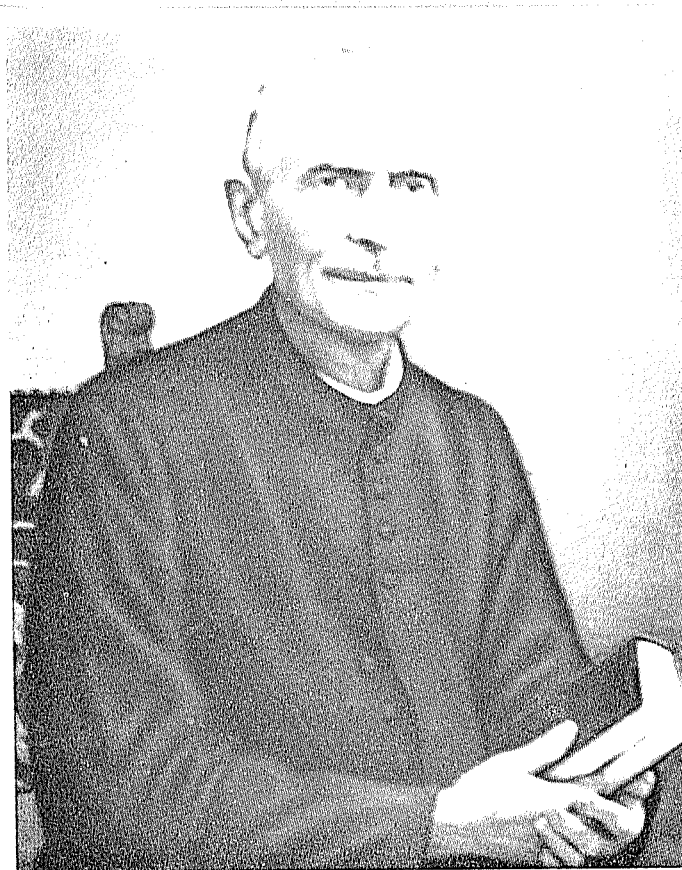

BLESSED MICHAEL RUA

**Salesian of Don Bosco
Modern Day Educator**

In 1848 while at school in the Northern industrial city of Turin, Italy, a close friendship developed between the 11 year old Michael Rua and the school chaplain Don Bosco. Twelve years later in 1860 Michael was ordained a priest for the Salesian congregation, a group formed by Don Bosco to offer 'a practical charity to their neighbour.'

After the death of the founder in 1888, Father Michael Rua was elected Superior General. Under his leadership and guidance the Salesian congregation grew and spread to many countries, while remaining faithful to Don Bosco's ideal of educating modern youth.

On April 6, 1910, after a lifetime of service to his congregation, this dedicated and gifted man died in Turin. He was beatified by Pope Paul VI on October 29, 1972.



John Ayers, S.D.B. Blessed
Michael Rua

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BLESSED MICHAEL RUA

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JOHN AYERS, S.D.B.

SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO
Boys' Town Engadine
P.O. Box 99
ENGADINE, N.S.W. 2233

First Printing November 1974.

Second Printing April 1976.

© 1974 John Ayers, s.d.B.

National Library of Australia
card number and ISBN 0 909986 14 2

Imprimi Potest T. F. Jennings, s.d.B.
Provincial

Nihil Obstat John T. Conway
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur James Madden
Vicar General
Sydney, October 24, 1974.

*Made and printed in Australia
by the Pauline Fathers and Brothers
of the Society of St Paul,
60-70 Broughton Road — Homebush, N.S.W. 2140,
as part of their communications apostolate.*

To God's Gentleman

F. X. A.

CONTENTS

Blessed Michael Rua — Preface	Page 9
Halves in everything	11
Absorbing a spirit	15
Timothy is faithful	19
New apostolic outlets	23
Flaws in the clay	27
Be always steadfast	31
Look at the saint!	35
Taking the wheel	39
Missionary crosses	43
A pilgrim Father	47
Gentleness at evening	51
Sharing the glory	55
Primary sources — Bibliography	59

PREFACE

It was Sir Walter Scott, if memory can be trusted, who once sniped mischievously: "The nearer to the Chancery, the further from Heaven."

In fact, from Chaucer's time onwards the image of a clerical administrator as an ecclesiastical Midas, who had taken far too literally the Lord's parable about the kingdom of heaven being like a householder in search of a coin, has been a persistent one.

Monsignor William ("Dollar Bill") Monaghan in the U.S. novel "The Cardinal" seemed, perhaps, too close to real-life to be funny.

To find a church administrator, then, raised to the altars as a Blessed is a welcome change. His name is Don Michael Rua, the first successor of Saint John Bosco in serving the Salesian society, who died in 1910 after a lifetime spent mainly at an office desk. He was beatified in 1972 by Pope Paul VI. ("Don" is the Italian title of respect given to priests.)

Much of this life is based on original documents from the Salesian Archives, Rome.

From the thorough De La Salle Brothers in Turin, Northern Italy, young Michael Rua learnt his first lessons in precision and self-discipline.

Their school-prospectus for the year of his entry (1848) seemed formidable enough to daunt any eleven-year-old newcomer. "Besides religious knowledge, the rules of literature, the system of weights and measures used in Piedmont; the recently developed decimal-metric system, the geography of Asia and Africa, the history of Savoy, drawing and handwriting."

