

## Paolo Albera's Visits During Don Bosco's Last Illness

Joseph Boenzi, SDB

**M**ention Paolo Albera's name and many Salesians recall the noted account of Don Bosco's death-bed cry: "Paolino, Paolino! Where are you? Why don't you come." Paolo Albera had been sent by Don Bosco to France as the first Salesian provincial in 1882. He had made his headquarters in Marseilles, a growing urban center that was close to Turin by rail and sea. But if Marseilles was so close, why did "Paolino" Albera not come to Turin during those final days of January 1888? Why was he not at Don Bosco's bedside? How did the death of his spiritual father and mentor impact on him? We can gain some insights into Paolo Albera's feelings by some of his jottings in published and archival documents.<sup>1</sup>

If there was anyone who was sensitive about the prospect of losing Don Bosco, it was the French provincial. Paolo Albera, like Don Bosco, came from a farming family.<sup>2</sup> At home he was called "Paolín," which is rendered in Italian

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<sup>1</sup>The Central Salesian Archives (Archivio Salesiano Centrale), Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma [=ASC], are the source for all of the unpublished documents cited here. The collection of documents relating directly to St. John Bosco (Fondo Don Bosco) is available in microfiche [=FDBM]. To cite unpublished materials, I make use of standard abbreviations: Manuscript [=Ms], Autograph manuscript [=AMs], Autograph manuscript signed [=AMsS], Manuscript signed [=MsS], Typed manuscript signed [=TMsS], Autograph Letter Signed [=ALS]. All references to the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* are taken from the original Italian edition: Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei and Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, 19 vols.; index by Ernesto Foglio (S. Benigno Canavese/Torino: Tipografia Salesiana/SAID/SEI, 1898-1917, 1930-1938, 1948) [=MB].

<sup>2</sup>Paul Albera was born in None, an agricultural center half-way between Turin and

“Paolino” — meaning “little Paul” rather than Paulinus. He was the baby of the family, and he would always be small in build and stature even as an adult. But diminutives in Italian have little to do with physical descriptions. They are terms of endearment. “Paolino” would be the name that his family would call him all their lives.<sup>3</sup> This same diminutive would follow Paolo Albera to Don Bosco’s oratory in Turin, and the saint would call him by this name<sup>4</sup> — but we are getting ahead of our story.

Paolo Albera was 13 years old when he first met Don Bosco,<sup>5</sup> and was among the first to ask to be admitted to the fledgling Salesian Society. What Paolino found at Valdocco can be surmised by the rich accounts that we have of

Pinerolo, on June 6, 1845. The last of seven children born to Margherita Dellacqua and Giovanni Battista Albera, he was baptized that same day in the parish church of SS. Gervasio e Protasio by the associate pastor, Don Francesco Lanza, and given the names Paolo Sebastiano Norberto. Cf. Valentino Vassarotti, Parroco, “Estratto d’Atto di Nascita e Battesimo,” Parrocchia dei SS. Gervasio e Protasio, None, July 30, 1900, MsS. ASC, B0250205.

The Alberas were farming people, respected for their sense of hard work and deep religious spirit. Paolo grew up in an atmosphere where duty and faith were valued and encouraged. Two of his elder brothers and his only sister entered religious life: Lodovico (1829-1902) entered the Franciscans, taking the name Telesforo, and worked in parish ministry in Turin for many years. His sister Francesca (1841-1882) and brother Luigi (1839-1904) both entered the family of St. Vincent de Paul: Francesca as a Daughter of Charity, called Sr. Vincenza, and Luigi as a Priest of the Mission. The first, third and fourth sons — Giovanni Battista (1827-1911), Giovanni Francesco (1831-1910), and Giuseppe (1834-1904) — all remained in None, married, and raised families of their own. Cf. Giuseppe Carossia, *Secretario Communale*. “Dati Genealogici del compianto Don Paolo Albera Secondo Successore del Beato D. Bosco,” None, March 6, 1934. TMsS. ASC, B0250210.

<sup>3</sup>This usage continues in family correspondence. Cf. Vincenza Albera, Dronero, to Luigi Albera, [Torino], July 21, 1871, ASC, B0250223; Luigi Albera, Scarnafigi, to Paolo Albera, Torino, October 27, 1907, ALS, ASC, B0250226.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, *Vita di San Giovanni Bosco, Fondatore della Pia Società Salesiana, dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiatrice e dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, rev. and enl. by Angelo Amadei (Torino: SEI, 1941), 2:653.

