



Don Bosco Study Guide March 2012 Special Lenten Edition

This issue of the Study Guide has many less pictures, illustrations, and photographs. Its intention is to accompany the Salesian with meditations throughout the season of Lent. May these reflections help each of you to prepare well for the Holy Triduum and the Feast of Resurrection.

As we enter into Lent, this issue of the Don Bosco Study Guide will look at Don Bosco's religiosity and his pivotal understanding of the last things, death, evil, and sin.

Don Bosco Study Guide

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2012

Last Things...

Introduction: Points of Arrival

It is difficult to confine a study of Don Bosco's educational system to a few topics. The approach to this subject can be quite varied, from a historical analysis, a research into the historical, cultural, and religious influences which shaped the man and his pedagogy to applications of that pedagogy in many contexts of the world of education in our own time.

Every one of these approaches has their value, but this study will focus upon the study of Don Bosco's ultimate purpose for his educational system, its desired "point of arrival," if you will.

By looking carefully at those endpoints of his method, it is hoped that a clearer insight might be gained in his overall purpose.

The task of this study has been an interesting one uncovering many details with implications for education in today's contexts. Yet it is curious that these same goals are most often avoided, if not deliberately shunned, in the task of education.

This study will examine Don Bosco as an educator

of "the Last Things." By looking at what Don Bosco did to prepare his young people to face death and by addressing the dangers of moral and other kinds of evil in those lives, we can discover an educator with a very clear purpose suggesting no ambiguity whatsoever. How, then, can education respond with any level of ambiguity in the treatment of these same topics? This question is one that would probably require a library's worth of research. There are, to be sure, so many factors to weigh in each culture and in each time in dealing with these sensitive issues, but the evidence suggests that Don Bosco would wrestle with them, no matter what the cost. Perhaps we as Salesian educators must do the same.

Part I. "A Renowned Genius of Pedagogy... and Holiness"

1. A Complete Education Includes "Last Things"

In the tenth chapter of Fr. Pietro Braido's book,

Don Bosco's Pedagogical Experience," the Salesian scholar turns his attention to many "fundamental pedagogical dimensions" of Don Bosco's system of education. He places within the context of this focus the education to "the last things." It is logical that Don Bosco would offer a model for embracing this difficult dimension of education because his entire system was rooted in the ideal of leading the young to become "good Christians" and "honest citizens." This "concern for complete education," as Fr. Braido phrases it, does not leave the ultimate goal of salvation in any ambiguity. Beginning with the spiritual dimensions of his pedagogy, Fr. Braido describes Don Bosco's aim "to cultivate the religious dimension, to infuse the fear of God into the boys, to educate them to live habitually in Grace." Fr. Braido insists that Don Bosco's pedagogy was a synthesis of human and divine and indicates that the "principle of sacramental pedagogy... was a general directive for the whole 'system.'"

The spiritual and religious dimensions of the educational system of Don Bosco was not an accident at all, nor merely a bi-product. It was, in fact, the underpinning of the entire system and pointed toward its ultimate goal. Therefore, it is essentially important to uncover the roots of those elements in the life and experience of Don Bosco, himself.

1.1. Elements Drawn from Life

The boy and the man, Saint John Bosco, stirred

many areas of his nineteenth century world before he was ever known as a saint. Devoted followers of Saint John Bosco's Preventive System of Education and scholars and students of Salesian Spirituality offer ample historical and spiritual reflection.

Under the scrutiny of Salesian scholars, strong themes suggest themselves from the life, work, and legacy of Saint John Bosco. In his lifetime, Saint John Bosco, the priest and youth worker was famous for his vast knowledge and educational outreach. He taught by word, by example, and by the power of publishing. But it was his ability to speak meaningfully to such diverse audiences while, simultaneously, calling them to live authentically, which registers his historical significance.

Don Bosco is a landmark in Church history. In fact, he has left behind him a concept, a teaching, an experience and method which have become part of our heritage. In the words of my venerated predecessor Paul VI, he was "a renowned genius of modern pedagogy and catechesis but, above all, a genius of holiness."¹

This giant figure of education and holiness began humbly and it is precisely these beginnings which highlight his significance. From the details of a tangible, though difficult, life history, Saint John Bosco's recounting and teaching continue to be relevant for diverse audiences. This study will mention very specific



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The Exercise for a Happy Death at the Oratory (Fr. Arthur Lenti)

The practice of the Exercise for a Happy Death was firmly established at the Oratory from the start. It was included in all editions of the Companion of Youth (*Giovane Provveduto*), beginning with the first in 1847. Indeed the practice acquired a key role in the spiritual and devotional life of the boys, and it appears to have been regarded as an indispensable educational tool for fostering the moral and spiritual life in the community of both students and artisans. The Biographer takes pains to stress this very fact. A couple of examples will suffice.

themes from John's history as points of development in his educating young people.

1.2. Death as a Defining Experience:

Death is, perhaps, the most significant experience of Saint John Bosco's personal history—the catalyst making sense of his future endeavors and mission. This impact will be developed carefully. It can be said that Saint John Bosco would spend his life fighting death—his own personal mortality, and the death of souls. Every mention of his life, every event seemed to be suffused with the reality of death's appointment for himself and others and the urgency to save one's soul.

Death, is always linked closely with human frailty, sin and evil, and the power to make choices in the stories of Saint John Bosco's life. In fact, his three student biographies (Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, and Francis Besucco) were built around the theme of moral decision making, conversion, and conquering evil in the face of untimely death. These works are considered most important because they pull from Saint John Bosco's own personal encounters and highlight the themes of his ministry. Fr. Arthur Lenti points this out:

All of Don Bosco's writings contain educational insights and suggestions, but the following deserve special mention.

The Biographies: *Comollo*, (1844...), *Savio* (1859...), *Magone* (1861), *Besucco* (1864). The biographies have a specifically educational and spiritual aim. In this respect, the Savio, Magone, and Besucco biographies are especially important since, taken together, they give us a compendium of Don Bosco's style of education and spiritual direction of boys in the student community in the 'fifties and 'sixties. The different types (Savio, from a good Christian family; Magone, from a "broken" home, though not a juvenile delinquent in any way; Besucco, an unspoiled mountain shepherd lad) give us three aspects of Don Bosco's approach.¹

1.3. Equipped for Addressing Difficult Realities:

A true evaluation of Saint John Bosco's impact as a teacher, a story-teller, a catechist, and a friend of the young would encompass a study too vast to be contained here. According to Fr. Lenti, Saint John Bosco became an educator because of the call of life—"drawn into the field by a crying need."¹ He, himself, was the educator and not a theorist. He lived the realities and addressed the real problems and concerns of the young people in his world.