Michaelino, or little Michael, as the slightly built Rua was called, remained undaunted and as a methodical student took each hurdle as it came. He would need to. His father, a supervisor at the Royal Munitions Factory in Turin, had died when Michael was only eight, leaving a widow and three sons; four other children had died in their infancy. As the youngest and brightest and serious above his years, Michael seemed earmarked for a clerical job

that would hopefully lead up to his father's old position at the factory.

But the school chaplain, a 33-year-old priest called Don Bosco, was to open up new vistas for the lad. Whenever Don Bosco entered the school chapel for Mass or confessions, as Rua later reminisced, the Brothers' proverbial discipline for once went out the window. "There was always a mad rush to greet him or to kiss his hand, the Brothers vainly trying to keep us in our benches. Each one of us felt genuinely loved by him."

Michael had already met Don Bosco on his home ground. Dazzled by a friend's bright tie won as a prize at the Valdocco Oratory (or youth centre), Michael had gone to see such munificence for himself. He had remained deeply impressed by his brief glimpse of this priest with the smiling eyes who could tolerate any amount of youthful exuberance.

But his mother, Mamma Giovanna, soon curtailed such visits. It was all right for his older brother, Luigi, to be mixing with the rowdy Oratory brumbies, but not for Michaelino with his matchstick frame. Besides, on Sundays he had to be on hand to serve Masses for the elderly factory chaplain who had very definite ideas on Don Bosco and his new-fangled projects, as Rua recalls. "I was deeply distressed when he once suggested that Don Bosco was ill—mentally ill."

Yet Rua's decisive life-call was still to come. Returning from school one day in the Porta Palatina market-place, Michael and his schoolmates met Don Bosco, and as usual they fronted up for a medal. Each received his medal except Michael. Instead

the priest held out his open left hand and, as the youngster watched wide-eyed, he pretended to cut it in half with his right.

"Take it, Michaelino, take half!"

It was a cryptic invitation—to be deciphered only with the passing years—for Rua to go halves in Don Bosco's life mission: halves in everything.

It was not easy for Rua, reserved and studious, to settle down in his new environment. Don Bosco's hostel was marked by a simple familiarity and free-flowing life-style that could be caught only by experience. From early morning till late afternoon the boys were out at various private schools or trade-centres; Rua's group, who went to Professor Bonzanino's school of classics being known locally as "Don Bosco's little Latinists." Most of them came from outlying farms.

Such a casual, nomadic existence seems to have thrown Rua's methodical study-system out of gear for a while. His first reports regretted his half-heartedness. Yet by the end of the year Michael's teacher was praising "his marvellous progress and enthusiasm" which won him a place in the "Senate" ranks in the fiercely competitive system then in use.

At the Oratory itself the neatly-dressed, quietly-spoken Rua must have felt overawed by the rough-

and-tumble country youngsters who spared neither plants nor people in their sweeping playground battles.

Typical of them was John Cagliero. Built like a tank and a straight-shooting one at that, he was to leave a fine reputation as the first Salesian bishop, cardinal, and musical composer. He recalls the quiet newcomer for us; hinting at the controlled energy which modern critics would call "that fire in the belly".

"Our youthful recklessness made a great contrast to Rua's self-control and sense of duty. On Sunday mornings while Don Bosco heard confessions before Mass, Michael took it on himself to stand guard near the playground tap; to remind forgetful ones of the Eucharistic fast (i.e. the old regulations). As our assistant on the way to school he would try — usually in vain — to hurry us on from the travelling acrobats or magicians in the market-place. Later on, as evening tutor to companions of his own age, he would quietly but firmly assert his authority at the start of class. I always had a holy envy of his goodness and self-control."

Tall, gaunt and eagle-eyed, the student-teacher proved just a little too stiff and unbending at times. Once when a young pupil by the name of Dominic Savio (yes, the schoolboy saint!) broke out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, he was sentenced to kneel in a corner by the disciplinarian Rua.

After one such incident the hyper-tense Rua found a small bottle of oil on his doorstep. "Take a few drops to loosen up the stiff hinges," ran Don Bosco's accompanying note. Only by a slow osmosis

would this intense young man absorb the Salesian gentleness.

Not that Michael Rua was ever a self-righteous prig. Far from it. In fact he was the mainspring of the senior students who went out during the cholera epidemic of 1855 to nurse the sick and dying in the Turin slums; often cutting up Don Bosco's altar cloths for sheets and bandages as they worked heroically for weeks on end, in shifts round the clock. Unstinted, self-sacrificing work would be the test of their authentic Salesian spirit in this low-keyed religious atmosphere.

Having received the clerical habit, Michael now took up his theological studies, often having to rise before dawn because of his regular teaching duties. Heaven knows how, but he also edited two Italian classics at this period.

Again the irrepressible Cagliero leaves us a memoir. "Rua and I slept in adjacent garrets, rising at four o'clock in the winter. With the water frozen in the basins, we used a handful of snow to freshen up before sitting down to work: Rua on his theology or Hebrew, and I at my old battered piano."

A religious society was slowly evolving, almost unnoticed. We find Rua's name among the first nineteen dedicated "to a practical charity to our neighbour", and known as Salesians; to the loving kindness of Francis de Sales would they look for patronage and inspiration in their work.

