

VOLUME I - 1815-1840

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THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

---

of Saint John Bosco



## Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne

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**FATHER GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE** (1839-1916) was the first and great chronicler of the life of St. John Bosco and of the first decades of the Salesian Congregation.

From their first, providential meeting in 1864, Father Lemoyne esteemed Don Bosco as a person of outstanding character and holiness. He not only strove to understand and acquire his spirit, but also took upon himself the task of committing to writing anything of significance that Don Bosco did or said. Information concerning earlier events he painstakingly gathered from eyewitnesses and other sources.

In 1883 he came to the Mother House as editor of the **Salesian Bulletin** and Secretary of the Superior Chapter. The five years that followed he spent in cordial intimacy with Don Bosco and heard from the Saint himself the story of the arduous road he had to climb in his youth to arrive at the priesthood, and of the wonderful manner in which Providence guided the Salesian work.

After Don Bosco's death in 1888, he was formally charged with the compilation of available materials for the life of the Saint. Forty-five large volumes of galley proofs bear witness to his dedicated research and provide the material for the nineteen volumes of the **Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco**, the first nine of which he authored. Noteworthy among his other works are the **Life of Don Bosco** in two volumes and the **Life of Mamma Margaret**, Don Bosco's mother. He died in Turin on September 14, 1916 at the age of 77.

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1987

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<i>Provinces</i>	77
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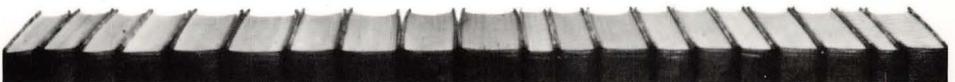
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OF  
SAINT JOHN BOSCO



*The*  
*Biographical Memoirs*  
*of*  
*Saint John Bosco*

by

GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE, S.D.B.

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AN AMERICAN EDITION  
TRANSLATED  
FROM THE ORIGINAL ITALIAN

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DIEGO BORGATELLO, S.D.B.  
*Editor-in-chief*

Volume I  
1815-1840

SALESIANA PUBLISHERS, INC.  
NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK  
1965

IMPRIMI POTEST: Very Rev. Augustus Bosio, S.D.B.  
*Provincial*

NIHIL OBSTAT: Daniel V. Flynn, J.C.D.  
*Censor Librorum*

IMPRIMATUR: ✠ Francis Cardinal Spellman  
*Archbishop of New York*

May 6, 1965

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat and imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 65-3104rev

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FIRST EDITION

**Dedicated**

WITH PROFOUND GRATITUDE

TO

THE LATE, LAMENTED, AND HIGHLY ESTEEMED

VERY REVEREND FELIX J. PENNA, S.D.B.

(1904-1962)

TO WHOSE

WISDOM, FORESIGHT, AND NOBLE SALESIAN HEART

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

OF

THE BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

OF

SAINT JOHN BOSCO

IS

A LASTING MONUMENT

To  
The Very Reverend  
*RENATO ZIGGIOTTI*  
Rector Major Emeritus  
of the  
Salesian Society

## *Editor's Preface*

**S**AINTE JOHN BOSCO, the central figure of this vastly extensive biography, was a towering person in the affairs of both Church and State during the critical 19th century in Italy. He was the founder of two very active religious congregations during a time when other orders were being suppressed; he was a trusted and key liaison between the Papacy and the emerging Italian nation of the *Risorgimento*; above all, in troubled times, he was the saintly Christian educator who successfully wedded modern pedagogy to Christ's law and Christ's love for the poor young, and thereby deserved the proud title of *Apostle of youth*.

He is known familiarly throughout the world simply as Don Bosco.<sup>1</sup> His now famous system of education, which he called the *Preventive System*, was based on reason, religion and kindness, and indicated by its descriptive name that, also in education, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. He always sought to place pupils in the moral impossibility of committing sin, the moral disorder from which all evils flow.

To ensure the continuation of his educational mission in behalf of youth he founded two worldwide religious congregations, the Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesian Society) and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) which today number more than 40,000 members conducting 2800 educational institutions throughout the world.

To help in the difficult art of educating the young, Don Bosco planned to expound his method of education in a book but, absorbed as he was in the task of firmly establishing his two religious congregations and in unceasing other labors, he had to content

<sup>1</sup> *Don* is an abbreviation of the Latin *dominus*, master. It is used in Italy as a title for priests; it stands for *Father*.

himself with a simple outline of his ideas in a golden little treatise entitled *The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*.

Fortunately, the *Biographical Memoirs* of St. John Bosco are ample compensation for a book which, if written, might have given us only theories. These memoirs, a monumental work in nineteen volumes, until recently reserved exclusively to Salesians and published only in the original Italian, are now available, unabridged, in this American edition not only to his spiritual children, devotees and admirers, but also to all who are interested in education.

In these volumes Don Bosco is shown in action: not *theorizing*, but *educating*. What he said and did in countless circumstances was faithfully recorded by several of his spiritual sons, chief among them Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. From the day he first met Don Bosco in 1864 to his own death in 1916, Father Lemoyne spent his life recording words and deeds of Don Bosco, gathering documents,<sup>2</sup> interviewing witnesses, and arranging raw material for the present nineteen volumes of the life of Don Bosco, eight of which he himself authored beside readying another volume for the press before his death.

In the compilation of the *Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, Father Lemoyne's primary sources were the *Memorie dell'Oratorio dal 1835 al 1855* (Memoirs of the Oratory from 1835 to 1855) written by Don Bosco himself, the diaries and chronicles of various fellow Salesians who daily recorded what Don Bosco said or did, numerous letters of the Saint, the *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* (The History of the First Twenty-five Years of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales) written by Father John Bonetti, S.D.B., and personally checked by Don Bosco, the proceedings of the diocesan process of beatification and other unimpeachable contemporary documents and testimonies. Above all, Father Lemoyne, intelligent, conscientious and well-informed, not only used reliable sources, but was himself an eye witness. He recorded what he personally saw and heard from Don Bosco. This enabled him to write a true history, even though not according to modern critical methods. He concerned himself

<sup>2</sup> All the documents in the archives at the Salesian Motherhouse in Turin, Italy are now being microfilmed and stored in the Don Bosco College Library in Newton, New Jersey.

principally with presenting chronologically his vast selected material and therefore his narrative is somewhat fragmentary and may lack scientific method. It is nevertheless true history, even Volume I which deals mainly with Don Bosco's youth and the training he received from Mamma Margaret, his mother.<sup>3</sup> When gifted writers and scholars of the future will produce a critical biography of Don Bosco, the *Biographical Memoirs* will still not be surpassed because Father Lemoyne lived at Don Bosco's side, wrote what he saw and heard, and eminently succeeded in giving us a living portrait of Don Bosco.

In editing the translation of the *Biographical Memoirs* accuracy and readability were the goals we set. This was not easy and occasionally, as regards the latter, we may have fallen short of the mark. Nineteenth century Italian does not readily lend itself to an agile version that strives to be an accurate translation and not a paraphrase.

We have departed from the original in only one minor point: the lengthy titles or series of subtitles in each chapter. Father Lemoyne's method of chronological sequence in his narration necessarily made the contents of each chapter fragmentary. As it was not possible, under these circumstances, to give them a meaningful title and the volumes were not indexed, Father Lemoyne prefaced each chapter with many subtitles. In some volumes such subtitles fill a whole page. Since we have indexed each volume and subtitles become unnecessary, we selected in each chapter the most outstanding episode and gave it a title.

For the publication of the *Biographical Memoirs* we owe a debt of gratitude to the Very Reverend Augustus Bosio, S.D.B., Provincial of the Salesians in the eastern United States, who sponsored this project.

In the preparation of Volume I we are indebted and wish to express our thanks to Mr. Salvator Attanasio, Rev. Paul Aronica, S.D.B., and Rev. Michael Ribotta, S.D.B., for their editorial assistance; to Rev. Henry A. Sarnowski, S.D.B., for the preparation of the Index; to Rev. Pietro Stella, S.D.B., and Rev. Amedeo Rodinò,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Francis Desramaut, S.D.B., *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*, Lyon, 1962, p. 411ff.

S.D.B., respectively assistant director of the archives and director of Public Relations at the Salesian Motherhouse in Turin, for providing valuable information; to the following members of the Editorial Board, Rev. Joseph S. Bajorek, S.D.B., Rev. Emil Fardellone, S.D.B., Rev. William Kelley, S.D.B., Rev. Peter Lappin, S.D.B., Rev. Hugh McGlinchey, S.D.B., and Rev. Joseph Perozzi, S.D.B., for their various contributions, and finally to all others who also have helped in some way or other.

May the reading of these *Memoirs* portraying the life of a man whom Pope Pius XI called "a giant of sanctity" inspire his spiritual children, to whom this work is primarily directed, and all men and women of good will to walk their own path of life in a spirit of service to God and man.

FR. DIEGO BORGATELLO, S.D.B.  
*Editor-in-Chief*

New Rochelle, N.Y.

*June 5, 1965*

124th Anniversary of Don Bosco's Ordination

## *Author's Preface*

WITH brotherly affection I offer my dear Salesian confreres this biography of Don Bosco, our venerated Father in Christ. Eagerly have they all awaited this work entrusted to me by the Superior. It is, then, a pleasure to be able to satisfy, at least in part, their most legitimate desire with this first volume: the rest will follow at brief intervals.

I have not omitted any significant detail about Don Bosco that came to my attention. The story of his life truly constitutes a wondrous complex of events in which the hand of God is clearly discernible. A source of infinite comfort to us in the present, it rekindles our firm trust in the future.

The narrative adheres strictly to the truth. Few people in this world, I believe, have had their love and affection requited by his spiritual sons as much as Don Bosco. They have provided me with innumerable recollections of things they themselves had seen and heard. From 1864 to 1888, I myself kept a record of everything I considered worthy of note. I came to know many things during the long, confidential talks I frequently had with Don Bosco over a period of twenty-four years. Not a single word of these conversations has been lost. I should like to stress the fact that throughout these talks Don Bosco never made the slightest allusion to the shining virtues of his upright heart. Nor did he ever express himself as favored by God with supernatural gifts. His reticence on this score, born of his deep humility, was amply made up for not only by those who lived at his side, but also by those who knew him as a friend, although less intimately, and by the Salesian Cooperators. These came forward by the hundreds to tell me what they knew about Don Bosco, and many of them declared their willingness to substantiate their testimony under oath.

Abundant as the material I have gathered may be, no less im-

posing are the many facts, assertions and proofs of his admirable virtues that I am still in the process of gathering. All this compels me to lament life's brief span and leads me to believe ever more that the subject I am dealing with is inexhaustible. My work could be considered complete only if the canonical inquiry into Don Bosco's life were already terminated and we could read and quote the depositions of sworn witnesses. This we cannot do until the canonization proceedings are over. Nevertheless, I trust that Salesians will be able to recognize the features of their good Father in these pages, and that they will be pleased with the testimonies that are described here.

These pages have been prompted not by the imagination, but by a heart guided by calm reason; they are the result of lengthy investigation, correspondence and comparison of sources. The narratives, the dialogues, everything that I considered worthy of being recorded, are a faithful, literal account of the facts as presented by the witnesses. Here and there some chapters may be judged overdrawn, many anecdotes overly embroidered with details, various acts of virtue too frequently repeated, even though they occurred at different times and places. I could have done otherwise, but then much valuable data would have been irreparably lost and my confreres could then justly deplore this course of action. Moreover, I had been instructed by our revered Rector Major, Father Michael Rua, to omit nothing that should come to my knowledge, even though at the moment I might consider it of slight importance. There is always time to eliminate the superfluous, and synthesis is made easier when the subject matter has been logically developed in its entirety.

I have also dwelt on Margaret Bosco, mother of the venerated founder of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. I considered this indispensable for a proper understanding of her son's life, especially of his childhood. Indeed, the virtues of the mother were to flower splendidly in Don Bosco.

My narrative has a family tone. My sole desire is to present Don Bosco as he really was and to paint as vivid a portrait as possible.

I have written this book for you alone, my dear confreres. Until the Holy See has pronounced its definitive judgment and our Rector Major has given his permission in writing, this book should not be

publicized. [Until that time] I do not authorize any translations, reprints, imitations, compendiums, or extracts for any purpose at all; I do not wish it to be put in the hands of anyone who is not a member of our Pious Society as source material to be published in praise of Don Bosco. Hence, I place this book under the protection of existing copyright laws. Another edition will be printed later, in order to meet the insistent demands of our pupils and innumerable friends and benefactors.

Dearest confreres, these pages portray Don Bosco as a child, student, seminarian, priest, and as a founder of festive oratories, hospices, trade schools, boarding schools, religious congregations and foreign missions. We shall find in them a powerful stimulus both for our own sanctification and that of the young people entrusted to our care. Here we have a guide in every circumstance of our own life, a model of all Christian, religious and priestly virtues. Here we shall find his spirit, his heart, his method of education, his insatiable and effective yearning for the salvation of souls. In his every thought and act we shall see his unbreakable bond to the one Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church and to the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth. We shall feel our love for the growth and glory of our Pious Society burn ever more ardently in our hearts; we shall have closer ties to, and a greater trust in, our Rector Major, Father Michael Rua, to whom I dedicate these volumes that he inspired and approved; we shall obey more generously and promptly Don Bosco himself who in his farewell letter repeats to us: "Your Superior is dead, but another will be elected who will take care of you and of your eternal salvation. Listen to him, love him, obey him, pray for him as you have done for me."

Finally, we shall feel within our hearts an ever more tender affection and gratitude toward the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Help of Christians, who most wondrously guided Don Bosco along every step of his life, in order to give us inexhaustible proof of her maternal goodness.

FR. GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE  
of the  
Society of St. Francis de Sales

Turin, August 15, 1898—Feast of the Assumption



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## CHAPTER 1

### *Historical Background*

**B**EFORE beginning our narrative of the remarkable life of John Bosco, it may be useful to make a rapid survey of the calamitous events that swept over Europe at the end of the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century. They can be summarized in a single phrase: war against the papacy.

Protestant princes, grown rich by despoiling the Church, ruled over the nations they had estranged from the true Faith by usurping the Pope's spiritual supremacy and persisted in their arrogant rebellion against the Vicar of Jesus Christ. Catholic princes chafed under an authority that exercised spiritual jurisdiction over them. They were constantly pressing the Pope to betray his obligations and submit to their bullying. Freemasonry was animated by Satan and his renegade Jewish, Protestant and Catholic disciples. It had sworn to erase the kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ from the face of the earth. Such an end, it saw, could best be achieved by wresting temporal power from the Pope in Rome, thereby curtailing his freedom and restricting his influence to a minimum. Prepared to betray both rulers and nations, Freemasonry succeeded in its efforts to win over perfidious councillors to its cause, or to plant them in the cabinets of ruling sovereigns. Dormant resentment against Rome was revived, and the already smoldering fires of agitation were fanned into life. History records their success in spite of the efforts of the Pope, who, with the gentleness of a good shepherd and a loving father, sought to dissuade kings from paths that inevitably led to perdition.

The time came when a sizable part of the populace, corrupt and irreligious, fancied itself stronger than even the very kings who had set the scandalous example of rebellion against God. The throne of France was the first to topple in 1793, and the very courts of

Protestant England indicted Freemasons as accomplices in every act of impiety and infamy committed during the rule of the French Republic.

Before long, the storm that menaced Europe broke over Italy because Rome was there. For four years the Austro-Sardinian troops had denied the French army access to the Alpine passes. At this time, Charles IV of Spain coveted Rome with its countryside as a gift for his son-in-law, the Duke of Parma, while Ferdinand IV, King of Naples, wanted to wrest the principalities of Benevento and Pontecorvo for himself. So both sovereigns chose this moment to open negotiations with the atheistic and regicidal French government to gain its consent to their plans. In their shortsightedness they failed to foresee the consequences of their foolish scheme. At the same time Francis II, Emperor of Austria, planned to seize the three Legations of Bologna, Ferrara and Ravenna.<sup>1</sup>

General Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Piedmont in 1796 after defeating the Austro-Sardinian alliance. He conquered Lombardy, Venice and Genoa. Then he wrested the three Legations and the Mark of Ancona from the Pope, and set out for Egypt after ordering his armies to invade the other Italian States. The Directoire ordered the occupation of Rome in 1798, and, as had been done elsewhere, the city was plundered of its treasures and its works of art. Pope Pius VI was taken prisoner to Valence, where he died on August 29 at the age of 82. "He is the last Pope," triumphantly shouted the sectaries. "Rome is ours!"

But the Italians, assisted by the English fleet and by the Russian and Austrian armies, rose against the oppressors. They drove them back on every front and cornered them in Genoa. The King of Naples entered Rome with his army and took possession of it in the name of the Pope about to be elected. However, he had no intention of returning Terracina and Benevento. The Austrians, disregarding papal rights, quartered their troops in the Legations, in Marche and Umbria, and there they set up their own government.

But this occupation was of brief duration. Returning suddenly from Egypt and proclaiming himself First Consul, Napoleon, at the head of a powerful army, descended into Piedmont in 1800 through the valley of Aosta. He defeated Austria at Marengo and

<sup>1</sup> Papal provinces governed by the Pope's Legate. [Editor]

forced her to cede the usurped provinces to Pius VII, the new Pope. At the same time he ordered the Neapolitans to evacuate Terracina and Benevento. This was not a change of heart, but mere political opportunism. When the Concordat was signed, the Church of France regained its religious freedom and rose from its blood-soaked ruins. And in 1804, Pius VII traveled to Paris to crown Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor of France.

Napoleon's arrogance kept pace with the victories he rolled up in the continual wars that raged from 1805 to 1810, and made him the conqueror of nearly all Europe. He intimated to the Pope to renounce his temporal power and his inalienable right to appoint bishops. The Pope resisted the Emperor's threats and insults and those of his masonic ministers, with the result that Rome was invaded by the French. The Papal States were declared provinces of the Empire, and in 1809 the Pope was taken prisoner to Savona. Later, he was transferred to Fontainebleau, where for five years he endured every kind of moral anguish, illness and privation.

But divine justice intervened to punish his enemies. Napoleon lost half his army on the snowy plains of Russia, was attacked on French soil by the Northern European Powers, and finally was forced to abdicate and retire in exile to the tiny island of Elba. Pius VII, free again, began his triumphal return to Rome on May 15, 1814.

How did the European Powers, assembled in Vienna, attempt to reconstruct the shattered States of Europe? They were imbued with sectarian spirit and acted accordingly. They claimed to be the champions of order, yet, they committed the selfsame errors as Napoleon. Indeed, in some respects the Emperor might be said to have been better than they. The British Foreign Minister [William] Pitt, the Emperor of Russia and the King of Prussia had repeatedly advised Napoleon to adopt the plan of Joseph II of Austria, and declare himself the supreme religious head in France and in all the other countries under his sway. To his credit, Napoleon had nobly rejected this infamous proposal.

Meanwhile the Church was subjected to countless injustices in the name of peace. Austria coveted the three Legations; Prussia insisted that these be given to the Saxon King in exchange for Saxony which Prussia wanted; and the ambassador of Tuscany proposed

that Bologna, Ferrara and Ravenna be handed over to Duchess Maria Luisa the former Queen of Etruria. The Congress of Vienna ultimately decided that Austria was to keep the lands of the province of Ferrara beyond the Po river, with the right to set up garrisons in Ferrara and Comacchio. In addition, the Church lost also the Polesine area and Avignon. All the German episcopates, hitherto independent ecclesiastical principalities, were now subjected to Protestant sovereigns. The episcopate of Basel was joined to Switzerland, and the Order of the Knights of Malta lost that island to Britain. In short, it was a greedy division of spoils against which the Pope protested in vain.