<sup>5</sup>Paolino entered the Oratory in October 1858. No stories or incidents from Paolino’s childhood are handed down to us. Yet, he was seen as a gentle and thoughtful child, who loved to pray and was not afraid of work. We do not know when he first expressed a desire to become a priest, but his pastor, Fr. Matteo Abrate, saw much potential. When Don Bosco stopped by for a visit in October 1858, Fr. Abrate lost no time in recommending Paolino as a candidate for priesthood. He was very direct: “Take him with you,” he said. This incident opens every biography, and is the pivotal scene in the mortuary letter written by Fr. Rinaldi, who sees a deeper meaning in the words than the pastor of None could have intended. Not only did D. Bosco take him to the Oratory, he included Paolino among those who would share everything with him, becoming one with him. Cf. Filippo Rinaldi, “Lettera mortuaria pel R.mo Sac. Paolo Albera, Rettor Maggiore della Pia Società Salesiana.” *ACG* 2.9 (November 4, 1921): 308.

Don Bosco's Oratory of St. Francis de Sales during that heroic decade between 1852 and 1862. The reader can refer to any number of studies. What interests us is that this young newcomer found himself in his element. His parish priest remembered him as "talented, studious and well-behaved,"<sup>6</sup> and it did not take long for him to "show his stuff" once he arrived in Don Bosco's house. Peers remembered him as a quiet but hard working boy, and he quickly gained their respect and the esteem of his superiors. Blessed Philip Rinaldi, Fr. Albera's immediate successor, described young Paolo in these terms:

When this young person came to the Oratory, it did not take too long before he attracted the attention of others for his gentle personality, which seemed to mirror his innocence of heart. His seriousness and composure revealed a spirit of interior recollection, and this aspect of his maturity edified all. One could describe him with the words of Tobit: "when he was younger... he did no childish thing in his work."<sup>7</sup>

Paolo Albera was admitted to the Salesian Society at the age of fourteen, on May 1, 1860.<sup>8</sup> He was still a secondary school student at the time, and would not don the cassock, sign of aspiring to the priesthood, for another 18 months. He was vested in the clerical habit by his own pastor during a solemn ceremony that took place in his parish church on October 27, 1861.<sup>9</sup>

When it became apparent that Paolo was not interested in leaving Don Bosco, he faced bitter opposition from his own pastor,<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, brought the young Albera to the attention of the new Archbishop of Turin, Alessandro

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<sup>6</sup>Matteo Abrate, None, to Vicario Generale Capitolare, Torino, November 29, 1867, Copy TMs, ASC, B0250221. Original in Archivio Seminario Metropolitano, Torino.

<sup>7</sup>Rinaldi, "Lettera mortuaria," 308 [translation mine].

<sup>8</sup>Cf. "Verbali delle adunanze dell'anno 1860 fino al 1869," Ms. [original], ASC, 0592, FDBM 1873:E1; "Elenco della Società Salesiana, con la data di accettazione," 1860-1864, Ms. ASC, 0585, FDBM 1926:B8.

<sup>9</sup>Fr. Abrate completed the paper work for Paul Albera's clerical vestition: the appropriate Latin document was issued by Turin's chancery office in the name of exiled Archbishop Luigi Fransoni and signed by Celestino Fissore on October 30, 1861. ASC, B0250102.

<sup>10</sup>Fr. Abrate met several times with D. Bosco, and eventually wrote a letter of complaint to Turin's vicar general. In this letter, the pastor represents himself as cultivating Paolo Albera's vocation, and states that he placed him in D. Bosco's institute with the understanding that the latter would train the boy for the priesthood. Now that the diocesan seminary had been reopened, Fr. Abrate contended that Albera should be settled there and be ordained for the archdiocese. Cf. Matteo Abrate, None, to Vicario Generale Capitolare, Torino, October 29, 1867, ALS [photocopy], ASC, B0250221; original in Archivio Seminario Metropolitano, Torino.

dei Conti Riccardi di Netro, who stepped up pressure on the cleric to join the archdiocese.<sup>11</sup>

This pressure was useless. Paolo was taken by Don Bosco's way of serving the Lord, and was ready to sacrifice anything to be "numbered among his sons."<sup>12</sup> Within a few years of his ordination in 1868,<sup>13</sup> he was sent by the saint to initiate Salesian youth work on the outskirts of Genoa. Here Fr. Albera was a key player in helping Don Bosco to spread his work beyond the confines of Piedmont, in finding benefactors for the Latin American Missions and helping with the departure of the missionaries,<sup>14</sup> and in facilitating efforts to organize the Salesian Cooperators by publishing the *Salesian Bulletin*.<sup>15</sup> In 1882, Don Bosco chose the 37 year old Albera to bring stability to Salesian foundations in France as provincial superior.

During Paolo Albera's years in France, he had to deal with the very heavy burden of loss, beginning with the sudden death of his dearest sister, Sr. Vincenza, on February 12, 1882 at the age of 40, followed by the death of his mother, Margherita Dellacqua on January 31, 1884, and concluding with the death of his spiritual father and mentor, Don Bosco, on January 31, 1888.

Sr. Vincenza was a Daughter of Charity, and from the age of 21, she had dedicated herself to nursing in the Vincentian hospital in Dronero, Italy. Her sisters in religion called her an "Angel" — a consoling angel to her parents and the delight of her brothers, an angel of charity to the poor and sick, whom she

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. MB 8:1004-1007; MB 9:627-629.