Michael Rua was at last ordained priest in 1860. Huge banners hung up in the playground read "Long live Don Rua"; but in his embarrassed, semi-humorous way Michael contradicted his boys, "No,

no! Long live Don Bosco." To this newly ordained assistant, Don Bosco had passed on a heavy, well-worn cloak for wintry days, adding significantly: "After I am gone, remember, you will have to wear Don Bosco's cloak full time."

On his return, he found a note in Don Bosco's handwriting on his desk: "Remember, Michael, that you will have many tribulations as a priest: first the dangerous Red Sea and long desert to cross; but then, at the end, you will enter the Promised Land."

TIMOTHY IS FAITHFUL

For the best part of 45 years Don Rua was glued to an office desk. A lot of that time he was to spend deciphering the handwriting of Don Bosco's voluminous letters and manuscripts. "None of you can make head or tail of my writing," Don Bosco would joke, "except Michaelino".

Only one who has actually seen the saint's feverish hieroglyphics, which would defy a professional code-breaker, can fully appreciate a Salesian wisecrack, "On that score alone Don Rua deserves to be beatified!"

One week it would be such a mountain of mail that Don Rua was forced to call in three secretaries to help; next time he would burn the late candle getting Don Bosco's History of Italy or current Catholic Readings off to the printers.

But this faithful interpretation of Don Bosco's hand was in itself symbolic: only Rua could read the man, the complex saint with an incredible number of irons in the fire; only Rua could understand

the vast world-vision that drove Don Bosco's Ordinary, Archbishop Gastaldi, to distraction; only Rua realized the revolutionary concept of a totally new religious life, stripped of every monastic vestige and modern enough to adapt to every time and place. So much so, that Rua secretly asked his fellow Salesians to keep written records of this "golden age" in Don Bosco's life.

For this reason it was Rua who always accompanied Don Bosco on his trips to Rome, France, and Spain. Of his first trip to Rome Don Bosco wrote back to the Oratory: "Michael Rua is in the seventh heaven. Besides the revised constitutions, his bag contains 25 gold florins which Pio Nono (Pius IX) has sent expressly to provide a treat for our boys."

After crowds had mobbed Don Bosco in Marseilles, he turned to Don Rua in the departing train. "Do you recall, Michael, that poor old house on the hill on the Murialdo road? That was my home, and there I grazed our two cows. If these people only knew they were making so much fuss about a poor peasant from the Becchi!"

A splendid photograph of the Barcelona trip shows Don Rua leaning over Don Bosco rugged up in an armchair, his eyes fixed on the older saint as if anticipating his every word or need.

If it was not an easy job to be dotting Don Bosco's "i's" or crossing his "t's", it was still less to be his financial administrator. Finance was never Don Bosco's strong point. Not that he lacked the charm to empty pockets in every part of Europe;

but he too often risked gigantic undertakings without considering his already heavy debts. (His own Salesian Chapter, for example, let Don Bosco die without knowing of a debt of 600,000 lire which he had contracted on the Sacred Heart Church in Rome.)

And it was precisely here that Don Rua shone. "So perfect was his office administration, you would have thought he was a bank manager all his life," a Turin financier observed. Not one Salesian house escaped his minute scrutiny of accounts, all hoping to hear his customary "Deo Gratias" if they successfully passed the ordeal.

Again, like a good vicar, Don Rua was prepared to act as a buffer to let Don Bosco's fatherly image be preserved. Any odium he would take on his own shoulders. Thus on the back of an old envelope are still preserved some of the admonitions written by Don Bosco but carried out by Don Rua:

"See that no punishments or permissions are given without authority — Some houses are still wasting soap, gas and fuel — Check on attendance at meditation and spiritual reading — (and a priceless one!) See that young aspirants are not put in charge of the winecellar."

In every storm Don Rua would gladly stand in as lightning-rod. In the long misunderstanding between the pioneer Salesians and the gifted Archbishop Gastaldi, for example, it was Rua who bore the brunt of the painful correspondence and humiliating meetings; to the point where he was found in tears at times.

A Timothy to Paul, a Francis Xavier to Ignatius; so would Don Rua be to Don Bosco—his *alter ego* or other self, prepared to eclipse for the moment his own ideas and feelings. At all costs he would be the loyal disciple and faithful interpreter.

NEW APOSTOLIC OUTLETS

In "The Soul of the Apostolate" Abbot Chautard has some very harsh things to say about religious who are over-involved in administrative work; he rates their chances of christian holiness rather slim, it seems.

In practice, Don Rua's life would flatly contradict this ascetic monk. Not only did his office become charged with a religious spirit, but he seized every chance for extra pastoral outlets. We have testimony of this from his secretary, Father Vespignani:

"For me Don Rua's office was an inspiring classroom. We started each day with a devout Angelus and a brief thought from St Francis de Sales' writings. Most of the correspondence dealt with spiritual matters or charitable requests, and I marvelled at the good humour seasoned with simple faith that permeated Don Rua's words. I absorbed his church-zeal and his enthusiasm for the foreign missions; an anecdote of Don Bosco's pioneer days broke the routine every so often. Every visitor, whether priest,

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layman or boy, left his office encouraged or consoled. In that room God's glory or the good of souls seemed always paramount."