One of the real problems he addressed without hesitation, quite significant for his time and for ours, was the problem of death. Death seems a distant topic in the educational enterprise today. Though the reality of death was far from unfamiliar or taboo in his time and culture, a consideration of death as a component in educating the young would draw negative attention and disbelief today. This begs the question as to the significance of this component in Don Bosco's system (see Chapter X "The Fundamental Pedagogical Dimensions" in Fr. Braidó's treatment: *Don Bosco's Pedagogical Experience*). Is it something we can easily leave aside as simply a leftover from a time that is has no connection with today's realities. Just below the surface of this question are the realities we know only too well. In the United States, the terrible weapons attacks of student-on-student has dramatically changed that equation from a blissful ignorance of death to a horrific vision of violence. But outside of this extreme context, many educators would vehemently oppose even the mention of death, let alone constructing an educational approach to that reality.

Connected to the question of the relevance of addressing death are a series of related themes: How did Don Bosco choose to present evil, sin, and moral choice? Why did he choose to depict these at all? How are these themes relevant for today's educator? And finally, what is "preventive" about dealing in these subjects?

1.4. Specific Themes and Their Relevance in Relation to Death

Having already opened a view of Death, this study will look more closely at its treatment in different studies of Don Bosco's work. After examining death, a glance at the concepts and experiences of evil follows logically. These examinations lend themselves to the theme of making moral choices.

An examination of Don Bosco's treatment of evil and sin must lead to a conclusion regarding his ultimate purpose of saving souls. But it must also rescue Don Bosco from the notion of many that religious faith, Catholicism, and the responsibilities of making moral choices makes of life a tortuous journey. There is nothing more distant from Don Bosco than this. His purpose, as we will see, especially in the details he has highlighted in his life and the lives of his students, was always connected to an optimism and faith. His vision of the future went beyond political or global realities, though they included these as well. Ultimately, as we will see, his vision—therefore his insistence upon the “last things”—was an eschatological vision. A full participation in life and its responsibilities was fully immersed in the reality of eternal life and its promises.

Part II: Death, Evil, and Human Choice in Saint John Bosco

2. The Lasting Impact of Death on Saint John Bosco

In his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Saint John Bosco recounts what he names as his earliest memory: the death of his father, Francis Bosco. It becomes obvious throughout the story of his early life, his formation as a young man, well into the history of his foundational work for youth that death plays a significant role. It is not unusual nor unexpected to uncover this influence in his or any person's life, but for Saint John Bosco, his encounters with

death have shaped the mission and the message of the man.

2.1. “You have a father no more...”

From the vantage point of the present moment, looking back on the figure of Saint John Bosco as saint and educator, he is now known as both “Father” and “teacher” of youth all over the world. The absence of a father in his own life became a recurring theme for his own discernment. To be sure, the continual loss of fatherly figures certainly formed the great champion of the poor, the abandoned, and the orphaned youth of the world.

It seems that the earliest recollection of his father's death, and the words of his mother, Margaret, “You have a father no more,” set in motion for Saint John Bosco the search for mentors, guides, and direction in his life. The next significant father-figure to impact the boy would be Fr. Calosso. Taking John under his wing, he inspires him to look beyond his circumstances and discover a life-long calling. He gives John the first means toward a future of promise by personally tutoring him and promising him the necessary resources for his future.

No one can imagine how supremely happy I was. I idolised Fr Calosso, loved him as if he were my father, prayed for him, and tried to help him in every way I could. My greatest pleasure was to work for him. I would have died for him. I made more progress in one day with the good priest than I would have made in a week at home. That man of God lavished affection on me, and he would often say, "Don't worry about the future. As long as I'm alive I'll see that you want for nothing. And I'll make provision for you after my death."¹

But, as Saint John Bosco recalls, this joy and security would come to a sudden and crushing end with Fr. Calosso's death which would occur

not long after making this promise. The death of this man impacted John perhaps more profoundly than even his own father's death and set John on a course he will not abandon, no matter the personal cost.

The absence of Fr. Calosso was more than the absence of a benefactor, for now John had to face his older step-brother's opposition without a defender. Anthony despised his younger brother's aspirations for education and prevented him from studying at every turn. Eventually, John's mother Margaret would decide that John's best hope would be to leave home and seek work, shelter, and education outside. The lingering absence of his father must have pressed heavily on this young boy as he walked the lonely roads into his future.

2.2. Continuing Encounters with Death

Saint John Bosco's next encounter with death would come as a teenager in the seminary. His best friend, Louis Comollo, became the model of sanctity that John aspired to emulate. It is also obvious that John became for Louis, the human balance this zealous young man needed in his life. The descriptions of this friendship are intimate and strong even though Saint John Bosco never strays from the language of edifying example and virtue. Reading between the lines, however, it is not difficult to see the human dimension to these affections especially when Louis dies an untimely death. So distraught is John after the death of his friend that he, himself, becomes quite ill. But there is another interesting formative element in this encounter with death. We see the development of a conscious need to prepare well for death and to live with meaning and purpose in every moment as if it might be the last.

John struck a pact with his friend Louis that whoever would die first would return to communicate if and when they had reached salvation. John already admired the piety and faith of his friend, but the lessons of a life lived well and consciously prepared for death would be seared into his memory with the remarkable fulfillment of that pact. John related that not long after the death of his friend, he found

himself inconsolable as he knelt praying at his own bedside. Suddenly, with loud rumblings and shaking, which awakened all the other seminarians, a light came to hover over John and he heard his friend's voice announce three times, "Bosco, I am saved!"

This event pressed itself deeply on the mind and heart of Saint John Bosco and it would develop in him a lasting respect for the mystery of death and the necessity to teach others how to live well and prepare for that moment.

The other deaths Saint John Bosco would encounter would be no less important, but a detailed investigation of these moments and their impact would be, in themselves, the content of a thorough study. We know from his own writings that there are at least four more significant deaths to mention: the death of his dear mother, Mama Margaret, and the deaths of three students he would immortalize in writing: Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, and Francis Besucco. These are mentioned here to introduce the elements of death in Saint John Bosco's teaching, catechesis, and piety. Writing about these significant persons in his life, long after his mission is fully engaged, shows us the focus of his teaching about death.