<sup>12</sup>Paolo Albera, *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 472: "Nei primi tempi della mia giovinezza, noi stimavamo un grande onore d'essere annoverati tra i suoi figli, ed era in noi la ferma volontà di consacrarci al Signore interamente e non solo a mezzo, no per vantaggi temporali, ma per la gioia di poter condurre, come lui, una vita tutta di sacrificio, benchè apparentemente ordinaria e comune. La santità del Padre fu la causa effettiva della vocazione di tutti i suoi figli: noi si voleva seguirlo, perchè da lui emanava una segreta virtù che ci rendeva il cuore più ardente, lo spirito più illuminato, le passioni più calme, spronandoci in pari tempo ad imitarlo in tutto."

<sup>13</sup>Paul Albera received the tonsure, minor orders and subdiaconate from Archbishop Alessandro dei Conti Riccardi di Netro in Turin on March 25, 1868; cf. ASC, B0250105 to B0250108: certificates of tonsure, minor orders, and ordination to the subdiaconate from the Archdiocese of Turin. The same Archbishop ordained him deacon on June 6, 1868; cf. ASC, B0250108: certificate of ordination to the diaconate from the Archdiocese of Turin. Difficulties with the archbishop of Turin prompted D. Bosco to have the deacon Albera ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Casale Monferrato by Bishop Pietro Ferrè: cf. ASC, B0250109: certificate of ordination from the Diocese of Casale, August 2, 1868.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Albera, *Lettere circolari*, 98.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Eugenio Ceria, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, vol. 1, *Dalle Origini alla Morte di S. Giovanni Bosco, 1841-1888* (Torino: SEI, 1941), 236.

served with a delicate and motherly affection.<sup>16</sup> She was struck down by a tumor, which consumed her so rapidly that the Sisters immediately contacted her family. Her brothers Father Telesforo, OFM, and Father Luigi, CM, were able to reach her bedside before her death, but neither had Paolo's address in France. They tried contacting him through a mutual friend, Canon Clément Guiol, but Luigi's letter reached him after Sr. Vincenza had already died. Telesforo wrote a long letter three weeks later, detailing her last days. Paolo kept this letter as one of the few souvenirs of his family.<sup>17</sup>

When his mother Margherita died on January 31, 1884, Fr. Albera moved as soon as the telegram arrived, and arrived in None just in time for the funeral. Immediately after the burial, he boarded the train for his return to Marseilles, since the demands of the province were especially crucial that year.

The hardest trial lay ahead. Fr. Albera would have to face the fact that his superior and mentor, Don Bosco, was beginning to show signs of aging. His precarious health gave cause for alarm, and Fr. Albera, who had just lost his mother, was perhaps even more sensitive to the inevitability of this loss than many of his peers during the spring of 1884.

Though two years had passed since he had left Italy, Paolo Albera had drawn closer to Don Bosco than at any time previous. The reason: Don Bosco's yearly visits to France. True, these visits were demanding, both in duration and intensity. The saint's 1883 visit to France, for example, began on January 31 and concluded on May 31. During this entire period of time, Fr. Albera worked closely with the founder: paving the way, arranging details, seeing that decisions received immediate follow-up. These were days of hard work that entailed a pressing schedule of meetings, appointments with potential benefactors and needy young people, preaching and speaking engagements...but Don Bosco's presence brought him profound joy.

Don Bosco's visits enabled the expansion of Salesian work in France: wider publicity increased donations, and the founder's presence gave an added impulse to an ever widening Salesian Family. For Fr. Albera, these visits added another dimension. This period of intimate contact was a schooling in spiritual and pastoral life. It was a time of apprenticeship. He witnessed the art of making "visitations" first hand, and, as happened early in his life, he was the recipient of many "confidences" on the part of his father. Years later he recalled the importance of these months at Don Bosco's side — important for his own formation.

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. "Sr. Vincenza Albera, Figlia di Carità †11 Feb, 1882," Mortuary Card, ASC, B0250224.

<sup>17</sup>The letter, dated March 6, 1882, is preserved in ASC, B0250225.

It was chiefly during the early years, but also in those that followed, when I had the enviable opportunity of working closely with him or of accompanying him on his trips, that I became convinced that the only thing necessary for becoming his worthy son was to imitate him in everything. Thus, following the example of many older brothers who already reproduced in themselves the same way of thinking, of speaking and acting as the Father, I strove to do likewise. And today, after more than half a century, I repeat to you, who are just as much his sons as I, and who have been entrusted to me as an elder brother: Let us imitate Don Bosco in the acquisition of our religious perfection, in educating and sanctifying the young, dealing with our neighbor, in doing good to all.<sup>18</sup>

To be a son of Don Bosco! Fr. Albera already felt he was one with his spiritual father. Catholic France admired Don Bosco's innovative ministry among the young, and this facilitated Fr. Albera's work. The mere mention of Don Bosco's name brought enthusiastic support for the Salesian mission. The reverse was also true. Any friends that Paolo Albera made were soon introduced to Don Bosco, and made to feel members of the family. The *Biographical Memoirs*, the *Annali della Società Salesiana*, and the Albera biographies are filled with the names of benefactors, members of the clergy, Cooperators, families whose bond of friendship with Don Bosco and Fr. Albera were one and the same. There was the Olive family from Marseilles and the architect Vincent Levrot from Nice; there were Canon Clément Guiol and Bishop Jean-Louis Robert; there was the Marquis de Villeneuve and his family: all cherished their relationship with Don Bosco and remained close friends with Fr. Albera.