More scope was given Don Rua's zeal when he was appointed part-time rector of the Vanchiglia Sunday Oratory. Local residents soon got used to the noisy crowds of boys who would walk the three miles with him, and to their breezy Piedmontese "*Cereia, Don Rua*" — "See you next Sunday, Don Rua." When one youngster grumbled at having to recite the Rosary during the walk home, Don Rua encouraged him, "Just one more decade, Domenico, and you can have my dessert at supper tonight"—as Father Dominic Teia recalled of his own life. He added, "He was constantly at recreation, taking part in all our games and songs."

Don Rua was now given a two-year respite from his office work when Don Bosco appointed him full-time rector of the Oratory and School at Mirabello. Again his personality expanded in this wider apostolate: his senior St Vincent de Paul lads visiting needy families with parcels; his juniors strengthening their faith in the St Aloysius Sodality. If spiritual results are tangible then one could point to the diocesan seminary at Mirabello, where the numbers jumped from 28 to 122 during his time there—most of them his past pupils.

Vocations were always uppermost in Don Rua's mind. Delayed vocations, men of mature age, were his forte in this field. "I was 42 and a practising chemist," writes Father Angelo Lago, "when Don Rua encouraged me to study. He joked I could say Mass for forty years before I was ninety."

Not that Don Rua's work was one long success story. Far from it. In an era unsettled by the industrial revolution and badly hit by war, street fights and gang warfare among the youths of Turin were only too common, and at times they invaded the Salesian premises. More than once some of his restless hostel lads would disappear with his blankets and borrowed clothing, after having upset the house discipline no end. At such times, the priest would need to call on all his well-known self-control and patience.

Recalled to his old office-desk at Don Bosco's Oratory in 1868, Don Rua found that the administrative work had got totally out of hand. Snowed under by mountains of paper and already worn out from Mirabello, he suddenly collapsed on the job. Don Bosco seemed strangely unconcerned, however, and even facetious: "Don't worry, Don Rua; even if you fell from your window onto the footpath you wouldn't die: we need you for many years yet."

Even so, a holiday was long overdue, and he was packed off to the country for some weeks to recuperate.

FLAWS IN THE CLAY

The Australian historian, Dr Manning Clark, keeps pointing out what he calls some fatal flaw in the clay that very often brings down a character in history.

By that criterion Don Rua's character would keep any critic busy: the hesitancy and insecurity; the scrupulous anxiety for minutiae which seems to prevent him from going through life at full stretch; the perfectionist hobbled to half-pace, etc. At least, to most eyes it would appear so.

A classic example is recalled by his secretary. "More than once I was called to book for my carelessness with mail in not having fixed a stamp in the right position." What may seem pettiness to us, was to him an infringement of principle; and a man of his integrity could never bypass principles.

Was it for this reason, perhaps, that Don Bosco gently satirized his vicar at times, even in public? At table on one occasion Don Bosco set all his Salesians laughing, Rua loudest of all. "Last night I

dreamed I was in the sacristy and wanted to go to confession. Looking round for a priest, I caught sight of Don Rua saying his Breviary. But he looked so stern that my courage failed me, and I just couldn't bring myself to approach this severe task master."

It was because of this sang-froid—more appropriate to an English Newman than to an Italian Rua—that an Oratory tradition judged a "no" from Don Bosco more pleasant than a "yes" from Don Rua.

This monastic severity seems reflected, again, in the way that Father Joseph Simeoni was given his posting overseas. "I was told by Don Rua that a Salesian was urgently needed for six years in San Francisco—to me the end of the world—and that he would like an answer by supper-time. Next morning I was off, with my six years actually turning out to be fifty."

In the same vein his extreme care for poverty might seem parsimonious to modern eyes: whether picking up bread-scrap in the playground for his next meal, using old envelopes for his daily notes, or calling the cook into his office to point out a wasted meat chop he had recovered.

Yet oddly enough it was on this very point of poverty that Don Bosco at times took Rua himself to task. "They tell me, Don Rua, that you're hoarding some shares in your desk to meet some heavy commitments in two weeks' time. That's the way human prudence works, not Divine Providence. Cash them today!"

Another time Don Rua and a few other Salesians

were reluctant to raffle a Raphael copy to pay for daily provisions as Don Bosco had ordered. Back came a curt note from Don Bosco. "Tell Don Rua and his friends that instead of eating in the dining room during dinner hour, they can go to look at Raphael's painting."

Again during Don Bosco's absence in Rome in 1876, Rua incurred a moderately heavy bill by bricking up some dormitory windows, without any previous consultation; and even the vicar's humble apology failed to appease Don Bosco's wrath on this occasion.

It is folly to play at character-judging our predecessors; more so today with Vatican II hindsight. Besides, as God's call in Scripture indicates, Providence does not always choose psychologically perfect personalities to the wedding-banquet. Let Don Rua's patron, St Francis de Sales, have the last word on this: "God has left certain faults even to the holiest of souls, which they are unable to cast out in spite of all goodwill; so they are compelled to constant prayer and humble reliance on God."

By using Manning Clark's criterion, instead, we can so easily underestimate not only the worth of the basic clay but the skill and patience of the Divine Potter as well.

