

D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 1

Getting to Know

# Don Bosco

## The Memoirs

Thanks goes out to Fr. Tim Ploch, the Provincial of the Western Province for providing each Professed Salesian with a personal copy of the *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales* as recently re-printed and made available at Salesiana Publishers. For those members of the Salesian Family receiving this guide, you are encouraged to purchase a personal copy.

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His Place in History



## Come Share Reflections and Insights!

This January there are two events offering further study and reflection on Don Bosco's life and his place in history. In both Southern California & Northern California there will be three evenings of study. For those wishing a more reflective experience, a Friday evening through Sunday lunch style retreat will also be offered.

### January 2012 Study Evenings and Retreats

#### Evening One

Monday January 9  
Don Bosco Hall,  
Berkeley 7-9PM

#### Evening Two

Tuesday January 10  
Don Bosco Hall,  
Berkeley 7-9PM

#### Evening Three

Wednesday January 11  
Don Bosco Hall,  
Berkeley 7-9PM

#### Evening One

Tuesday January 17  
St. Joseph's Youth  
Renewal Center,  
Rosemead 7-9PM

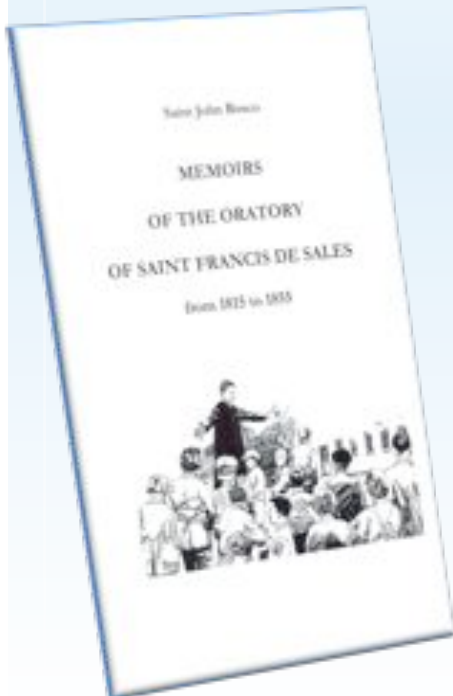
#### Evening Two

Wed. January 18  
St. Joseph's Youth  
Renewal Center,  
Rosemead 7-9PM

#### Evening Three

Thursday January 19  
St. Joseph's Youth  
Renewal Center,  
Rosemead 7-9PM

Detailed flyers and registration information are found in the last pages of this study guide.



## The Comollo Biography

Comollo's Biography was reworked many times  
for different audiences

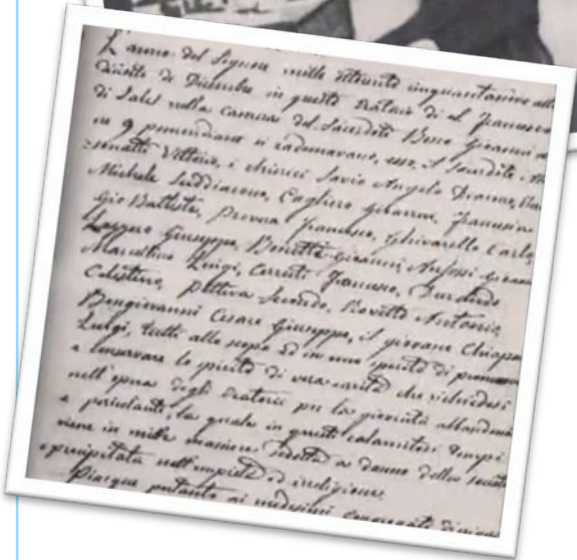
### Don Bosco's Curious Attachment

Having a world expert on Don Bosco living with you is quite a gift. As precise and critical as Fr. Arthur Lenti can be, I enjoy it very much when he speaks off the cuff and shares his insights and opinions about the details of Don Bosco's life. He is not above raising question and doubt while never losing respect or admiration for the great saint and founder.

In a recent conversation, Fr. Arthur recounted the propensity of Don Bosco to return again and again to the story of his adolescent friendship with Luigi Comollo. Fr. Arthur is not afraid to admit that this relationship and its hold on Don Bosco's adult life are a bit of an anomaly. Why, really, was the adolescent Bosco so taken by this boy whose personality and

temperament could not be more at odds to Bosco's own character? Bosco was certainly hungering for the spiritual and his friend pointed him in that direction, but the severity of this boy's asceticism would not be a tradition that Don Bosco translated into his own pedagogy of spirituality. Instead, Don Bosco would insist upon joyful, everyday—almost playful holiness. We can surmise that the experience of Comollo's death somehow cut a groove into the young Bosco at some intellectual and emotional level. The experience of the relationship and its sad ending has psychological significance, to be sure. One has to wonder how connected was this loss to the other traumatic losses of his childhood.

