishop Gastaldi alludes to the church of St. Secundus sponsored by the Archbishop. Both churches are located in the same general area south of the city, and both were built first as *tributes* and then as *memorials* to Pius IX at the height of the Bosco-Gastaldi

---

familiar: "(Most) Affectionately Yours (in J and M – in J, M, and J); Your Most Affectionate (Servant and) Friend." — Of interest is a statement by Fr. Rua to the archdiocesan chancery (February 10, 1878. *FDRM* 3938 C11-12) regarding priests in good standing who cannot show a permit to hear confessions and to preach for having recently been transferred. A double list of priests requesting faculties to hear confession and to preach is attached (*Ibid.* D1). Don Bosco also dealt on friendly terms with Canon Chiuso, using the same familiar forms of address and closure (Cf. Don Bosco to Canon Chiuso. August 8, 1875, in Motto, *Epistolario* IV, 495, regarding Work of Mary Help of Christians)..

<sup>22</sup> Fr. Rua to Canon Chiuso, October 25, 1875, in *FDRM* 3938 C6-7. I number the paragraphs for easier reference.

conflict.

In 1867 a group of proprietors formed a committee to build a church in the district of San Secondo. The City granted a building permit (January 2, 1868), and donated land and a subsidy of 30,000 lire. But the project stalled until 1871 when the committee and the diocesan vicar prevailed on Don Bosco to take it over. On March 27, 1872 the preliminary work began for the preparation of the ground and materials. But Don Bosco meanwhile had persuaded the architect to modify the plans to include a facility for an oratory. The City rejected the proposal, and Don Bosco resigned from the project.

All the while Don Bosco had been purchasing land piecemeal for the construction of St. John Evangelist Church in the adjoining district of San Salvatio. The church was to be built at the site of St. Aloysius Oratory as a *tribute* to Pius IX. But one of the locals (a Waldensian Protestant) would not sell; consequently Don Bosco resorted to the legal device of "expropriation in view of public need," and on April 16, 1872 he submitted a petition to the king to that effect. City Hall took two years to establish "public need" and three additional years for the expropriation of the land. — Meanwhile the recently appointed Archbishop Gastaldi revived the St. Secundus project under the sponsorship of the diocese, and began to publicize it as *tribute* to Pius IX. Work was resumed in 1875, and the church was consecrated in 1882. Don Bosco began construction of St. John Evangelist Church in 1878, and Archbishop Gastaldi consecrated it in late 1882. By this time Pius IX had died, and both churches, planned as *tributes*, were consecrated as *memorials* to Pope Pius, hence the "rivalry" and the problems.

## 6. Don Bosco's Supposed "Suspension" from Hearing Confessions

The year 1875 was to end with a sensational incident: Don Bosco's "suspension" from hearing confessions. That is what the Salesians thought; the chancery instead maintained that there had been no suspension. What really did happen?

Faculties for confessions were renewed routinely every year or every six months, and the document would routinely be picked up at the chancery or delivered. Don Bosco's faculties had been renewed in March for six months; but for some reason the document was held back at the chancery and was delivered to Valdocco only in October. His faculties had by then expired. Father Cagliero and Father Rua, who



received the envelope by messenger, not wanting to upset Don Bosco withheld the information from him. In the absence of the archbishop, the Vicar General Canon Giuseppe Zappata, contacted by Father Rua, granted temporary renewal. But Father Rua for some reason notified Don Bosco, of the expiration of his faculties only on Christmas Eve. Availing himself of a special concession obtained from Pius IX, he heard the confessions of many penitents that night. But, believing himself suspended, on December 26 he applied to the archbishop for a renewal, before retreating in great distress to Borgo San Martino (in the diocese of Casale) Don Bosco truly believed that he had been the object of that severe canonical penalty.<sup>23</sup> But there was no canonical suspension, and the archbishop's reply through Canon Chiuso is additional proof of that.<sup>24</sup>

The incident, however, caused anger and consternation in Salesian circles. The fiery Father John Bonetti, having learned of the "suspension" from Don Bosco at Borgo San Martino, wrote to the pope directly, decrying "the unjustifiable measure of suspending this worthy priest from hearing confessions [...], a punishment usually given only to priests guilty of scandalous conduct."<sup>25</sup>

It is hard to see clearly into this murky affair. Fr. Rua's failure to notify Don Bosco immediately is puzzling; but so was the chancery's handling of the matter.