As a character Don Rua has never been universally popular even with his own Salesians. As Cardinal Cagliero once told Don Bosco in his own inimitable way, "Rua's not everyone's darling, you know."

Aquiline and forbidding in appearance, Rua might have been an Old Testament prophet come straight from the desert; or an elongated El Greco portrait come to life. His statue-like posture at prayer was in itself a rebuke to any slackers. Meriting the nickname of the "living rule", this steadfast priest would every day act as boundary-rider, doing the rounds of every corner in the Salesian house. "Under the master's eye the horse grows fat," he was fond of quoting. At night he would gently but firmly enforce the silence after prayers, bailing up any transgressors he found and then conscripting them into a rosary with him in the courtyard.

Such strength and gentleness were admirably blended in Brother Dogliani's case. At times this

veteran Salesian Maestro burnt the late candle in composing his musical scores, so that his violin — for all its eloquence — cut into the prescribed night silence. A discreet knock at the door.

“Ah, Dogliani, I thought I heard two violins in harmony.”

“No, Don Rua, I’m composing an exercise for two strings.”

“Wonderful, wonderful, but do look after your health now; the Oratory wants to keep its musical maestro in perfect shape, you know, and now, ‘Sogni d’oro (Pleasant dreams).’”

Not even Dogliani, for all his sensitive genius, could take offence at that.

His strength of character was evident above all in his work. His day began at 4 a.m. and finished at 11 p.m., so that often he had to stand at his inclined writing-desk to keep himself going. “Even in a train,” the Belgian provincial recalls, “Don Rua would still be busy every minute, reading letters or making notes.”

Text-snippings from Scripture are just as inconclusive as snap character-judgments, but one passage from St Paul does seem to fit Don Rua to a tee.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the works of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain” (1 Co 15, 58).

There is another little-known side to Rua’s character as well: a gentle moderation and warm humanity that shone through in spite of himself. After his last surviving brother died, Father

Francesia found him with his eyes red from crying. “Poor John was the last of my dear brothers, and now I’ll soon be joining them.”

Again in the last few years of her life Mamma Giovanna kept house for the Salesians, and Rua was embarrassed by the little comforts that his mother insisted on getting for his room—a better iron bedstead, thicker woollen blankets, etc. — much to the secret delight of the other Salesians and boys.

There were, besides, many personal kindnesses that showed the heart of the man: Father Tozzi, suffering from a persistent cough in South Africa, receiving a bottle of medicine from Don Rua in far-off Turin; the Salesian baker in Montevideo, South America, thrilled by Don Rua’s note praising his “excellent loaves from the oven and hoping now for a fresh batch of fine vocations”; the Argentinian priest proud of the 115 letters from Don Rua to help him with his largely imaginary problems; the local friends who annually received the first grapes or new pears from the Oratory garden.

And Don Rua insisted on the same personal approach in others. In South America a heavy-handed superior in Father Borghino opened a parcel from Don Rua to find a small jar of honey with a note attached, “Take a spoonful every morning, dear Father, to sweeten your community life” (shades of his own oil-bottle lesson!)

For all his seriousness, too, shrewd observers noticed that Don Rua had a subtle sense of humour. When a naive Father Versiglia (later bishop and martyr) indiscreetly asked Don Rua whether he had

ever worked a miracle, the priest feigned embarrassment: "Well, there was this woman with a heart condition whom I blessed," Rua began reluctantly. "And she . . .?" interrupted the ingenuous Versiglia. "And she died a quarter of an hour later." All this with a straight face, apart from the smile playing around the corners of his eyes.

Likewise on leaving the novitiate house in France, Don Rua gave the absent-minded Father Binelli—despite his protests—three 100 franc notes as a farewell token. "Don't thank me, Don Binelli," Rua laughed, "I found them as markers in the book beside my bed." And there was the time when the big-hearted Father Ubaldi, corrected by Don Rua for omitting several kisses in the liturgy, took the little man too literally into an enthusiastic embrace, much to the delight of the altar boys. "No, no, on the hands," Rua bellowed in mock protest.

In short, we need to get behind the caricature of an icy, distant figure to do justice to the man who had taken Francis de Sales as his model of gentleness and loving-kindness. After all, since the Church has spoken, Don Rua is not on trial; but perhaps our own historical perspective is.

LOOK AT THE SAINT!

During one of his visits to Sicily, Don Rua was disconcerted by a little girl shouting from the crowd, "Look at the saint; look at the saint!"

When we come to look more closely at the saint in Don Rua, however, we might feel a little disappointed. At first there seems so little, if anything, of the spectacular about his life and work, that we could echo Silvio Pellico's words about Don Bosco: "What impressed me from the first was his simplicity and recollection: the hallmark of a holy man."

Don Rua did share with his founder a virile, stout-hearted piety that looked for expression in self-sacrifice for Christ's Church. "Coming out from Mass," Father Vespignani remembers, "Don Rua greeted all of us Salesians and boys with a glowing countenance and serene smile; both arms extended as if wanting to take the whole world in his embrace after the charity of Christ." His prayer life was always profound and intense.