Yet, Don Bosco would return to the story of his friend again and again. It was the first of his written biographies and he reworked and edited many editions for various audiences well into his old age. What can we make of this?





## Preparation for Death and the Awareness of God's Attentive Presence

We know that Don Bosco's Exercise for a Happy Death was a key ingredient of his piety and something he insisted should be part of the Salesian tradition. During his time, there were many harsh and tortured images of death outside of faith or without the sacraments. This fear hung over the cultural experience of God for Don Bosco's age. As far as we can tell, much of Don Bosco's youthful formation wrung of such brooding rigorism and he was able to navigate past those squalls of faith because of key people in his own life.

Somehow, Don Bosco found the right point of balance between watchfulness and fear, between lively faith and dark piety. I would like to delve a bit deeper into this dimension of Don Bosco's piety and for that, I turn to a study I did regarding Don Bosco and the Last Things.

### Comollo, Death, and Evil

I will refer much to Fr. Arthur's critical analysis of this trait.

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.

### Teaching Others to Prepare for Death

Fr. Lenti gives a detailed description of Saint John Bosco's catechesis 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."<sup>10</sup>

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

<sup>10</sup> Lenti, p. 693.

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.<sup>11</sup>

An important part of the catechesis of Saint John Bosco, then, centered on 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 antibiotics 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.

### Death and Its Connections with Evil

Death predictions were not the only extraordinary 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 that 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 that 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."<sup>12</sup>



## From Accompanied to Accompanying Don Bosco's Biographies Pass on the Mission

### **A Movement of Accompaniment: the Sheep Become Shepherds**

Into the circle of his efforts to respond to the cry of the young, Don Bosco would pull in many resources from every sector of Piedmontese society. From clergy to government officials—even to the King himself, Don Bosco called for accompaniment of resources and concerned action on behalf of these young people. His plan took on more practical dimensions as he envisioned preventive measures of education for both social responsibility and productivity as well as moral and religious depth. These were two sides of the same coin for him. While Don Bosco frequently visited the young people in the poor places where they lived and worked, another need pressed itself upon him immediately and by May of 1847, with his own mother Margherita to assist him; he welcomed his first orphaned and homeless boy. It is interesting to note that Don Bosco quickly found a “companion” for this lad by opening the house to another orphan. Soon, Don Bosco's Oratory would be linked to boarding students and housing the homeless. This did not curtail him from continuing to offer assistance to those who did not stay with him. He continued to walk the streets, to meet in the marketplace, to visit the prisons, and to check on the factories. These activities would never wane. Instead, his focus on providing a whole environment for the young in which to grow into healthy citizens and committed Christians took on new force. He was always a collaborative man. He launched many initiatives, but always with others at his side. From Don Borel at the

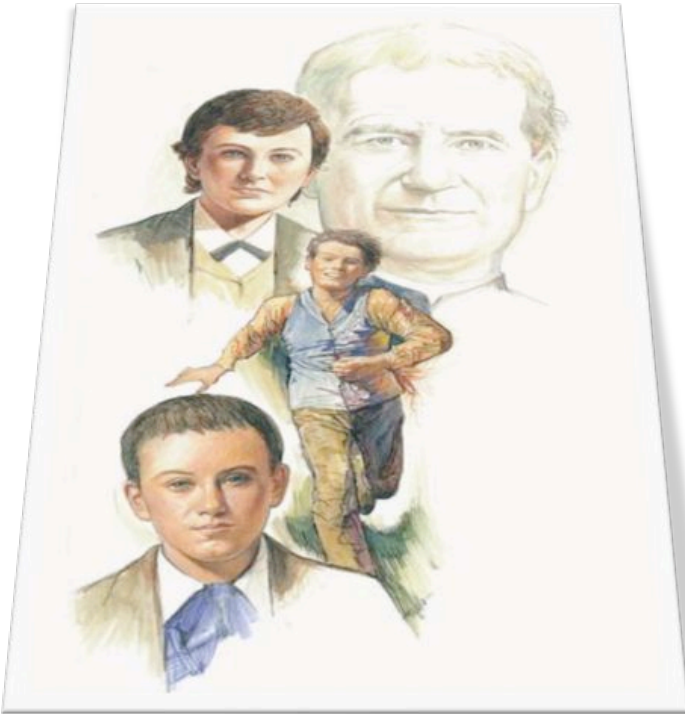
Filippi fields, to Mamma Margherita at the Pinardi House, to the Cooperators of future days, Don Bosco reached out with the force of an army of concerned individuals. Percolating in his mind, early in the evolution of the first Oratories of St. Francis de Sales and of the Guardian Angels, was the intentional forming of young people to take on his own tasks. This happened at two significant levels. First, it was a decisive part of the work of prevention in the lives of his young people—forming companions to keep each other from harm and to increase in virtue. At another level, though, was a new signpost growing clearer and clearer as it approached: the formation of a Salesian family of vowed members to carry on the outreach he had begun. At both levels, Don Bosco saw the fulfillment of sheep becoming shepherds and felt the guidance of the Shepherdess in the lead.