## 7. Fr. Rua's Defense of Don Bosco with Archbishop Gastaldi

On December 29 the Archbishop, through Canon Chiuso, summoned Fr. Rua. He responded that very evening and did his best to defend Don Bosco and his charitable pastoral practice. The following day he continued his defense in a fairly extended letter, which though excerpted in the *Biographical Memoirs*, deserves to be reported in full.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For the story, cf. *EBM* XI, 449-459. Don Bosco's letter to Archbishop Gastaldi, December 26, 1875 reflects Don Bosco's conviction that there had been a suspension: "I respectfully implore you to let me know the reason [...] in order that I may make amends for any fault I may be guilty of" (p. 451f.).

<sup>24</sup> Canon Chiuso to Don Bosco, December 27, 1875, *EBM* XI, 456: "Your faculties for confession are still valid. [...] These faculties would never have expired, if what is customary in such instances had been done at the proper time."

<sup>25</sup> Fr. Bonetti to Pope Pius IX, December 28, 1875, *EBM* XI, 453-454.

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Rua to Archbishop Gastaldi, December 30, 1875, in *FDRM* 3903 D6-9; excerpt in *IBM* XI, 475-476, *EBM* XI, 446-447.

Your Grace:

Yesterday evening I meant to speak to you about another matter, namely about our priests who need your permit to preach; but on second thought, not wanting to take advantage of your kindness and patience, I refrained. I am writing now to assure you that all the priests listed in the note herewith attached are worthy and exemplary. Therefore I humbly request for them the faculty to proclaim the work of God. I am also providing the explanations that Your Grace requested, and we hope to have a [favorable] reply from Your Reverence.

When I got home yesterday evening, I tried to figure out who the young man could be whom the Reverend Don Bosco allegedly accepted to spite Your Grace. I realized that we do have in reality a pupil from Vinovo that was accepted during the past summer holiday. But I feel bound to bring to your attention that the Reverend Don Bosco played no part in accepting him. I was the one who accepted the young man. When he applied, as a layperson, I accepted him on recommendation of one who is known to me as a trustworthy person. Unaware of his prior history [that he had been dismissed from the diocesan seminary], I accepted him to allow him to pursue the vocation to which he aspires. I had no idea this would incur in any way Your Grace's disapproval. We regret this because you are dear to us, and we aim at being of service to you, avoiding anything that may displease you.

What causes me most pain is the cleavage that seems to have come between Your Grace and our congregation, its Founder in particular. I believe the reasons that caused Your Grace to form such a sinister opinion of our congregation would dissipate if Your Grace could hear an objective explanation of things.

Forgive me if, in speaking or writing, inadvertently I lapsed into not quite so reverent expressions. When I hear someone speaking disparagingly of our Superior I feel pangs to the heart, and as strenuously as my weakness will allow I rise to his defense, especially when I see that the facts of the case are poorly known or distorted.

I have lived at his side for many years now and had the opportunity to learn by experience and admire the many virtues that grace his character. Everyone can see the good things he is doing and how the Lord blesses his undertakings; and I am amazed when I see the most unlikely projects devised and directed by him come to fruition. I cannot but conclude that the Lord makes available to him *the grace of state*. By this I mean that, having destined him to carry out a providential mission, the Lord generously provides the help that is needed to ensure success. This remains true in spite of the fact that, as is the case with other holy founders, he might come into conflict with persons that are in every way

worthy of respect.

This is the reason why yesterday I dared to speak in Don Bosco's defense, perhaps a little too boldly. For this, as I said above, I humbly beg your kind forgiveness in the hope that it shall not be faulted to me.

Your Grace, kindly accept our sincerest good wishes, which we tender to you for this coming year and for many years to come. Please bless this Oratory, its Head and the last of its members [Rua], who is honored to be able to profess himself with deepest veneration —

Of Your Grace's

Most Humble and Devoted Servant,

Fr. Michael Rua

### 9. Fr. Rua's Responds to Serious Charges Brought against the Congregation

The "conversation" resumed on more serious grounds in early January. On December 31 (1875) the Archbishop's chancery had leveled a number of serious charges, duly documented, at the Salesian Congregation. Fr. Rua rose to its defense by responding to the accusations point by point with a long letter addressed to the Archbishop.<sup>27</sup>

January 8, 1876

Your Grace:

I feel it my duty to tender heartfelt thanks to you for your remarks of December 31. They confirm our belief that Your Grace's displeasure with the Salesian Congregation is due only to our failure to offer you clearer explanations. I have reason to believe that once matters are seen in their proper light, and our good will is made clear, difficulties weather non-existent or not intended will disappear.