Besides this eucharistic self-giving, his strong devotion to Mary as Mother of the Christian Church was prominent. In the presence of Cardinal Rampolla at a Rome convention, Don Rua once rose to correct a previous Salesian speaker. "How can we possibly speak of Salesian expansion," he chided vigorously, "without singling out Mary's powerful help."

Yet one must return to a major theme of the Scriptures to understand Don Rua's particular holiness at a deeper level: to the concept of the Poor Ones of Yahweh. After their return from exile, the remnant of God's people found their only hope in an utter, child-like dependence on the Lord; totally abandoning their private plans for the future to be, instead, like the Psalmist, simple servants at the Lord's beck and call. All this was in contrast to the stiff-necked worldly shrewdness and self-sufficiency that had once led them to disaster. It was precisely this spirit that Christ exalted in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit;" and it reached its zenith in the Suffering Servant, who had totally emptied his life of self-will, and in his Mother, who as a lowly maid-servant would magnify her Lord. Accordingly, *only* as a little child could anyone gain the kingdom.

In this light, all the accusations of Don Rua being a non-person, a passive shadow, a second-string Salesian etc. fade to nothing.

This is given powerful confirmation by Dr Victor Frankl. With his own experience in Auschwitz concentration camp behind him, this genuine modern prophet reaches the same conclusions by psychiatry

"Only to the extent to which a man forgets himself, giving his life totally to working for God's cause and for others, will he find genuine self-fulfilment" (*Man's Search for Meaning*).

On the other hand, could not much of today's frustration, boredom, and disillusionment be traced precisely to this preoccupation with one's own personality-development and self-centred plans?

Miracles in Don Rua's life there were too; but usually of the charming, insignificant type which we would come to expect from this self-effacing man of God: multiplying toffees from a small bag to delight 200 Arab children in Jerusalem; asking a deaf man if he would become a Salesian co-operator if cured, only to be told by the patient that he'd never heard of that organization; or (this one almost transposed from the *fioretti* of Assisi, and on convent hearsay only!) ridding a convent kitchen of Argentinian ants by having them march in files to an accommodating ditch nearby. Many more are documented. No wonder Bishop Mantegazza, the Auxiliary of Milan, could say with tongue in cheek, "In Turin there are three things worth venerating: the Holy Shroud, the Church of the Consolata, and Don Rua!"

Among poor youngsters, above all, Don Rua radiated God's goodness. "One could never forget him," a Swiss newspaper recalled, "as he set the youngsters alight with enthusiasm by a gentle, Christlike pat on each head."

From 1885 onwards, he had shouldered most of the work for the ageing Don Bosco. At his death in 1888 the founder's last words for his disciple were,

“Don Rua, make yourself loved.” He would, for certain; progressively as the years went on, until some thought they discerned in Rua’s character a real metamorphosis.

On paper one would have thought it was a matter of simple succession: “Don Bosco is dead; long live Don Rua.” For had not Cagliero earlier declared, “Don’t call Don Rua Don Bosco’s right-hand man: in fact he’s Don Bosco’s heart, head, and hands!” Besides, with the unanimous consent of his chapter Don Bosco had actually drawn up before his death such a document of succession.

In practice, however, it was far more complex than that. Not only had the succession document been mislaid, but in 1888 Rome had its doubts about this newly launched congregation with the wind in its sails and an unproved newcomer at the wheel. So much so that there was serious talk at the Curia of merging the Salesians with an older, more experienced religious order; until a friendly Cardinal Protector was finally able to straighten out matters.

In his very first letters to the widespread Salesian family, Don Rua clearly set out his intended programme: “To maintain and develop Don Bosco’s

work while faithfully carrying on the founder's own familiar spirit and life-style."

Even so, Don Rua would have to trim his sails for a time at least. "Slow down," Pope Leo XIII had good-naturedly advised, "you are expanding too rapidly and sending mere boys as superiors to South America."

Despite this, during his 21 years as superior-general, Don Rua would see the original 64 Salesian houses grow to 314, and the Salesians themselves increasing from 774 to 4010. Such increased manpower, Rua insisted, should be diverted towards the children of the poor in Oratory-type work.

"If you wish to save a poor neighbourhood, open a Festive Oratory. Even without grounds and buildings, if you are real Salesians the Oratory will be in you." His followers took him at his word. In Seville, Spain, for example, the terrorized citizens were relieved when at a Salesian Brother's prompting over 500 youngsters laid their catapults ("shanghai") at the foot of Our Lady's statue. Street lights would now shine again, and the district could sleep in peace!

Faced with new problems, Rua was not slow to diversify the Salesian work: whether a school for deaf children in Naples, a rehabilitation centre for young offenders in Malta, a bike-racing club in Milan, or a christian co-operative and trade-union centre in Switzerland.

He was too realistic, however, to be deceived by any window-dressing or mere numbers. "Don't be deluded," he wrote, "by fictitious progress; only houses built on piety and christian conduct will

flourish. Vocations are always the only true index of progress and God's blessing. Music, drama, and sport are all praiseworthy; but our chief aim is to sanctify feastdays by the teaching of catechism as our unforgettable Don Bosco wanted us to."

So anxious was he to preserve Don Bosco's original unity, that he often expressed fears of a local "provincialism" among his Salesians, as at the 1904 General Chapter for example. In our post-conciliar era with emphasis on decentralization, some might deplore his stand; but in this initial period, vigilance was essential for the slightest sign of division. Church history has shown too many young congregations split down the middle by a green-stick fracture.