### **Human and Spiritual Accompaniment of Don Bosco's Students**

We cross now from the accompaniment in the life and faith journey of Don Bosco to the accompaniment he offered to his own students. Many of his students would become his first Salesians. A look at these interactions between Don Bosco and by referring to personal testimonies of the young it is hoped to reveal specific characteristics of the Salesian spirituality of accompaniment and its earliest applications. In such details are found intentional strategies and tactics of Don Bosco for reaching the heart of a young person and offer a passage to find fulfillment and holiness.



## The Biographies of Three Students of the Oratory at Valdocco: Living Hermeneutics



Normative to a study of Don Bosco's pedagogy and spirituality are the biographies he penned for three of his students to be preserved as models for imitation offered to all of his students present and future. In reality, there are four specific biographies, but the life of Comollo has been mentioned and is distinguished from the student biographies as a memoir of a seminary companion of Don Bosco. There are, of course, other students mentioned in Don Bosco's writings, but no others are written with such detail and with such clear intent.

Aldo Giraud, Salesian scholar and professor at the Università Pontificia Salesiana in Rome, has offered a structure for evaluating the encounters of these particular students as recorded by Don Bosco. This structure is helpful for deciphering these biographies for what is common in Don Bosco's approach with these students and what distinguishes one

from the other. Such analysis enables themes and styles to surface in the effort for a spirituality of accompaniment to emerge.

Giraud offers three levels of narration for organizing the biographies<sup>1</sup>. The first levels make use of historical details filtered through the "hagiographical aspects of the virtues concerned." The next level reveals the "hidden plot" of Don Bosco giving us a window into what is important for Don Bosco; this permits us a view of his ideas of good behaviour and holiness, his manner of relating to the students, and his deepest convictions. The third level or organization<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the identical narrative sequence Don Bosco followed in each biography, namely:

- The early life
- The meeting with Don Bosco
- Life at Valdocco
- Crisis, decision and transition
- The spiritual program
- Sickness and death
- Epilogue

The dusting of these biographies for the fingerprints of a spirituality of accompaniment will not include detailed historical information in the life of the subject (though some contextual information is always necessary) nor attempt a contextual analysis of Valdocco. However, the investigation pointedly focuses on the meeting with Don Bosco and what is revealed about his personal convictions. The process of "winning their hearts" will be touched upon with a more thorough examination of this experience at a later point in this work. With these parts of the narrative sequence isolated, it is hoped to reveal the spiritual program inside of a framework of accompaniment.

Giraud suggests that there is often opposition between the argumentative discourse and the narrative discourse in a narration, but he supports a union of purpose between these two dimensions. The

interaction between the lived situation and its recounting reveals something important. In other words, the time at which an account of a past encounter is made reveals something in that encounter which serves as a unique form of communication. For Don Bosco “in the perspective of the Oratory the story intends to transmit something, to disclose a pastoral model and an educational method, a spirit and spirituality...”<sup>3</sup> He suggests a link between the story and Don Bosco’s reason for telling it. The communication was never simply the recounting of facts, but, in reality, a hermeneutic intended to evoke “what it reveals”<sup>3</sup> in its listeners. Giraudo borrows an idea from Paul Ricoeur explaining that Don Bosco always included in the narrative a moment of challenge, something that needed resolution, in order to provoke a question that demanded a personal response inside of his listener/reader.<sup>5</sup> This provocation has the special quality to survive beyond the moment of the recounting and sets up a dialogue with all listeners/readers in the future, regardless of their own situations.

Don Bosco wanted to save souls. He wanted these stories to provoke a longing for holiness in the hearts of his listeners and make the encounters their own. We turn briefly to the narratives of these biographies to discover what they reveal about a spirituality of accompaniment.

### **Dominic Meets the Tailor: Accompaniment and Dominic Savio**

The most famous, and perhaps the most studied, among the student biographies are Don Bosco’s narration of the life of Dominic Savio. Don Bosco begins with details from Dominic’s home-life. What is important in these details is not the historical chronology so much as the foundations laid for building a life of holiness. Inside of the narration is the exposition of Dominic’s hunger for God and the paths the boy took in pursuit of spiritual

nourishment. Giraudo contextualizes the telling of these details within a certain religious and psychological profile of this young man: an anxiety for eternal salvation, anguish over the possibility of damnation, propensity for emotional religiosity, the dramatic perception of sin, and the view of God as both merciful Father and fearful judge. He demonstrated an early love and devotion for the Mother of God, an intense mystical awareness of the Eucharist, a desire, and delight for the vocation of the priesthood, a longing to study, and a heroic level of self-donation. These are the historical and anthropological character traits Giraudo identifies as those considered by Don Bosco for an intentional interpretation of the boy’s life.<sup>6</sup>

Such longings, sentiments, devotions, and fears would not have been unfamiliar to Don Bosco’s students at any of the points in which the narrative was offered. They point up the character of life and culture for that time and region. Don Bosco insisted here, as in other writings, the necessity of religion for a sound and complete education. It is enough to recall that Don Bosco proposed a style of education at a time of great anti-clerical sentiment

suspicious of faith and the influences of religion.