There was another aspect of this same French experience that perhaps made Fr. Albera more acutely aware of Don Bosco's failing health. While his confreres in Turin witnessed Don Bosco's decline in gradual stages, Fr. Albera only saw the founder after long intervals, and the changes seemed more dramatic. Shortly after his own mother's death, Fr. Albera received Don Bosco for another prolonged French visit. The saint had arrived in Nice with Fr. Giulio Barberis on March 5, 1884. From March 15 to 25 he was to spend time in Marseilles. Within two days, Fr. Albera arranged for a medical examination by Dr. P.-M. Combal, of the University of Montpellier.<sup>19</sup> The professor's diagnosis: exhaustion. He prescribed absolute rest, which of course was the only remedy that Don Bosco was not willing to take.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Albera, *Lettere circolari*, 331 [translation mine].

<sup>19</sup>P.-M. Combal, born in Lagrasse on Oct. 27, 1814, gained recognition for his research into the treatment of typhoid fever in 1849. He served as chief physician at the General Hospital of S. Éloi, developed a school for therapeutic care in 1863, and became professor of the medical school at the University of Montpellier in 1873. He died in Montpellier on March 4, 1888. Dr. Combal was one of the most celebrated physicians of his times, especially in Catholic circles.

<sup>20</sup>It is Domenico Garneri who states that Fr. Albera himself called Dr. Combal,

During the final months of 1887, Don Bosco's health steadily and relentlessly declined. These were anxious months for Fr. Albera. He went to Piedmont in September for his annual retreat and was saddened by the state of Don Bosco's health. He made another trip to Turin two months later, and was shocked at how much of a toll the sickness was taking. Don Bosco, for his part, was overjoyed to see his beloved Paolino. As they spoke, Don Bosco broke into tears. There was so little time left, he cried, and yet so much more that he wanted to tell Paolo Albera.<sup>21</sup> The separation was as difficult for the father as it was for the son.

After Christmas, Fr. Albera returned to Turin, to see Don Bosco. By now Don Bosco was confined to bed. The French provincial was hoping and praying for a miracle, as can be seen in a dialogue reported as taking place on December 28, 1887.

"This is the third time, Don Bosco, that you've come to the threshold of eternity. The other times you turned back, thanks to the prayers of your sons. I am sure the same thing will happen this time."

"This time I will not turn back!" Don Bosco replied.<sup>22</sup>

The doctors were clear that Don Bosco had little time left. Fr. Albera had made three trips to Turin in the last four months of 1887, and was again at the founder's bedside during the middle of January. He came to visit the venerable patient several times between January 12 and 19, as he later recounted.

Last January 12 I had the good fortune to present myself to Don Bosco who was gravely ill. There is really no need to tell about the kindness with which he received me. After I conveyed to him the sorrow of all his children in Marseilles over the news of his illness, I spoke with him about our dear cooperators and benefactors. I told him the names of many families that are

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though he does not document this assertion: cf. Domenico Garneri, *Don Paolo Albera, secondo successore di D. Bosco. Memorie biografiche* (Torino: SEI, 1939), 86. ASC contains the original Ms with Dr. Combal's diagnosis, as well as a transcription on stationery from the Salesian oratory of Marseilles, and an Italian translation made by Giulio Barberis. Cf. ASC, 111, FDBM 437:B9-B12, C1-7. The meeting between D. Bosco and Dr. Combal is portrayed in MB 17:56-59. For a complete description of Dr. Combal's meeting and diagnosis, see Arthur J. Lenti's study published in this issue: "Don Bosco's Last Years, His Last Illness and Sainly Death from Eyewitness Accounts," *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 5,2.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Garneri, 104.

<sup>22</sup>Carlo Maria Viglietti, "Diario della malattia di D. Bosco." *Bollettino Salesiano* 12.4 (April 1888): 43 [translation mine].

Questa volta non ritorno più! — rispose Don Bosco.

[This dialogue is not recorded in Viglietti's "Original Chronicle," which (of course) does not mean that the episode is spurious].

very devoted to his work, among others, the Olive family. I could not leave him in the dark about how many were praying for him, and how *someone* had wanted to offer his own life in order to secure Don Bosco's healing. The venerated Father looked at me and smiled, and after a few moments of silence, barely able to control his emotion, he answered me: "I know that they love Don Bosco very much in Marseilles. I know that they pray for me. I know how good the Olive Family has been toward me...but...but..."