One of Don Rua's tasks as new superior-general was to give out every year the special crosses for departing missionaries. Some years there were as many as 295 in one group.

Such a function mirrored Don Rua's life at the time: inspired by missionary zeal on one hand and harrowed by grievous crosses on the other.

Rua often called to mind Don Bosco's insistence that the Salesian spirit must be an ecclesial, missionary spirit; for educative-love by its own intrinsic dynamism must end by filling the earth. "If I only had ten Don Ruas," other Salesians recalled Don Bosco saying, "I could conquer the world."

To Bolivia, Mexico, Colombia, China, India, and the United States would Rua send his men, mostly rugged late-vocations, with their hands toughened by the plough and their homely speech indicating their peasant background.

Typical of these stalwart men of God welcomed by Rua was Father Michael Unia. In four years with

the lepers at Agua di Dios (Colombia), almost single-handed he built a church-settlement, hospital, and school; began a vast agricultural scheme, bringing water over a hundred miles to that mountainous spot by an elaborate canal system; and—mourned by the whole country—died of sheer overwork at 44.

Such gigantic ventures cost money, and Don Rua was often at his wit's end to meet his missionary commitments. Even so, he never once let up from his old refrain, "Let us go to the young, to the poor, to the world." When a procurator, already in financial trouble, asked permission to complete a church-building, Rua's answer seemed paradoxical, "Yes, on one condition—that you find accommodation first for fifty poor apprentices."

It was on his Salesian co-operators that Don Rua leant for such funds, telling them that the survival of society and the renewal of the Church were at stake. Several world congresses were organized, not as shows of triumphalism but because Rua knew that at such moments a crowd finds its heart and soul. "Courage, we have Divine Providence," he wrote, "and we have the co-operators. That is enough."

His own courage was to be sorely tested at this period. From Brazil arrived news of a train accident, killing Bishop Lasagna and several other Salesians; from France and Ecuador news of religious suppression.—In Messina, Sicily, it was a disastrous earthquake killing 54 in one Salesian house alone; in Turin itself Rua was called in as an outside arbitrator in a prolonged cotton-mill strike; in Poland,

an attempted breakaway by "stricter observance Salesians."

On top of that the Holy Office now decreed that religious superiors could no longer hear confessions of their subjects or pupils—up to this time considered an integral element of Salesian direction in education. Don Rua's subsequent trip to Rome to plead against this ruling earned for him only a sharp rap on the knuckles and an ultimatum from that august establishment to quit Rome within twenty-four hours. For a time, also, the Salesian Sisters were compelled to sever all family links with the congregation. Finally, trumped up charges against the Salesians in Varazze led to unpleasant drawn-out court proceedings. "Don Rua looks like a broken man," the house chronicle reported at the time.

"If the Lord gives me strength to complete this desert crossing," Rua humbly promised, "I will make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land."

A PILGRIM FATHER

By third-class train journey, by steerage, by donkey, and on foot Rua kept his vow. Having retraced the Lord's steps throughout the Holy Land, and along the Via Dolorosa, he would visit the many Salesian works of charity in the Middle East: Oratories and orphanages, technical and agricultural schools, colleges and seminaries. "How these Arab people love Don Bosco!" he marvelled with simplicity when mobbed by enthusiastic crowds.

From there he visited practically every Salesian house in Europe to maintain Don Bosco's spirit of unity, despite the aversion his own weak health and retiring disposition felt for such travel. He showed himself the good father rather than a superior, although once or twice the old taskmaster did peep through: "Gregorian chant needs improving; some theology students still persist in abuses of poverty; and pupils must have better supervision on train journeys."

In London Bishop Butt of Southwark made the

interesting comparison that he "had been more impressed by the gentle, ascetic Don Rua" than he had earlier been "by the headstrong Don Bosco". Salesian folklore, I believe, claims that a young English cleric, having entered the dimly lit office and having heard a sepulchral-tone "*dunque*" (Come, then!) from the skeleton-like Don Rua, turned and fled in terror. Cardinal Bourne remained a lifelong friend and admirer of the Blessed, as did many of the English clergy.

In Malta Don Rua's visit is commemorated to this day by streets named after him. He was not at all pleased, however, when admirers there were indiscreet enough to snip pieces off his soutane as "relics". "Not all lunatics are in padded cells," he was heard to mutter impatiently.

In Rome, at the Irish College, Don Rua had a long conversation with Archbishop Carr of Melbourne who asked for a Salesian foundation in his archdiocese. "This request," wrote his secretary, "pleased him immensely as if he had been waiting for it." (By coincidence, the shaky Salesian foundations in Australia were eventually consolidated by Father Joseph Ciantar, whose youthful vocation-doubts Don Rua had once settled in Malta.)

Before each hop on these journeys, Brother John Balestra would follow Don Rua's methodical list when packing his bag: "Breviary and spiritual-reading books, diary and calendar, rail time-table and concession lists, holy pictures and medals, cocoa, etc."

This last item was a concession to his weak stomach, for Rua found that hot cocoa was the only

drink he could digest when travelling. Such long journeys, in fact, had taken more out of him than he realized, and on his return his health suffered a steep decline. And yet he was deeply consoled, especially by the Old Boys he had met.