In Italy, meanwhile, the Masonic lodges had split into two factions: one faction instigated Napoleon to found an Italian kingdom with Rome as its capital, while the other beguiled Joachim Murat, King of Naples, with the promise of the conquest of the entire peninsula, provided he wrest Rome from the Pope. Both factions, however, were ready for reciprocal betrayal should such course of action serve their own interests. But their scheming proved fruitless. Napoleon did land in France again, but he reigned for only 100 days; 800,000 allied soldiers utterly defeated him at Waterloo after a series of battles. He was taken prisoner by the British and exiled to the isle of St. Helena where he died in 1823, after a painful captivity which lasted as long as that of Pius VII. Joachim Murat invaded the Papal States with the aim of imprisoning the Pope in the fortress at Gaeta. But he was defeated by the Austrians, driven from his kingdom, and finally executed by a firing squad, following an abortive attempt to regain his throne by landing in Calabria with a handful of followers.

At last, Europe seemed to enjoy a respite of peace, but Papal rule was still threatened. In 1816 the Austrian statesman, [Clement] Metternich, tried to stir up rebellion in the Legations by aiming to put in key positions people friendly to his government. He hoped to win these provinces at the death of Pius VII and unite them first to Tuscany and then to the Lombard-Venetian kingdom. But Cardinal [Hercules] Consalvi discovered this plot and thwarted it by warning the French ambassador.

In 1817, in different areas of the Papal States, persons known to be loyal to the government were stabbed to death by a band of

unknown assassins. The secret societies of Marche had organized a conspiracy with the express resolve to submit to any foreign prince rather than remain subject to the Pope. Poisonings and arson were the order of the day. A date was set for the violent uprising, but premature action by the conspirators of Macerata revealed the plot. Most of them fell into the hands of the police, and for the moment it seemed that peace had been restored.<sup>2</sup>

In 1820, incited by the example of the Spaniards who had forced Ferdinand IV to comply with their demands and restore the Constitution of 1812, all European sectaries decided to attempt the same in their respective countries. Thus, they might be free to fish in troubled waters and wage war on Rome. The first tumult was launched by the Neapolitan army, many of whose officers and soldiers were Freemasons. The King was weak. He agreed to grant a constitution similar to the Spanish and then fled from Naples in terror, while Parliament ordered the army to support the revolt. But the Neapolitans were defeated by an army of 50,000 Austrians on March 7, 1821, and order was restored throughout the kingdom.

In Piedmont the people gave no thought to uprisings or social upheavals. They were devoted to their King, Victor Emmanuel I, who was a just, devout and good-hearted man. Nevertheless, some noblemen, ambitious sectaries, acting under orders of the Masonic lodge in Paris, met secretly in Turin in the French and Spanish embassies and in that of the Bavarian envoy to discuss ways and means of forcing the King to grant a constitution on the Spanish model. They maintained close contact with the conspirators in Milan and with sectaries in Rome and Milan. This was the plan: as soon as the German troops would evacuate the cities of Lombardy and move to Naples, the Piedmontese army would descend on Lombardy and support the rebels who would hasten to take arms, while the Republic would be proclaimed in Rome. The plot was discovered by the Austrian police, however, toward the end of 1820. The conspirators were imprisoned and sentenced to death, but their sentence was commuted to hard labor. Students of the University of Turin, nevertheless, began to demonstrate on the

<sup>2</sup> Anelli, [Luigi, *Storia d'Italia dal 1814 al 1850*, 4 Vols. (Torino: Bianciardi, 1856)], I, p. 85: Ristretto del processo sino in fine, ecc . . . sentenza nella causa Maceratese. [Summary of the trial, etc. . . . , verdict on the uprising of Macerata.]

streets in the first days of 1821; the army intervened and there was bloodshed. This availed nothing. Enormous funds were sent from Geneva to bribe the troops, and the garrisons mutinied in Turin and Alessandria. In March, Charles Emmanuel abdicated in favor of his brother, Charles Felix. The revolt lasted thirty days. It was quelled by an army of 13,000 Austrians and 6,000 Piedmontese soldiers who had remained loyal.

The sectaries in the Papal States, carrying out their assigned role, staged revolts in Benevento and Pontecorvo and installed themselves as masters after declaring the demise of the Papal government. They roamed through Ascoli in marauding bands, shouting the slogan of "freedom for Italy" and, as usual, stealing public and private funds and throwing open prison gates to release criminals. But finding no support anywhere they were forced to flee and go into hiding. Nevertheless, they treacherously continued to wield daggers, and threatened the lives of [the Pope's] Legates, magistrates and witnesses if punishment were meted out to the assassins.

In article 33 of their social covenant, the *Carbonari* had stipulated that upon the proclamation of the Republic the Christian religion would be the official religion of the united peninsula. A general council of all bishops, re-elected or confirmed, supposedly would restore the faith in all its *primitive purity*. Article 38 further decreed: "The present Pope will be *requested* to accept the dignity of *Patriarch of Italy* and will receive, as compensation for his temporal revenues *incorporated* in the treasury of the Republic, a personal indemnity to be paid annually for the duration of his natural life . . . but not to his successors. If, after his death, the Sacred College of Cardinals shall elect *a new Pope*, he shall be obliged to transfer his see outside the territory of the Republic."<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius VII, in the Papal Bull of September 13, 1821, excommunicated "*the multitude of evil men affiliated with the Carbonari and other secret societies, banded together against Jesus Christ.*"

Meanwhile, in view of the symptoms of revolt not only in Italy but almost everywhere else, the reigning sovereigns of Europe assembled in Verona in October, 1822, to discuss measures to be taken against the mounting dangers. Francis IV, Duke of Modena,

<sup>3</sup> Gualterio, [Filippo Antonio, *Gli ultimi rivolgimenti italiani*, 4 Vols. (Firenze, Le Monnier, 1850-51),] I, pp. 167ff., Doc. 4.

advised governments to protect the Faith, to enhance the prestige of the nobility, restrain the press, restrict the number of students at the universities, extend parental authority and increase respect for it, shorten political trials. But no one heeded his advice. Hence, the revolutions and sects increased their power precisely because of the lack of religion, the debasement of the nobility, the unchecked freedom of the press, the indifference to parental authority. They found considerable support among innumerable lawyers without clients, who were looking for uprisings which might bring them to the fore in demagogy and intrigue. They had a following also among doctors, engineers and university graduates of every description, without income, incapable of manual labor and unfit for intellectual work. They threw themselves wholeheartedly into the secret societies, corrupting countless youths of brilliant intellect and demagogically inciting people to try new ways. Still, the European powers clung to their belief that revolutionaries could be suppressed by the gallows and by terror.

The sects, which had enveloped Romagna in a closely meshed net, continued their activities in the period between 1821 and 1830, murdering magistrates and citizens. At the very time that the prelate Invernizzi succeeded in unmasking and disbanding them, Louis Bonaparte suddenly appeared on the scene in December, 1830. Later to become Napoleon III, he was the son of Louis, ex-King of Holland, whose family had been cordially received by Pius VII after it had been spurned by all the reigning sovereigns of Europe. Now Bonaparte was conspiring with the Carbonari and the Freemasons for the reestablishment of the Italian kingdom. His plan was to assemble the conspirators on the square in front of the Vatican, and then storm a nearby armory, rob the Bank of the Holy Spirit, open the jails, seize some influential citizens as hostages and then proceed to the Capitol. Hence, the plan called for setting up a regency and the issuing of a proclamation inviting the provinces to unite with the Capital. But the government was informed of the plot. It changed guards in the threatened localities, imprisoned several persons involved in the plot and expelled Louis Napoleon and others from Rome.

Nevertheless, the sectaries took heart when Louis Philip of Orleans, after reviving their spirits with his offer of protection, drove

Charles X from his throne in July, 1830. Riots in Paris led to his election as King of France. So on February 4, 1831, the sectaries attempted another uprising in Bologna and to the shouts of "Long Live Liberty", they formed a new government. Meanwhile, the heads of the secret societies roamed Romagna inciting the people to revolt. The Legations, Marche and Umbria made common cause with Bologna. Rome, however, declared its opposition to this treachery. Louis Bonaparte hastened to join the revolutionaries. Pope Gregory XIV, defenseless, appealed to the King of Naples for arms, ready to pay for them, but Ferdinand II refused. The Austrian army then entered the Papal States and, while the Freemasons and rebels beat a hasty retreat, the liberated peoples themselves again hoisted the papal banners. Archbishop John Mary Mastai of Spoleto aided Louis Napoleon in his flight. The latter showed his gratitude in a manner well known to all.

In 1832, the Masonic lodges resumed their agitation in Romagna, while the Austrians again marched upon Bologna, pushing as far as Ravenna. Originally the French government had proclaimed the foolish principle of nonintervention. Now, against the Pope's wishes, it sent a unit of the fleet to Ancona, with the excuse that it did not want Austria alone to have the honor of having quelled the uprising. The French occupied the city by force and set up a garrison. They freed political prisoners, gave safe conduct to bandits and passively stood by while some three hundred of them slaughtered the chief magistrate, robbed citizens, desecrated the churches, jeered at and assaulted priests, made mockery of religion and called subversive assemblies. Austria and Russia declared themselves ready for war on France. But Lord Palmerston, the avowed protector of anyone opposing or scorning the Pope, approved the French action. He directed the Pope to introduce some reforms but went no further. He reserved his overt protection of rebels in Italy for a later time. In view of England's hostile attitude, neither of the two Powers took action. France put an end to its bullying and contented itself with maintaining a garrison in the city instead of playing the master. Nevertheless, she withdrew her troops only on December 3, 1838, when the Germans evacuated Papal territory.

In 1831, Giuseppe Mazzini founded a society known as the *Gio-*

*vane Italia* [Young Italy]. Its members were bound by a frightful secret oath, committing them to wage war against every positive religion, particularly against the Roman pontiff. In the name of Italian unity, it aimed to strip him of territorial possessions, and possibly remove him altogether if the Pope refused to accept the terms to be dictated to him. The sect gained a foothold in several Italian provinces. Mazzini always took great care to protect his own skin, but mercilessly condemned to death all sectaries who did not obey his orders. In 1833, he decided to send several thousands of them to Savoy to infiltrate the Piedmontese army and win its sympathies, planning to use them as a threat to Austria while the rebellious Neapolitan army would advance on Rome, confiscate the property of the clergy and the nobility, and proclaim the unity and freedom of Italy. But in Naples the police uncovered the plot and punished the conspirators. In Piedmont, 200 managed to flee the country, 100 were taken prisoner and 12 of them were shot. In 1834, 200 followers of Mazzini entered Savoy under the command of General [Girolamo] Ramorino. But since nobody stepped forth to join their ranks, they hurriedly returned to Switzerland without engaging the royal troops.

The sectaries continued to foment plots, disorders and assassinations in 1837, 1841, 1843, 1844 and 1845, with the aim of destroying papal rule. The rabid sectary Ricciardi in his book *I Martiri di Cosenza* [The Martyrs of Cosenza] explicitly declared that their aim was to swoop down on Rome *to annihilate the Papacy, that receptacle of fraud and infamy which has afflicted and plagued the earth for more than eighteen centuries!*<sup>4</sup> But the troops were loyal, and the police alert.

Failure and frustration after so many efforts made it obvious that agitations in Italy would come to naught without a seasoned army around which to rally the revolutionaries. But what prince would heed their pleas and how could they induce him to serve their purpose? Massimo d'Azeglio suggested Charles Albert and his Piedmontese army.<sup>5</sup> Under the specious and noble-sounding pretext of Italian independence, they would dignify with the name

<sup>4</sup> Ricciardi, [Giuseppe], *Storia d'Italia dal 1850 al 1900*, (Parigi, 1842), chap. 19, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Farini, [Luigi Carlo, Lo] *Stato Romano dall'anno 1815 all'anno 1850*, 4 Vols. (Torino, Ferrero e Franco, 1850-53), I, p. 101.

of state policy all that complex of false principles and accomplished facts leading to war against Rome, the Pope, the Church and God.

This was the situation when John Bosco was born into this world. Second to none in desire for his country's welfare and glory, once he grasped the nature of his times, he clearly saw that Italy would be headed for disaster should it overthrow the divinely established order by which the temporal and independent Papal See had been placed in her land. History, which he studied avidly, had taught him that whenever peoples had turned against the Vicar of Jesus Christ the words of the prophet Isaia came to be realized. *Terra infecta est ab habitatoribus suis, quia transgressi sunt leges, mutaverunt jus, dissipaverunt foedus sempiternum. Propter hoc maledictio vorabit terram.* [The earth is polluted because of its inhabitants who have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the ancient covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants pay for their guilt. (Isa. 24, 5-6)] Love for the Holy Father was to be Don Bosco's life program: *All with the Pope and for the Pope!*

## CHAPTER 2

### *Margaret Occhiena*

THE storm clouds of rebellion thickened and hovered menacingly over the Catholic Church. No glimmer of hope was in sight wherever its frightened glance might fall. But the divine Eye, which scrutinizes the hearts of men, delighted in the sight of thousands and thousands of souls, unknown to the world, who by prayer and exemplary Christian lives were contributing to the Church's triumph over ungodliness. These were the Christian mothers who planted the seed of holiness in the hearts of their children, thus making them worthy of the mission for which God had created them. The general truth of this assertion could be amply confirmed by reading the lives of saints. Indeed, the 19th century compares very favorably with the preceding ones in its number of Christian heroes.

Margaret Occhiena, John Bosco's mother, was certainly one of these souls on whom God looked with favor. She was born on April 1, 1788 in Capriglio in the diocese of Asti, to Melchior Occhiena and Domenica Bossone, and baptized on the same day. The village had about 400 inhabitants and was located on a small plateau enclosed by sharp-jutting hilltops in a thickly wooded area six miles from Chieri. Her parents were countryfolk of modest means, but they possessed great wealth—the fear of God. The Lord had blessed their union, and Margaret was the third child of five brothers and sisters. By their example and admonition both parents had inculcated such a deep sense of duty in their children that even in their critical years of adolescence their sole desire was to conform to the will of God.

Frightening were Margaret's first experiences of her childhood. She was but nine, when in July, 1797, the bells tolled for hours on end both at Asti and at Chieri. French emissaries and Piedmontese

revolutionaries, protected by the French ambassador in Turin, had incited the mob against their legitimate King, Charles Emmanuel IV, and had proclaimed a Republican form of government. The peasants rushed to the support of the royal troops. Thirty rebels were summarily shot at Chieri, while nine others were sentenced to death after a quick trial. Some fourteen death sentences were handed down in Asti alone.

The following year the good villagers of the Asti district were further enraged at the effrontery of the French, who had seized the armory of Turin and had ruthlessly forced the King to abdicate and retire to Sardinia. It was an outrage. But all the peasants could do was to curse the French silently in the safety of their homes. At the beginning of 1799, having had enough of the new democratic government, they took up arms and marched on Asti to the cry of "Long live the King!" But the French garrison easily drove them back, routing them to their farms and villages, and shooting many who were found to be carrying weapons. Terror and mourning were the lot of their families.

Later, the sensibilities of Catholics were stung to an even greater indignation and their hearts stirred by an even more pitiful sight. During the night of April 24-25, Pius VI, escorted by a commissar of the Republic, entered Turin as a prisoner, after a long journey from Tuscany by way of Casal Monferrato, Alessandria, Crescentino and Chivasso. The Pope, now 82, was so exhausted that it was feared he might die on the spot. The Directoire had ordered him to be brought to Valence in the Dauphine, thus forcing the aged pontiff to cross the Alps along the rim of dizzying precipices amid deep snows and in bitter cold.

Added to these sorrows were the privations that the people in Piedmont had to endure, primarily because their own King was in desperate need of men and money to drive back the French army, and secondly, because the greedy French victors' needs and demands knew no bounds. The war, begun in 1792, was suspended by the armistice of Cherasco on April 28, 1796. There was no letup in exorbitant taxes, extraordinary customs duties, forced loans, forced gratuities, fines levied upon reluctant municipalities or individuals, unreasonable war reparations. Laws were passed that devaluated paper currency, confiscated almost all ecclesiastical

property and forced the rich to buy state bonds. Requisition of food and clothing for the troops, food shortage and epidemics breaking out among the livestock and people added to the crisis.

Undoubtedly the Occhiena family felt the impact of these public calamities, but they were strengthened by their trust in God and the knowledge that they had successfully molded the moral character of their children. Thanks to the upbringing she had received from her mother and the experience of so many hardships, Margaret gave sure signs of becoming an excellent housewife.

Even as a little girl she divided her time between prayer and work. She took great delight in going to the village church, which she made the object of all her devotions. Here she carried out her religious duties, attended Holy Mass, received the Sacraments and listened to the word of God. Nature had endowed her with a strong will. This, combined with an admirable common sense and divine grace, was to be her greatest aid in overcoming every spiritual and material obstacle that she would encounter in the course of her life. The limit to her freedom was the law of God, by which she regulated every one of her actions. Margaret was upright in conscience and in her affections and thoughts. Her appraisal of people and events was sound. Her manner was brisk and her speech, straightforward. She never hesitated or feared in matters of both major and minor importance.

In a neighboring village there lived a man who won exceptional attention by his tall, powerful build and handsome features. Whenever he strolled through the streets people flocked to watch him, and children would tag after him spellbound. Such persistent curiosity annoyed him no end. One day he turned to Margaret, who was gaping at him and exclaimed: "Good heavens, what's the matter with you people? Can't I go anywhere I want without everyone gaping at me? I'm talking to you, little girl! Can you tell me why you must stand there and stare at me?"

Unabashed, Margaret replied: "If a bishop came around, wouldn't everyone stare at him? So why can't I stare at you?" Quite a saucy reply for such a young lass! <sup>1</sup>

Margaret displayed similar spirit in all her actions, as is vividly

<sup>1</sup> In those days it would indeed have been extraordinary if a bishop had visited a small village like Capriglio. [Editor]

shown by the following charming anecdote. In 1799, the Austro-Russian army wrested Lombardy from the French and occupied Piedmont in the name of the King of Sardinia. They treated the country as a victor's spoils. Never was life so wretched as that year. The already exorbitant taxes were increased, young men were mustered into the army, many persons guilty of having sided with the Republic, whether voluntarily or by force, were barred from public office, fined or imprisoned.

In Castelnovo d'Asti, a stone's throw from Capriglio, the police arrested and handcuffed the rural dean, Father Joseph Boscasso, and brought him to Turin with three other priests who had been arrested at Asti: the Vicar General, a canon, and the Prior of the Servite Order. Seventy priests were seized in their own churches on political charges, some even while hearing confessions. Chained together in pairs, they were led on foot from Turin to the armory in Alessandria amid the jeers of the mob. Food was scarce and wheat rose to the exorbitant price of 20 lire per *emina*.<sup>2</sup> During this very time Austria prohibited the exportation of wheat from Lombardy. As a result the country folk lost faith in the new and inept administration, which represented the King's government. In fact, they almost abandoned their old affection for the House of Savoy. But their feelings against the allies had reached an explosive point.