The way he cut off his words...the way he moved his head as he spoke, made me realize that there could be no hope for a healing.

I then spoke to him about a little letter that Henri wrote to his parents about Don Bosco's illness, and of the letter that Mademoiselle Claire had written and of the offering it contained. The good father smiles and with great emotion pronounces these very words: "You will tell Monsieur and Madame Olive that I go to heaven to prepare a place for them, for their children..." His breathing became very labored, and impeded him from continuing.

At that moment I pulled a small case from my pocket. It contained devotional objects that Madame Olive had entrusted to me to present to the beloved Father for his blessing. He gestured to Fr. Viglietti to hold them for safe keeping. Little by little these religious goods were resting on the good Father's bed and night table. Every time he was asked to bless some religious article, Fr. Viglietti and I take care to present him some of these articles so that he can bless them as well. They would remain there until Thursday morning (January 19).

It was only on Saturday, January 14, that I was able to show the good Father the necklace that Madame Olive had promised to Mary Help of Christians during the painful days of Mr. Ludovic's illness. I presented this necklace to him and I told him, in the presence of Fr. Rua and Fr. Viglietti, what had taken place on that occasion. During this whole time, Don Bosco held the necklace in his hands, examining it to the extent that his eyesight permitted. He then handed it to Fr. Viglietti who moved toward the window to examine it well in the light. He returned it to Don Bosco and told him: "It is very precious. It is truly pure water."

When I told him that the necklace was certainly quite valuable in itself, but that the circumstances under which it had been given to Madame Olive made it even more precious, Don Bosco who holding the necklace again, made an effort to speak to me. "You will tell Madame Olive that Our Lady Help of Christians is pleased with the sacrifice that she has made. The necklace belongs to me now; I can do what I like with it. I therefore make a gift to Madame Olive..."

I thought he was going to give me the necklace as soon as he said these words. Instead, he continued to hold it in his hands for a long time. It was only in the course of the ensuing conversation, perhaps ten minutes later, that when I thought it was beginning to bother him, I held out my hands and Don Bosco gave me back the necklace.



Whenever I visited him in those days, the conversation often returned to the Olive family; he always spoke about them with affection and gratitude.

I certify the truth of all that is written above

P. Albéra s[alesian] p[riest]  
Marseilles, 1 May 1888.<sup>23</sup>

By now Fr. Albera was afraid to return to Marseilles for fear that Don Bosco would die in his absence. Don Bosco realized this. In the past, he had been quick to send Paolo off to fulfill the duties of his office,<sup>24</sup> but this time he gave no indications. He seemed to want Fr. Albera to stay in Valdocco, but knew that it was impossible that a provincial should stay out of his territory for long periods of time. He himself had made the rules clear enough!<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Grosso, who lived and worked in Marseilles at Fr. Albera's side during those years, later described the French provincial's feelings as he had observed them. We are told that a long-time personal friend and member of the superior chapter, Francesco Cerruti, intervened to offer Paolo Albera a solution to his dilemma.

When Fr. Albera saw how visibly Don Bosco's health was deteriorating, he was aware of the danger. He could not decide whether to return to Marseilles or not, for he was afraid that he would never see his beloved Father again. Don Bosco saw all, but he did not have the heart to tell Fr. Albera to leave and return to his post. An old school mate, confrere and intimate friend (Fr. Cerruti) intervened to prompt a decision. He assured Fr. Albera that he would warn him, even by telegram if need be, should Don Bosco's illness become critical. Fr. Albera trusted these words of assurance, and departed.

The following January 31 he received a telegram announcing Don Bosco's death! No special warning! What a hard and meritorious sacrifice to make! Still, Fr. Albera could not forgive himself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. Paolo Albera, Marseilles, May 1, 1888, MsS, B034:G-H. [Translation mine; see "Appendix" for a transcription of the original text].

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Gamberi, 72.

<sup>25</sup>At D. Bosco's suggestion, the Second General Chapter of the Salesian Society (1880) mandated that without the Rector Major's permission, no provincial should absent himself from his province, except in cases of urgent need; nor must he permit directors to absent themselves from their communities without a reasonable motive. Cf. *Deliberazioni dei Sei Primi Capitoli Generali della Pia Società Salesiana, precedute dalle Regole o Costituzioni della Medesima*, edited by Paolo Albera, introduction by Michele Rua. S. Benigno Canavese: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1894), 188, no. 122.