"I have seen poverty everywhere; and yet, thank God, I have also seen thousands of children taken off the streets and changed into honest citizens and good christians."

In a tender passage Dante eulogizes evening as "the hour that softens the heart." Certainly in the twilight of his life Don Rua seems to have mellowed beyond recognition, all fatherliness and with no trace of the exacting martinet. He had heeded Don Bosco's wish, and had made himself loved; his deeper, truer self emerging for all to see from behind a bogey-man image.

For this reason, possibly, some hero-worshippers have consistently proclaimed him as "a second Don Bosco". "I have seen a miracle," the Cistercian Abbot at Nice would write, "Don Bosco is incarnated in Don Rua." One must take issue with this assessment. While scrupulously preserving Don Bosco's ideal, Don Rua had added a definite, distinct contribution of his own; carefully distinguishing between the Founder's essential spirit and transitory 19th century regulations. "With Don Bosco—yes; but with the times as well." In natural

temperament they were poles apart, despite inherited traits.

This estimate seems to be confirmed by the present superior-general, Father Ricceri. "Saints are not made in series, and each one has his own special characteristics. But undoubtedly one characteristic Don Rua *did* inherit from Don Bosco was that of work: work for his neighbour so prolonged, unstinted and immersed in God that one remains dumbfounded before it—more so considering his natural frailty. One thinks here of Rua's constant refrain, "True charity *never* grows tired'" (*Vatican Radio Broadcast—Dec. 1972*).

For this reason, despite hardening of the arteries and senile weakness which left him with pitifully swollen legs and reddened eyes, he was to die in harness. Only in the last few weeks did he tie up his bundle of mail and admit defeat. "Give these to Father Rinaldi (his vicar)," he told his secretary, "I can do no more."

But on Carnival Day, with the playground alive with merry-making youngsters, he could not resist the temptation and, making a last supreme effort, he dragged himself out onto the balcony to see the festivities. The youngsters below went wild with enthusiasm, madly cheering the emaciated, bent old man who could barely raise his arm in acknowledgment. It was to be their last sight of him.

The great Belgian, Cardinal Mercier, called in to see the dying priest and after imparting his blessing stooped to kiss Don Rua's hand.

His last prayer when he came to die on April 6th, 1910, was a short invocation he had learnt from Don

Bosco as a little boy. "Dear Mother Mary, ever Virgin, help me to save my soul." He had finished the long desert crossing.

On Don Rua's tomb they wrote a simple epitaph; but even that would have embarrassed him. It read, "The Second Father of the Salesian Family."

“Every time I saw Don Rua,” Pope Pius X remarked lightly to Cardinal Salotti, “I thought you could have put him, on the altar, while still living. Why are the Salesians waiting so long to introduce his Cause?”

But Saint Pius X’s friendly opinion notwithstanding, there was no longer a *vox populi* which could bypass the involved official Processes for Beatification. Not until 1971 were these completed, while the Beatification Ceremony itself took place in St Peter’s on October 29, 1972, with over 200,000 people crowding the vast Basilica and the historical Piazza outside. Youngsters, of course, predominated.

A few minutes before the ceremony began a former Salesian superior-general, eighty-year-old Father Ziggiotti, recalled in an interview how as a young cleric he had called in to see the dying Don Rua, who was just then being dosed with a bitter medicine.

“‘Are you suffering a lot, Don Rua?’ I asked him.

“‘A little.’

“‘And then with the impertinence of a newly professed I was bold enough to suggest, ‘The Lord has suffered much more on the Cross.’

“Don Rua opened his eyes, looked at me, smiled and said, ‘Bravo, Ziggiotti, bravo!’

“I have to laugh today, recollecting my cheek in giving advice to a dying saint. But I hope also that when I arrive in Paradise, Don Rua will again say to me, ‘Bravo, Ziggiotti, bravo!’ ”

The Beatification took place during the Mass, a simple Gregorian *Missa de Angelis*. In the presence of over thirty cardinals, including Australia’s Cardinal Gilroy, Pope Paul VI traced Don Rua’s greatness.

“In these days when the smashing of traditions seems the norm, Don Rua instead has been humble and faithful enough to be a *continuator*. And yet this great little man, this athlete of apostolic activity has not been cut off from the mentality of our modern times. Rather by his capacity for new apostolic ventures, he has reached the height of greatness in character and in spirituality. He teaches all of us reverence for the Magisterium in the Church, and he teaches his Salesians to remain faithful sons of their founder.”

When the Holy Father officially declared Michael Rua now “inscribed in the ranks of the Blessed,” thunderous applause echoed throughout the great Basilica and beyond into the Piazza.

At the same time, over the alabaster window set

in the bronze Glory of Bernini, a large banner was dramatically unfurled. It showed Blessed Don Rua in surplice and soutane, looking as diffident and self-effacing as ever. Perhaps, even, he was appealing helplessly towards the marble statue of Don Bosco high up over St Peter’s Chair!

Did anyone think back, I wonder, to a De La Salle youngster in the Porta Palatina market-place: a mere slip of a lad racing to greet a friendly priest, only to be set back by a mysterious hand-sign?

“Take it, Michaelino, take half—half of everything.”

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