Although Margaret was not one to harbor hatred, the effects of the general indignation inevitably left some effects on her. It was the corn harvest season, September, 1799. Ears of corn lay spread out over the yard of the Occhianas, drying in the sun. A squadron of German cavalry suddenly rode up in a cloud of dust. The soldiers halted to rest in a nearby field, and their horses, free of reins, immediately headed for the corncobs. Margaret, who was watching the corn, loudly protested this invasion. Pushing and slapping the horses she tried to drive them away. But the animals refused to budge and continued to feast on their newly found fodder. Thereupon, Margaret boldly turned on the soldiers who were watching from the other side of the ditch and laughing at her vain efforts to rout their horses. She began to upbraid them in her native dialect for not keeping better watch over them. Since they could

<sup>2</sup> A dry measure equivalent to about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a bushel. [Editor]

not understand a word of what she was saying, the soldiers laughed all the more, occasionally punctuating their laughter with loud "*Ja, jas.*"

"You think it's funny, don't you?" shouted Margaret, placing her arms defiantly akimbo. "You don't care if your horses eat up our crops, worth fourteen and one-half lire every *emina!* This corn costs you nothing, but we've been sweating over it all year! What do you expect us to eat this winter? How are we going to make our polenta? This is a shame! Are you going to lead your horses away, or not?"

It was now quite clear to Margaret that the soldiers were joshing her. Moreover, that chorus of "*Ja, jas*" began to unnerve her and she became infuriated. Several soldiers came up and attempted to speak. She understood their German just as much as they understood her Piedmontese. In revenge she began to badger them with repeated cries of "*bo, bo,*" an expression which used in a bantering tone means "yes" in Piedmontese dialect. The whole thing made as much sense as one asking: "What's your name?" and the other answering: "Yes, the weather is fine!" It made for an interesting duet—"Ja, jas" reechoed by a chant of "*bo, bos*"—all this occasionally interspersed with shouts of coarse laughter. Finally, Margaret lost all patience and shouted: "Yes, yes! *Bo* and *ja*, *bo* and *ja*. Do you know what that makes? *Boia*,<sup>3</sup> you scoundrels! And that's just what you are, ruining our fields and stealing our crops!"

This was an open declaration of war. Since words were getting her nowhere and the corn continued to disappear, Margaret ran off to fetch a pitchfork. Using first the handle, she poked one horse and then another with no success. Then turning the pitchfork about, she began to prod their flanks and struck them on the nostrils. Thoroughly frightened the horses reared and galloped off. Ordinarily the soldiers would not have foregone the pleasure of playing the lords of the land, but this time they did. It would have been ridiculous to turn against an eleven-year-old girl. So they caught hold of their horses and tied them to trees in a nearby field.

Napoleon's victory at Marengo on June 14, 1800, forced the Austrians to evacuate Piedmont, which thereupon became a French province. A brief interval of peace followed. Thenceforth Piedmont

<sup>3</sup> Italian for "hangman" or "scoundrel". [Editor]

was spared the invasion of enemy troops. Instead, a widespread manhunt was launched against marauding groups of brigands, criminals, deserters and escaped convicts. These outlaws had enjoyed immunity during the panic of civil disturbances. For several years they had roamed from town to town engaging in pillage, arson and murder, almost daily. The terrified peasants would always travel in large groups and never ventured through the woodlands that then extended far and wide. They did not dare leave their families at home alone and unprotected, but would hasten home before dark. In tiny hamlets, such as Capriglio, the peasants sometimes took turns at keeping an armed guard. Certain death awaited anyone suspected of being an informer.

One of the most notorious leaders of these outlaw gangs was a certain Mayno from Spinetta, a village near Alessandria. The French police had set up criminal courts in the districts most infested with nests of bandits. They imprisoned or ruthlessly shot so many of these outlaws that as long as the French controlled the region no one dared to embark on a career of crime. The French rule put an end also to the arbitrary methods of Prefects in the Provinces. The iron will of one man [Napoleon] brought order out of chaos in the tax system and in the administration of government.

Events entirely unforeseen now gladdened the hearts of the good people of Piedmont. In 1805, Turin celebrated the golden jubilee of the miracle of the Eucharist which had occurred in that city in 1453.<sup>4</sup> The church of *Corpus Domini* had been splendidly restored and a spacious pavilion erected in the tiny square in front of the church. The finest orators preached on the occasion, and the Holy Eucharist was borne in procession by Bishop Valperga of Masino, formerly of Nice. Both the municipal authorities and the French garrison attended these solemn celebrations. The faithful of Turin and the surrounding provinces were awed and strengthened in their faith at the news of the sudden death of a miscreant who had mocked the piety of the people of Turin flocking to the celebrations.

<sup>4</sup> The miracle took place during the sack of the city. A soldier was carrying off in a sack over the back of a mule an ostensorium containing the Blessed Sacrament. When he reached the spot where the church of *Corpus Domini* was later erected, the mule refused to budge notwithstanding whippings and blows. The ostensorium fell to the ground while the host remained suspended in midair for all to see. [Editor]

He had scornfully called the religious festivity the "feast of the jackass" and had dropped dead on the spot.

On November 12, 1804, en route to Paris to crown Napoleon, Pius VII arrived in Turin where he was received with enthusiastic applause and acclaim. On his return from Paris, he again stopped in Turin on April 24, 1805, remained there three days and imparted his blessing to a vast multitude from the balcony of the Royal Palace. The Occhiena family, inspired by the devotion of their fellow villagers, followed their example by going to Turin to see the Pope. Margaret had just turned seventeen. It was on this occasion, I believe, that she first felt that love of the Pope which she was later to inspire in her children. The strength of this love increased with tender compassion when Pius VII, forcibly removed from the Quirinal Palace on July 17, 1809, by order of Napoleon, was driven in a carriage under police escort to Baron Rignon's castle at Ponticelli, midway between Santena and Chieri. There the vehicle halted for an hour and a half one morning, before continuing on its way to Grenoble.

Margaret was a young woman of ardent faith and maidenly purity, entirely unconcerned and unimpressed by what others did or thought. This frankness of character was the safeguard of her virtue because it was strongly combined with a prudence that prevented her from being misled. Often on Sundays her young girl friends would invite her for a stroll through the neighboring hills and valleys. They saw no harm in enjoying a little recreation after six days of hard work. But Margaret felt uneasy when out of her parents' sight. She always had an excuse ready when they came knocking at her door.

"Look," she would say to her companions, "I've already taken my walk, I went as far as the church today. That's long enough for me and I just don't feel like walking any more."

No matter how much they might cajole and insist, they could never change her mind. As an adolescent, Margaret knew only the road that led to the church—and truly it was a rather long way.

Everyone knows how the annual village fiesta attracts country-folk. It runs long into the night, as younger people keep flocking to it, even if only to watch. Occasionally, some fun-loving girls

from Capriglio, dressed in their finest, would invite Margaret to go along with them. Upon hearing their cries, she would come out to the threshold.

“Come along, Margaret, come along with us!” they shouted.

Margaret would look them over from head to toe and feigning surprise at their attire, would ask: “Where on earth are you going?” Her smile had a faint touch of irony.

“To the dance. There’ll be lots of people there and a good band. We’ll have a wonderful time!”

A serious expression would cloud Margaret’s face. Looking straight at them she would reply: “Those who are willing to play the devil’s game will never find joy with Christ!” Thereupon, she would return indoors, leaving her young friends so dumbfounded that some would return home instead of going to the fiesta.

But, above all, Margaret rarely kept company with the young men of the area. Several of them used to call on her on Sundays and waited to escort her to church. This greatly annoyed her. She was often compelled to attend church alone because the rest of the family had gone to church at dawn while she took care of the house. However, she disliked being rude to these persistent country swains. It would have been useless anyway, for at best, it would only have given them a pretext to laugh and poke fun at her and perhaps lead others to do the same. So Margaret thought up a simple way of ridding herself of their unwanted attention. She simply left for church on Sundays much earlier than usual. This worked for several weeks. But the boys soon saw through this ruse and also became early churchgoers. Margaret then begged a friendly neighbor to accompany her to Mass. But it sometimes happened that her neighbor escort was kept at home by household chores. What was Margaret to do? She did not give up so easily. Unable to dodge her admirers, she returned their greetings, and accepted their company. But as she walked she maintained such a determined fast pace that they were forced to trot along after her. Passersby smiled at the ridiculous sight. Weary and out of breath, they gradually fell behind. “Why should we wear our legs out?” they would ask. So Margaret would be the first to arrive at church; she chuckled at the success of her tactics. After Holy Mass, she sought out someone from the crowd to walk home with. Usually

her choice fell upon a humped, short-tempered old shrew, who was always quick to send packing anyone she did not like. With her, Margaret would wend her way home through the fields.

In the book of Sirach we read: "Heed your own heart's counsel; for what have you that you can depend on more? A man's conscience can tell him his situation better than seven watchmen in a lofty tower. Most important of all, pray to God to set your feet in the path of truth" (37, 13-15). Margaret had fortified her heart with the precepts of the catechism and had modeled her actions on this divine counsel. Thus, she was able to survive the pitfalls of youth unsullied.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Francis Bosco*

**C**ASTELNUOVO D'ASTI lies northwest of Capriglio, one and one-half hour's journey on foot. Sheltered from the north winds, it nestles snugly at the foot of one of the lovely hills that surround it. The hamlets of Pino and Mondonio enclose it on the east, fertile meadows and fields on the south; a hill separates it from the nearby villages of Moriondo and Lovanzito on the west. Flourishing vineyards encircle it like garlands. The little town includes the five hamlets of Morialdo, Ranello, Bardella, Nevissano and Schierone. Most of Castelnuovo d'Asti's dwellings are built on a hillslope with the church in the center. Castelnuovo d'Asti in the Turin archdiocese is about 15 miles from Turin and some 20 miles from Asti. At this period it was the administrative seat of seven municipalities. Its 3,000 population consisted of merchants and tradesmen whose business took them to various European cities. The local chalk quarries were a source of profitable income. The climate is mild, and healthy. In summer the torrid heat of the day is made bearable by a steady fresh breeze. The pleasant setting of the town contributes to the good-natured temperament of the people and to their frank, easygoing disposition. They are very courteous to strangers and cordial in their hospitality, a common characteristic of the Asti region.

A small group of dwellings at the edge of the wood marked a spot midway between Capriglio and Castelnuovo. This area was known as Becchi and formed part of the hamlet of Morialdo. Francis Bosco, born February 4, 1784, was the owner of one of these farmhouses. Although his house did not reflect stark poverty, it certainly did not bear any mark of wealth or social standing. The owner's meager possessions consisted of some adjacent fields that he worked himself. Since they did not yield enough to meet the

needs of his family, Francis also farmed the adjoining fields belonging to a certain Biglione on whose land his home stood. There he lived with his wife, his son Anthony, born February 3, 1803, and his elderly mother, to whom he showed the respect of true filial piety. Francis was a man of excellent character; he had learned his religion well by attending catechism classes and listening to the parish sermons. True God-directed wisdom teaches man not to lose himself in vanities, but rather to surrender himself wholly to the will of a divine and most benign Providence.

One day while Francis was at work on his farm, unexpected calamity struck; his wife became fatally ill and died on February 28, 1811. She was given the last rites by Father Joseph Boscasso, the same rural dean who had been imprisoned in the armory of Alessandria in 1800.

That year, public grief followed upon this private sorrow in the sudden death of Father Boscasso, aged 74, on November 11. He was buried in the so-called "Castle" church. To Francis who had been quite close to him, his death was a second great loss. In those days in rural parishes a pastor was father, friend, confidant and comforter to his parishioners. He knew each member of the family; on the street he was always greeted with great joy. The children were all baptized and admitted to First Communion by him; most men and women of the village were married by him; the old folk relied on his advice in family matters and often he was also consulted in matters of public interest. There was no home in which the pastor had not set foot to comfort the dying and uplift the heart in the hope of an eternal happier life beyond the grave, while offering solace to the grief-stricken survivors. Birth and life, death and burial, joys as well as sorrows and afflictions were closely linked to the memory of a good pastor. He shared everybody's secrets, and his divine ministry placed him above all in the community. A pastor's death was felt as deeply as that of the father of a family. It broke off, at times irreparably, relationships, confidential matters and other jealously guarded affairs.

Because of the turmoil of those times the most devout among the faithful wondered who would succeed their deceased pastor. A new code of laws sponsored and promulgated by Napoleon served as a powerful weapon against the Church. Masonic lodges

were sprouting and spreading all over Italy, fostered in every conceivable way by the imperial government. Members of religious Orders had been scattered to the four winds: convents and monasteries to which the faithful had flocked with so much faith were now closed, and ecclesiastical property had been confiscated and sold. Licentiousness flourished. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life became very scarce. Freedom of worship placed error and truth on an equal footing and ecclesiastical immunity was abolished. The principles of Gallicanism, which attacked papal rights and prerogatives, were made prescribed teaching in the seminaries. New, harsh laws were enacted against members of the clergy who might express disapproval of any act of the government. Bishops were viewed as servants of the Emperor and the schools removed from their supervision. Thus, young minds were molded in accordance with the political views and religious aberrations of those at the helm of the State. Pius VII was still being held captive in Savona.

Added to these general difficulties were specific problems arising from the very nature of the office of pastor that required great prudence and apostolic zeal. The pastor was compelled to distribute and expound a catechism compiled by Napoleon's order for use in every diocese of the Empire. It was full of inaccuracies and heretical doctrines: there were not a few glaring omissions and cunning insertions. Moreover, by indirection, it attributed authority to the Emperor even in matters of religion. The parish priest could not inveigh, directly or indirectly, against other religions authorized by the State. He could not bestow the nuptial blessing on couples who had not first contracted marriage before civil authorities. Church trustees first had to be approved by the government. The Bishop still retained the right to appoint and install pastors but these appointments, kept under wraps, were not canonical unless first approved by the Emperor through the Minister of Worship. Furthermore, the appointed pastor could not enter upon his duties until he had taken the prescribed loyalty oath before the Prefect of the province.

But to return to Francis Bosco, he faced a serious problem: he could not carry out his work in the fields and at the same time care for his mother and watch over his nine-year-old son. He decided

to remarry. Formerly, Francis had often been to Capriglio and had noticed the rare domestic qualities of Margaret Occhiena.

But Margaret showed no inclination to marry. Always busy with her chores at home or in the fields, she deliberately avoided every kind of diversion, even the festive Sunday afternoon gatherings of townspeople. She was now 24, but she showed every desire to remain at home to care for her aging parents. But the Lord had destined her for the married life. “. . . a worthy wife brings joy to her husband, peaceful and full is his life. A good wife is a generous gift bestowed upon him who fears the Lord; be he rich or poor, his heart is content, and a smile is ever on his face” (Sir. 26, 2-4). Francis requested her hand in marriage. Margaret hesitated to accept and made known her reluctance to leave her parental home. But her father approved the match and advised her to accept. Although on in years, he insisted that he could take care of himself. In fact he came from a family that enjoyed enviable longevity. He actually lived to the ripe old age of 99 years and 8 months, while his younger brother, Michael, died close to ninety. Besides, other sons and daughters were still living at home and one of them, Marianne, promised to look after him. So the ever-obedient Margaret complied with her father’s wishes. Although it brought no wealth, the match was suitable. [Says St. Paul:] “. . . godliness with contentment is indeed great gain” (Tim. 6, 6). [And in the book of Proverbs we read:] “Better a little with the fear of the Lord than a great fortune with anxiety” (15, 16).

St. Paul has [also] taught that the sacrament of matrimony is great in Christ and in the Church. As a sacrament of the living, it must be received in the grace of God. Woe to those who enter into this new state of life sacrilegiously! This is the cause of the unhappiness that besets families. Unworthily received, this sacrament is as another original sin, drawing God’s curse. But those who receive it worthily, realizing that their union symbolizes the divine nuptials of Christ and His Church, obtain abundant graces and many temporal blessings—blessings to bear with ease the burden of the obligations which they have taken before God: blessings of peace in the home, blessings in having all they need for life and especially blessings in having children.

In those days, even as now, weddings were festive occasions, with

noisy merriment, gathering of friends, banquets, fireworks, music. But before all else, bride and groom went to confession and received Holy Communion. Then with the blessing of their parish priest, the groom bestowed the nuptial ring on his bride at the foot of the altar at a nuptial Mass. Thus it was with Francis and Margaret. After the ceremony at the Town Hall, they were married in the parish church of Capriglio on June 6, 1812. From that moment on, they strictly observed St. Paul's weighty precept: "Let each one of you also love his wife just as he loves himself; and let the wife respect her husband" (Eph. 5, 33).

As soon as Margaret entered her new home at Morialdo, she took little Anthony to her heart, as if he were her very own. Thus, he acquired a real mother to replace the one who was dead, and not an indifferent stepmother, as is so frequently an orphan's lot. Despite this affectionate acceptance on Margaret's part, the child did not welcome his father's second marriage, seemingly because of a [precocious] fear for his inheritance.

It was at this time, on June 11, that a carriage was dispatched from Savona and driven at top speed across the plains of Alessandria. It bore Pius VII, now close to death's door and a prisoner of Napoleon for the past three years. Escorted by a commissar of the Emperor, he passed incognito through the Asti hills, reached Stupinigi and entered France by way of Mont Cenis, ultimately arriving at Fontainebleau where very bitter sorrow was in store for him. Aware of the affection in which he was held by the good Piedmontese, the Pope presumably imparted blessings to them along the way. And when Margaret learned of his passage through the region, is it not likely that she asked God that this blessing give her strength in her new state of life?

Margaret was happy because "a lighthearted man has a continual feast" (Prov. 15, 15). Francis' old mother, whose name was also Margaret, had received her daughter-in-law with open arms and had immediately put all her trust and affection in her. Margaret responded with filial love and obedience. The two women immediately came to a cordial understanding. Both shared the same ideas of work, thrift and charity, of running a household, and of rearing a family. Under her peasant garb, Margaret's mother-

in-law was a woman of noble sentiments, firm of will, keen perception and eagerness to achieve all that is good.

The Lord blessed the marriage of Margaret and Francis and gladdened them with their first child on April 8, 1813. He was baptized Joseph by the new rural dean, Father Joseph Sismondo, who had taken possession of the parish in the latter part of August, 1812.

Their joy was not untinged with sorrow and apprehension for their country's pitiable state. The churches were shabby and stripped of their precious adornments and works of art. The belfry towers were silent on feast days because thousands of church bells had been melted down for cannons. The priests were old, poor and under constant police surveillance. Tax collectors were unbending in their demands. Mothers shed bitter tears for their sons drafted into military service. War (albeit far away) had raged continuously since 1805. Very many Italian lads had lost their lives in the war against Germany; 20,000 perished in Spain, 15,000 in the Napoleonic retreat from Russia. That year northern Europe and England had united against Napoleon. All young men eighteen and up, were drafted and sent to France to be slaughtered in defense of Napoleon, the despot who once had cynically called them "cannon fodder!" And in the churches people were forced to hear the chant: *Domine, salvum fac Imperatorem nostrum Napoleonem!* [O Lord, protect our Emperor Napoleon!]

But the prayers of the faithful continued to rise to heaven imploring forgiveness; God, in His mercy, removed the scourge afflicting the nations. The year 1815 brought peace and respite to Europe. After being banished for the rest of his life to the tiny isle of St. Helena, Napoleon—the modern Nebuchadnezzar—ultimately recognized that God alone bestows and takes away royal crowns and imperial scepters.

For Piedmont it was a year of joyful exultation. All the oppressive anti-Church laws were abrogated. At Savona Pius VII, surrounded by the bishops of the area and a vast multitude of people, thankfully crowned the Blessed Virgin for having mercifully liberated him from his harsh imprisonment. By his side stood Charles Emmanuel I, who on May 20 had been restored to his rightful

throne. Pius VII arrived in Turin on June 19, after passing through Genoa, Novi, Voghera, Moncalieri. It was his seventh journey through the subalpine countryside. Words cannot adequately express the love with which he was received by the Royal House of Savoy and by the jubilant population. To commemorate this event the Holy Shroud was publicly displayed from the eastern and western balconies of the Madama Palace<sup>1</sup> to the kneeling multitudes. The Pope and the Bishops held aloft this precious relic, second only to the Holy Cross itself, while the city's church bells rang out jubilantly amid the roar of cannon which announced the august event far and wide.