2.3. Teaching Others to Prepare for Death: Catechesis in the Love of God

Fr. Lenti gives a detailed description of Saint John Bosco's catecheses regarding death and the last things. His survey is insightful and worth mentioning to highlight various elements. Often, Saint John Bosco would predict the deaths of others, especially boys at his Oratory. He offered these predictions by way of premonitions and dreams. He admitted that often times the details were not clear until the events unfolded, but he clung to the belief that it was beneficial for the boys to know the reality and prepare for it. "He certainly believed that confronting the youngsters with the

thought of death was both educational and spiritually helpful.”¹

What is useful in this study, however, is uncovering exactly what Saint John Bosco wanted to teach his young charges with these warnings. The biography Saint John Bosco penned for his friend Comollo was primarily a catechetical tool to teach his students the value of “the Last Things.” He developed a pious tradition of conducting “an exercise for a happy death” once every month for this purpose beginning in 1847. Fr. Lenti, in his review of Fr. Stella’s examination of Saint John Bosco on the topic of death predictions, points out that these practices were not meant to terrify the students. They were intended to teach important lessons. Fr. Lenti quotes Fr. Lemoyne from *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*:

The Exercise for a Happy Death was another powerful factor in his educational system. When boys began boarding at the Oratory, they made the exercise for a Happy Death with the day pupils; later on he scheduled it on the last Sunday of the month for the former, and on the first Sunday for the latter. To make it truly effective, he exhorted them to put all their spiritual and temporal things in order as though they were to appear before God’s tribunal on that day and to be mindful that they could be suddenly called into eternity. [...] The worldly-minded might think that mentioning death to young boys would fill their minds with gloomy thoughts, but that was not so at all. On the contrary, it filled their hearts with peace and joy. Spiritual unrest comes from not being in God’s grace.¹

An important part of the catechesis of Saint John Bosco, then, centered around death and its inevitability. However, the focus had its context and points to important components in Saint John Bosco’s ministry of education. The most obvious context was, of course, the mortality rate in that part of the world in the mid nineteenth century. In an age before anti-biotics and treatments for

common recurring illnesses, sickness and disease often claimed many young lives. The cholera epidemics of 1831 and 1854 were experiences close to Saint John Bosco. In the first, he had been a seminarian and witnessed the exodus of many students under the direction of the protective Jesuits. In the latter, the students of Saint John Bosco’s Oratory would bravely assist the sick and dying in the ravaged city of Turin, winning for the boys and for Saint John Bosco the reputation of holiness and courage. The possibility of a sudden and unexpected death, at any age, then, was not far-fetched. This had considerable bearing on the piety of the times.

There was a sense of urgency in living life. Fidelity to one’s duty and faithfulness to God was not something to postpone. At first glance, especially with twenty-first century filters, this focus upon death may seem morbid or suggest a catechesis reduced to scare-tactics. And while fear was not an uncommon tool for evangelization in Saint John Bosco’s era, the evidence suggests that the predictions, the dreams, and the practices of preparation for death had positive consequences for the students in Saint John Bosco’s care. Fr. Lenti’s survey of such death predictions and the practice of the Exercise for a Happy Death comes with a caution; he is well aware that fear by itself could be psychologically damaging. He concludes this survey, with appeals for caution, but concludes that Saint John Bosco’s approach had to be much more than fear to produce such peaceful and positive results in his students. In fact, he mentions that many of the students lost their fear of death and strove to live in readiness to meet God—considering the moment of death to be a great and wonderful moment deserving of one’s best preparation.

Perhaps the first most important component revealed in this approach is an authentic love of God based on a personal trust and the conscious development of a deep relationship; such a relationship created a longing for union with God. Certainly, the flip side of this coin is a fear of hell and damnation, and this was not a catechetical tactic left aside. But the emphasis

does not seem to be left in that dark place. The student biographies mentioned earlier are Saint John Bosco's greatest testimony to the positive. With this longing for union with God came abhorrence for evil in all of its forms. This, too, has a flip side with a focus upon the power of the devil prowling to devour a soul. This particular focus upon the presence of evil and its dangerous consequences often rises to the surface of Saint John Bosco's catechesis and not infrequently without great drama and flare, but this will be the next subject of comparison.

2.4. Death and Its Connections with Evil

Death predictions were not the only extra-ordinary signs in Saint John Bosco's life. He also had vivid encounters with evil and seemed to be able to read the presence of evil among the students. These dimensions of Saint John Bosco will be analyzed more carefully in the third section of this study, but for our purposes here, a link needs to be made.

For Saint John Bosco, death was not a neutral reality. He advocated a healthy fear of death as the final consequence of sin and evil and the most dramatic affirmation of its power. For Saint John Bosco, physical death was always an impending possibility, but it was spiritual death which preoccupied him more than anything else. "Give me souls, take all else away!" This was his life's project as inspired by Saint Francis de Sales. Saving and protecting the souls of his students became the highest motivation for everything he did. But his vision of evil did not confine itself to moral ambiguity or mistaken choices; evil was a force to avoid and to be prepared to combat with all one's resources. Details of his own resolutions at various points in his own personal journey of spiritual growth reveal this abhorrence for sin and evil and this readiness to fight against them.

It is this abhorrence which is evident in the lives of the young men Saint John Bosco examined in his writings. He offered their examples as young people whose love for God took primary place in all their actions and goals. Like their mentor, they, too, made resolutions to turn away from evil at every possible encounter. In so doing, these

young lads met death, ready to meet God, victorious over sin and evil. They were the models, not only of how to die, but also how to live. They were models of combating evil in all of its manifestations, internally and externally.

Evil in all its forms was to be avoided. For Saint John Bosco, the devil could manifest itself in his dreams and premonitions in terrifying detail. Yet, just as terrifying was his presentation of moral decay. For him, the external and the internal evils were all the same.

One of us will not be able to make it again. Who? It may be myself, or it may be one of you! [...] I could tell you, but I won't just now. [...] When that happens, you will say, 'I never thought he would be the one to die!' [...] I gave you something to think about. Really we should meditate [on death] all the time. [...] We have but one soul. [...] If we lose it, it would be lost forever. [...] I know that boys [...] do wrong with inconceivable light-mindedness and then sleep for a long time with a horrible monster that could tear them to pieces at any moment. Is there anything to alert us to this danger? Yes, the thought of death! I shall have to die one day. [...] Will it be a slow death or a quick one? Will it be this year, this month, today, tonight? What will happen to my soul in that fatal hour? If we lose it, it will be lost forever."¹

2.5. Death and Evil in the Biographies of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone

What approach does Don Bosco offer to the subjects of evil and death in the biographies of Dominic Savio and Michael Magone? This is an important question because it is already evident that the main purpose for sharing

details about the lives of these students had very clear educational and catechetical ends in Don Bosco's purpose. Some themes may be extracted from these two lives to highlight these objectives of Don Bosco. We do not find in these biographical works scientific treatises but evidence of Don Bosco's practical methods for teaching about holiness, the last things, and the sacramental life.

Don Bosco had no intention of offering his readers learned or scientific works; with his simple style, whether edifying or apologetic, his aim was to touch the hearts of the people and of his boys, both those he encountered in the streets and those who were educated within his institutions.

Although these writings are often schematic or written for some special occasion without any firm theoretical underpinning, they tell us quite a lot about Don Bosco's doctrinal ideas and, at times, about his practical method in educating others about the sacraments. His doctrinal ideas are, essentially, drawn from the widely held theology of the official counter-reformation and from the catechesis that was produced in the climate of the Restoration. It was the theology which had coloured Giovanni Bosco's entire formation, at home, at school, in the seminary and in the Ecclesiastical College.¹

2.5.1. Evil and Death in the Experience of Dominic Savio

Don Bosco credits his young student Dominic Savio with a hunger for the sacraments already burning within him before coming to the Oratory. Dominic took to heart the council of a priest in his own parish that there were three things a young person would need do to prepare well for the path to heaven: "frequent the sacrament of confession often, receive the Holy Eucharist, and open your heart to a confessor..."¹ And Don Bosco noted that Dominic immediately sought out a confessor upon coming to the Oratory. It is interesting to note Don Bosco also mentions that there was an unusual scrupulosity at the time.