Giraudo points out that Don Bosco’s response to this situation is evident in the saint’s repeated association

of educators with shepherds. In this insistence, Don Bosco highlights the role of one who accompanies; an educator concerned more for the whole child than merely his academic formation. In addition, the power of that illustration is made in describing the interaction that occurs between Don Bosco and Dominic.





Dominic's hunger for holiness, nurtured by his family, noticed and fostered by his pastor, and finally brought to the attention of Don Bosco, was in need of direction and formation. In the narration, the central theme is depicted in Dominic's meeting with Don Bosco at the saint's office. There, Dominic sees Don Bosco's life motto: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*. Dominic asks for an explanation, is moved, and takes the occasion, eventually, to ask Don Bosco to be his special guide. The boy offers himself as a willing piece of cloth to be tailored in the skillful hands of Don Bosco. Here we find the meeting of two models: the young saint and the ideal educator. This begins a narrative with clear intent to reveal "a book of spirituality and narrative pedagogy."<sup>6</sup> Don Bosco's response to this request sets down a spiritual itinerary for Dominic to follow and outlines a very particular spirituality. He begins by telling Dominic to continually lift his heart and thoughts to God in prayer. In the next moment, Don Bosco cautions Dominic that two tools are necessary for the heart to remain attached to God. The first is mortification and the second is virtue. By mortification, innocence is preserved and by living virtuously, the love of God is known and demonstrated to others. Immediately a link is forged between personal piety and communal responsibility. This will become the template for a spiritual life. All the other tools are means for fostering these gifts of innocence and virtuous living. The presentation of this encounter puts the reader in the meeting and raises the same challenge to maintain innocence and live exemplary lives of virtue. In fact, as Don Bosco concludes the narrative of Dominic, he again addresses the reader and explicitly reveals what is the heart of his motive: to invite the reader to "pass from the plan of the narration to the religious message, from the contemplation of the 'pleasing, virtuous, and innocent' life of Dominic to personal commitment, from admiration to imitation."<sup>8</sup>

Stella's analysis of the same material uncovers what he calls a *typical post-tridentine*

*hagiography* at the center of the narration.<sup>9</sup> These include: the spirit of prayer, the devotions to the Eucharist and to Mary, the practice of charity toward others, and collective religious attitudes of associations and sodalities. Don Bosco's contribution to these appears in the homilies he gave on holiness and which move Dominic Savio's heart. This preaching on the vocation of holiness was followed by one on the zeal for souls and this seems to lead in the narrative to Dominic's decision to form the Company of Mary Immaculate. Here again, the process moves from personal piety to communal responsibility—indispensable for understanding this particular spirituality. In every biography, Don Bosco emphasizes the necessity of frequent confession and a consistent confessor. To Dominic, he recommends these as indispensable for holiness. He enshrines the virtues of doing one's duties to their fullest and with a cheerful disposition. Dominic becomes the prime example of choosing good companions and correcting those who stray from the fold through unhealthy relationships. His devotions for the Eucharist and to Mary are highlighted as extra-ordinary and spill over into the supernatural. The mention of the supernatural, however, is presented by Don Bosco not as the end in itself, but as a further confirmation that a young person could authentically give witness to the highest expressions of faith and the most profound experiences of God.

In the study of Giraud, he enumerates observable steps in the spiritual sequence proposed by Don Bosco in these narratives. The means to holiness, then, are:

- Piety
- Fulfillment of duties/studies
- Cheerfulness
- Mortification
- Apostolate
- Charitable service
- Practice of virtues

- Tending toward holiness

These would remain simply ideals if they were not presented as lived realities in the lives of Dominic and the other students. He presents Dominic as a model of attainable and visible holiness. His biography is not an “ideological deformation of the originating historical event” but a participation and mediation of the reality of spiritual life, bringing closer the experience of Christ and provoking in them a dramatic decision.<sup>10</sup> Taking the challenge of seeing in the holiness of the saints a living hermeneutic, Dominic Savio is Don Bosco’s prime example of living holiness.

#### **“He has a good heart”: Accompaniment and Michele Magone**

The starting point of Michele Magone is obviously a radical departure from the foundations in the life of Dominic Savio. So different, in fact, that Magone’s starting point appears as an intentional device of Don Bosco. We will see in the treatment of Francesco Besucco, that it is both lives taken together which inspires this third boy to become a saint.