The Pope left Turin on May 22, after visiting the shrine of the *Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation].<sup>2</sup> In this eventful year, Margaret Bosco's second child was born only a few months after the Pope had instituted the Feast of Mary, Help of Christians. John Bosco was born on the evening of August 16, in the octave of the Assumption of Our Lady. He was baptized in the church of St. Andrew on the evening of August 17 by Father Joseph Festa, and then given the name John Melchior. His godparents were Melchior Occhiena and Magdalen Bosco, widow of the late Secondo.

In moments of turmoil and peril when society is in extreme danger and seemingly totters from its very foundations, Providence brings forth men to become the instruments of its mercy, the support and defense of its Church, and the architects of social restoration. Peace, though short-lived, had settled on the world.

The secret societies continued their underground work undermining both throne and altar. From time to time they showed their daring by provoking riots and disorders, and finally they openly rebelled against the established civil and ecclesiastical order. God permitted this both as a punishment for evildoers and for the triumph and exaltation of His name.

John Bosco was a young child in Becchi, when in Castelnuovo four-year-old John Joseph Cafasso was already being nick-named the "little saint" by his playmates because of his goodness and his

<sup>1</sup> The Madama Palace was built at the close of the 13th century on the Roman east gate of Turin. The remains of the gate towers were incorporated in the palace. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> *La Consolata* was the Madonna of the Turinese. The shrine is one of Guarini's baroque churches. [Editor]

devout behavior in church. These two children were to grow into adulthood precisely at a time when the struggle between good and evil was to be resumed at a most furious pitch; both would be at their posts, each carrying out his own providential mission.

A gentle peace that was never disturbed reigned in the Bosco household. Margaret loved order and peace and with thrift managed the household, while Francis worked hard in the fields to provide for the maintenance of his ailing seventy-year-old mother, three children and two farmhands. Nothing was dearer to the heart of Francis and Margaret than to preserve for God those beloved treasures He had bestowed upon them. Both parents kept a watchful, loving eye on them lest anything blight their innocence.

All their neighbors held the Bosco's in great esteem as God-fearing people who lived an exemplary Christian life. Even after these many years they are still remembered. This is the best legacy that children can inherit, "for his father's honor is a man's glory" (Sir. 3, 11).

But all earthly joy must end. Misfortune suddenly struck the happy household. Francis, who was in the prime of life and so intent to rear his children in a true Christian manner, suddenly fell ill. Coming home one day, soaked with perspiration, he thoughtlessly entered the cold cellar of his farmhouse. This sudden temperature change brought on a raging fever, followed by a severe attack of pneumonia. Every attempt to save him proved useless; Francis was mortally ill. After being strengthened by the last Sacraments, he exhorted his heartbroken wife to put all her faith in God. A few moments before dying he called her to his bedside and said: "See how good God is! He calls me to Him today on Friday, the day of our Divine Redeemer's death, at the very hour in which He died on the cross, and at the very same age of His mortal life." Then, after bidding her not to grieve unduly over his death and to resign herself entirely to the will of God, he added: "I entrust our children to you, but take special care of little John."

Francis died on May 11, 1817, at 33 years of age, in a room of the Biglione farmhouse; burial services took place the following day amid the grief and prayers of the entire village. The above account is authenticated by Father Michael Rua and others who heard it directly from Mamma Margaret.

Don Bosco often referred to this day of mourning when speaking to his little friends, the boys at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. He used this incident in his life to instill respect, obedience and love for their own parents. In the early days when Don Bosco was not beset with so many time-consuming tasks, he would stroll into the playground in the evening during the recreation hour. Instantly, hundreds of boys would run toward him; sitting in their midst, Don Bosco would entertain them with a string of edifying anecdotes. Often he would tell them episodes of his own childhood. Thereupon several of his young listeners inevitably would ask: "Tell us about the day when your father died."

And Don Bosco would oblige, recalling: "I was not yet two when my father died, and I no longer remember what he looked like. I don't know what I did on that sorrowful occasion. I remember, and this is the earliest recollection I have in my life, that my mother said to me: 'Now you have no father!' Everyone had left my father's room, but I insisted on staying. My mother picked up a bowl containing some eggs and bran, and sorrowfully told me: 'Come John, come with me.' I answered, 'If Papa doesn't come, I won't come either.' 'Poor child,' said my mother, 'come with me, you no longer have a father.' Thereupon, she broke into heartbroken sobs, took my hand and led me away. Because she was crying I burst into tears myself. At that age I certainly did not understand what a great loss it was to lose one's father.

"But I have always remembered those words, 'Now you have no father!' I still remember what we did to comfort my brother Anthony, who was beside himself with grief. I don't remember anything else from that day until I was four or maybe five. From the age of five I can recall everything that has happened to me."

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Wisdom of a Christian Mother*

CONSTERNATION gripped the entire family at the death of Francis Bosco. Now Margaret, who did not have the heart to dismiss the two farmhands, was faced with the grim task of providing for five persons in her household. Famine, which (since 1816) had been raging for a year, had reduced Piedmont to a state of misery. The annual harvests, the region's sole resources, had been killed by an early frost followed by a terrible, prolonged drought. Desolation hung like a pall over the oat fields, meadows, and fruit trees. Food prices soared exorbitantly. One *emina* of wheat cost 1.25 lire and one of maize, 1.16 lire. Contemporary witnesses described how beggars pitifully begged for a handful of bran to cook with their chick-peas and beans. People were found dead in the fields, their mouths stuffed with grass with which they had tried to satisfy their raging hunger. In their great distress people turned to God praying for rain. There were public demonstrations of penance, something, which in the wake of the recent revolution, one had never expected to witness again after so much vaunted indifference toward religion. Emaciated and shabbily clothed peasants journeyed barefoot on pilgrimage from shrine to shrine, begging for mercy, bearing chains about their necks and heavy crosses upon their shoulders. If, on the way home through country roads, these poor wretches caught sight of some prosperous-looking farmhouse, they would wearily drag their steps toward it, kneel on the threshold and feebly beg for alms. The once well-to-do farmer, himself now on the verge of poverty and need, would emerge with a sack of bran and give a fistful to each supplicant. Sometimes they would swallow it dry as it was, moistening it with their tears.

Such hardships caused widespread disease and epidemics; thousands met an early grave. Scores of exhausted and sore-covered

beggars, victims of typhoid, publicly displayed their affliction with the hopes of eliciting compassion and alms from passersby. They were everywhere—in the streets, in town and village squares, at the doors of the rich and of churches. No road was safe. Wolves, routed from northern Switzerland by mass hunts, now infested the woods bordering on the Stura abbey near Turin.

Amid all this misery, Mamma Margaret continued to feed her family as long as she was able. Finally she entrusted a sum of money to a neighbor, Bernard Cavallo, to purchase food. Nobody in Morialdo would sell what few provisions remained at any price. Cows and bullocks were no longer available for sale at country fairs. There were no buyers, because there was no fodder. Cavallo tried his luck in several places, but was unable to find food even at exorbitant prices. Two days later he returned to the village where Margaret and the children eagerly awaited him. Fear and dismay gripped them when he told them that all he had was the money originally given him. They had had very little to eat that day and dreaded the hunger pangs that would assail them at night.

Overcoming her disappointment, Margaret again tried to borrow food from her neighbors, but nobody could help her. Thereupon she gathered her children about her and said: "As he lay dying, your father told me always to have great faith in God. So let us kneel and pray." After a brief prayer she rose, saying, "Extreme cases require extreme remedies." Then she went to the stable and with Bernard's help slaughtered a calf. She cooked part of the meat to appease her family's hunger and during the next few days managed to subsist on some cereals brought in from distant farms at a very high price. The intense suffering and strain upon Margaret in that year of privation can readily be realized, but by dint of untiring labor and endless thrift, by careful planning even in the most minute details, she was able to survive this crisis, thanks also to some assistance given her by a truly providential person. "Neither in my youth," says King David, "nor now that I am old have I seen a just man forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 36, 25).

In the midst of all these troubles and tribulations, Margaret was stricken by an added misfortune: her mother, Domenica, died on March 22, 1818, at the age of 60. (Margaret herself related the

above incidents to us and they were confirmed by neighbors, relatives and friends.)

When this moment of crisis was past and conditions had improved, Margaret received a very attractive proposal of remarriage. She turned it down saying: "God gave me a husband and took him from me. As he lay dying he entrusted three sons to me; I would be a cruel mother were I to abandon them when they need me most." She was assured that her children would be entrusted to a guardian who would take excellent care of them . . . "A guardian," replied Margaret, "is only a friend. I am their mother. I would not desert them for all the gold in the world. My duty is to dedicate myself entirely to their Christian upbringing." She also made it clear that she herself would take care of her elderly mother-in-law.

At this point, I would like to remark that the successful education of children is linked to their mothers' prayers and Christian living, as well as to the intensity with which a mother desires this success by her Christian dedication and spirit of sacrifice. Natural love is rooted in selfish interest and cannot bear much fruit. God gave John Bosco a truly Christian mother who was to mold him according to His plans. Margaret understood her mission.

The Holy Spirit said: "If you have sons, chastize them; bend their necks from childhood" (Sir. 7, 23). "A colt untamed turns out stubborn; a son left to himself grows up unruly" (Sir. 30). "Pamper your child and he will be a terror for you, indulge him and he will bring you grief . . . Give him not his own way in his youth, and close not your eyes to his follies" (Sir. 30, 8-9.11). "Train a boy in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not swerve from it" (Prov. 22, 6).

Margaret had learned these truths in the greatest school of the entire world—the Church and its Sunday religious instruction. These truths were her constant guide. She blended them with her Christian love, while the persuasive example of her virtues made them all the more acceptable to her children.

John modeled himself on his mother. Later, we shall see in him the same faith, the same purity, the same love of prayer. Margaret's patience, fearlessness, constancy, trust in God, zeal for the salvation of souls, simplicity and gentleness of manner, charity toward all, untiring diligence, prudence in managing affairs, careful super-

vision of dependents and serenity in the face of adversity will, in time, be revealed in John Bosco. Margaret's personality was to leave its imprint on him just as an image leaves its likeness on a photographic plate.

This creative molding of her son's character was Margaret's great achievement. She did not thwart his inclinations and the natural gifts with which he was so richly endowed, but with foresight and careful solicitude she tempered them and directed them toward God. John had an open mind, but he was inclined to cling to his own opinion, and was steadfast in following through whatever he attempted. To counteract this, his mother wisely trained him in total obedience. She never flattered his self-love but persuaded him to accept gracefully the limitations of his social status. At the same time, she left no stone unturned to help him obtain an education. But she did not unduly fret over this problem: Divine Providence would see to it in due time. John was endowed with an intensely sensitive nature, a nature that was to shed its glow on everyone who met him. Yet, in his early years it could have had lamentable consequences if overindulged. Margaret never debased the dignity of motherhood by unwise caresses, or by condoning or tolerating anything less than perfect. And yet she never used harsh or violent ways that might exasperate him or diminish his love for her. There was a certainty and steadfastness of purpose about John that is instinctive, perhaps necessary, in a man destined to govern others—a trait that could easily be transformed into pride. Margaret never hesitated to repress his tantrums and caprices from the very start, even when he was too young for any moral responsibility. But when she saw him emerge as a leader for good among his companions then she just observed him in silence and did not obstruct his activities. Rather, not only did she allow him a certain freedom of action, but sacrificed much to give him what he needed. By such loving gentleness, she gained his heart and was thus able to make him pliant to her maternal will.

In a word, the virtues of Mamma Margaret make us understand the virtues of John, for he was most worthy of her. Hence, Mary Matta, paternal grandmother of Father Secundus Marchisio, a Salesian, and Benedict Savio, a former teacher in the kindergarten at Castelnuovo, both of whom knew her very well, quite fittingly

called her “a Queen among Christian mothers.” The same method she used with John, Margaret used also with her other children.

Let us now see this exemplary mother in action as she educates her children.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Early Religious Training*

**A**S soon as her children could tell right from wrong, Margaret started teaching them the A, B, C's of their religion. She encouraged them in the diligent practice of their faith and to live up to its precepts.

At his mother's knee a child learns to love God and His Blessed Mother, to detest sin, to fear the eternal punishment of hell and hope for the joys of heaven. From her lips these lessons are permanently and indelibly imprinted in his heart. The Christian mother can drive home these truths with persuasion and love. Youth today has become unruly, insolent and irreligious because many mothers have abandoned the religious instruction of their children. A good teacher may exhort his pupils to study Christian doctrine in their catechism,<sup>1</sup> but his exhortations will be short-lived and will hardly survive the distraction-filled world of children. From teacher and priest a child may receive some knowledge of his religion, but it is doubtful whether this knowledge will form deep convictions. Religious instruction imparted by a mother by word and example, by relating religion to life, becomes an integral part of a child's life. Sin becomes a loathsome thing, virtue a desired goal. Good conduct soon becomes an ingrained habit. Reared in this environment, a child would have to turn against himself to become evil.

Margaret was aware of the powerful influence she possessed in the Christian education of her son. She saw in daily catechism instruction and frequent reference to its doctrines the surest means of securing the obedience of a child. So she frequently repeated catechism questions and answers until the children had memorized them.

<sup>1</sup> Religious instruction was a requisite subject of the curriculum in the public school system in Piedmont. [Editor]

Margaret was a deeply religious person; God was always uppermost in her thoughts and conversation. Nimble of mind and fluent in speech, she made the name of God a household word. This could not fail to influence deeply the hearts of her sons. *God sees you*: that was the watchword that she constantly brought to their attention. When she allowed them to go out and play in the nearby meadows, she would leave them with the words: "Remember that God sees you." If at times she sensed that they harbored resentful thoughts against each other, she would suddenly whisper: "Remember that God sees you and that He knows even your most secret thoughts." If, when questioning one of them, she anticipated a lie or an excuse, she would forestall an answer by telling them: "Remember that God sees you." Unwittingly, she was repeating God's words to Abraham: "Walk in my presence and be perfect" (Gen. 17, 1). And the words which Tobias spoke to his son: "All the days of thy life, have God in thy mind. And take heed thou never consent to sin, nor transgress the commandments of the Lord our God (Tob. 4, 6). This is the same great truth that caused Joseph to reply to his tempters: "How . . . can I commit this great crime, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39, 9)

Margaret constantly reminded them of God, their Creator, by drawing their attention to the beauties of nature. One beautiful starry night, she pointed to the sky and told her children: "God created the world and adorned it with all those stars. If the sky is so beautiful, what must Heaven be like?"

In springtime at the sight of the radiant countryside, a flower-strewn meadow, a rosy dawn or a flaming sunset, she would exclaim: "How many beautiful things the Lord has created for us!"

Whenever storm clouds gathered overhead and the children huddled around her in fright at the clap of thunder, she would say: "How powerful is the Lord! Who can stand against Him? Let us keep free of sin!"

If a disastrous hailstorm destroyed the crops, she would look over the extent of the damage with her sons and comment: "The Lord gave it to us and the Lord took it away. He is the master of the harvest. He knows best, but remember that the wicked will be punished and no one can mock God."

But when the harvest was good and abundant, she would say:

“Let us give thanks to the Lord! How good He has been in giving us our daily bread.”

In the winter when all the family gathered around a cozy, cheerful fire and wind and snow battered the frosted windowpanes, she would tell her children: “How grateful we should be to the Lord, who provides us with all we need. God is truly a Father, our Father who is in heaven!”

Margaret was also very adept in drawing a moral or applying a lesson to any event that impressed any of her sons. It was from his mother that John learned to feel the omnipresence of God, and to accept everything, good and bad, as coming from the hand of God. Whenever he talked about his mother, and this he did frequently, he always showed himself very grateful for the excellent Christian upbringing he had received from her. He frequently acknowledged the great sacrifices she had made for him.

Margaret taught each of her children, while still very young, to say his prayers morning and night. As soon as John, her youngest, was able to join the others of the family she would have him kneel with them for morning and evening prayers and for the family recitation of the rosary. Although he was the smallest of the three, John was the first to remind the others of time for prayer; his child-like devotion inspired them to sincere prayer. Margaret herself prepared her children for their first confession as soon as they were able to discern right from wrong. She accompanied them to church, made her own confession, then introduced them to the priest. Confession over, she helped them with their act of thanksgiving. She continued to assist them in this manner until they were able to make their own confession properly. Under her guidance, John went to confession frequently. She took the children to Mass every Sunday and holy day to a small country chapel of a hamlet named after St. Peter; there the priest would preach and teach catechism. When John returned home, he would repeat what he had heard and he always had a very attentive audience.

Through prayer and the Sacraments, Margaret led her children to God with great gentleness. This gave her a powerful influence over them that she was never to lose. Long after they were adults she would not hesitate to ask them with all frankness whether they frequented the Sacraments and said their morning and night pray-

ers. And her sons, already in their thirties, would dutifully answer her with the very same candor and openness they had shown as little children.

Nor did she cease reminding John on this score of his prayers even after he had become a priest. She would remind him even when he returned late to his hamlet home after exhausting mission work in the nearby country parishes, soaked with perspiration and exhausted by his long return walk. Years later, at the Oratory, when Don Bosco would be about to retire to his room after a hard day of preaching and hearing confessions, his mother would ask: "Have you said your prayers?"

John, of course, had already said them, but knowing how it would please her, and despite the fact that he was already half asleep and about to undress for bed, he would reply: "I'll say them right away."

"Of course, you know Latin, and a lot of theology," Margaret would continue, "but your mother knows something more important than that. She knows that you must pray." John would then drop to his knees while Margaret moved silently about the room, turning up the wick in the lamp, smoothing the pillow, turning down the bed. When John was through with his prayers, she would quietly leave the room.

This to some may sound indiscreet. But surely the good mother must have been happy in the thought that after so many years her sons were still the same: frank, docile and respectful. How few mothers today can make this claim. Disrespect and neglect often become their lot. Many bitter tears are shed because of the scorn, derision and insults heaped upon them by abusive and cruel children who have learned to dominate their parents. Margaret, instead, felt she could chide her grownup sons as she had done when they were still tots in the Becchi farmhouse. They were still as respectful as ever: she was ever the same mother to them. The years had passed but the joys of childhood were not forgotten. How often Margaret, a woman of sensitive and delicate feeling, would withdraw to her own room to dry her tears of joy. Such tears which a son brings to his mother's eyes are as precious in the sight of God as all the pearls in the Eastern seas. Indeed, "He stores up riches who reveres his mother" (Sir. 3, 4).

But besides religious instruction and prayer, Margaret also used another means to educate her children—work. She could not bear to see her sons idle. Even as very young children she entrusted them with simple chores. At four, John was already stripping hemp canes that his mother would give him. With his work done, he would busy himself making playthings. At this early age he would whittle small pieces of wood to make balls and sticks for a game called *galla* in which one player strikes a ball with a small flat piece of wood towards his opponent and the latter swats it back with a long stick. John had great fun playing this game with his friends. Of course, squabbles and fights would occasionally arise. John's role then was always that of peacemaker. He would rush into the argument and attempt to restore peace. More than once, however, the ball, which some awkward or careless youngster sent flying towards him, would strike him on the head or in the face. Screaming with pain, John would rush to his mother for comfort. At the sight of his tear-stained face, Margaret would exclaim: "Again? How do you manage to get into trouble every day? Why do you play with those boys? Can't you see they're not very nice?"

"That's just why I play with them. When I'm around, they're not so nasty, and they don't say bad words."

"But then you come home with a broken head."

"It was an accident."

"Very well. But don't play with them any more."