As prefect of the Salesian Congregation I have always kept abreast of everything that's happened, and therefore, if you will allow me, I shall give you my take on things, leaving the ultimate judgment to your wisdom and enlightened understanding.

—[1] You say: "The Salesian Congregation cannot accept anyone any one, unless his bishop's testimonial letters are presented beforehand."

[R] We see no difficulty in complying, as this is a prescription in Ch. 11 of our Constitutions. On the first day of each year, in the presence of the whole Salesian community we read the Decree *Romani Pontificis* issued by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, where we find directives to follow in the matter. Moreover we keep in touch with that Congregation's frequent responses issued to solve doubts and to address inquiries.

—[2] [You say:] "The Salesian Congregation has

no right to have young people in its schools wear the cassock without permission from the bishop in whose diocese the school is located."

[R] I believe that we have never countermanded the bishop's rights in the matter. Neither in this nor in any other diocese do we have schools where the young people wear the clerical garb.

—[3] [You say:] "Only recently a young man from Vinovo was vested with the clerical habit without permission from the bishop of Turin. This was a serious lack of respect, quite contrary to the deference that is owed to the diocesan Ordinary."<sup>28</sup>

[R] If there was anything wrong in this the fault is mine entirely. I hope, however, it will not be imputed to me in view of the fact that I acted with the intention of doing the right thing. I accepted the young man as a layperson on recommendation of a pious and zealous clergyman whom I trusted implicitly. He received the clerical habit after he submitted his petition to join the Congregation, and on the strength of a faculty granted to me I admitted him together with a few others to the reception of the clerical habit. You yourself were good enough to assure us that you had no objection whatsoever if we accepted lay young people who afterwards asked to join our congregation.

I should like to add also that when the Salesian Congregation was definitely approved (March 1, 1869) it was granted also the faculty to issue dimissorial letters on behalf of those young men who had been accepted into our school before the age of 14 and later opted to join the Congregation. And when the Salesian constitutions were approved (April 3, 1874) the same faculty was extended on behalf of those who had been accepted in a Salesian house over the age of 14 and later opted to join the Congregation. Archbishop Vitelleschi of happy memory, when consulted, repeatedly confirmed this interpretation.

—[4] [You say:] "The Salesian Congregation harbors individuals dismissed from the archdiocesan seminary, and does so not only without permission but against the very objections of church authority."

[R] Your Grace knows better that I that a diocesan bishop cannot prevent any of his priests or seminarians from leaving the diocese and enrolling in a religious congregation. Not so very long ago (January 13, 1875), the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars declared as much. Of this, no doubt Your Grace received official notification. Living as we do in troublesome times, our chief concern has been for the good of souls rather than for the prescription of law. However, when you raised objections we stopped accepting such individuals. Your Grace in the colloquium of February 6, 1875 named two

<sup>27</sup> Fr. Rua to Archbishop Gastaldi, January 8, 1876, in *FDBM* 673 B4-7. Everything in square brackets has been added to facilitate reading.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. preceding letter of December 30, 1875, second paragraph.



such seminarians, the clerics Mondina and Macocco. True, they were received and assigned to a house of ours far from Turin, but after a few months they were dismissed.

—[5] [You say:] “In letters and conversations the Salesians fail to show due respect to their Archbishop, etc.”

[R] Your Grace, all the Salesians, myself included, would like to have someone point to any letter or conversation of ours that could be construed as being irreverent to our Archbishop. We would like to know this so that we can make amends and offer official reparation. In the conversation you and I had on December 29, if I took the liberty of bringing to your attention certain [offensive] words and expressions of yours about our Superior [Don Bosco], it was solely to recall gratefully the friendly sentiments your Grace once nourished [toward him]. I made a mistake and humbly beg your pardon if that gave you offense. It shall not happen again in the future.

Let me add that we have frequent exchanges with over forty bishops who act and speak as true fathers and benefactors toward us. With none of them do we have to watch the least word we speak or write for fear of offending them.

I would very much like to know what in particular motivates your complaint [that the Salesians fail to show you due respect].

—[6] [You say:] “Let the Salesian Congregation abide strictly by Canon Law, etc.”