Fu qualche tempo dominato dagli scrupoli; perciò voleva confessarsi ogni quattro giorni ed anche più spesso; ma il suo direttore spirituale nol permise e lo tenne all'obbedienza, della confessione settimanale.¹ (It was a time dominated by scrupulosity; therefore one was encouraged to go to confession at least four days in the week; but if the confessor did not permit this, one must obey with only a weekly confession).

Don Bosco describes Dominic's desire not in morbid or unbalanced terms, but coming from a deep joy. In fact, it would be Don Bosco who would urge him to not look for other penances to combat sin, but merely maintain a good example, put up with the cold and hunger of each day, and do one's duties with joyful diligence.¹ This became the primary project of the young Savio.

Dominic gladly took this advice and became a model of obedience and diligence to his companions and he translated that into proactive steps to align others in holiness. This was his weapon against evil. With a band of companions, he pledged many virtuous practices to the Immaculate Mother of God in December of 1854.

As time went on, however, it was clear that his health was not improving. Dominic is never shown to reveal any fear of dying in these accounts of Don Bosco. The opposite is true. In fact, when Don Bosco sends Dominic home in March of 1857, Don Bosco tells him he will get well and will return to the Oratory. Dominic's response is clear and decisive that he will not return and projects what great joy would be his upon entering paradise.¹

Dominic was conscientious about mortification of the senses, about daily prayer and devotions, and about being the most cheerful and diligent example he could be for his companions. Don Bosco describes a moment when Dominic fled from a man peddling pornography and another time when he confiscated his materials and tore them to bits. He had no room for evil and told

his companions that God had given them eyes to contemplate the beauty he had created, not to give into these vile interests. His actions matched his words.¹

Two things are very obvious in the mere mention of these few details. Dominic, before the direction of Don Bosco, and especially after, hungered for sanctity. But this hunger did not remove him from life or his companions. In fact, he very much struggled as Don Bosco and Dominic's father discussed what course of action to take as his health worsened. He was obedient in returning home, but he had tried once, only to insist upon returning to the Oratory to continue his studies. The last time, he was aware he would not return. But he accepted this with more than resignation; he was anxious to return to God. This hunger for holiness expressed itself in practical ways as he threw himself into his duties. But his activity was always predisposed to combat evil in every form—within himself and those around him. The second feature of this quick glance is the readiness for “the last things” that marks Dominic's experience of declining health. Don Bosco mentions many conversations in which Dominic shows no concern for his “carcass” but only for his soul. Dominic told a companion that his “carcass” was not meant to last forever but, with the help of our Lady, he would be led to paradise where his impatient soul would “melt” away from his body and fly readily to God.¹ Obviously, then, Don Bosco's system of education had achieved its purpose in this young life. Dominic had become an outstanding citizen of both this world and heaven.

2.5.2. Evil and Death in the Experience of Michael Magone

In Don Bosco's examination of Michael Magone, we have another figure of youthful holiness. But unlike Dominic, who seemed predisposed for holiness, Don Bosco dedicates the second chapter of his biography of Magone to outline

the boys resistance to moral reform and the restlessness leading to a change within him. Don Bosco identifies this restlessness specifically, and this is key to his understanding of Grace, sin, and salvation. He identifies this unhappiness precisely as a response to a lack of confession or the making of a bad confession. Don Bosco shares a dialogue that he had with Magone. In that dialogue, the young man admits to being filled with remorse. As Don Bosco questions him, trying to lead him to his conclusions, Magone surmises that his restlessness has something to do with not being able to share in the joy and piety of his companions. At one point, Don Bosco asks him what is holding him back from joining them, and it is clear in this exchange that he already has the answer, though he is coaxing Magone to see the reality of his own sinfulness.¹

During this conversation, Don Bosco does something which has marked him out as a man of God—and we will look at this gift in greater detail in the next section; he names Magone's sins. He promises not to intrude on his conscience, but he invites him to acknowledge the list. The dramatic point Don Bosco makes is that Magone does eventually confess and begins a new life, close to the Sacraments.

He makes a study of the growth of Magone's virtue and recounts episode after episode. But, it will be in the face of death that Magone's true conversion rings clearly. It is interesting the Fr. Jacques Schepens highlights a tension between two sides of Don Bosco in this kind of work. He sees a tension between the “anxious, vigilant Don Bosco” and the “gentle, kindly Don Bosco who appealed to the moral sense of the young and the personal bond between the educator”¹ and the youth.

Where the eternal salvation of souls was concerned, Don Bosco did not want to take any risks, and he was prepared to apply a certain amount of pressure on

the consciences of his boys in a way that is today less acceptable. This is the Don Bosco who insisted on the need for confession because of the natural “weakness” of the young which leads them more easily into sin and can cause them to make bad confessions. In his opinion these boys needed to be convinced by their educators that the sacraments of confession and communion are their best safeguards, or that frequent confession is a “support during the unstable period of youth.”¹

Fr. Schepens is careful to point out the observation made by Fr. Pietro Stella that this “rigid” Don Bosco did not distance him from the young. In fact, as in other areas of their lives, he inspired fatherly affection and trust in the confessional. In this life of Magone, as in the biographical reports of Savio and Besucco, Don Bosco gradually introduced the idea of a permanent confessor to Magone.¹

Underlying this process of education, this insistence upon confession, the right relationship with God, etc, is Don Bosco’s anthropology. For him, man is “existing for God”¹ and for no other purpose. In view of this, any small event, idea, or influence that could veer any person off of this path toward identification in God is an evil unto itself. As we will see, Don Bosco had a flare for the dramatic and visual when dealing with evil hoping such illustration could attract the attention of the young.

Unlike Dominic Savio, Magone was small in stature, but “sturdy” as Don Bosco put it. He described him as lively and Don Bosco admits his own wish that Magone had lived to become a priest. This was not to be. Perhaps this surprising death became an even more valuable witness to Don Bosco for his young people since any one of them could relate to the possibility of a sudden change in their health. There is, then, a bit of distance and a particular nuance that seems a trusting sadness and resignation as Don Bosco recounts the death of Magone. Here again, his message about the “last things” is emphasized with simplicity and directness.