"Mom, . . ."

"Did you hear me?"

"I won't play with them any more if you don't want me to. But when I'm there they do whatever I say and they don't fight."

"All right, but that means you'll be coming back to have your head bandaged again. Be careful," she would conclude, shaking her head slowly, "be careful because I know they're rough boys, very rough." John would not stir from the spot until his mother spoke the last word. She was reluctant to bar him from his games lest she prevent him in some way of being a good influence among his chums.

"All right, you may go with them," she would say.

So young, yet so wise.

Already at that tender age John was dreaming of the day when

he would be surrounded by many young boys who would live with him, obey him, quietly and attentively listen to his words, and become good. To him this was the only happiness possible on earth. Unknowingly prompted by divine grace, he was already longing for his future mission, his heart ever filled with the holy fear of God, from whom comes all wisdom, which “hastens to make herself known in anticipation of men’s desire. He who watches for her at dawn shall not be disappointed, for he shall find her sitting by his gate. . . . She makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her, and graciously appears to them in the ways, and meets them with all solicitude. For the first step toward discipline is a very earnest desire for her; then care for discipline is love of her; love means the keeping of her laws: to observe her laws is the basis for incorruptibility; and incorruptibility makes one close to God; thus, the desire for Wisdom leads up to a kingdom” (Wisd. 6, 13-14, 16-21).

## CHAPTER 6

### *Mamma Margaret and Her Children*

**I**N the Book of Proverbs we read: “Even by his manners the child betrays whether his conduct is innocent and right. . . . Correct your son, and he will bring you comfort, and give delight to your soul. . . . The ear that hears, and the eye that sees—the Lord has made them both” (Prov. 20, 11; 29, 17; 20, 12). Thus should all parents keep watch over their children!

Margaret kept her children’s conduct under constant supervision, but there was nothing unpleasant about her vigilance. It was not irksome, mistrustful or nagging; rather, it was constant, prudent and loving, as the Lord would have it. She took pains to make her presence welcome, and she inculcated the spirit of obedience in them according to St. Paul’s advice: “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but rear them in the discipline and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6, 4).

Their noisy games never annoyed her. In fact, she even took part in them herself and suggested new ones. She would reply patiently to their childish and sometimes tiresome, insistent questions. Not only did she willingly listen to them, but she actually encouraged them to talk. By this means she was able to know the thoughts occupying their tender minds as well as the affections blossoming in their young hearts. Responding affectionately to her love, the children kept no secrets from a mother so ingenious in finding new ways to carry out her noble task lovingly and worthily.

In those days it was not rare to find the Bible or the Lives of the Saints in the homes of the more prosperous peasants. On Sunday evenings the good elderly men of Capriglio would read a few pages aloud to their families gathered around them in the stables in winter, in the patio in summer or autumn. Thus, Margaret had memorized many examples taken from Holy Scripture or the Lives

of the Saints concerning the rewards the Lord bestows upon obedient children and the punishment he metes out to those who are unruly and rebellious. She would often repeat them to her children, skillfully arousing their curiosity and holding their attention. Margaret was particularly talented in projecting vivid descriptions of the childhood of Jesus as she presented Him as a model of obedience and humility.

Children, we know, listen eagerly to stories and are greatly impressed by them. Thus, Margaret gained such a moral ascendancy over her sons, and later over her grandchildren, that a mere word of hers brought instant and loving obedience. If she wanted some little chores done, such as fetching wood, drawing water from the well, bringing fodder or straw to the animals or sweeping the floor, it was sufficient to mention it to one of them and all would run to do it.

Margaret also managed to obtain from her children perfect obedience on two matters that most parents consider beyond their reach. Under no circumstances, without her permission, were they to associate with people whom they did not know, or leave the house without her previous consent. Sometimes they would hang around her, asking: "Mom, our friend So-and-So is outside calling us. May we go out and play with him?" If she said "yes" they would run out of the house with shouts of glee to go romping in the fields or over the hills. At other times when the answer was a flat "no" they wouldn't even dare to peek from the doorway, but would continue to play contentedly at home. Chattering quietly together, they amused themselves with their little homemade toys, or those Margaret had bought for them. Sometimes she would leave them alone when she went working in the fields. Neighbors, who happened to drop in, would ask the boys why they remained indoors when it was so lovely outside or why they were so quiet and well-behaved. They would reply: "So as not to displease Mamma."

They were accustomed to obey her out of love and therefore Margaret could have felt at ease even if she left them alone when she had to go to Castelnovo every Thursday to market her produce, sell some chickens or purchase cloth, linen or other objects for home use. Nevertheless, she was too deeply concerned about the dangers to their innocence to take chances. She knew how even

the slightest breath of evil could tarnish it. So before leaving she would ask their grandmother to keep an eye on them, and she would warn them to be good.

For their part the youngsters were careful to avoid doing anything that might displease her and would await her return anxiously, because she always promised to bring as a reward a special blessed bread. A little gift of this kind meant a lot to them at that age and in those days. So they would watch for her from the crest of the hill. Eventually Mamma Margaret, looking tired and covered with perspiration and dust would appear at the bottom of the path leading up to the house. Then they would run down to her, shouting in unison over and over again: "The blessed bread! Where's the blessed bread?"

Smiling, Margaret would stop in her tracks to exclaim: "Take it easy! Let me get home first and put this heavy basket down! Give me a chance to catch my breath, please!"

Romping joyfully around her, they would follow Margaret into the kitchen. There she would sit down and surrounded by the children, she would take the blessed bread from her basket, while their hands eagerly reached out for it. "Give me some! Give me some!"

But Margaret would reply: "Quiet, please, quiet! You will get your bread, but first tell me how you spent the day." Thereupon the children would become silent, waiting to answer the questions she would put to each one of them individually. For example, she would ask of one of the boys: "Did you go to that farm for the seeds and that tool as I told you to? What did they say? And what did you answer?" Turning to another she would ask: "Did you give my message to the neighbor who was to come to the house? What did you say?" Finally she would ask all of them: "Did grandma ask you to do anything for her? Did you obey her right away? Did she have to scold you? Did any of your friends come to visit you? How did you spend your time with them? What did you do all day? Did you get along without quarrelling? Did you recite the *Angelus* at noon?"

In this manner, Margaret would exact a complete account of their actions and almost of their thoughts, and through these dialogues the children would tell her whatever had happened in minute

detail. Meanwhile, Margaret lovingly and serenely would make prudent observations designed to guide them on future occasions. "That was right," she would say to one of them. To another: "That was well said. Just a little more patience, just a little more courtesy." Or: "That wasn't right; next time be more careful. Don't you understand that you told a lie, and our Lord doesn't like it?" If they had been well-behaved and obedient, she would conclude: "I'm glad. Be good to grandma and God will reward you."

In this manner she accustomed them to judge the rightness or wrongness of their ways by the standard of Divine Law and Christian practice and thus avoid falling into the same mistakes. After her admonitions and words of praise, she would at last reward them with a piece of the blessed bread which the boys would eat with great relish.

Margaret would similarly question them even after only a short absence, for example, after she had gone to work in the fields, or the boys had left the house for some reason or other. These questionings invariably ended with a word of advice. She continued this practice until they were grown men.

As a result the boys grew up to be well-mannered, reserved and careful in their behavior. If, on occasion they were careless, they themselves were the first to be aware of it, recognize their fault and resolve to be more alert in the future. John pondered every one of his mother's words in his heart, and stamped each of her actions indelibly on his mind. Without realizing it, he was storing up for the future her effective pedagogical method based on love and sacrifice. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of ardor and love that inspired the sapiential books, intersperses the series of His teachings with gentle invitations to the soul to surrender itself, such as "My son give me your heart, and let your eyes keep to my ways" (Prov. 23, 26). Don Bosco took this to heart. We heard this passage a thousand times from his lips as he ever exhorted us to do good. We saw reproduced in him his mother's teachings and examples: that constant vigilance, that desire to be as much as possible with his boys, that patience in listening to everything they had to tell him, that solicitous and prudent, gentle questioning with which he invited them to give an account of their conduct. All this he had learned from his mother.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Firm Guidance*

MARGARET was never one to raise her voice when chiding her children, lose her temper when correcting them, or make decisions in a fit of anger. She always was calm and affable, always smiling; she never was gloomy. The children were conscious of her love and in turn they loved her immeasurably. Nevertheless, like all good mothers, she would not fail to warn them or scold them whenever necessary. She was consistent in correcting them. "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him takes care to chastise him . . . Folly is close to the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away from him . . . A boy left to his whims disgraces his mother" (Prov. 13, 24; 22, 15; 29, 15).

Margaret was of very gentle disposition, but she was by no means a weakling. The children knew that punishment would be their due if they persisted in some failing. She never relinquished her punitive authority, symbolized by a cane standing in a corner of the room; but she never used it, just as she never had to slap any of her children even once.

She relied on other means, all her own. Used wisely, they had a remarkable effect on youngsters trained to obey. One day, when John was only four, he came home from a walk with his brother Joseph. It was summer and both were very thirsty. Margaret went to draw water and gave it first to Joseph, who was older. John was a bit piqued at this act of preference and when it was his turn he refused to drink. Margaret put the water away without a word. John just stood there for a moment and then timidly said: "Mom!"

"Yes . . ."

"Aren't you going to give me some water too?"

“I thought you weren’t thirsty!”

“I’m sorry, Mom!”

“Now! That’s a good boy!” She went back for the water and gave it to him, smiling.

On another occasion, because of his age and his impetuous nature, John had gotten into a temper of impatience. Margaret called him to her side, and John immediately ran over to her.

“John, do you see that cane?” she said, pointing to the cane in the corner.

“Yes, I see it,” answered John, timidly drawing back.

“Bring it to me.”

“What do you want it for?”

“Bring it here and you’ll find out.”

John fetched it and handed it to her.

“Are you going to beat me with it?”

“Why not? You asked for it.”

“I won’t do it again, Mamma!”

And the child would be glad at his mother’s smile. That was enough of a lesson for him to exercise more self-control in the future. But John would have submitted to the caning, if his mother had chosen to punish him instead of being satisfied with his prompt obedience. Margaret herself later stated that little John had never given her any cause for displeasure. If inadvertently he bordered on misbehavior, a warning word sufficed to restrain him. He would promise to behave and always kept his word.

Joseph had a mild and affectionate disposition, but being only a small child, on occasion he would flare up, go into tantrums and become unmanageable. If his mother would then take him by the hand, Joseph would fling himself on the floor, struggling and screaming. Margaret, patient but firm and unperturbed, would hold on to him. “Look, it’s no use,” she would tell him. “I won’t let you go even if you lie there all day. You’ve got to stop.” And when he continued screaming, she would remind him: “You know I’m the stronger. You’re not going to win. Don’t fool yourself! If you don’t stop being a bad boy, the Lord will get you, bring you before His throne and punish you. And then will you be able to get away from Him?” Joseph would then realize the futility of his efforts,

and would calm down. Looking up at his mother's face, ever smiling gently at him, he would smile back and the matter would be closed.

The good done to a child by his mother's smile is beyond description. Her smile makes him happy and conscious of being loved. In later years it becomes a fond memory and a powerful incentive in the performance of one's own duties. It is an echo of heavenly joy that uplifts hearts and makes them purer.

Such was Margaret's way of correcting her children, ever seeing to it that punishment should not arouse anger, mistrust and estrangement. Her guiding principle on this point was to lead her children to do all things out of love and to please the Lord. She was, indeed, a fortunate mother.

To be nice with affectionate children, and to gain responsive hearts does not seem to be a difficult task. The real test is in being able to train with loving kindness a person inclined to anger and of overbearing and unfriendly disposition. Margaret succeeded in doing precisely this. Her stepson Anthony was already past nine when Francis contracted his second marriage. He received his new mother coldly, regarding her almost as an intruder. Whenever his father showered caresses on Joseph and John, he felt that his stepbrothers were usurping his rights. His resentment was fed further by the realization that the modest inheritance he had formerly considered all his own would now be reduced by two-thirds. Although there was no real reason for him to feel this way, it is understandable in view of the natural impulsiveness of youth.

Thus, he nursed a certain aversion for his stepmother. Margaret, instead, particularly after her husband's death, made it a point to give Anthony preferential treatment in all things in an attempt to overcome his resentment. She showed him such consideration that no firstborn could have wished for better. In this way she managed to keep peace in the household, even though sometimes she could not altogether prevent some unpleasant scenes arising from disobedience or insolent talk. Heroic virtue was necessary to cope with Anthony's unpredictable and impetuous disposition. Sometimes, he did not hesitate to quarrel even with his old grandmother. But Margaret never lost her self-control in this trying situation.

Anthony would often take to hitting his little brothers, and

Margaret had to intervene and shield them from him. But she never resorted to force in defense of her own children. Faithful to a self-imposed rule, she never laid a hand on Anthony. We can easily imagine how great her self-control must have been if she was able to stifle her maternal instinct and ardent love for Joseph and John. After such outbursts on Anthony's part, she maintained an attitude of cold reserve toward him, not addressing a single word to him the rest of the day or making any allusion to what had happened. After a few hours of glum silence, Anthony would go up to her and ask: "Mamma, what's the matter?"

"Leave me alone," Margaret would answer, "I'm too upset right now to talk. Let me calm down, I'll tell you tomorrow." The night brings good counsel.

Next morning Anthony would approach her and say: "Mamma, forgive me!"

"How do you feel about what happened yesterday?"

"But they started it and got me mad. I like to be respected. They started it all."

"That's enough! If that's the way you feel, it's no use talking. And you expect me to forgive you?"

"But I was in the right."

"In the right? Suppose you were right at the start. You must, at least, admit that you were wrong to behave as you did and that you shouldn't have taken the law into your own hands. Besides, the others are not entirely to blame. You too, are at fault. Admit that you, too, were wrong and promise to mend your ways. Only then will I believe that you are truly sorry."

In the face of such calm reasoning, Anthony at times would reply: "Yes, I'm sorry, I admit I was wrong and I won't do it again."

"Good! Now you're forgiven!" So saying, she would smile at him so affectionately that Anthony would beam with happiness.

But there were times when he would not admit his error, and he would withdraw muttering angrily to himself. Margaret would be patient until evening and family night prayers. Anthony would be sitting in a corner all by himself, sulking. Lest he should not join in the family prayers, Margaret would gently take him by the hand and ask: "Well, have you been thinking over what I told

you?" Anthony would shrug his shoulders, and while trying to free himself from her, he would repeat that he was right. Margaret would then try another tack. She would beg him to come and pray so that the Lord might bless him. Pulling him by the arm, she would lead him where the others were waiting for him. She did this with great patience, without trace of anger or force, always using persuasive words. Sometimes it took a lot of doing, but at last she would succeed in making him kneel down, although at some little distance from the rest. At other times Margaret would try to soothe him by telling him a funny story or a joke and Anthony would respond with a begrudging smile. Then Margaret would begin to pray aloud. After the act of contrition, they recited the Our Father. But at the words: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*, Margaret would suddenly interrupt the prayers and turning to Anthony, she would say: "Leave out the words *Forgive us our trespasses*; you had better not say them

"Why not? That's what the prayer says."

"Still, you had better not say them."

"What shall I say then?"

"Anything you like, but not those words!"

"Why?"

"Why? Do you have the nerve to say them when you yourself won't forgive others, when you are still mad at your brothers after you have almost broken their heads? Aren't you afraid that the Lord will punish you for saying such words? Coming from you they would be a lie and an insult to God since you do not want to forgive. How can you expect our Lord to forgive you, when you so stubbornly refuse to forgive others?"

Such words, coming straight from her heart with a spiritual motivation and uttered in a pleasant way would generally achieve their desired effect. Anthony usually ended up admitting: "I was wrong, Mom. Forgive me." And Margaret would promptly do so.

But more than once, upon being chided or thwarted in some whim of his, Anthony would fly into a rage and lose all control. With outstretched arm and clenched fist, he would threaten Margaret, screaming: "You are just my stepmother!" Margaret, a strong woman, could easily have settled him with a swift smack

on the face. Instead, she would step back a bit with such a penetrating look that he would promptly halt in his tracks while the little ones would fling themselves between them, cling to her and cry: "Mamma, don't be afraid . . . Anthony! Stop it!"

Margaret would say: "Listen, Anthony, I have called you my son and I mean what I say. You are my son because you are Francis' son, because your father entrusted you to me and because I love you as such. You know that if I wanted to I could bring you down to your knees, but I don't want to. I've made it a point never to use physical force to assert my authority over my children. You are my son, and I don't want to hit you. You may do as you wish, but you are doing wrong."

And with that she would withdraw. At such words, Anthony, embarrassed and confused, would come back to his senses and walk away hanging his head in shame.

Many times Anthony went into a rage, but he always calmed down at Margaret's soothing words. She was putting into practice the advice given in the Book of Proverbs: "Chastise your son, for in this there is hope . . ." (19, 18).

To Anthony's credit we must add that he never went beyond threats and that he never failed to apologize once his anger subsided. His grandmother's serious admonitions had also something to do with it. As the years rolled by, Anthony mellowed to such an extent that he acquired the reputation, still extant, not only of being a man worthy of respect and easy to get along with, but also of being a friend that could be trusted and eagerly sought for his cheerful company.

The love and esteem that he felt deep in his heart for Margaret, although in a muddled and hidden way, came to the open when he began to support himself after the family estate was divided. As long as Margaret remained in Morialdo, he would visit her frequently, always addressing her as "Mother." When, later on, she moved to Turin, he would travel there just to see her and enjoy her company for a few hours, and respectfully he would listen to her counsels.

And so, under the guidance of his mother, John was absorbing that remarkable gentleness of manner that forestalls trouble and enables the educator to conquer the hearts of his pupils.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Grandmother Bosco*

**I**F Margaret found it so easy to obtain perfect obedience from her children, it was not just because of what she said, but especially because of her example. Her husband Francis had entrusted his mother to Margaret's care as he lay dying. She was old and ailing, afflicted by various infirmities that obliged her to spend the greater part of her day either in bed or in her chair. Nevertheless, this good and devout woman, used to bustling activity since childhood, tried to be helpful in the household to the best of her ability. She knitted socks, mended clothes, cooked, sewed and swept. Everything in the little house was kept in tip-top shape thanks to her care, and if she was unable to finish such chores, her daughter-in-law would lend a hand when she returned home. Margaret, too, was a stickler for cleanliness and tidiness in the home.

She regarded her mother-in-law as queen of the household, revering her as her own mother, obeying her and consulting her in all matters. Whenever differences of opinion arose, she was always ready to defer to her. Margaret went out of her way to do what she knew would please her mother-in-law, even preparing those dishes that she knew were most to her liking. During the daytime, especially in winter, whenever she had a moment's respite from work, she willingly sat beside her and kept her company. At night, every time the old woman's infirmities troubled her most, Margaret would sit up with her with a more than filial solicitude. Whenever she made trips to the market or to a fair, and this she did nearly every week, she never returned home without something for her mother-in-law, such as some choice brand of pasta for the soup, breadsticks, cookies, or first fruits of the season.

This same respect for their grandmother Margaret demanded

of her children at all times and without reservation. She used to tell them: "You must obey grandma even more readily than you obey me." And she would unfailingly punish them whenever they had been lacking in respect or obedience toward her.

Despite her great affection for her children she never sided with them against their grandmother, and never claimed that they were right once her mother-in-law had said they were wrong. Margaret never questioned any punishment the grandmother might inflict, and she never tried to cancel or mitigate it or counteract the old woman's momentary severity by an ill-advised expression of tenderness.