<sup>26</sup>Giovanni Battista Grosso, "D. Paolo Albera. Ricordi personali," AMs, pp. 15-16, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma, ASC, B034: [D. Albera] vedendo declinare visibilmente la salute di D. Bosco, ne era accoratissimo: non sapeva decidersi a ritornare a Marsiglia, temendo di non più rivedere l'amato Padre. D. Bosco tutto vedeva, ma non sapeva comandare a D. Albera di ripartire. Un antico

Fr. Albera left immediately for Turin, arriving in time for the funeral on February 2. At 3:15 in the afternoon, he took his place in the funeral procession. By now he had heard from his confreres all the details of the final days, including how three nights before his death, Don Bosco, in his agony, had repeatedly called out for him: "Paolino! Paolino, where are you? Why aren't you coming?"<sup>27</sup> That news cut him deeply, and although he never discussed what exactly he felt about missing that last opportunity to see Don Bosco alive, we can catch a glimpse at the depth of his emotions in some of his writings. In his biography of Bishop Luigi Lasagna, he describes the missionary being forced to leave Turin while knowing that his father was dying and haunted by a premonition that he would never see Don Bosco again.

Unfortunately this awful foreboding became reality, for when he returned among us in 1892, he was no longer greeted by the cheerful smile of that beloved Father. By that time his father's mortal remains had rested for four years in a cold marble tomb under a shady row of weeping willows.<sup>28</sup>

Paolo Albera depicts the missionary's feelings with a poignancy that is too sharp to be a third-person observation. He speaks of Luigi Lasagna, but he is describing his own heart-break.

This year began for him...on the high seas. Unfortunately it would be the last year of the precious life of Don Bosco. The tender heart of the missionary, in saying goodbye to the venerable old man, had felt a deep, almost unbearable anguish. He didn't know how to take his eyes off the smiling face of that man who experienced the deepest joy when he was among his beloved children. He couldn't stop kissing those hands always open to distribute blessings. An inner voice told him that this conversation with Don Bosco would be the last: that he would never see him again, and that this would also be the last blessing he would ever receive from the one whom he had called by the sweet name of father for the best side of twenty-five years. No thought is more devastating to the heart of a son!<sup>29</sup>

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condiscipolo, confratello e intimo di D. Albera (D. Cerruti) per deciderlo gli assicurò che l'avrebbe avvisato, anche telegraficamente, se fosse stato necessario, in caso che la malattia di D. Bosco fosse gravissima. E D. Albera fidando su tale assicurazione, partì.

Il 31 gennaio seguente riceve telegraficamente la notizia della morte di D. Bosco! Nessun preavviso speciale! Quanto fu duro e meritorio il suo sacrificio! Non poteva darsi pace.

<sup>27</sup>Lemoyne, *Vita di San Giovanni Bosco*, 2:653; *Documenti* XXXVII:167, ASC, 110: Cronachette, Lemoyne, Doc., FDBM 1148:E12.

<sup>28</sup>Paolo Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna, Memorie biografiche* (San Benigno Canavese: Scuola Tipografica Libreria Salesiana, 1900), 210 [translation mine].

<sup>29</sup>Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna*, 230-231 [translation mine].

Paolo Albera describes the devastation experienced by “the heart of a son” who loses his father. We realize that this description applies as much to himself as it does to Bishop Lasagna: Paolo Albera feels like an orphan.<sup>30</sup>

Paolo Albera believed that Salesians must continually strive to live as worthy sons of Don Bosco. He returned to this theme often in his writings<sup>31</sup> and talks,<sup>32</sup> and this concern lies at the core of his understanding of his own role as superior. He obeyed Don Bosco and he strove to imitate him, but he did not stop at externals. Fr. Albera longed to live Don Bosco's spirit. Like Elisha with the prophet Elijah, Fr. Albera had sensed and dreaded that he must soon separate himself from Don Bosco. His prayer may well have been: “May I receive a double portion of your spirit.”<sup>33</sup> And if this prayer could never be put into words, lest it offend Piedmontese reserve, it seems that this gift was indeed given to him. In the years that followed, the people in Marseilles recognized Don Bosco alive in Fr. Albera.<sup>34</sup> His confreres recognized this same spirit, and elected him to the Salesian general council in 1892 as spiritual director general. His deep spirituality was linked with an unassuming manner that endeared him to adults and young people. In 1910, after the death of Blessed Michael Rua, it was Paolo Albera who was chosen as Don Bosco's second successor. He was, as the people of Marseilles called him, “le petit Don Bosco” — little Don Bosco.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> When Michael Rua died in 1910, Fr. Albera reflected in his spiritual journal that the Salesians were “again orphans of our father.” Cf. ASC, B0320109, entry for April 6, 1910.