Magone’s sickness, surfacing in January of 1859,

appeared a mere flu but progressed rapidly to an internal bleeding that confined the boy to bed. He seemed very aware that this was his last moment in life. Don Bosco reports evidence of this awareness in Magone even before the onset of the illness. Magone would die at the Oratory and Don Bosco could record his last words. When Don Bosco asked the boy if he would rather be healed or go to eternity, his first response was not surprising, “Whatever the Lord wills.” Pressed further, Magone said he was ready to meet God and anxious to do so. His parting words, left consciously to his companions and his own dear Mother, was to prepare themselves for death by making good and frequent confessions that the Mother of God may accompany them at the last hours and that those hours may be filled with peace.¹

2.5.3. Setting in Motion the Prevention of Evil

We can see, then, that Don Bosco’s main preoccupation was preparedness for death and the resistance to evil. His method of education reflected this on every level. He wanted to set in motion a movement to prevent evil from threatening the young from their promise of eternal life. This was not a consequence of his mission—it was his mission entirely.

The discussion of moral evil, choice, and holiness cannot go without mentioning Don Bosco’s extra-ordinary encounters with evil. It may have been his way of driving a point home to his young people, but it was effective. To combat evil, one must name it clearly. To this task we now turn.

Part III: Preventing and Combating Evil

3. Preparing for Battle

We have seen his intentional and educational focus upon death. We have touched lightly upon his ability to read the presence of death

and predict its movements. To re-iterate: death was not a neutral reality for Saint John Bosco. This conviction went beyond mere physical death to the reality of spiritual death. Both realities were the results of the presence of evil from within and without. Both were effects of man's fall from Grace. For Saint John Bosco, death, to be overcome effectively, called upon the person of faith to live a life worthy of the next life. Such a mission was the focus of his whole life.

He was convinced that any effort to take on this mission of preparation would be met by opposition. This opposition would come, as death and evil themselves, from within and without. To be armed for battle against this opposition, one would have to know the enemy well. Saint John Bosco knew the enemy well from his own life and set about the business of preparing his young people to do battle.

3.1. Beyond Death to New Life

It can be said that Saint John Bosco certainly knew the enemy and spent his life preparing others to know, meet, and overcome that same enemy. The enemy for Saint John Bosco, ultimately, was the loss of one's soul. To die in the state of sin—the place of separation from God—was the greatest enemy and evil to confront in any person's life.

Death is the first face of evil encountered by Saint John Bosco. Death robbed him of his father, Fr. Calosso, his dear mother, many of his friends, and many of his own students. Death was an enemy that knocked forcefully upon his door more than once, nearly robbing him of his own life and energy. Because of the devotion and prayers of his own students early in his priestly life, Saint John Bosco was convinced he was spared from a terrible sickness to live out his mission for their sakes. But it would be inaccurate to leave this first face of evil with the impression that it was supreme and unchangeable. With proper attention to one's choices, by making good moral choices, this first face of evil could be destroyed. In fact, what we fear most could actually transform into a

beautiful invitation to new and complete life if one lived with the proper focus and motivation. For Saint John Bosco, there was no greater motivation than to serve and love God. For him, this translated best into service of the young. And this service, both temporal and spiritual, was best described as guiding souls to salvation. We have seen there were many lives Saint John Bosco could not save. He had little power over the reality of death when it came for his boys. But he had tremendous power to lead them in hope to the promise of new life. They embraced this promise with lives of good moral choices, as positive examples among their peers, and as an ultimate victory over death by returning to a loving and forgiving God.

3.2. The Mask of Sin—Barrier to New Life

At the risk of moving backwards in this assessment, however, there is the other face of evil to mention here. Saint John Bosco believed the more terrifying face of evil was that of sinfulness. To choose sin was to choose eternal death, to become separated from a loving God. To combat this particular face of evil, Saint John Bosco worked to uncover its every disguise. He spent himself totally in the daily task of revealing evil's appearance in every part of life. Here, too, evil came from within and without.

On the surface, this mask of sin can be said to have come to the boys from within their hearts and in the environments in which they were situated. Like death, they often could not escape from or strategize against the losses of being born into poverty, becoming imprisoned by slave labor, or hopelessly set upon some path to nowhere without education or practical direction. Too often they had no resource to lead them out of so much disadvantage. Saint John Bosco believed, however, that he could help the boys overcome these circumstances imposed from without and give them the roadmap for finding holiness.

Because the enemy was formidable in their

lives, more formidable than their own poverty, he made use of dreams, stories, and rich imagination to grab the attention of the young and to make them aware of-- without a doubt-- the most grievous threat of sin.

3.2. The Mask of Abandonment and Alienation—Barrier to Daily Life

Saint John Bosco never set out to create a spiritual reality for getting through life. Instead, he nurtured the spirit to change the conditions of life. He was busy about transforming souls so that he could transform the world one good citizen at a time. His heart was moved by the evil of exploitation. He spoke the language a poor and orphaned child would understand and offered them a chance to rise out of their circumstances. This face of evil, abandonment and alienation, came from many different directions. The most obvious face appeared in the orphaned youth on the streets of Turin. But he found this same face in the young prisoners he visited regularly. In fact, it was this face in prison that moved him to work to prevent this further alienation in the lives of young people by offering them education and protection before ending up in prison.

While he dedicated himself to giving each young person the tools to rise out of poverty and ignorance, he was more concerned about offering other kinds of tools to the young: tools for holiness.

3. 3. Symbols of Evil and Sin—Pervasive Barriers

When it came to the topic of sin, Saint John Bosco never minced his words nor watered down his message. Sin was evil and to be avoided at all costs. To illustrate its power and sway in young lives, Saint John Bosco often employed horrific and classical images of evil and the devil itself.

We have already briefly examined his predictions of death. Let us turn again to the Salesian scholars to examine the faces of sin and evil he used to drive home the necessity for holiness.

Fr. Lenti examines the work of Fr. Stella in his examination of the *Biographical Memoirs* and *The Memoirs of the Oratory*. He makes a quick survey of the premonitions of Saint John Bosco and their mention of evil.

He categorizes the dreams and premonitions in this manner: There are predictive dreams warning the young people about deaths in their community and the necessity to prepare their hearts and souls to meet God. There are also moralistic dreams with symbols pointing out good and evil choices and their consequences. Fr. Lenti also classifies certain dreams as clairvoyant and others as visionary experiences. Sometimes Saint John Bosco presented composite “dreams” employing actual historical figures and their realities while blending these with symbolic images and actions. There are woven between these teaching tools “extra-ordinary occurrences” as well, such as multiplications, healings, and encounters with the dead. The element common in all of these communications and experiences is the powerful images of evil used to illustrate the danger of sin.

To exhaust this list would take another lengthy study. Some recurring images of evil in these communications made especially during the 1860’s are these representations of evil: An elephant who destroys many of the students after luring them by their curiosity; a snake that trips the boys and squeezes the life out of many; the flesh of a serpent that makes the boys deathly ill; hardly visible traps of thin wires pulling many youth over cliffs and into the abyss; hearts eaten by worms; a serpent destroyed by a rope (the rosary); four wolves prowling through the Oratory; and more.¹

In these same years, especially during the final stages of the building of the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians, Saint John Bosco shared stories of encounters with demons

appearing as toads and other awful beasts. He described a huge beast at the center of a cave where he had followed the lines of traps pulling his boys away. In his dream of hell, his descriptions of the various levels of hell and its inhabitants are terrifying. From beasts to monsters to desperate states of suffering and pain, Saint John Bosco left no ambiguity as to the horror one must have of moral evil and the danger of losing one's soul.