Such harmony was indispensable for the proper upbringing of the children, because the entire responsibility for running the household rested upon Mamma Margaret. She alone did all the work on the farm and the buying and selling connected with it. Further, she dauntlessly undertook not only the farm chores usually assigned to women, but also the heavier and more arduous work generally performed by men. Her brother Michael willingly helped her whenever possible, but occasionally he was busy with his own work and unable to come. Then Margaret, all by herself, would scythe the grass, or plow the fields, sow and harvest the wheat. She would gather it into sheaves, and cart them to the farmyard for threshing. Here she would stack them, thresh and store the grain in the barn. Whenever she had to hire laborers for the day, she would exhaust them by the pace she set for them since they couldn't stand being outdone by a woman. Anthony could not yet give much help in these chores, so Margaret had to spend a great deal of time away from the house. But this was no cause for worry, since she knew that her children were well cared for. Her mother-in-law was of very valuable assistance in bringing up her children; she was one with her in intent and means.

The grandmother was often immobilized in her chair, but this did not prevent her from running things with the sole strength of her moral authority. Her grandsons treated her with the utmost deference and regarded every wish of hers as law. She was extremely mild-mannered and tender-hearted but nevertheless inflexible in demanding that the children admit their guilt whenever they

were wrong. If any of them got out of line when Margaret was not at home, she would not close an eye, but would call the culprit and tell him: "Get me that cane."

"You're not going to beat me, are you?"

"I certainly am. Hand it to me." The boy would meekly obey.

"Now get closer." The boy would inch forward.

"But I didn't start the fight, Grandma! It wasn't really my fault."

"Very well. Instead of giving you one stroke, I'll give you two!"

"Grandma, please forgive me!"

"That's not enough!"

"Grandma, I was wrong, and I won't do it anymore." Thereupon the culprit would admit what his fault was.

"Do you really admit that you were wrong?"

"Yes, grandma."

If the culprit should hesitate to confess, the grandmother would raise her cane, but as soon as she heard the words: "Forgive me, I was wrong," she would lower her hand and say: "Put the cane back in its place and behave yourself." The matter almost always ended this way. Since the children knew that this was the only way to avoid actual punishment, they did not waste any time in admitting their guilt.

It was only very rarely that she had to use the cane on them, and then it was only with a light stroke or two, which certainly did not really hurt them. But since the strokes were a punishment, they sufficed to make them break into tears, but they would not dare to move one inch away. A church-going woman, she knew by heart the pastor's teachings from Scripture: "Withhold not chastisement from a boy; if you beat him with the rod, he will not die. Beat him with the rod and you will save him from the nether world" (Prov. 23, 13, 14).

Since the grandmother was hardly able to get up from her chair, the children were sometimes asked: "Why do you go to her when she wants to punish you? Why don't you run away? She can't run after you!"

"Oh, Mamma wouldn't like that," was the usual reply.

One day the grandmother noticed that some fruit, which she had set aside, was missing. Her suspicions fell upon the youngest of her grandchildren. "John!" she called out to him. John, who was

wholly innocent ran joyfully to her. With a serious expression on her face, she told him: "Get me the cane over there." Puzzled, little John meekly obeyed, well-knowing who was at fault.

"Grandma," he said, "you can do what you want, but I didn't take that fruit."

"Well, then, tell me who did, and I won't hit you."

"I'll tell you, if you will forgive him."

"I will. Bring the naughty boy here and if he asks my forgiveness, brings me the cane, and admits that he deserves to be punished, I'll forgive him."

John ran to his older brother, against whom he bore no grudge notwithstanding the latter's ill feelings towards him, and told him what had happened. Anthony, who was now 15 and already a good farmhand, thought his grandmother was being ridiculous. Being punished in the manner of a six-year-old seemed to him a rather odd humiliation. So he merely shrugged it off as though to say: "Nonsense!" But John insisted: "Please, come, don't cross her. You know how she is! This would upset her terribly! And it would upset mamma, too. I know you're already a big boy, but still you must respect grandma." Anthony yielded.

"Very well," he said. "Let's go." Once in the house, he took the cane and handed it to his grandmother, mumbling: "I won't do it anymore," not exactly with a great display of humility.

All the same, the grandmother seemed to be satisfied by his gesture. Holding him affectionately by the arm, she said to him: "My son, just remember that if it's true that gluttony kills more people than even the sword, it's also true that gluttony and its consequence send more people to hell than any other sin."

This perfect harmony between mother and mother-in-law was a valuable object lesson to John on the necessity and advantages of mutual accord between the superiors of a school for the successful character formation of its pupils. If the educators are divided among themselves by jealousy, grudges, differences of opinions and methods, the sad consequences will show up in the pupils proving the truth of the [scriptural] saying: "If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (Mark, 3, 25).

## CHAPTER 9

### *A Mother's Ways*

**B**ESIDES requiring of her sons orderliness and beauty of soul, along with a docile and constant gladness of heart, by which she wanted all their actions to be imbued, Margaret also insisted upon personal neatness and cleanliness. Her diligence in this matter accorded with the exhortation of Ecclesiastes: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works. At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head" (9, 7-8).

She not only made it a point to scrub them herself until their eighth or ninth year, but she also took a certain pride in dressing them as nicely as she could afford. On Sundays especially, she had them wear their best clothes, tidily brushing their great shocks of curly hair, which she tied with a pretty ribbon. Then she would take them to Mass, holding them by the hand. At times she allowed Anthony to walk ahead of her with Joseph, but she never let them out of sight. The people they met on the way, especially mothers, would stop to congratulate Margaret. "What handsome lads!" they would exclaim. "They look like little angels!" Margaret enjoyed such praise. Deep in her heart, but with a greater nobility, she felt the same surge of affection that had inspired the mother of the Gracchi one day to answer some Roman matrons who had asked to see her jewels by pointing to her sons and saying: "Here are my pearls!" For Margaret, her sons were her treasure, her adornment, her glory.

As they drew closer to the church and the crowd grew larger, the boys would notice some old men wearing a shiny pigtail, tied by a ribbon, as was still the custom in those days.

"Mamma!" they would cry out. "Look at Jim over there! (He was a kindly oldster, the village sage.) When are you going to let

our hair grow and fall down on our shoulders like that, so that we can braid it too?"

"The curls with which the good God has adorned you are enough for you. You like to make a good appearance, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"Well then, listen to me. Do you know why I put these nice clothes on you? Because today is Sunday, and it is only fitting that you outwardly show the joy that every Christian should feel on this day, and I want your clean clothes to mirror the beauty of your souls. What good would fine clothes be, if the soul is ugly with sin? Make sure you merit the praise of God and not the praise of men, because that serves only to make you proud and ambitious, nothing else. God can't bear proud and ambitious people, and He punishes them. They said you look like little angels: and you must always behave like little angels, especially now that we're going to church. You must kneel down and not squirm in your seats, nor chatter. And pray with your two hands joined together. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament will be pleased to see you gathered devoutly before His Tabernacle, and He will bless you."

By thus remarking on neatness and good behavior, Margaret taught them to respect themselves and others. John retained this care in the cleanliness of his clothes until his last days. Nobody ever saw a stain on his garments, because he never neglected checking both his cassock and his cloak constantly for spots or stains. Consequently, he could enter any lordly mansion, home or social gathering and be acceptable even to the most fastidious people. The exterior care of his person mirrored the admirable order that ruled his soul.

Margaret was careful to inculcate in her children the habit of thinking before acting. For carelessness, no matter how innocent, may be a source of moral and material harm. One day—John was eight years old—while his mother was out on business in a neighboring village, he tried to get at something that she had stored away on a high shelf. Since he could not reach it, he took a chair and while climbing onto it, he overturned an oil jar and it fell to the ground in pieces. Little John anxiously tried to clean up the mess by mopping up the spilt oil, but upon realizing that he would not be able to get rid of its stain and the smell, he figured how best he

could avoid displeasing his mother. Breaking off a rod from a hedge, he stripped the green bark in several places, and tried to make it look as pretty as he could. When it was time for his mother to return, he ran to meet her down in the valley. As soon as he came up to her, he asked: "How are you, Mamma? Did you have a nice walk?"

"Yes, John dear. How are you? Is everything all right? Have you been a good boy?"

"Oh, Mamma! Look!" So saying, John handed her the rod.

"Ah! That means you've been a naughty boy."

"Yes, I have. This time I really deserve a whipping."

"What did you do?"

"I was climbing up to the high shelf and accidentally broke the oil jar. I know I deserve a whipping, and so I brought you this stick to hit me with and save you the trouble of fetching one."

Meanwhile, John handed her the nicely decorated rod and looked up into her face with an expression at once shy, cunning and mischievous. Margaret looked from her son to the rod and broke into laughter, amused by his childish wiles. Finally she said: "It's too bad about the oil jar, but I'll forgive you because your behavior shows you didn't do it on purpose. But always remember this: before you do anything, always think of the possible consequences. Had you first looked to see if there were anything you might break, you would have climbed up more carefully, and there would have been no accident. If as a child you are thoughtless, you'll continue to be that way when you become a man, and that could cause a lot of trouble, and you may thereby even offend God. So be careful!"

Margaret would repeat such advice whenever necessary. She was so persuasive that her sons really became more careful in their actions.

"Prudent is he who heeds reproof" (Prov. 15, 5). Such prudence will teach him not to deserve reproof, to submit to it when needed and to avert its consequences by humility and sincerity. This is just what John did. In this small episode do we not already glimpse a spark of that Christian diplomacy which, with the simplicity of the dove and the prudence of the serpent, he was to employ so many

times to safeguard his institutions and to escape the snares laid by his adversaries, without thereby incurring their enmity?

Here we may also observe how Margaret differed from so many parents. Many fathers and mothers cannot educate their children in the love of discipline and thrift, because they themselves exemplify negligence and rashness. Ranting and raging, they thrash their children for every minor mishap, such as a broken window, a crumpled garment, an overturned chair, as though they had committed a grievous fault. The little ones quake in fear, weep, seethe with anger, and begin to nourish a hatred of parental authority, sometimes even rebelling against it. Such parents do not realize that by acting in this manner they can even destroy a child's moral instinct. At times they actually tolerate, or, at best, halfheartedly punish a lie, a squabble, immoderate speech and disobedience, whereas for a minor material damage they mete out corporal punishment along with a stream of words that often give cause for scandal and offense of God. How foolish they are to equate petty mishaps with transgressions against the law of God, or to give such importance to trifles.

Although Margaret dearly loved her sons, she never smothered them with cloying affection. Actually, her idea was to accustom them to a sober, hardworking and spartan life so that they would grow strong and robust. Long hikes did not tire them and long distances never bothered them. When John was attending the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, he often left Turin on foot at two in the afternoon and calmly arrived in Castelnuovo d'Asti at eight in the evening.

She did not want them to get used to having something with their bread at breakfast, neither coffee with milk, nor fruit; although they lived in the country. She would give them a piece of bread which they ate dry. In this way she accustommed them to consider it wholly normal if breakfast consisted merely of a slice of bread and nothing else. She treated John in the same manner when he returned home from school for his summer vacation, even as a seminarian.

Although John had grown used to sleeping on a softer mattress in the seminary, at home Margaret would make up his bed with a plain, hard, straw mattress: "It's best that you get used to sleeping without too much comfort; conveniences are not hard to get used

to." This was his bed throughout his four months of vacation. She ordered the boy to wrap up the soft mattress and store it away until the beginning of the new school year. "You don't know what may happen to you in the future," she would say. "No one can tell what fate Providence has in store for you. So you had better get used to a little hardship."

She also wanted her sons to endure some inconvenience with regard to their sleeping hours. "The early bird catches the worm," she used to say. Some evenings she often would allow them to stay up rather late if she had to attend to various chores in providing hospitality for some homeless person who could not find shelter elsewhere. In the morning she would get her children up before sunrise and expected them to get on their feet immediately. At times she would even wake them up at night if some sick neighbor needed their help. Thus, John became accustomed to miss his regular sleep. If Margaret thought that he had not slept enough during the night, she would tell him to nap during the hottest hours of the day. John would obey. Sitting on a wooden bench near the table, he would rest his head on his arms and would vainly try to doze.

"Sleep, John, sleep," she would say.

"Yes, Mamma," he would reply, "can't you see I am sleeping?"

So saying, he would close his eyes. Mamma Margaret would break into laughter. "Look, son, life is so short that we have little time for doing good. Every hour we give to unnecessary sleep is time lost for heaven. Every minute we can spare from unnecessary rest prolongs our life, because slumber is the image of death. How many good works we could accomplish in these minutes and how many merits we might earn for ourselves!" Her counsel was an echo of the divine word: "Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going" (Eccles. 9, 10).

Later we shall see how adept John was in making fruitful use of his time.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Childhood Episodes*

SOME may consider the incidents described in this chapter as trivial. Yet, they should not be omitted, because they ever more clearly reveal Margaret's way of raising her children. John was only five years old when together with his brother Joseph he was assigned the chore of leading a drove of turkeys to pasture. A cunning rogue who was passing by, saw the children and thought he would swindle them out of a turkey. He approached them and asked: "Will you sell me a turkey?"

The two little boys looked at each other. How lucky they were to have a chance of playing storekeeper and earning some money.

"I'll give you five *soldi*,"<sup>1</sup> the man added.

"Five *soldi*!" they exclaimed. It seemed an enormous sum to them, and without further ado they accepted the money while the swindler grabbed the largest turkey and quickly disappeared from sight. The boys instantly ran to their mother.

"Mamma, we've sold a turkey," they shouted, panting with excitement.

"Oh," said their mother, who had hardly been expecting such a piece of news.

"And we got a good price for it! Five *soldi*!" They handed her the money with an air of triumph, holding it out on their palms.

Mamma Margaret could not believe her eyes. "Poor me! Five *soldi*! A fine bargain! Don't you know that a turkey costs at least four and a half lire? That man was a rascal, and he robbed you."

The two children were dumbfounded. After recovering from their shock they ran off in desperate search of the buyer. Margaret called out vainly for them to come back; they heard nothing, but raced wildly from one side of the hill to the other. While hunting for

<sup>1</sup> An Italian 5-centesimi (cents) piece. [Editor]

that one turkey they forgot all about the others with which they had been entrusted and which were now at the mercy of the first passerby. Margaret saw what was happening from her window. She ran out, and with the help of some neighbors, managed to herd the straying turkeys and lock them up in the henroost. Meanwhile, the two little boys, who, as might have been expected, had not found the swindler, returned home, heads hanging in shame. They were dripping with perspiration and very upset. Their feelings can easily be imagined when they reached the meadow and discovered that the other turkeys had also disappeared. They looked about them: nothing in sight. They looked in the direction of their house: there was no one there either. Immediately both boys figured that the other turkeys had been stolen as well, so they were in a real panic when they reached home. They had hardly crossed the threshold before they gasped: "Mamma, the turkeys have gone!"

Margaret looked at them and smiled. Suspecting she had some good news they ran to her. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because I've already put them away. You boys do things without using your head. Next time, don't trust to your own judgment, but ask the advice of someone who knows a little more than you do. Then you won't have to be sorry, and you won't sell any more turkeys for five *soldi* apiece. Neither will you run the risk of losing all the others! What do you think you could have done—little as you are—all alone against the thief?"

Here I cannot refrain from an observation: who would have thought then that Divine Providence would appoint John as His treasurer, and that he would be called upon to administer vast sums in support of innumerable works of charity?

Some time later John noticed that one of the turkey cocks in his care was no longer in the meadow. He had not seen anybody around who might have stolen it. Upon looking about, however, he noticed a tall, bearded man going his way with utmost indifference, never glancing at the little keeper. But John had already reasoned logically that only this man could have been the thief, though he had no evidence to prove it. Nevertheless, he was so sure of himself that he dashed out into the road in hot pursuit of the man. Then, with the courage born of certainty, John ordered him to stop.

"You're not going one step farther unless you give back my turkey."

The stranger looked little John over sternly and replied: "Have you gone out of your mind? Keep well, and good day to you!"

But John daringly insisted: "Didn't you hear me? Give me that turkey! You stole it, I tell you."

The stranger unbuttoned his coat: "Where do you think I might be hiding it?"

But John was not discouraged. "I don't care if you haven't got it on you. I want it back, I tell you."

"I see you like your fun," observed the stranger, "but it's out of place. I've got no more time to lose with you." So saying, he continued on his way, but John ran on ahead to bar his path.

"You're not going on unless you give back what belongs to me. Otherwise I'll start shouting 'Thief, thief!' and if nobody comes, I'll grab you by the legs and I won't let you go."

In the face of such resolution the man, afraid of being caught, went behind a bush and from the ditch pulled out a sack in which he had hidden the turkey, with the intention of returning for it during the night when nobody was about. Making the best of a bad situation, he said: "Look, I just wanted to play a trick on you, and see whether you'd notice that a turkey was missing." And he handed back the stolen bird.

"Very well," John replied, "now you can go about your own business. But don't try to play such tricks again, because it's something no honest man would do."

That evening when John returned home he told his mother about his exploit. Another mother, perhaps, would have praised her son's presence of mind and would have railed against the thief, loudly and tiresomely recounting the event to her neighbors. But Margaret was of the opinion that the child had run too great a risk and she told him so.

"Now supposing he had not stolen the turkey, you would have been in trouble because he might have felt insulted and given you a thrashing."

"But I was certain he'd stolen it! There was no one else around, and I'd seen the turkey only a few minutes before!"

"The fact that you didn't see it wasn't reason enough for you

to accuse him. Someone else might have come close to the meadow and then hidden himself behind a tree or a hedge.”

“If I had thought of all these things, we’d have lost the turkey.”

“Listen, that would have been no great loss. You know that I don’t care to insist on my rights at the risk of offending the spirit of charity or getting into trouble with my neighbors. I don’t like to quarrel over a bunch of grapes or some fruit that somebody might steal. If necessary, we can warn them; but the world won’t come to an end over such trifles.”

“So you would let people take everything from you, without a complaint?”

“Easy, son. If my family’s well-being were at stake, you’d soon see that I would stand on my rights even against the toughest people.”

“But don’t you see that man was shamelessly lying?”

“How did you know it was a lie? He might actually have been meaning to play a joke on you. You had no proof to the contrary.”

“Hum!” grumbled John, somewhat incredulous.

“Anyway, even if he were guilty, you could have accepted his apology and spared him embarrassment. And I’d like to point out that the last words you said to him were unnecessary. Since you had already gotten the turkey back, there was no need to say anything else.”

“So I did wrong then?”

“I didn’t say that; your intention was a good one and you won your point. But take care not to mention this to anybody else. Should you meet that man again, pretend you’ve forgotten all about it. Remember that a single enemy is one too many.”

But if Margaret was a model of prudence, she nevertheless trained her sons to be courageous by setting an example herself, as the following amusing anecdote shows.

One year there was general grief over the prospect of a poor vintage. Prices had soared, and the peasants kept close watch over their vineyards as vintage time drew near. Some thieves had been roaming about at night stripping the vineyards to stock their own wine cellars at the expense of others.

Margaret lived alone with her three boys in an isolated house surrounded by woods. She certainly was not in a position to defend

herself against anyone trying to rob her. So she lived in constant danger of waking up one fine morning to find herself robbed of the most profitable source of revenue from her farm. Several vines along the path had already been stripped of their fruit. But there was an indefinable virile character about Margaret's way of thinking and acting that kept her from easily succumbing to despair.

One day she saw a man passing by her vineyard, looking as though he were out merely for a stroll. She noticed that from time to time he would cast a knowing eye over the slopes and hedges, as though he were studying the landscape. Suspecting he might try to loot the vines that very night, Margaret gathered her sons around her and said: "I'm afraid someone may try to steal our grapes tonight. We must be on the alert. Don't make a single sound, keep absolutely silent. But when I give the signal, start shouting 'Thief! Thief!' at the top of your voices and make all the noise you can."