<sup>31</sup> Fr. Albera often used the phrase “son of D. Bosco” to carry a sense of heritage, duty, fidelity; cf. e.g. Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna*, 283, 335-336, 344, 368; *Lettere circolari*, 53, 107, 108, 110, 113, 146, 155, 163, 194, 214, 227, 228, 230, 240, 248, 260, 263, 264, 270, 271, 272, 310, 311, 323, 324, 330, 331, 334, 335, 336, 358, 366, 368, 370, 371, 379, 435, 438, 440, 470, 472; *Lettere circolari ai Salesiani militari*, 32 printed circular letters (Torino: 19 March 1916 - 24 December 1918, ASC, E223), 3:2, 4:2, 6:2-3, 10:1-3, 22:3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Paolo Albera, “Tutto per Gesù: Istruzioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali,” AMs., 1893, pp. 74-75, ASC, B0480113; “Raccolta di Istruzioni predicate dal Sign. D. Albera, Catechista Generale de' Salesiani, in occasione degli Esercizi Spirit. Tenuti in Foglizzo agli Ascritti Salesiani il Marzo 1894,” Ms., 1894, p. 27, ASC, B0480115; “Notes confidentielles prises pour le bien de mon âme,” AMs., 1898, ASC, B0320104: entry for 9 November 1898; “Istruzioni Direttori,” AMs., 1903, pp. 21, 39, ASC, B048013; pp. 44, 45, ASC, B0480137; “Esercizi Direttori 1910,” [Instructions for the Spiritual Exercises preceding the Eleventh General Chapter of the Salesian Society] AMs., 1910, insert p. 1, ASC, B0480138.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. 2Kgs 2:9.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. “Moteur et Moteur,” *Bulletin Salésien* 13.4 (April 1891): 67-68.

<sup>35</sup> On the night of Paolo Albera's election as rector major, the *Osservatore Romano* reported that D. Bosco's spirit had been transfused into Paolo Albera: “Basti dire che in Francia egli è designato col nome di *Petit don Bosco*. I salesiani, sotto la sua direzione, non potranno fare a meno di prosperare,” [Quoted in

Blessed Philip Rinaldi would call him “the continuation of Don Bosco’s life.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, if “Paolino” was far from Don Bosco’s bedside during the saint’s final illness, he was never far from the heart of his spiritual father and mentor.

## Appendix

### Paolo Albera’s Description of His Last Visit with Don Bosco

#### Description of the Document

Paolo Albera wrote the following account in French on letterhead from the Salesian provincial house in Marseilles, France. The original document<sup>37</sup> is found in the Central Salesian Archives, Rome, as part of the “Rector Major Collection.”<sup>38</sup> Typically, Fr. Albera’s penmanship is neat and clear; his orthography is not always precise, but he makes only one correction. Domenico Garneri published excerpts in translation,<sup>39</sup> but, to my knowledge, the complete text has never appeared in print.

#### Historical Background

It is not clear whether Paolo Albera wrote the present account as a letter — there is no salutation! Still, all the references to members of the Olive family (Eudossia Olive, and three of her thirteen children: Henri, Claire and Ludovic) make one suspect that he meant to write this memo of his last visit with Don Bosco for their benefit.

“L’Osservatore Romano saluta il successore di Don Rua,” *Il Momento* (August 17, 1910): p. 4, col. 1]. Nearly every piece of commemorative literature in life, and eulogy in death, will make use of this phrase.

<sup>36</sup>Filippo Rinaldi, “Lettera mortuaria pel R.mo Sac. Paolo Albera, Rettor Maggiore della Pia Società Salesiana.” *ACG* 2.9 (November 4, 1921): 311: Don Rua e Don Albera non devono essere considerati come semplici successori di Don Bosco, ma come i continuatori della sua vita, la quale in loro prosegue e si svolge e giunge fino al suo compimento.

<sup>37</sup>1 sheet, 4 sides, 27 x 24 cm., half-fold, unlined letterhead: Oratoire, Saint - Léon, (Œuvre de Dom Bosco), 9, Rue des Romains, 9, Marseille, ; up mrg r, printed: “Marseille, le \_\_\_\_ 188\_\_”; date filled in by hand to read “1 Mai 1888”; up mrg r, date cancelled, substituted with “Documenti: 1888 12 Gennaio,” underlined, cancelled [black ink]24 [pencil]; up mrg c: “?” [blue pencil; cancelled: black ink], “-2-” [blue pencil].

<sup>38</sup>At the time of my research (July 1994), the final classification of this document was still pending. Its provisional location was ASC, B034:G-H.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Garneri, 106-108.

The purpose of the French provincial's fourth visit to Turin during the Don Bosco's final illness was to speak with the saint about Cooperator Salesians and benefactors from Marseilles, and to present a gift from Madame Eudossia Olive. This gift was a votive offering, which Madame Olive wanted to offer to the Mother of God in thanksgiving for a "Grace Received." Madame Olive's sixth child, Ludovic, had entered the Salesian novitiate in S. Benigno Canavese in the autumn of 1886, but fell seriously ill in December. On the night of 4-5 January, Don Bosco dreamt about the sick young Frenchmen, and conveyed his impressions of the dream to the young novice the next day. He gave Ludovic the blessing of Mary Help of Christians, promising him that he would not only survive, but he would go to the missions as well. From that time, Ludovic's conditions improved, and he was on the road to recovery.<sup>40</sup> Madame Olive had Fr. Albera present her diamond necklace to Don Bosco as a votive offering to Mary Help of Christians, but Don Bosco returned the precious heirloom to the Cooperator from Marseilles.