Into this list might be added the belief that Saint John Bosco, like many saints before him, had personal encounters with the devil itself. He spoke of touching the outermost wall of hell and the blistering and peeling of his palm which followed. He spoke of demons pinning him in bed, fires set spontaneously, and ink strewn across his writing. Obviously, such details would have fascinated and frightened his listeners. It seems that no matter the device, be it a dream, a vision, a prediction, a personal encounter with evil, or the incidence of sudden and unexpected death, Saint John Bosco wanted to display the faces of evil in all its terror to encourage in his students a healthy fear of evil and its consequences.

Part IV: Extraordinary Manifestations of Evil

4. Prevention—Fighting Sin at its Roots

There is never any mention of a physical mark that stands out in Saint John Bosco's story—at least not a literal or physical mark on his person. We have already looked at the scar left in his life by death and abandonment and the power that impression made to propel him into ministry for poor and abandoned youth. We have looked at the mark of evil as he found it threatening the souls of his students and its many manifestations. We can also suggest that the saint was bent on leaving a mark of holiness in the hearts of his young charges so that they might make the right decision when the choice between good and evil

would inevitably present itself time and time again in their lives.

With Cain, who murdered his brother in the book of Genesis, sin left its mark on the story of humanity in the symbolic figure of this brother cursed to wander the earth a marked man. Saint John Bosco spent his life protecting his students from wandering through the wastelands of sin—the empty promises which lure all of us to pursuits selfish and deadly—figuratively, spiritually, and literally.

4.1. The Mark of Sin at the Oratory

A remarkable detail in the life of Saint John Bosco was his ability to read the sins of his students. He often commented that he could see the sins of the boys on their foreheads in various dreams and premonitions. But this was not the only place where he demonstrated this ability. There are numerous accounts of boys who were approached by the saint who asked them why they had left this or that sin out of their last confession. There were others he urged to make confession and could reveal their most disturbing fault. One of his own students, who would become one of the first Salesians and his first successor as the Superior General of the Salesian Society, Fr. Michael Rua, offered these words:

“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 seminarians supervising them. I can state with absolute certainty that [this was not the case]. [...] 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. [...] 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 [...] the more deeply am I convinced that God had endowed him with the gift of prophecy.” [Ibid. 482f.] Father Bonetti's chronicle is quoted with regard to the good effects of this dream. [Ibid. 484f.]¹

We have already seen that the motivation for Saint John Bosco's every action was the salvation of the young. We can conclude, then, that this reading of the mark of sin on the foreheads of the young people did not make these young people bad in themselves, but alerted Saint John Bosco, and therefore the students, to deal with whatever force of sin was polluting their lives. He never used this ability to label any student but to warn the young man to set things straight with God. There is no evidence that he ever used this to shun any student or to make a public embarrassment of any of them. Saint John Bosco saw the effect of evil on their young lives. He, in effect, felt its pain for them and alerted them to make a change.

4.2. The Mark of Holiness in St. John Bosco: Sacramental Life

. Don Bosco's own words tell us that his first encounter with the power of reconciliation over sin left an indelible mark in his life. This mark is the mark of grace impressed upon a boy of six or seven receiving the first sacraments. Very often, when referring to the lessons of his dear mother, John Bosco described her messages as written on his heart. Let us venture to say, then, that John Bosco's mother, Mama Margaret, gave her whole life to her sons. In so doing, she left a mark of selfless love that kept her boys on the path of holiness. Fr. Daniel Lyons and Fr. Michael Mendl offer these words of Pius XII in their 1989 translation of *The Memoirs of the Oratory*:

John would have been six or seven when he first received the sacrament of penance, by

which Christ acts through his priestly minister to forgive sins committed since baptism. Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), speaking to Christian families on the feast of Saint John Bosco, January 30, 1940, referred to the little house at Becchi:

Imagine the 'young widow with her three sons kneeling for morning and evening prayer. See the children, in their best clothes, going to the nearby village of Morialdo for holy Mass. See them gathered around her in the afternoon after a frugal meal in which there would only be a little bread on which she had invoked the Lord's blessing. She reminds her sons of the commandments of God and the Church, of the important lessons from the catechism, of the various means of salvation. She then goes on to speak in simple but forceful country terms of the tragic story of Cain and Abel, or of the painful death of her dear Jesus, nailed to the cross on Calvary for all of us.

Who can possibly measure the lasting influence of the first lessons given by a good mother to her children? It was to such lessons that Don Bosco the priest used to attribute his loving devotion to Mary and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.¹

Fr. Juan Maria Laboa suggests that St. John Bosco's vision of holiness was, in its time, very utilitarian. We know the significance of his Mother's influence. We have seen his own spirituality and piety surviving rigorism in his on training. And it is obvious that his vision of the "last things" was nuanced by the realities of his day: immanent death, moral ambiguity, and anti-religious sentiment. For Don Bosco, holiness consisted chiefly of connection to the Church and a defense of what is true. Don Bosco equated holiness with morality:

“Oh the Catholic religion, holy and divine! What wonderful benefits you bring to those who practice you, hope in you and trust in you. How fortunate are

those who live within your bosom and observe your precepts!”¹

Don Bosco was so sure of this that he founded a Congregation designed to help young people and others in general to achieve these benefits.¹

Part V: Transforming the World One Good Citizen at a Time

5.1. Moral Choice: Right or Left, Religious or Political?

One of the criticisms of the Salesians of Don Bosco since the time of their founder, John Bosco, has been their lack of involvement in the politics of their settings. Having expanded throughout the world in unparalleled missionary outreach with remarkable speed, certainly Salesians have found themselves in various political contexts which others might perceive as demanding political response. Saint John Bosco never advocated indifference, but he also did not espouse political affiliation. In imitation of their founder, Salesians have often been busy about the livelihood and well-being of the young, protecting their rights by education and evangelization, physically moving and hiding them if needed (as happened in Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa not long ago, and as continues in China and Vietnam at the writing of this article) but never becoming politically active in such a way that would draw them away from their daily efforts nor put their young people within the target of political violence.

Saint John Bosco walked another kind of tightrope as an adult, the tightrope of diplomacy. At a time when the government in Piedmont was anti-clerical, closing seminaries, and restricting properties, Saint John Bosco was opening schools and educating the displaced seminarians. At a time when the nasty vines of heretical theology wound their way into the pieties and scrupulosities of seminaries, theologates, and liturgical practice, Saint John Bosco was

advocating joyful friendship with God, daily communion, and other unheard of practices for his time.