When night came over the farm, Margaret left the house without taking a light. She sat on the ground, surrounded by her sons. Before long a shadowy figure appeared at the far end of the vineyard moving stealthily around the hedge. And then entering the farm itself, the figure walked along a row of vines and suddenly came to a halt. Margaret watched. All was still and silent. The alert youngsters waited only for her signal. The man had already broken off a bunch of grapes when Margaret cried out: "Thief! Do you want to go to hell just for a few grapes?"

The three boys immediately began to yell: "Thief! Thief! Quick! Quick, police! Over there! There's the thief! Hurry, hurry!"

They raised a tremendous racket by wildly beating iron shovels and tongs against each other. Scared out of his wits by such an unexpected uproar, the thief dropped the grapes, raced madly down the hill, and disappeared, but not before he had fallen headlong into a ditch.

Delighted with her victory, Margaret said: "See, we've chased the thieves away even without guns!" They all laughed heartily. Shortly afterwards the thief fell foul of the law by other robberies and spent several years in prison.

Trained thus to be fearless, John was always able to keep a cool head. This was very essential to him in view of the many vicissitudes and perils he was to encounter in the course of his long life. To

be sure, he was inspired by supernatural motives, but virtue in a heart trained to aim at perfection since childhood is like a heady wine in a fragile vessel: it requires a miracle to keep it intact. John truly exemplified the righteous man about whom we read in Sirach: "At the father's death, he will seem not dead; since he leaves after him one like himself whom he looks upon through life with joy, and even in death, without regret: The avenger he leaves against his foes, and the one to repay his friends with kindness" (30, 4-6). Was not John, indeed, to be the keeper in the Lord's vineyard, one of the defenders of His house?

John was to give further proof of his courage a few years later. Mamma Margaret had always been careful never to tell her children terrifying stories that might over-excite their imagination. Unfortunately many mothers imprudently do so and thereby rear cowards instead of men of courage. One autumn John went for a brief vacation to the home of his mother's family in Capriglio, where Margaret customarily spent several days to help with the vintage. His grandfather, uncles and aunts gave him a hearty welcome.

As night drew on and they were waiting for supper, someone began to spin a tale about how, in times gone by, they used to hear different weird sounds coming from the attic. The sounds were either of long or brief duration, but they always had a hair-raising effect on those who heard them. Everyone maintained that only the devil himself would have been able to upset people in such a manner. John refused to believe such idle tales, and insisted that it was all due to some natural cause, such as the wind, a polecat or something like that. Since it was already dark, someone lit the lamps. The room in which they were talking had a ceiling with many rafters. This formed the floor of a large attic used as a barn and storehouse for other crops. Suddenly they heard the noise of a falling object, like a big basket of bowls, followed by a slow, dull sound that traversed the space above their heads from one corner to another. Everyone stopped talking and a sombre silence fell on the group. When the sinister sound was repeated their faces grew pale.

"What can it be?" they whispered to one another.

"Let's go outside," Margaret said to her son. "Come on, a sudden fright might do you harm."

"No," John said, "I want to see what it is."

The noise continued at intervals, and given the hour it was so inexplicable as to be terrifying indeed. They all stared at each other quizzically.

"Did anybody leave the door open?" someone asked.

"No, it's locked," answered another.

"What then?"

John stood up resolutely, lit a lamp and said: "Let's go and take a look."

"Listen, let's wait for tomorrow—it's prudent . . ."

"What! Are you afraid?"

So saying, he climbed the wooden staircase leading to the attic. The others, each holding a lantern and a stick, followed behind him, trembling and muttering to themselves. John pushed open the door. He entered the attic, held the lantern up and looked about him. He could see nothing. All was still. Some of his relatives peeped in from the door, only one or two having dared to enter after him. Then they all gave a startled cry, and some fled. Something very strange was going on: a wheat-sieve in a corner, was moving of its own accord and advancing toward them, coming to a sudden halt in response to their terror-stricken shrieks. But after the shouts died down, it resumed its movements and did not halt until it had reached John's feet. The boy stepped back. Then he handed his lantern to the person nearest him, who terrified let it fall, plunging the room in darkness. He called for another lantern and stood it on top of an old chair. Then, bending down, he touched the sieve. "Don't touch it! Don't touch it!" someone yelled from the doorway. John paid no heed and lifted it off the ground. A great roar of laughter filled the room. Underneath the sieve stood a big hen!

This is what had happened. Some grains of wheat had become lodged in the grill of the sieve that was tilted against the wall. Lured by the grains, a hen had begun to peck at these tempting morsels of food. The sieve had unexpectedly toppled over and had imprisoned the hen. Captive and hungry, the hen had tried to escape,

and because it was unable to rid itself of the great weight, it had battered itself against the sides. Thus, the hen had pushed its not too heavy prison from one end of the attic to the other. The silence of the night, the floor made of rafters and the general fear had given the noise a particularly eerie quality.

Gaiety succeeded their panic for which the hen paid dearly. Grabbing the bird, Margaret said: "You won't frighten us like that any more!" So saying, she wrung its neck and then plucked and cooked it.

"The goblin's in the cookpot!" they all shouted in unison as they prepared to sit down, quite unexpectedly, to a magnificent supper. No one felt like going to bed, so after having been freed of their fear they spent the night in a frolicsome mood as they watched their vats and barrels.

John was always even-tempered. The conviction that he is in the grace of God endows a youth with great certainty and assurance: "He who fears the Lord is never alarmed, never afraid; for the Lord is his hope" (Sir. 34, 14). Those who trust in the help of God, "shall not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day" (Ps. 90, 5).

## CHAPTER 11

### *Early Signs of Virtue*

**B**EFORE going on with our narrative, we must speak of the place where the events about to be described occurred. Following the road from Buttiglieria to Becchi, a hamlet forming part of Morialdo, the traveler will see to his right a hill. On its crest stands a plain cottage, at its foot lies a meadow shaded by a grove. The house was Margaret's, and to this meadow her sons, Joseph, and later, John, used to lead a cow to pasture.

We read in Sirach: "Idleness is an apt teacher of mischief" (33, 28). Margaret's children heard this, time and again, and learned to avoid offending God and to be busy round the clock. Work became a welcome part of their lives. Margaret saw to it that they were always engaged in chores compatible with their years.

Thus, she assigned John the task of tending the cow and he applied himself most diligently to it. He could be seen every day in the meadow holding the rope tied to the cow's horns, to prevent it from straying and doing damage in the neighbors' fields.

The following incident was told to us by John Filippello, one of John's contemporaries. According to Filippello, John's actions, even then revealed something extraordinary about his character. "I used to take the animals to pasture with John when he was about seven. He excited the admiration of everyone who saw him, on the one hand, because he was so unassuming and humble, his head always slightly bowed; and on the other, because he was so lively and bright that he instantly made friends. I often would say to him: 'You won't have any trouble in being a success in life, John.' To which he would answer quite simply: 'I hope not.'"

A boy named Secundus Matta was another of John's cow-herding companions in the pasture. John's own age, he was a young farmhand on one of the surrounding estates. Matta would come

down the hill every morning with his master's cow; he carried along his breakfast, a piece of coarse bread. John would be munching on a piece of tasty white bread that Mamma Margaret always took great pains to keep in the house.

One day John asked Matta: "Want to do me a favor?"

"Sure," Matta replied.

"How about swapping bread with me?"

"Why?"

"Because your bread must taste better than mine, and I like it better."

In his simplicity Matta really believed that John preferred coarse bread. Since he liked his friend's white bread better, he eagerly agreed to the exchange. From that day onward, for two successive spring seasons, they exchanged bread every morning in the meadow. Later on, a grown man, Matta often thought about this. He would often discuss it with his nephew, Fr. Secundus Marchisio, a Salesian, observing that John's motive for the exchange could only have been to practice self-denial. The coarse bread of those days was certainly not a choice tidbit.

The solitude of the meadow offered John an occasion for prayer. He had learned this habit from his mother, for Margaret, apart from the prescribed prayers she recited devotedly on her knees, would continually murmur words of love for God throughout the day, while occupied with the most varied chores. All those who knew John as a child testify to his love of prayer and to his great devotion to the Blessed Virgin. John must have been very familiar with the holy rosary, because from the earliest days of the Oratory up to the last years of his life, he always insisted that his boys recite it every day. He never subscribed to the idea that a religious community could be exempt from reciting these prayers for any reason at all. In his view, it was a necessary practice of piety for proper living, as important as his daily bread in sustaining his strength and keeping him alive. Moreover, as soon as the bells of Morialdo rang out the *Angelus*, he would immediately bare his head and kneel in homage to his heavenly Mother. John Filippello adds that his piety was so great that frequently one could hear his clear silvery voice echoing through the hills uplifted in sacred song.

Prayer combined with work maintains one's purity of soul; thus, it can be said that John preserved that immaculate virtue that makes men akin to angels. Hence, it is not surprising if Marianne Occhiena more than once observed to Joseph Buzzetti, with the utmost conviction, that from time to time the Blessed Virgin appeared to her nephew when he was alone in the meadow and spoke to him. We have no way of confirming such a signal favor, but merely suggest that such a statement reveals the esteem in which he was held during his childhood by all who observed him closely.

While these scenes of a simple life unfolded on the hill of Becchi, the people of Castelnuovo hastened to the parish church on a certain week day of the year 1822, summoned there by a ceremony of exceptional character. It was the day on which the dean of the area, Father Joseph Sismondo, with the entire clergy, stood before the high altar and swore allegiance to King Charles Felix, who had ascended the throne the year before, and to his successors. The mayor and a municipal councillor acted as witnesses. This royal decree affected the clergy throughout the Kingdom. The Pope had granted the necessary authorization, even though it was a gratuitous slur to doubt the loyalty of priests to their King. It was then that Bishop [Louis] Fransoni of Fossano, most rightfully exclaimed: "*Incidimus in tempora mala.*" [We are falling into evil times!] For he foresaw the shape of things to come and was aware of the bad faith of the men around the King.

They had already sown seeds of mistrust in the King's mind against Archbishop [Columban] Chiaverotti of Turin, although things never went so far as to cause an open break between them. The Archbishop was overly respectful to his King while Charles Felix, being deeply Christian in spirit, showed a great deference toward ecclesiastical authority. In many ways he deserved well of the Church, and more than once he succeeded in curbing the demands of his ministers, who did not share his respect for the rights of the Church. Nevertheless, he was not consistent in upholding some of these rights: the triple ecclesiastical immunity, which had been reestablished in 1814, did not last very long since it proved irksome to the innovators. Consequently, upon the King's request, in 1823, Rome authorized priests to act as witnesses in court, both in civil and criminal cases when subpoenaed, although

certain limitations still protected sacerdotal dignity. Even so, the priestly dignity inherent in a pastor, confessor, counselor and natural confidant of the people surely deserved some special privilege. In view of the benefits deriving to all from this office, surely a priest should have been exempted from any odious obligation.

Again in 1824, the King's ministers demanded that episcopal pastoral letters be submitted to the civil authorities for revision, should some phrases not be to their liking, and arrogated to themselves the right to exercise the veto if a Bishop refused to submit. The King sided with those Bishops who appealed to him personally, and in individual instances the ministers backed down. But they did not recall the order they had issued to printers, prohibiting them from printing anything not having official approval.

The King's predecessor and brother, Victor Emmanuel I, had been a devout, righteous and good-hearted monarch, both respectful and obedient in his attitude toward the Church. He had reinstated the religious Orders. But he, too, was surrounded by men such as President Count Peiretti, Ambassador to Rome, who was wont to say: "Whatever builds up hopes in Rome is a cause of fear for us and by no means must we yield to it."

Royalist traditions were still alive at court and the crown councillors worked hard to convince the Sovereign that certain privileges enjoyed by the clergy were no longer compatible with the changed conditions of the time. Victor Emmanuel himself, in his written instructions to Count Barbaroux, his envoy to the Holy See, had impressed upon him that he mistrusted the Pope as a temporal ruler. He trusted, instead, the other European Powers, which were allowing the sectaries in Turin to hold their meetings in the French and Spanish Embassies and in the palace of the Bavarian Envoy. The outcome was the revolution of 1821 and Victor Emmanuel, in fright, voluntarily abdicated in favor of Charles Felix.

All this was the result of the principles taught at the University of Turin. These can be summarized briefly: "Either the Pope consents to do our bidding, or we shall do what we want anyway!" This principle, on the whole, smoothed the way for all foes of the Church. Count [Clement Solaro] della Margherita declared that he was very lucky to have studied Canon Law by himself from authors not

condemned by the Church. He had received his degree before the reform when there was as yet no faculty of Canon Law in [the State University] in Turin.

How much superior to these ministers and university professors was a humble boy who knew nothing beyond his catechism. "I have more discernment than the elders, because I observe your precepts," John might have echoed the Psalmist (Ps. 118, 100). Indeed, these officials and titled professors caused immeasurable harm to society, whereas the young cowherd laid the foundations for its restoration. John, ever intrepid and faithful in serving God and his Church, could in truth have made his own the words of Sirach: "When I was young and innocent, I sought wisdom before all else. In prayer I begged for her, and from my youth followed after her. She was rich like ripening grapes; in her was my heart's joy. My feet were steadfast in her path; thus, I attained to her at last. For a short time I paid heed, and I acquired great instruction; as in this way I have made progress, I shall return thanks to him who gives me wisdom. When I had considered how I might make her mine, I strove to do well, lest I should be rebuffed" (51, 13-18).

## CHAPTER 12

### *First Schooling*

THE three children left by Francis to Margaret Occhiena—Anthony, Joseph, and John—were very different in character and inclination. Anthony was rough-mannered, with little or no delicacy of feeling. Boastful, always quick with his fists, he exemplified an I-don't-care attitude toward life. In school he had learned to read and write but boasted that he had never studied or really attended class. To be sure, he had no aptitude for study. He worked in the fields and with his strong physique he had all the makings of a good farmer.

Joseph was a gentle and serene soul, good, patient, and prudent; he took after his father and was very adept in turning everything to some advantage, even things that might seem of little use. Thus, had he not been so fond of the peaceful life of the farm, he might have become a successful businessman.

On the other hand, John was by nature at once quick to flare up and rather inflexible, so that he had to make great efforts to achieve self-control. He had a serious disposition. He talked little but noticed everything, weighing the words of others, trying to understand other people's character and to guess their thoughts so as to conduct himself with prudence. He was never seen to laugh uproariously, no matter how ridiculous the things he heard, or even when he himself did or said something silly. "A fool raises his voice in laughter," says Sirach, "but a prudent man at the most smiles gently" (21, 20). Warm of heart and of lively intelligence, he quickly learned the knack of any trade or craft that he saw others perform. Thanks to his tenacity and patience in achieving his purpose, John was able to overcome all the obstacles that life set in his path. According to John Becchis, a

neighbor who knew John Bosco as a child, his obedience was so outstanding that mothers would cite him as an example to their children.

John was of medium height, agile and pleasing in appearance. His face was full and oval in shape, surmounted by a broad forehead that expressed an inner serenity. His nose was regular and his lips always seemed to be set in a kindly smile. His chin was well-formed and graceful. His eyes were black and piercing and his facial expression changed with the glow of his eyes. His hair was thick, curly and dark blond as were his eyebrows. Such is John's portrait as his contemporaries recall him.

Relations between Anthony and the other two brothers were always strained. On the other hand, Joseph and John were deeply fond of each other; their tastes were identical, and there was never the slightest discord between them. Indeed, they seemed to vie with each other in trying to do whatever would please the other most.

It was the year 1823 and John was eight years old. Margaret, perhaps foreseeing that Providence had destined him for tasks other than that of work in the fields, wanted to send him to the public school at Castelnuovo, where instruction was limited to reading, writing, the essentials of arithmetic, the rudiments of Italian grammar and the catechism. But she was troubled by the fact that their hamlet was some three miles from Castelnuovo. This would entail some expense to board him with a family and provide whatever he would need. She talked it over with Anthony, now twenty, who immediately expressed his opposition to her plan.

"Why must you send John to school?" he grumbled. "Let him swing the hoe, like I did!"

"I'm not showing John any favoritism by sending him to school," Margaret replied. "Joseph also learned to read and write, and your father did the same for you."

"But you're talking of boarding school."

"Now listen to me: up till now we've managed to get along and the Lord has always helped us. Don't worry, no one will eat up your share. Study is important nowadays; even shoemakers and tinkers study. It's a common thing now to go to school."

Anthony retorted that he had grown to be a strong man without benefit of school or studies. So he stubbornly opposed Margaret's plan.

This incident provides a shining example of Margaret's prudence. Although Anthony was her stepson, he was nevertheless the first-born, so she deferred to him in a way that was unique rather than rare, although he did nothing to deserve it. She never undertook anything without first consulting him or first persuading him of its desirability when his opinion differed.

Further, Margaret readily yielded if she realized that a decision was not to his liking. Thus, she maintained that peace in the family which, next to the grace of God, is the most precious and enviable of treasures. So she let the matter drop for the time being. After waiting for a more propitious moment, she gave Anthony to understand that although she had given up the idea of sending John to Castelnuovo, she was still determined that John should study. Anthony was appeased.

August of that year saw all the churches draped in black, while the mournful tolling of the church bells announced the death of Pius VII, who had passed away on August 20. A few weeks later, Christian hearts again surged with joy and exultation at the news of Leo XII's election on September 28. There was lots of talk among the people in those days about Pius VII, for whom the whole of Piedmont felt the deepest affection. They had seen him many times, they had wept over his sufferings and rejoiced in his triumphs. His picture was venerated in every household: everyone was familiar with his lovable countenance. Not so many years ago, one still saw oil paintings of this great Pontiff in the homes of well-to-do families. The impressions of one's childhood being indelible, I feel certain that these events kindled in John's heart that love of the Pope that one day was to permeate all his great undertakings.

When autumn came, Margaret had recourse to an expedient to which Anthony consented. That winter John was to attend the public school daily in the neighboring village of Capriglio, where he would learn the rudiments of reading and writing. The teacher was the chaplain, Father Joseph Lacqua, a very pious priest. Margaret called on him, begging him to admit her son to his classes,

since John was still too young to make the long trek between Becchi and Castelnuovo. The priest was not inclined to do so, since he was not obliged to accept pupils residing outside Capriglio. Margaret was greatly distressed and at her wit's end, when unexpectedly a kindly peasant offered to be John's first instructor in reading. She accepted his friendly offer. So that winter, 1823-24, John learned to read and spell tolerably well. A few years ago this same man told Father Michael Rua how happy he was to have had the good fortune of being John Bosco's first teacher.

Meanwhile the Lord ordained events in a way that brought new hope to Margaret. Father Lacqua's housekeeper died at Capriglio in 1824 and her place was taken by Marianne Occhiena, Margaret's sister. Marianne was very fond of her nephews and often came to visit them at Becchi. She immediately beseeched the chaplain to accept John at his school. He could not refuse his new housekeeper, whom he already knew to be a reliable and very religious woman. So he agreed to teach the boy free of charge. Aunt Marianne, who cleared the way for little John's elementary schooling, served the revered chaplain until his dying day. A spinster, she ended her days in the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, putting her charitable activity in the service of the youngsters who were sheltered there.

With his aunt in Capriglio, school for John was just like being at home. School started shortly after All Saints' Day and continued until the Feast of the Annunciation. At that tender age and in the harshest season of the year, John walked the two and a half mile trek to school in freezing rain or snow along a muddy road, almost daily. Father Lacqua grew very fond of his new pupil and was kind to him in many ways. He zealously dedicated himself to the lad's instruction and even more to his Christian education. Amazed at his outstanding aptitude for study and religious practice, the priest gave him further explanations of the truths that his mother had already taught him. He advised him on the means to keep himself in a state of grace and how to approach the sacrament of Penance with greater benefit. Father Lacqua also stressed the necessity of Christian mortification, the practice of which requires a vigilant watch over one's every action, even the slightest, lest it be tinged with pride.