[R] I ask you again, Your Grace, to allow me to make a simple comment. Our Congregation was born in stormy times and is still in its infancy. Hence it needs the help of everyone and of everything, and particularly the greatest possible leniency that is compatible with the authority of the Ordinaries. Accordingly, we beg not to be treated rigorously by the letter of Canon Law but with the greatest possible charity and leniency in its application. It is with this hope that the Salesian religious have always worked and continue to work, over 100 of them, in the diocese of Turin. They persevere in the work not because they feel obliged by law or because they are looking for material advantage, but solely because they are aware of the great need the Church has of evangelical workers. Nevertheless my Salesian confreres have asked me to represent them in assuring you that anything Your Grace may bring to our attention as not being in conformity with Canon Law we will strive with all our might to practice or avoid, as the case may be.

I beg you further to allow me a remark about some matters that have greatly dismayed and humiliated us poor Salesians. [i] The decree of November 17, 1874 by which Your Grace saw fit to abolish the privileges and

the favors that your predecessors had granted to our Society over the last 30 years is seen as an act that has few parallels in the history [of religious congregations(?)]. [ii] The fact that the faculty to hear confessions and absolve penitents, reserved to our Superior, was restricted and denied to him is viewed as an unwarranted humiliation. Though he had never requested the faculty, it had been graciously granted to him.<sup>29</sup> [iii] Your negative reply to our invitation to come and honor with some special church service the seventh anniversary of the consecration of the church of Mary Help of Christians was especially painful — as was your refusal to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to our young people. It did not seem appropriate to invite another bishop. [iv] At the beginning of the current year the faculty to preach was denied to four of our priests, one of whom is director of our school for day pupils and of the weekend Oratory of St Francis de Sales.

No doubt such strict disciplinary measures were motivated by serious reasons, which however were never made known to us. In spite of this, our Superior, who has to bear the brunt of such measures, was never heard to speak, write or support anything improper against his ecclesiastical Superior.

On the other hand, I can assure Your Grace from personal knowledge that he was insistently requested to lend his name in support of accusations against Your Grace, which were actually delivered in Rome. He flatly and disdainfully refused.

Having discovered that a reporter for an anticlerical paper had prepared a series of articles against Your Grace, [Don Bosco] decided to approach the writer with a sum of money and the promise to accept one of his sons into the school on condition that he would surrender the infamous manuscript and not ever publish any of that material. He succeeded.

Only this past October (1875), some people who believed what was being bruited about, namely that Don Bosco was against the Archbishop, came to him with an infamous biography of Your Grace and a large sum of money, asking him to edit it for the press. Once Don Bosco had that manuscript of over 1000 pages in his possession and saw what kind of biography it was, he shredded it and burned it. This caused him plenty of trouble, and he is still involved in a settlement. But he is happy whenever, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, he can protect the honor of his Archbishop whom he has always loved and revered.

I realized now that this letter has gone to an excessive length, but I hope you do not mind my giving vent to my feelings. I just meant to give you assurance that the Salesians have never lost their esteem and veneration.

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf. above: (2) Don Bosco’s Supposed “Suspension” from Hearing Confessions.

tion toward Your Grace—not when you were a simple canon in this city, not when were bishop of Saluzzo, nor when Divine Providence saw fit to make you our Archbishop.

It is a great honor for me whenever I can declare myself with deepest gratitude,  
Your Grace's most humble and devoted servant.

Fr. Michael Rua

On reading these documents of Fr. Rua's forthright defense of Don Bosco with Archbishop Gastaldi, and reflecting on the conversations that preceded them, one can only admire Fr. Rua's courage on the one hand, and the archbishop's wiliness to dialogue with Fr. Rua, a person whom he evidently trusted.

long process of formation which will end only with Pentecost: "When the Spirit of truth comes He will lead you to the complete truth" (Jn 16,13).

One of the difficulties Jesus meets with in his followers as regards their discipleship is pride and the desire for power. While He begins to announce his future death they are discussing who is the greatest (Mk 9,30-37). The sons of Zebedee even get their mother to put in a good word for them: "Promise that these two sons of mine may one sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom" (Mt 20,21). The others are angry, but Jesus does not condemn this very human desire, but points out the real path to follow to be successful: "Anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (v.26-27). It is not easy for them to understand. On other occasions they show the intransigence of someone who feels he is superior to others: Jesus corrects them after they have prevented some one who did not belong to their group from doing good in his name (Mk 9,38-40); he reproves them when in the face of the opposition of the Samaritans in crossing their territory, they call down fire from heaven to consume them (Lk 9,51-69). In the face of these human weaknesses Jesus shows understanding, patience and compassion. But he does not compromise on the essential: faith. This is not 'negotiable'. He is not interested in having a crowd of followers who go away when faced with his 'hard' words (Jn 6). Their little faith also shows itself in their inability to understand the parables (Mt 13,10s) which he is forced to explain, and when he announces his passion: "They did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him" (Mk 9,32). It was the attitude of someone who realises that it is better not to know ...