Michelle’s plight shared similarities to Don Bosco’s story: the loss of his father, a hardworking mother, and the lack of means to rise above this lived situation and get an education. Don Bosco’s meeting with the boy is nothing like Dominic’s. In Dominic’s case, the eagerness to meet with Don Bosco and the strong desire for holiness propelled him to Don Bosco. In Michele’s case, Don Bosco runs into “the General in charge of the game”<sup>10</sup> at the train station and slowly wins the boy’s trust. The starting points are vastly different, but the end points are strikingly similar. Whereas Dominic’s heart seemed to be formed by his parents, his pastor, and an intuited love for God, Michele’s heart seems trapped inside of an impatient and intelligent lad not given to study or to catechism. Every attempt to harness this energy is met with frustration and disappointment. Despite this, Michele’s

pastor sees a deep goodness in the boy’s heart. This is the essential condition for holiness. Don Bosco’s intention seems clear in this detail. He accepts the recommendation of the boy for the Oratory because the pastor insists the boy “has a good heart.”

Is there a lack of accompaniment in the boy’s life, then? The accompaniment afforded Dominic Savio is certainly evident and comes from every angle. However, like Mamma Margherita, Magone’s mother did the best she could having to go away often to find work. Her intentions were good. Her means were limited. Don Bosco saw the boy’s goodness in his train station and marketplace meetings, but he awaited the same recognition in the pastor. This subtle detail is telling. Don Bosco does not encourage accompaniment. He insists upon it. Without the presence of the interested pastor, one wonders if Don Bosco would have ever made the invitation to Magone to come to the Oratory. What was assured in the life of young Dominic was not as evident for Michele.

As with Dominic, Don Bosco would enlist Magone into a life of spiritual hunger and the desire to become a saint. This met Magone from a different path than that of Dominic. Don Bosco’s first level of appeal was for Magone’s leadership and not explicitly his religiosity or devotion. It seems that immersed in the spiritual environment of his peers, Magone’s leadership was not enough to bring the boy satisfaction. What was missing was not immediately clear to Magone and it seems Don Bosco allowed the question to deepen in the boy’s heart until Magone, himself, came to the realization of his own hunger.

One has to imagine many groups of boys from all manner of varied backgrounds sitting and listening to Don Bosco’s stories finding themselves attracted in one way or other to one or the other model of holiness. How many knew their thirst for holiness like Dominic? How many were innocently unaware until they spent sufficient time in the Oratory with Don Bosco and those caught by his invitation?

Let us highlight Don Bosco’s intuition to find

the potential for Magone to become not only a leader but also a companion to his peers. How interesting is the intuition!

Accompaniment, then, is the capacity to lead, the ability to invite, the inspiration to transform, and the trust to let God's Spirit do the work. Dominic had this ability. Magone did as well. In the best and most apostolic sense, Don Bosco seemed to be covering all of his bases! He found willing hearts with different faces.

The key to Magone's story is the basic goodness in the boy. Every means suggested to Dominic became the passion of Magone after he realized that his life was empty so long as he was incapable of the same sense of prayer and meaning. Soon, confession and a regular confessor became unquestionable for Magone. He, too, gave himself to the Eucharist and the Mother of God. Yet, at first, these devotions and practices held no appeal to him. This is significant because the narration testifies to a heart not only attracted to Don Bosco, but one in which Don Bosco highlighted its goodness and invited the boy to deeper transformation. The raw materials were present. Holiness was possible.

### **The Gift of Diligence: Accompaniment and Francesco Besucco**

Francesco Besucco is Don Bosco's synthesis and spirituality put on full display. Here was a lad from poor means, loved by a large "harmonious" family, drawn like Savio from his earliest memories to prayer and devotion. Here was a boy whose mother, like Mamma Margherita, wanted holiness for her son above all other gifts. Francesco was a child whose goodness touched the heart of his pastor and whose hunger for knowledge of God and heavenly things was extraordinary.

Francesco had read the lives of both Savio and Magone and connected strongly with their experiences. Here was a member of Don Bosco's audience tuning into the frequencies intentionally signalled by Don Bosco in these writings.

The link between the three boys seems to be the important support they received from their pastors. This key person of accompaniment saw each one with the greatest of potential and each contacted Don Bosco to help foster this capacity within them.

In this particular biography, Don Bosco explicitly states that Francesco's heart had become possessed by God.

When the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in this world and no suffering distress it; on the other hand every affliction in this life is a source of consolation.<sup>12</sup>

It was this that gave Don Bosco fertile ground to shape a soul.