The Olive family remained close to Fr. Albera all their lives, and besides Ludovic, who indeed became a Salesian missionary, accompanying Blessed Luigi Versiglia on the first expedition to China — he died in Canton, China on 18 September 1919 — two of the Olive girls became Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: Claire (†Marseilles: November 14, 1945) and Julie (†Marseilles: January 18, 1959).

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<sup>40</sup>Cf. "Il primo Salesiano morto in Cina," *Bollettino Salesiano* 44.1 (January 1920): 15-16.

## Transcription

ORATOIRE  
 Saint - Léon  
 (ŒUVRE DE DOM BOSCO)  
 9, Rue des Romains, 9  
 M A R S E I L L E

Marseille, le 1 Mai 1888

Le 12 Janvier dernier<sup>41</sup> j'ai eu le bonheur de me présenter à Dom Bosco gravement malade. Il n'est pas nécessaire de dire avec quelle bonté il me reçut. Après lui avoir exprimé le peine de tous ses enfants de Marseille pour le savoir malade, je lui parlais de nos chers coopérateurs et bienfaiteurs. Je lui nommai plusieurs familles très-dévouées à son œuvre, entre autres le famille Olive. Je ne pouvais lui laisser ignorer combien on avait prié pour lui, que quelque personne<sup>42</sup> aurait voulu offrir sa vie pour obtenir la guérison de Dom Bosco. Le vénéré Père me regarda en souriant, et après quelques instants de silence<sup>43</sup> maîtrisant avec peine son émotion, me répondit: je sais bien qu'on aime beaucoup D. Bosco à Marseille, je sais qu'on prie pour moi, je sais combien le famille Olive est bonne pour moi... mais... mais.

Cette suspension... le mouvement de la tête | 1 | qui l'accompagnait me fit connaître que pour la guérison il n'y aurait rien à espérer.

Je lui parlais ensuite d'une petite lettre d'Henri à ses parents sur la maladie de D. Bosco, de la lettre de Mad<sup>lle</sup> Claire et de l'offrande qu'elle contenait. Le bon père sourit et avec émotion prononça ces paroles textuelles: Tu diras à Monsieur et à Madame Olive que je vais au ciel leur préparer une place pour eux, pour tous leurs enfants. La respiration très-pénible l'empêchât de continuer.

Dans ce moment là je tirai de ma poche la petite boîte contenant des objets de dévotion que Madame Olive m'avait confiée, pour les faire bénir par le Père bien-aimé. Il fit signe à D. Viglietti de les garder. Ces objets sont restés tantôt sur le lit, tantôt sur la table de nuit du bon Père. Toutes les fois qu'il bénissait quelques objets religieux ou | 2 | D. Viglietti ou moi, nous avions soin de les présenter pour être bénis. Ils resterons là jusqu'à jeudi matin (19 Janvier).

Ce n'est que samedi, 14 Janvier, que j'ai pu entretenir le bon Père de la bague que Madame Olive avait promise à Marie Auxiliatrice dans la douloureuse conjoncture de la maladie de M<sup>r</sup> Ludovic. Je lui présentai cette bague et je lui

<sup>41</sup>12 Janvier dernier: underlined, not P. Albera's hand [black ink].

<sup>42</sup>quelque personne: underlined, not P. Albera's hand [black ink].

<sup>43</sup>After the word "silence," the author wrote the word "que," then cancelled the word.

racontai, à la présence de D. Rua et de D. Viglietti, ce qui s'était passé dans cette occasion. D. Bosco pendant tout ce temps tenait dans ses mains la baignoire en la regardant autant que sa vue le lui permettait. Il la passa ensuite à D. Viglietti qui l'ayant bien examinée en s'approchant de la fenêtre la rendit à D. Bosco en lui disant: elle est bien précieuse: elle est vraiment de belle eau.

Lorsque je lui dis que la baignoire était certainement bien de valeur en elle-même, mais que la circonstance dans laquelle elle fut donnée à Madame Olive la rendait encore plus précieuse, Don Bosco qui l'avait reprise, en faisant un effort me dit: Tu diras à Madame Olive que N. D. Auxiliatrice a agréé le sacrifice qu'elle a fait. La baignoire m'appartient maintenant: je puis en disposer comme bon me semble. J'en fais donc cadeau à Madame Olive...

J'aurais cru qu'il me l'aurait remise de suite après ces paroles, au contraire il la garda encore longtemps dans ses mains: ce n'est que dans le cours de la conversation, peut-être dix minutes après que croyant que cela la gênait je tendis la main et D. Bosco me remit la baignoire.

Plusieurs fois encore le discours roula sur la famille Olive lorsque j'allais lui rendre visite et toujours il en parlait avec affection et avec gratitude.

En foi de ce qui est écrit ci-dessus

P. Albéra p s

Marseille le 1 Mai 1888 | 4 |