5.2. Eschatological Hope or Conservative Icon?

Anyone who has worked with young people and turned to the stories of St. John Bosco's life will remember the power those stories have had over their young audiences. But why is this? Often times the stories are scary, laced with images of demons or assassins. Other stories recount horrifying dreams. Another side of the stories would seem too distant in time and culture to speak to young people of today with their themes of religious discipline, guidelines for virtuous living (suggesting that games, card-playing, and even playing the violin could be dangerous and sinful!). What about messages of moderation can speak to young people today? How can the story of a peasant boy in the nineteenth century speak with power and appeal? Is his story ever rescued from the rigorism of his training?

Some religious groups have adopted Saint John Bosco as their patron for this or that cause or movement. Unfortunately, many of these groups demonstrate a judgmental and conservative brand of faith that would be surprising to Saint John Bosco. Taking his words and images out of context, many of these associations paint a dismal picture of this great friend of youth as anything but friendly. They use his teaching to prop up their claims to moral certainty and to denounce much of what is in our world today. Ironically, John Bosco would probably be found on their suspect lists today as he would mingle among the young to know their world and to present to them and attainable ideal of holiness.

It is important to stress that Don Bosco's attention to "the last things" was based on a tremendous optimism rooted in an eschatological vision of reality. This is contrary to many conservative groups of

Catholics enlisting members today for their various causes.

Don Bosco's vision of the future, with his all-conquering optimism was very different from that of the doom and gloom prevailing in the apocalyptic model of many Catholics. It was also different from the model set up by the Catholic Movement after 1870. Doubtless, this was due to the interior choice that he had been forced to make between the rigorism of his own ecclesiastical formation and the spirit of St. Francis de Sales to which he felt personally called.¹

Putting John Bosco's stories and teachings in the right context, this eschatological hope, allows them to breathe new life and new insights into any outreach for the young. The proper context has been set down clearly by Saint John Bosco and it is evasive because it is so obvious. The proper context to teach and share with the young is in their world and in their terms. That demands getting messy. That demands leaving the comfort zone and protection of this or that affiliation or the certainty of any self-righteous position. So obvious and tangible is this context that it is often distrusted as too simple or too old-fashioned. How difficult it can be to actually hear what the young are saying and to see what they are experiencing. But it is here that Saint John Bosco has always assured anyone interested in touching their lives that God can be found as real and alive. Eschatological hope does not move out of fashion.

5.3. Transformations: Victory Over Sin, Evil, and Death for Today

What can this focus upon "the last things" say to the educators of our time? Perhaps the most obvious response to that question is simply to recognize, once again, the existence of sin, evil, and death in a culture which has grown numb to those realities. The numbness is from too much

information and permits the viewer to be merely a spectator. In recent years, the internet has provided, sadly, an intimacy with death that has made it more a commodity for entertainment than something that demands our personal reflection. Curiosity, even morbid curiosity, has the power to hold death—and sin, and evil—at a distance. We can watch the gruesome beheading of a journalist on the internet, see bombing in Iraq through night vision technology, and absorb endless images and sounds of war, anger, despair, hunger, and genocide without any of the profound impact such events would have had at any other time in history. How can this pedagogy of Don Bosco speak to such an age? Is there any thing at all that can strike balance and reflection in our lives and the lives of the young?

The best answers usually come from the young people themselves. Are they looking for victory over sin, evil, and death? Is this a useless ministry or one that is vital and pertinent for today.

Craig Kielburger began a movement from his home in Toronto, Canada when he was 11 years old. This young Catholic boy read a story about the death of a Pakistani boy who dared to show the world the slavery of children. He was so moved by this story that he began a program which has now grown all over the globe. This program, staffed mainly by children, is entitled *Kids Can Free the Children*. It is an organized effort to motivate the children of the world to demand education and resources to combat war, evil, slavery, and every malady dramatically affecting the lives of countless children in the world today. Craig is removed over a century from Don Bosco and his efforts never once mention the sacraments. But his global encounter with the realities of death, evil, and choice put him on the same playing field with a Don Bosco. And it is his strong faith that has put him there.

What is important about the efforts of this young man is his ability to hold a mirror of reality to the faces of the countries and leaders of the world and show them with unstinting frankness and courage the brutal reality so

When we were up in these incredibly isolated communities that haven't changed in the past hundreds of years, they had never heard of the attack on America . They had never heard of the war in Afghanistan . But I am sure that they would share with us a message that whether a child be born in New York City or Kabul , whether a child be born in Santa Barbara or Quito , they are the children of the world, and it is our future which we all share. Every child is a treasure. Every child has the potential to be the next Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela. Every child has the potential to be the next Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King, Jr.

I want to leave you with a final thought, a quote from one of my heroes, Mahatma Gandhi. He said, "If we are to achieve true peace in this world, it must begin with the children."¹

Don Bosco had the same instinct to look to the insight and strength of the young. He too looked into the dismal face of their realities, but responded with hope. If we are to do the same, perhaps we need a bit of Don Bosco and Craig Kielburger: a good mix of eschatological hope with its burning desire to bring that same hope and salvation to the young, and an undying determination to seek freedom and justice for these same young lives. Both of these leaders of the young and founders of movements on their behalf can lay claim to the same source of their strength and vision: the Gospels. Let us conclude with the power of that Word.

Conclusion: The Pulsing Word of God

Dealing with death, evil, sin, and the decisions of life are never easy topics for anyone. For children, these topics are especially sensitive and demand the care and attention of a safe and reliable teacher.

Saint John Bosco's message was direct, clear, and attainable. It also reached a vast audience of the young and has done so for more than one hundred years.

It has been the hope of this study to illustrate some important themes of Don Bosco as educator of the young. It has also been the hope

of this work to recognize "that the Word of God is pulsing through life." These are the words of Dr. John Buchanan, the present pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. He has taught homiletics in both New York and Ohio and is currently writing, preaching, and teaching in Chicago. In Ohio, Dr. Buchanan had a weekly radio broadcast and was featured in *U.S. News and World Report* as the pastor of one of five model communities in the United States. In his teaching about the process of preaching on the Word of God, taught at Catholic seminaries as well as Protestant, he outlined a six day process for studying with, praying with, reflecting upon, and writing about the Word of God for a given Sunday. Dr. Buchanan insisted that the Word of God is a living reality pulsing through life and that every week, the homilist must "go in search of the Word." It was his conviction that the very readings for a given Sunday would be found in life. He urged his students to go into life with their eyes, minds, and hearts open for that living Word.

In short, this is the magic of Saint John Bosco. He had found the pulsing Word of God in life and invited his readers and listeners to join in the search. No journey into the Word is ever a journey leading away from the hard questions of life. In fact, it is in the Word, however it is conveyed, that hope in the face of death is found. It is in that living Word that the power of Love becomes real. It is that living Word which directs the human heart to make the right choices along the way. Ultimately, the real secret to life's mysteries is found only in this living Word. How fortunate we are to have such a monumental and attainable figure as Don Bosco, educator and saint.