His avenue of approach respected the gift of Francesco. This was not an accompaniment of coercion, but invitation. Discovering his love of studies



and his great diligence, Don Bosco made this the sure roadmap for Besucco's path to holiness. Don Bosco saw his responsibility to be an important one in this act of accompaniment. Daniel O' Leary captures well the vocation of accompaniment as he writes:

Maybe, as well as being called to save and convert people into membership of the church, we are first called to the primary task of liberating people into the fullness of their own already graced humanity, into revealing to people the blessedness of their very being, of their capacity for living the abundant life in the here and the now.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Don Bosco even admitted some reservations that Besucco's thirst for holiness was a bit misguided in his excessive attempts for physical suffering and mortification. Don Bosco will go so far as to suggest that this area seemed an obstacle and weakness in Besucco that may have contributed to his untimely death. That being said, there is an interesting

detail that surfaces in this admission. Don Bosco felt himself standing at the door of a mystery. He had often felt this way in the presence of Savio, given to ecstasies and premonitions. He had the same feelings as he watched the transformation of Magone into a champion of good and frequent confession. Now the feelings returned as Besucco's sudden illness and death filled Don Bosco with awe. He suggested:

God saw the great love that this little heart had for Him and to prevent the evil of this world from ruining him, He decided to call him to Himself; he allowed an inordinate love of penance to a certain extent to be responsible for it.<sup>14</sup>

We see in this Don Bosco's clarity regarding his own role in the lives of the students. He was to accompany and guide, but God had the last word. The role of the guide is to lead the youth to awareness of God's goodness already present and at work in the soul. His job is one of invitation, not creation--of encouragement, not coercion. This awareness did not lessen Don Bosco's passion for saving souls; it simply respected the roles of those concerned and placed all the efforts into the hands of God.

### **Common Themes of Accompaniment from Comollo to Besucco**

There has been no attempt to include the biography of Luigi Comollo here or the disappointing story of a lost invitation in a student named Valentino. There are, however, common themes from all of these stories. Don Bosco's narrative of the life of his seminary companion returns us again to the theme of accompaniment in his own life. It was the depth of his friend that invited the young Giovanni into deeper awareness and the thirst for an interior life. Certainly, these had been implanted in Don Bosco from the start and we have seen influential persons and some of the events that molded his desire for holiness. However, the story of Comollo highlights a detail that runs throughout every narration, even those ending in apparent disappointment. Every narration presents a moment of crisis. The

crisis is very different from one protagonist to another, but a decision is provoked in every instance. Again, we call to mind the notion of the saints as true testimonies bringing the Incarnation of Christ closer and demanding a choice, in the views of Von Balthasar. Often times the crises are not neatly packaged in one event or person but sprout in the garden of particular seasons of life as a cumulative effect or a moment of reckoning. In some cases, though, they are dramatic turning points. For Giovanni Bosco, the meeting with Comollo seems to have been one that forever changed him.

Stella notices that the original text was structured chronologically and did not devote large portions to the development of some virtue. This separates this narrative from those of Savio, Magone, and Besucco. Indeed, what is common to all of them is the dearth of biographical detail and the anecdotal method with the goal of edifying and inspiring the reader.<sup>15</sup> One obvious additional device employed in this early writing is the comparisons offered between Comollo and Saint Aloysius Gonzaga.

In Comollo's biography arise sayings and maxims that would be found throughout Don Bosco's works, repeated in his *Companion to Youth*, and in other publications such as the biographies mentioned in this study. Yet it is curious that a decisively different quality of spirituality asserted itself in Comollo that would *not* survive in the later works: an excessive personal piety. Comollo wanted to withdraw from life completely. While this translates in Don Bosco's later writings as a detachment from the world and its priorities, it never becomes an obsessive dualism finding evil in every created thing. Fortunately, for Don Bosco's spirituality of accompaniment, there is a marked celebration of life and creation calling for participation rather than withdrawal. Such spirituality involves others rather than judges them. It rejoices in communal participation and mediation rather than self-preoccupation.

It is fortunate for the legacy of Don Bosco that in him we receive a more mature view of God as judge. Certainly, Don Bosco wove images

that were frightening and moved many a young heart to steer clear of hell, but for Comollo, the vision of his own condemnation and fear of a wrathful God became excessive. Might we make the link between the moment of hope that followed upon the great fear of Saint Francis de Sales and conclude that Don Bosco clung to this



hope and made it his own? The devotion to Saint Francis de Sales, so much a part of Don Bosco and his region, figures richly in Don Bosco's history of founding the Oratories and establishing a Salesian Family. Familiar to Don Bosco and his contemporaries would be the tale of the young lawyer and student of theology at the Sorbonne in Paris finding himself on the verge of despair. Having lived and breathed a loving and natural relationship with God in his home, the young scholar was repeatedly struck by the harsh soteriology of his Dominican and Franciscan professors. Salvation was reserved for the few. Logically, Francis' bid for salvation would be challenged to the core. This was the crisis, which, through prayer and divine intervention, would fashion the great Doctor of God's love. Don Bosco's patron had dedicated himself to combat these heretical and dark views of a loving God and rob the soul of God's closeness and availability. Don Bosco would join in this battle with passion. Saving souls, not threatening them, not terrifying them into submission, was his lifelong mission and he would speak the language of a Good Shepherd, the language of reasonable, loving kindness and faith. Perhaps the most important detail to underline in the narration of Comollo is his friendship with Giovanni and Giovanni