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus questions them about the opinion the people have of him, and then puts to them the decisive question: "And you, who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8,29). It is not sufficient to know what the others say; nothing can take the place of the personal option of faith and devotion to the Lord Jesus. This lack of faith, which finds expression in their not wanting to accept the plan of God, and to the extreme degree in fact in the head of the apostolic group, Simon Peter, whom Jesus reproves with the most forceful words he has ever used: "Get behind me Satan...the way you think is not God's way but man's." (Mt 16,23; Mk 8,31-33). There are situations where one cannot compromise: at stake is the very essence of what it means to be a disciple. The Gospels do not hide even the most deplorable attitude: the cowardly abandonment of the Master by the apostles on the night of his arrest, including the shameful denial by Peter. And yet, even in the dark night of the flight and the denial the flickering flame which burns in their heart is not extinguished: love for Jesus which leads Peter "to weep bitterly" (Mk 14,72) and which, after the death of the Master, will enable them to encounter the



## OCTOBER MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

### THE FORMATION OF THE DISCIPLES

*To change people it is necessary to love them.  
Our influence only reaches as far as our love.  
(Johann H. Pestalozzi)*

We have already reflected on the call of the disciples which was a watershed in their lives, determining the "before" and the "after" which continues with their fidelity "until death." Now we are going to look at the common life of Jesus and his disciples. He invites them, not to learn some teaching or to discuss religious ideas but to share his mission: passion for the Kingdom and for the Rule of God/ Abbà which give meaning to his whole life. However, it is not only a matter of a job to be done, but of being, at the deepest level, believers/disciples/apostles. "He summoned those he wanted ... he appointed twelve ... to be sent out to preach, with power to cast out devils" (Mk 3,13-15). The invitation to be 'Jesus' friends' does not change the disciples automatically. The future columns of the Church had limitations, defects and sins. The Lord begins with them a

Risen One and the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1,8). We don't know a great deal about their lives, but we do know that they were faithful to the Lord and sealed this fidelity with their blood. Except Judas: his "physical" closeness to Jesus did not become devotion. But the Church has never expressed a definitive judgement about him. We leave in silence what God Himself has chosen to keep quiet about.

Don Bosco, with his first Salesians, knew how to follow a pedagogy similar to that of Jesus. He wasn't an indulgent grand-dad who puts up with everything; he was an affectionate and understanding father, but also demanding. "He used to close an eye, sometimes both, to the defects and the imperfections of his young collaborators," but he was inflexible when it came to morality, because what was at stake was the good of his boys. He was not satisfied with mediocrity, but put to them a "high measure" of holiness. In this way he succeeded in producing masterpieces such as Dominic Savio and the other youngsters who died in the odour of sanctity.

Lookly concretely at the apostolic school, we contemplate that small group, insignificant in human eyes, who gathered together in the room of don Bosco on December 18, 1859, became the pioneers of the Congregation and the Salesian Family: the small mustard seed that has become a great tree that extends its branches throughout the world to welcome the poorest and most abandoned youth.

*(Courtesy of sdb.org)*



VIVA DON BOSCO!



SEPTEMBER  
11TH-19TH  
2010

DONBOSCO2010.ORG



RELICS  
PILGRIMAGE  
OF  
SAINT  
JOHN BOSCO



Ongoing Formation Bulletin  
Institute of Salesian Spirituality  
Don Bosco Hall  
Berkeley, CA, 94709, USA



Editor, Layout and Design:  
Gael E Sullivan, SDB, Director  
sullivangael@aol.com

Articles: Arthur J. Lenti, SDB, Professor  
artlenti@aol.com

Translation: Horacio Macal, SDB  
macalsdb@gmail.com

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT FOR THE SERVICE  
OF THE INTERAMERICAN REGION AND BEYOND.  
UN ESFUERZO COLABORATIVO PARA EL BIEN  
DE LA REGIÓN INTERAMERICANA Y MÁS ALLÁ.