

Union with God amidst so much business. – June 2010

## Ongoing Formation - St Joseph Cafasso

Newsletter as an aid for the animation of Communities and Confreres.



**Feastday: June 23**

This year the feast day of St Joseph Cafasso happens to be the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. That means he died just six months after the foundation of the Salesian Congregation. It was an undertaking which Don Bosco must surely have discussed at length with him, not only on the practicalities of the project, but more importantly on discerning God's will in the foundation of a new Congregation.

It was Joseph Cafasso who was initially instrumental in directing Don Bosco in working with youth in difficulty, who continued to direct him in his weekly confession, who advised him to take up lodgings with Don Borel at the Refuge, who worked closely with him in the foundation of the Oratory, giving him financial support and convincing others to fund his charitable foundation and, when necessary, to defend him from critics even from the clergy.

There is no doubt that the three years that Don Bosco spent at the *Convitto* were crucial. As Don Ceria testifies, they *'contributed powerfully to mould his spirit in a definitive manner'*. After six years of speculative theology isolated from reality in a seminary, insertion into the active apostolate was not easy. Cafasso exposed the young priests to the pastoral realities of a city fast becoming industrialized, and then helped them in their theological reflection on their experience in a way that this becomes for them the crucial element in their discernment. In reading the *Memoirs* one can see the impact that Don Bosco's visit to the prisons left on him and the very important conclusion this led him to: **"Who knows?" I thought to myself, "if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days. Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin?" With Fr Cafasso's encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice...** This was the seed that germinated into the Oratory and eventually into the Congregation and Salesian Family.

Knowing the positive impact that the *Convitto* has had on don Bosco, it does make one reflect on whether we offer a similar opportunity to our young Salesians. Perhaps this is the missing link in our formation process: a year specifically designed for our Deacons and Young Priests in which they have a *practical pastoral experience on which they are helped to reflect in the light of Pastoral Theology and the insights gained from human sciences.*

It would be worthwhile to invest in such an initiative.

### Seminary director

Joseph Cafasso was born in Castelnuovo d'Asti in 1811. Son of small land owners, he was the third of four children. From when he was very young he was regarded him as a young saint. He completed his theological studies at the seminary in Chieri and in 1833 was ordained priest. Four months later he went to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, a residential Pastoral Institute for putting the finishing touches to his priestly and pastoral formation. He would remain involved there for the rest of his life, eventually becoming its Rector.

### Spiritual director

At the *Convitto* the spirituality of St. Ignatius reigned supreme as well as the theological and pastoral orientations of St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori. Teaching was given much attention and was aimed at forming good confessors and capable preachers. Joseph studied and gained a deeper understanding of the spirituality of St Francis de Sales, which he then passed on to one student in particular: John Bosco. Cafasso, his spiritual director from 1841 to 1860, contributed to forming and guiding Don Bosco's spirituality.

Typical of his teaching was his appreciation of daily duty as a way to holiness. As the Founder of the Salesian also testified: *"the extraordinary virtue of Cafasso was his marvelously faithful and consistent practice of ordinary virtues"*

### Apostolate to the poor:

Having the poor at heart, he visited and also financially supported those who were poorest, bringing them the consolation that came from his priestly ministry. His apostolate also consisted in spiritual accompaniment of prisoners and those condemned to death, to the point where he was defined as the prisoners' priest. Prudent and



reserved, a spiritual master, he was spiritual director of priests, lay people, politicians, founders.

### **Pearl of the Italian clergy**

Pio XI called him the pearl of the Italian clergy. Fr Cafasso also supported Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation in material ways from its very beginnings. After a short illness he died at just 49 years of age on 23 June 1860. He was beatified in 1925 and canonised by Pius XII in 1947, who recognised him as a "*model of priestly life, father of the poor, consoler of the sick, support for prisoners, saviour of the condemned*". The same Pope, in his encyclical *Menti Nostrae* proposed him as a model for priests.

## **AT THE SCHOOL OF CAFASSO**

*This extract from the book of Don Ceria **Don Bosco Con Dio**, [Chapters 4&7] shows the crucial role that Don Cafasso played in the discernment of Don Bosco's vocation and in recognizing the true spiritual dimension of his initiatives.*

Don Bosco could not have had a better preparation for his mission as a zealous apostle of the young. The three years that he spent there contributed powerfully to mould his spirit in a definitive manner. Providence placed him in the hands of that saintly teacher of priestly souls, and the graces he received there bore much fruit.

At the school of Cafasso he eagerly imbibed that spirit of prayer which he had already acquired intuitively in spite of the prevailing fashion of the times he lived in, prayer based on "*unlimited trust in the goodness and loving-kindness of God towards us*". From Cafasso's conferences on theology and his spiritual direction, he learnt how to hear confessions "*with prayerfulness, knowledge and prudence*". In the lessons on sacred eloquence he heard emphasized that a priest does not go into the pulpit to show off, but "*to preach on observance of the divine commandments, prayer, devotion to Our Lady, frequent reception of the sacraments, avoidance of idleness, fleeing from bad companions and occasions of sin, charity towards one's neighbour, patience in affliction, and he learned never to end a sermon without reference to the eternal truths.*"

He accompanied Cafasso in offering religious assistance to prisoners and took part with him in retreats, growing in fervour as he prepared for his apostolic work. Even in their daily conversations, he heard and took on board wise recommendations on "*how to live in society, to deal with the world without becoming a slave of the world, to become true priests armed with the necessary virtues, ministers capable of giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*"

...We have a statement made by Don Cafasso in 1853 to clarify things for some learned clerics who were a bit hesitant in regard to Don Bosco, but its value goes far beyond the petty scope for which it was first given. In it Don Cafasso said: "*How well do you know Don Bosco? For me, the more I study him, the less I understand him. I see him as both simple and extraordinary, humble and great, poor and yet undertaking huge projects that seem impossible. I have seen obstacles in his way and his situation impossible, and yet he succeeds splendidly in whatever he undertakes. For me, Don Bosco is a mystery! I am certain, however, that he is working for the glory of God, that God alone is his guide, that God alone is the motive for all his actions.*"



## **A POPE'S APPRECIATION**

**68. Satisfaction with Spiritual Directors** We desire likewise, in this paternal exhortation of Ours, to give special mention to those priests who, in humility and burning charity, labor prudently for the sanctification of their brother-priests as counselors, confessors, or spiritual directors. The incalculable good they render the Church remains hidden for the greater part, but it will one day be revealed in the glory of God's kingdom.

**69. The Example of St. Giuseppe Cafasso** Not many years ago, with great satisfaction, We decreed the honors of the altar to the Turinese priest, Giuseppe Cafasso who, as you know, in a most difficult period, was the wise and holy spiritual guide of not a few priests whom he helped to progress in virtue and whose sacred ministry he rendered particularly fruitful. We are fully confident that, through his powerful patronage, our Divine Redeemer will raise up many priests of like sanctity who will bring themselves and their brethren in the ministry to such a height of perfection in their lives that the faithful, admiring their example, will feel themselves moved spontaneously to imitate it. *Menti Nostrae – Pius XII - 1950*