with him. Here is a complementary model. A spirituality of accompaniment begins with a seed planted in an open heart and proceeds through its stages of growth with various positive aids to that growth, including helpful persons and events. The journey of the budding spirituality necessarily depends on the intentions of others for designed and planned growth and formation, for nurturance by word and example. The greatest danger to the forming life is exposure to dangerous elements and the evil intentions of others. The framework of this spirituality is a shared journey to fruition. It is spirituality fiercely guarded by those who see the potential of holiness in another and who actively protects, guides, and nurtures the journey to fullness. The first line of defense is always at the peer level. This was the insight culled from his experience of Comollo. This is the importance of "good companions" becoming the guardians and protectors of the spiritual journey Don Bosco would offer to the young. These companions acknowledge the goodness of God already at work in life and participate in the invitation to act as co-creators with a loving God.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Aldo GIRAUDO, *Narrazione e formazione dei giovani, livelli di lettura e chiavi interpretative di alcuni opera narrative di don Bosco*, Dispense ad uso degli studenti, Roma, UPS, 2007,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Narrazione e formazione dei giovani*,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Narrazione e formazione dei giovani*, 4. This is my translation of the text: il racconto di sé in prospettiva oratoriana vuol dire, trasmettere qualcosa, svelare un modello pastorale e un metodo educativo, uno spirito e una spiritualità..., un racconto memorialistico che, nel suo stesso impianto narrativo, si rivela profondamente argomentativo, esprimendo la sua argomentazione attraverso lo strumento di una narrazione.

Così vorremmo che attraverso il corso traspaia uno stretto legame tra il racconto di Don Bosco e la sua argomentazione, legame troppo



spesso sconosciuto agli approcci tradizionali, ma anche a quelli di tipo semiotico.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Narrazione e formazione dei giovani*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Narrazione e formazione dei giovani*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. GIRAUDO (cur.), *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco. Riflessioni sulla "Vita."* Atti del Simposio. Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma, 8 maggio 2004. LAS, Roma, 2005, 42-60.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Domenico Savio raccontato da don Bosco*, 48 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II: *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Roma, LAS, <sup>2</sup>1981, 218-225

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Larry CHAPP, *Revelation* in Edward T. OAKES and David MOSES (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, <sup>2</sup>2006, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John BOSCO, *Biographical sketch of Michael Magone, young pupil at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, (translation by Aldo Giraudo),

Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales <sup>2</sup>1866, 3.

<sup>12</sup> John BOSCO: *The young shepherd of the Alps, or the life of the young Francis Besucco of Argentera*, (translation by Aldo Giraudo) Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales <sup>2</sup>1878.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel O'LEARY, *New Hearts, New Models*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 1997, 18.

<sup>14</sup> BOSCO: *The young shepherd of the Alps*, <sup>2</sup>1866.





## Suggestions for Use of this Guide...

### Community Days

During the Advent Season...

- Share the familiar stories of Christmases past with each other.
- While you are remembering past Christmas celebrations, recall a story or two of a young person who moved you personally by the example of that person's life.
- Invite local youth to an Advent Service and invite them to share the same stories in their lives.

### Cooperators

The Cooperators of the Province have a wonderful opportunity for organizing mission trips to the poor for the young people in their neighborhoods and parishes.

- Gather a local group of teens and young adults to pick a service project
- After the day of service, share a meal and ask the young people to imagine what Don Bosco did in the cold winters of Turin. How did he meet the needs of the youth during those cold months?

### With the Young

Advent and Christmas are rich opportunities to connect meaningfully with young people. Become involved in a service project or outreach to the poor with a group of young people.

- Invite the young people to share their experiences of ministry in this season by writing an article or by setting up shared experiences of prayer and celebration
- Invite the young to prepare an Advent Service using their culture to retell the story of Christmas

### Colleagues

In this month of exams, deadlines, traffic, and lines at the retail shops, take a step back to breathe and to pray.

Gather with your colleagues for an evening of reflection followed by a shared meal. Don't give in to the temptation to leap over Advent for a Christmas Party. Instead, celebrate the story of our longing for a Savior. After prayer and sharing, over a potluck meal, invite one another to share stories of faith and meaning. Explore what it means for us today to long for our Savior and what it means to bear Christ into the world.

# Merry Christmas!



The snowcaps of the Alps form a backdrop to a winter portrait of Turin, Italy. Whether you are dreaming of a White Christmas or a Golden Winter Tan, we wish you all the best for the great solemnity of Christmas. May the coming year bring you closer to the Savior and closer to the precious roots we find in Don Bosco!