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Other

BUCHANAN Dr. John: his method of preparing for homiletics is mentioned in the Conclusion of this paper. Here is some information about Dr. Buchanan: Currently serving as Pastor of Forth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, and Editor/Publisher of *Christian Century* magazine, Dr. Buchanan has also served the Presbyterian Church (USA) as Moderator of the 208th General Assembly and on the General Assembly Council. Dr. Buchanan's weekly column in *The Christian Century* is read by thousands of Christian leaders around the United States. He is the former Board of Directors Chair for the Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries and former member of the Board of Trustees of the Northwestern Memorial Hospital. He has received seven Honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees and three Doctor of Humane Letters. www.christiancentury.org/, or www.nccusa.org/.

KEILBURGER Craig, as cited on www.wagingpeace.org, the website for the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. Keilburger is also author of many books, especially the story of his efforts to begin *Kids Can Free the Children*.

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¹ Pietro BRAIDO, *Don Bosco's Pedagogical Experience*, Rome, LAS, 1989, 130.

² BRAIDO, 130.

³ John Paul II: Address to the Rector Major and General Council of the Salesian Society, February 4, 1989, in *Atti del Consiglio Generale LXX* (1989), no. 329, pp. 24-27 at 25; cf. Acts of the General Council, no. 329, p. 26.

⁴ Arthur LENTI, *Don Bosco: Father, Educator, and Spiritual Master*, in Chapter 29: "Don Bosco Educator of the Young: Development of a 'Method,'" Institute of Salesian Studies, Berkely, 2006, p. 659.

⁵ LENTI, p. 659.

⁶ Giovanni BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, translated by Daniel Lyons, edited by Michael Mendl, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1989 p.

⁷ Lenti, p. 693.

⁸ *BM III*, p. 251

⁹ *BM VII*, pp. 405-406 as cited by Fr. Lenti, p. 696.

¹⁰ Jacques SCHEPENS, "Don Bosco and education to the Sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist," in EGAN Patrick and MIDALI Mario, (editors) *Don Bosco's Place in History*, Rome, LAS: 1989, 383.

¹¹ Giovanni BOSCO, *Vita del giovatetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francis di Sales, (6° edizione)* (cura del Sac. Giovanni Bosco), Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1880, 59.

¹² BOSCO, 59.

¹³ BOSCO, 65. Don Bosco mentions his dialogue with Dominic Savio about not taking on more penances. This was important to Don Bosco because he notes that Dominic's health was already delicate.

¹⁴ BOSCO, 104.

¹⁵ BOSCO, 68.

¹⁶ BOSCO, 102.

¹⁷ Giovanni BOSCO, "*Cenno biografico del giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. Dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, ²1866, Cap. III, 5.

¹⁸ SCHEPENS, 392.

¹⁹ SCHEPENS, 392-393. Fr. Schepens quotes these words from Don Bosco in his later edition of the life of Comollo in *Comollo* [1854] 4.

²⁰ SCHEPENS, 394-395.

²¹ SCHEPENS, 400.

²² BOSCO, *Magone*, Cap. XV, 25-26.

²³ LENTI, p. 694. Fr. Lenti refers also to a study done by Fr. Pietro Stella entitled, *Sickness and Deaths at the Oratory*, in *Don Bosco, in Economic and Social History (1815-1817)*, p. 213-230. Volume IX of the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco (1867-1869)* offers many similar dreams and messages of Saint John Bosco regarding evil. Of particular note are three dreams he had in succession. The first dream begins with a vision of the vine plant extending from his window. The vine bears enormous clusters of grapes but the Don Bosco is suspicious of these unusual grapes. Some of the boys burst a few grapes and discover that their insides are rotten and foul. The second dream also deals with the vine, but this time it is barren. He notices boys falling and being dragged away. Finally, on a third night, Don Bosco is led by a guide into the very chambers of hell. All of these dreams were an answer to his request to receive messages to help him convince his students of the urgency to turn away from sin.

²⁴ LENTI, p. 690.

²⁵ *MO*, p. 13.

¹ Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco II* as cited by Juan Maria LABOA in "Don Bosco's Experience and Semse the Church," in EGAN Patrick and MIDALI Mario, (editors) *Don Bosco's Place in History*, Rome, LAS: 1989, 133.

²⁶ LABOA, 133.

²⁷ Emile POULAT, "Don Bosco and the Church in the world of the Nineteenth Century," in EGAN Patrick and MIDALI Mario, (editors) *Don Bosco's Place in History*, Rome, LAS: 1989, 109.

²⁸ Craig KIELBURGER, copyright by Nuclear Age Peace Foundation 2001-2006 as cited on their website, www.wagingpeace.org.



Continued from page 2 – Fr. Arthur Lenti

[Don Bosco] offered [the boys] another spiritual prop, [...] the Exercise for a Happy Death. "Remember," he wrote, "that at the hour of death we shall reap what we have sown in life. If we have done good works we will be happy. [...] Otherwise, woe to us! Remorse of conscience and the open jaws of hell will await us [...]" In 1847 Don Bosco began to set aside the first Sunday of each month for this salutary exercise, inviting all the boys to make a confession as if it were each one's very last, and to receive Holy Communion. [...] He heard the confessions of crowds of boys for hours and hours. After Mass and removing his vestments, he would kneel at the foot of the altar and recite the prayers of the Exercise for a Happy Death. [...] He would read aloud with great feeling the brief descriptions of the various stages of approaching death, and to each of them the boys would respond: "Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me!"¹

The Exercise for a Happy Death was another powerful factor in his educational system. When boys began boarding at the Oratory, they made the exercise for a Happy Death with the day pupils; later on he scheduled it on the last Sunday of the month for the former, and on the first Sunday for the latter. To make it truly effective, he exhorted them to put all their spiritual and temporal things in order as though they were to appear before God's tribunal on that day and to be mindful that they could be suddenly called into eternity. [...] The worldly-minded might think that mentioning death to young boys would fill their minds with gloomy thoughts, but that was not so at all. On the contrary, it filled their hearts with peace and joy. Spiritual unrest comes from not being in God's grace.²

On the day of the Exercise for a Happy Death, the boys not only faithfully carried out the customary practices of piety, but they also truly acted as though that day might be their last on earth. When they went to bed they even laid themselves out in the manner of a corpse. They longed to fall asleep clasping the crucifix; indeed many of them truly wished that God would call them to Himself that very night when they were so well prepared for the awesome step into eternity. One day Don Bosco remarked to Father [Giovanni] Giacomelli: "If everything is going so well in the Oratory, it is mainly because of the Exercise for a Happy Death."³

¹ *EBM* III, p. 14f.

² *EBM* III, p. 251.

³ *EBM* IV, p. 477-478.

This is a publication of
The Institute for Salesian Spirituality
At
Don Bosco Hall in Berkeley, CA

John Roche, SDB Arthur Lenti, SDB Joe Boenzi, SDB

Send questions and inquiries to donboscohallca@gmail.com