## Institute of Salesian Spirituality

1831 Arch Street]  
Berkeley, CA 94709

### *Share your questions for Fr. Arthur...*

Please send your questions regarding the History of Don Bosco and his place in History to Fr. Arthur. Send these to [DonBoscoHallCA@gmail.com](mailto:DonBoscoHallCA@gmail.com)

## Guidelines for Deeper Study...

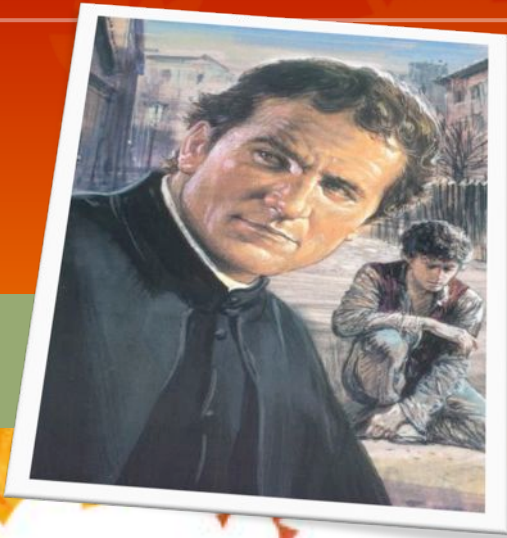
From the Critical Works of Fr. Arthur Lenti peruse the following treatments of the material included in this Study Guide

- Read Chapter 11, “John Bosco at the Public Secondary School of Chieri,” in *Don Bosco History and Spirit volume 1*, pp. 245-289.
- Pay particular attention to those details of the adolescent Bosco which begin on p.259 and read through 267 with the details of “the Happiness Club,” Jonah, and Louis Comollo.
- Continue reading into chapter 12, “John Bosco’s Vocational Crisis and Discernment at Chieri (1834-1835) pp. 291-309. Note the interesting critical corrections made to the MO in these pages.

From the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, by St. John Bosco, read the following sections:

- Read Chapters 8-16, pp.53-74. These chapters carry to the end of Part I of the *MO*.
- Note Chapter 16 in which Don Bosco describes his vocational crisis and discernment.
- Compare these details to those recorded by Lemoyne and the critical corrections regarding the recurring vocational dream and Don Bosco’s experience of discernment.





# Exploring Don Bosco

A Three Night Study and Reflection Series  
7:00 PM – 9:00 PM

Evening One

Evening Two

Evening Three

**Don Bosco  
in His Time**

**Post-modern  
Don Bosco?**

**The Young  
Adult Bosco**

In Northern California: DON BOSCO HALL BERKELEY

Monday January 9, 2012

Tuesday January 10, 2012

Wednesday January 11, 2012

In Southern California: SALESIAN RESIDENCE LOS ANGELES

**Tuesday January 17, 2012** **Wednesday January 18, 2012** **Thursday January 19, 2012**

This evening explores Don Bosco's historical and cultural settings which shaped his vision and mission. Understanding those influences help us to "begin afresh" from his perspective to enable our times to intersect with his.



Can the historical figure of Don Bosco offer insight for our own time and place situated within a post-modern crisis of meaning? What clues has this saint left us for navigating our way back to the "meta-story" of the Gospel?

Examining the young adult Giovanni Bosco, on his way to his mission and taking the first steps in his dreams, offers us a rich model of discernment and faith. Looking at his friendships, his seeking out mentors and spiritual guides, and his own ascetic choices offers today's young adult a roadmap for mission and an itinerary for everyday holiness.

There is no fee for this series.

INSTITUTE FOR SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY PRESENTS...

# A Special Retreat on Don Bosco

*The Don Bosco Retreats are offered for young adults and adults of the Salesian Family: members of Salesian parishes, youth centers, school faculties and staff, adult past pupils, and collaborators in the Salesian Mission. This weekend experience will offer reflection, discussion, and prayer around the life of Don Bosco, his place in history, and his impact on our lives and ministries today*



## “Don Bosco In History”

**January 6-8, 2012**  
**Don Bosco Hall**  
**Berkeley**

**January 20-22, 2012**  
**Salesian Residence**  
**Los Angeles**

**The retreat begins at 7:00 PM on Friday evening and concludes at lunch on Sunday.**

**Cost for materials, meals and lodging for 3 days inclusive, \$60.00**

### Retreat Registration

Mail registration to Don Bosco Hall 1831 Arch Street, Berkeley, CA 94709 or Fax to (510) 704-1925

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Check which retreat you would like to attend.*

January 6-8 Berkeley

January 20-22, Los Angeles

*Checks payable to Salesians of Don Bosco. Space is limited. Register by **December 29, 2011.***