It was a step forward which God had preordained for John. At times his younger schoolmates badgered him, as if he were a simpleton. It is only natural that a child who had grown up in the isolation of a lonely farmhouse should at first feel ill at ease upon suddenly finding himself among children who were total strangers to him. But John never attempted to defend himself, as he might easily have done, especially when he could no longer be regarded as a newcomer. He chose to endure this badgering in patience, without asserting himself, even though he could certainly count on the support of his aunt and of his teacher. We learned this from Anthony Occhiena son of Francis Occhiena, a former schoolmate of John, and in later years Mayor of Capriglio. Already at that tender age apparently, John was fond of practicing certain penances in secret, as we shall see later. He was greatly stirred by the stories of the lives of saints as told by his teacher, and he tried to emulate them.

Although he attended the school at Capriglio with some degree of regularity only in the winter of 1824-25, John nevertheless made great progress in reading and writing. In his free time he drove the cattle to pasture and soothed Anthony's feelings by working in the fields in the summer months. According to the testimony of all the people of the hamlet, however, no sooner had he learned to read than he eagerly dedicated himself to this task with the idea of qualifying for the priesthood. He had already made known this desire. His brother Joseph recalled that John always had a book in his hand at meal times and read constantly while eating. His favorite book was the catechism. He always carried it on his person until he began to attend school regularly. This little book was a source of new grace to him. The Scriptures tell us: "Reflect on the precepts of the Lord, let his commandments be your constant meditation: then he will enlighten your mind, and the wisdom you desire he will grant" (Sir. 6, 37).

November brought the first snows and all outdoor farm work came to a halt. John talked about returning to school. Anthony began to wear a sullen look and Margaret deemed it wiser not to enforce her authority. Since it was always easy to find some pretext to send the boy to Capriglio, either to visit his aunt or to run on some errand to his grandfather, during that winter of 1825-26

John was able, though not too frequently, to talk with Father Lacqua, practice his writing and borrow some books. But it was not long before he had to break off all contact with that priest. A cruel fate for someone fired with the will to learn!

Meanwhile, the seeds of virtue that his mother and his teacher had sown in his heart were slowly developing and flowering. Secundus Matta recalled another incident in the pasture. It sheds light on John's behavior as a boy. There were four or five other boys who used to lead their cattle to pasture near the meadow where John watched over his cow. They would often leave the animals unattended and romp all over the meadow, climbing trees and playing games. John never took part in their frolic, but sat apart, praying or reading continuously. The boys called out to him many times to join them, each time receiving a courteous refusal. One day, determined to break down his reserve at any cost, even by force, the youngsters approached and surrounded him. Roughly they announced: "This time you're going to play with us."

"Do me a favor," John answered, "leave me alone. Have all the fun you want, I won't stop you, but I've got other things to do."

"Can't you see we want you to come along with us and that you are going to *have* to come?"

"I don't butt in on your affairs, and I don't see why you should butt in on mine. I don't bother you and you shouldn't bother me."

"Don't you know that by acting in this way you show that you despise us? After all who are you to despise our company?"

"Despise you? Far from it! While you are having a good time, I keep an eye out for your cows and stop them from damaging other people's property. So I am saving you scoldings and punishments."

"Come on, now," shouted the toughest boy among them, "if we try talking to you, you'll make fools of us with all your arguments. We've made up our minds that you are going to play with us. Stop the chattering and let's go!"

"Surely you're smart enough not to force me. Go on playing, and I'll look after your cattle, but leave me alone."

"No! Absolutely no! You're coming along with us."

"I'm not."

"If you don't, you'll be sorry!"

“I’ve said I’m not coming and I’m not!”

“So you won’t, well, then . . .”

The gang jumped on him and began hitting him with clenched fists, releasing their pent-up resentment. John, who was already quite a husky lad, could easily have knocked them down and returned blow for blow, but he endured their cruel jibes and jabs without complaint. After they had wrought their petty vengeance on him, the boys went back to their games, guffawing loudly and uttering further threats. John sat down again under the shade of a tree and continued his watch over his cow as well as theirs. Later, when they came to ask if he was now ready to play with them after the rough lesson they had taught him, he replied: “Hit me again if you want to, but I’ll never join you in playing because I want to study and become a priest.”

His reply and his demeanor made a deep impression on the boys, so much so that they agreed among themselves to keep watch for him over his own cow. “Don’t worry about looking out for the cattle any more,” they told him. “We’ll look after them, and you can go on reading.”

Here we see how John never resorted to violence in self-defense nor sought revenge, although he was exceptionally courageous and resolute. He did so at times, but only to defend the weak against bullies.

From that time onward those boys became his friends. After he finished his prayers or his reading, they would come over to him and he would talk with them so warmly and intelligently that they grew all the more fond of him. Eventually he began to exercise a certain moral authority over them. He would repeat to them all that he had learned from the catechism or from sermons, and gave them such religious instruction as he could for their moral and intellectual advantage. Sometimes he entertained them with hymns, which he would alternate with an interesting tale. At other times, he would teach them their morning and evening prayers. At home he would find delight in building a small altar before the picture of the Blessed Virgin and adorning it with green boughs and wild flowers. When the altar was ready, he would call the boys in to admire his handiwork. All this he did to keep them away from bad companions. This had also been his mother’s suggestion. Ac-

According to his brother Joseph, John had a healthy fear of God's judgment and a great horror of sin. Whether at home or in the fields, he had his little friends make the sign of the cross before and after his story-telling or his catechism lessons. Little girls, by the way, never took part in these gatherings and conversations.

In these villages, the common consensus to this day is that from his earliest childhood John was greatly esteemed because of his deep piety.

## CHAPTER 13

### *Young Acrobat*

**A**BOUT this time John developed a keen interest in the markets and fairs of neighboring villages. Here he would watch the sleight-of-hand artists and the strong men, always an indispensable feature attraction. Instinctively, John felt he had to excel among his companions so as to be of greater benefit to their souls. He lacked, however, those requisite qualities that might have drawn the attention of others: education, wealth, high social rank. Moreover, he lived in an isolated hamlet, far from any important center where he could come in contact with large groups of people. Some special talent or skill was required in order to arouse the interest of simple, uneducated folk, who naturally would not deign to listen to a mere child. John realized that the novelty of possessing some exciting and entertaining skill would provide him with the means of gaining ascendancy over the minds of others, so he diligently applied himself to learning skills of this kind.

He first asked his mother's permission and told her about a plan of his, which, we shall see later, he carried out. After some thought, his mother agreed, but since some money would be needed she warned him: "Go ahead and do what you think is best, but don't ask me for money, because I don't have any!"

"Let me worry about that, I'll find a way," John replied.

In the following chapters we shall see how he busied himself in raising the money he needed.

It is somewhat surprising that Margaret, otherwise so prudent, should grant a permission of this kind to her son. But it must be borne in mind that those times were very different from ours. People were much more simple in their customs, and even among mountebanks there were those who could pass as persons of honorable character and refinement. The renowned Orcorte, whose leg-

erdemain is still remembered although he has been dead for many years, was impeccable in speech and manners. The civil authorities, moreover, kept a watchful eye on public morals, and supported the clergy whenever the need arose to remove some evil. Besides, John never went to the fairs alone, being always accompanied by his mother or by persons she could trust.

He began this phase of his life by attending the fair which was held twice a year at Castelnuovo. In addition, he often visited the markets for the sole purpose of talking with the mountebanks and acrobats. The moment John heard that there was a tightrope walker or juggler in a nearby hamlet, he instantly made his way there. He did not go just for fun; he wanted to learn how it was done. So he attentively studied their every feat of prowess. He would pay two *soldi* to see them work at close range, carefully observing their slightest gestures, at times hardly perceptible to the quickest eye, in order to discover their tricks and acquire their skill. Upon returning home, he would set about practicing and repeating their tricks until he had mastered them at the price of many bumps, bruises, falls and tumbles. But nothing dismayed him; he would begin by a successful leap or two, but then at the third he would come crashing down to the floor, the breath knocked out of him. After resting for a moment, he would try again.

John also practiced tightrope walking. He stretched a rope at a certain height from a rough-hewn pole which he himself had fashioned, climbed up and attempted to walk over. At times he would come crashing headlong to the ground almost killing himself. Luckily, he was never hurt badly nor did he ever become discouraged. Such determination is beyond belief.

At the age of eleven he could perform all sorts of acrobatics and spectacular feats; he knew juggler's tricks, he could turn somersaults, flip handsprings and walk on his hands. Moreover, he walked and danced on the tightrope like a real professional. He also learned many sleight-of-hand tricks, the kind that amaze those who do not know the secret behind them. But this was not all. John never rested until he really grasped everything he saw and had fully understood everything that took place before his eyes. For this reason he followed attentively every gesture of a certain quack who really had quite a remarkable gift for pulling teeth.

By dint of close scrutiny, John became adept at manipulating pliers, learned about the way the tooth was set in the gum, and also the correct movement of the hand for extracting it at the first try.

Some of the mountebanks suspected and mistrusted his continuous visits to the fairs, his close scrutiny, his remarks and some of his questions. They were annoyed by his presence, and had already come to look upon him as one of those seeking to steal the secrets of their craft. They realized that more than once he had actually caught on to their tricks and this irritated them all the more. Consequently, they tried every means to elude his curiosity; they turned their backs upon him or placed someone in front of them to block off John's view of their little table. But John merely moved to a better position and either faced or flanked them, and so their precautions proved useless.

Among the many anecdotes with which he later used to amuse his boys, the following highly merits mention. These tales recall precious memories to us, because they almost make our ears re-echo his pleasing voice that helped us spend so many delightful hours of recreation in our youth. Don Bosco was ever ready with a joke or an entertaining tale. Indeed, joviality was the very essence of his character, even in the midst of the thorniest problems and the greatest afflictions.

A mountebank once appeared in the square of a neighboring hamlet. His act was accompanied by music and the boom of a big bass drum. John pushed his way forward from the middle of the crowd until he stood right up against the cart. The mountebank recognized him and asked him to move back. But John wouldn't budge. "It's a public square," he said.

From his high perch on the wagon the mountebank then began to relate a tall story of how he had performed for the Great Mogul and traveled across the whole of China; he also told of his intimate friendship with all the princes of Persia and how he had miraculously cured the Great Khan of Tataria and the Mikado of Japan. For the sake of humanity, continued the charlatan, he had dedicated himself for many years to the study of herbs under the light of the moon, and thus had discovered such beneficial secrets of nature that would amaze Solomon himself were he still alive. Then, in a booming voice, becoming increasingly louder, he announced

to the whole world that he had discovered a miraculous way of extracting teeth. He could do it with either a sword, a hammer or even only his fingers, but painlessly. The secret was a certain powder he was selling at a very moderate price, a powder which, moreover, had marvelous power to cure a thousand other ailments. To substantiate his claims the quack produced parchments, letters, certificates and testimonials of services rendered; he also complacently dangled the seals of all the reigning monarchs. Declaring that he had come to this hamlet only to ease the sufferings of mankind, he invited anyone who had cavities or needed an extraction kindly to step forward, and he would take care of him without the slightest pain.

At the end of his bombastic speech, during which from time to time he had glanced at John not so benevolently, indeed, rather suspiciously, he mopped the perspiration from his face and signaled a brief blare of the trumpets. After that, a farmer stepped forward and asked him to pull a tooth that was causing him great pain. The quack invited the patient up to the coachman's box and made him sit down, with an ill-concealed gesture of impatience clearly visible on his wrinkled brow.

Embarrassed at having all eyes on himself, the peasant asked: "What is the fee?"

"How money-minded you are!" the charlatan replied. "I don't work for money. No money could pay for my skill. If you wish to make me a gift after the operation, I'll deign to accept it only to please you."

"And . . . you're sure you won't hurt me?"

"Just as if I didn't even touch you. Now, open your mouth." The patient obediently opened his mouth wide as an oven.

"Which is the tooth that hurts you?"

"This one!" answered the peasant, pointing to a lower molar. The charlatan now turned to the spectators and extolled the miracle they would soon be witnessing. The poor peasant again said: "But you won't hurt me, will you?"

"Keep quiet and you'll see how good I am!"

John was observing the scene, leaning on the wheels of the coach, wide-eyed, with bated breath, but with a slightly ironic smile playing on his lips. The quack, who never took his eyes off him,

shook his head: John was an importunate spectator. The man's face now reflected annoyance at some unforeseen turn of events. Perhaps the peasant had unexpectedly beaten the intended patient to the game. By coincidence or design, a stranger had approached the coach a few seconds after the appearance of the simpleton, and had winked at the charlatan. At any rate, the quack did not lose his self-assurance and applied some powder to the decayed tooth. "Now," he said, "I leave the choice to you; shall I use a sword, a hammer or just my fingers?"

The peasant, of course, replied: "Your fingers!"

The charlatan set himself to the task. John, who did not miss a single movement, noticed how the charlatan had slid a pair of pliers from his sleeve, and he made a gesture implying that he had caught on to the trick. The charlatan flashed him an angry look and put his fingers inside the peasant's mouth. The tooth came out, but with a howl from the peasant. It was drowned right away by prolonged, resounding and well-timed shouts of "Success!"

John could not keep from laughing. For a moment the quack seemed confused, but he kept his composure. The peasant stood up, protesting: "Butcher, liar, impostor, this is murder, you've ruined my gums!" But his voice was faint with pain and muffled by the blood he was forced to spit out. Deliberately drowning out the peasant's accusations, the quack kept repeating: "Excellent! Gentlemen, do you hear what he says? He felt no pain at all!"

The enraged peasant tried again to be heard, but the charlatan, holding his arms lest he start a fight, shouted even louder: "Thank you, thank you! Forget about it. Yes, I did it for free." And he eased him down from the coach. Flashing a silver coin, the same stranger who had appeared before took him by the arm and led him away as if he were a friend. A loud burst of music again drowned out the peasant's last futile protests, while the rest, unaware of the trick, pressed forward to buy the miraculous powder. John alone, who had witnessed the whole scene because he had been so close to the coach, kept laughing, but did not say a word to anybody. This was one of the last times he attended such performances.

Home again, he told his mother the amusing story of the trio formed by the shouts of the mountebank and the peasant, and the

accompanying boom-boom of the big bass drum. Margaret laughed and said: "Keep away from that kind of people; only a fool would be taken in and get his teeth pulled out. Do you know why there is so much shouting and singing wherever people are gambling and drinking? Because in all this din it's easier to steal money, self-respect, esteem, and above all, the grace of God from the poor wretches who allow themselves to be surrounded by bad companions. There are many foolish people in this world who do things even more ridiculous than what you saw on that charlatan's cart!"

But what are we to think of these pastimes and practices on John's part? This is certainly a strange chapter in the life of a servant of God, and it would be hard to find similar happenings in the biographies of other Saints. But the spirit of the Lord moves where it pleases and as it pleases. The ability to entertain young boys in order to attract them to his Festive Oratories would become a necessity later on, and the Lord gave John the necessary disposition to like what others might find unendurable. Besides, what else could a penniless young boy do in an isolated hamlet, having no one to guide him and lend assistance? Furthermore, his aim was a holy one. St. Paul says: "Now we know that for those who love God all things work together unto good" (Rom. 8, 28).

Another great thought was then dawning in John's mind, which later prompted him to talk with humor and amusement of the tricks of charlatans. If all priests and Christians, upholding the honor of God by word and example, pleading the cause of the orphan and the abandoned, and imposing silence on those who outrage faith and morality by scandalous talk, were as glib as charlatans in telling their tales and selling their wares, what immense good would come of it! Charlatans have no qualms to meet the public face to face, without fear or embarrassment, and thus win over people to exploit them for their own advantage. If courage, inspired by charity and combined with Christian prudence, would always put into practice the command of our Savior to preach from the rooftops, it would certainly promote God's plans for the salvation of souls!

## CHAPTER 14

### *Boyhood Adventures*

MARGARET encouraged her children in hobbies that would occupy their minds constructively. When she noticed that John had taken a fancy to keeping birds as pets, she allowed him, with due precautions, to go looking for birds' nests. She even told him what food was most suitable for different types of birds and also taught him how to build cages for them. Little John was quick to learn. Soon he was making large, solid, beautiful cages, gradually filling them with chirping, captive birds.

One day he caught sight of a nest of titmice at the top of a tree trunk. He climbed up for a closer look. The nest was built deep inside a crack so narrow that he could not see into it. John knew the birds to be titmice because he had sighted the mother bird in flight. To get at the nest he thrust his arm inside the opening up to his elbow, only to find he could not withdraw his arm, caught in the hole as in a vise. The very effort to free his hand made his arm swell. Suddenly his mother called out to him from the field where she was working. John struggled desperately but vainly to free himself. Finally, overcoming his embarrassment over his plight, he shouted back that he couldn't come because his arm was stuck inside the tree. Margaret ran up to see what had happened. "Stupid boy!" she remarked. "So you're in trouble again. What is it now?" But, as usual, she was smiling and little John smiled in turn from his perch.

Margaret quickly fetched a small ladder and climbed up beside him. She tried to free his imprisoned arm but in vain. She tried turning it around to see if maybe his shirt was caught and could be pulled free, but that did not help either. So she called for assistance. Two men came up with a hatchet but she wouldn't let them use it. Instead, she suggested they try a chisel. Margaret bound

John's arm with her apron and then the men chipped off enough of the tree to set him free. John was unhurt except for a few scratches. Margaret didn't pass up this opportunity to draw a moral from the incident: "Those who try to take what belongs to others are caught in the same way in the vise of divine and human justice!"

On another occasion John caught sight of a pretty nest of nightingales among the branches of a boxtree. He decided to wait until the fledglings put on their plumage. Now and then, from behind a nearby hedge, he would watch them being fed by the mother bird. He was utterly enchanted by this nest and its brood. One evening he saw a cuckoo dart out from a neighboring tree and swoop down on the nest, even though the mother nightingale was in it. The cuckoo completely sealed the nest with its wings, thrust its beak deep inside, killing and devouring all of them. The marauder then settled down beside the nest, too surfeit even to stir. John was heartbroken over the loss of these birds that he had already come to regard as his own. He became curious about the cuckoo's inertness, however. Next morning, at dawn, he cautiously drew close to the spot and watched. The cuckoo flew to the raided nest and deposited an egg of its own inside it. But a few minutes later a cat, that had been lying in wait, leaped savagely on the cuckoo, seized the bird's head with its paw, dragged it from the nest and killed it.

"Serves it right!" John must have said to himself, pleased with that act of just retribution. When he drew closer to see what was going on inside the nest, a novel and delightful sight met his eyes. A nightingale, perhaps the slaughtered bird's mate, seeing the empty nest had returned and began to hatch the egg. Eventually, a little monster emerged, featherless and wild-eyed. Nonetheless, the nightingale brought food to it as though it were its own. Fascinated, John would go to the nest every day to enjoy that sight. As soon as the baby cuckoo grew feathers, he plucked it from the nest and placed it in a cage. For a time the captive cuckoo was a source of great fun to him. The bird enjoyed having its back stroked, but if John attempted to seize it, the cuckoo would squeak and skitter, bobbing its head back and forth to John's great enjoyment.

Despite the fun he had with the bird, John, distracted by other

chores, once forgot to feed it for a couple of days. "What about your cuckoo?" asked his mother abruptly. In response John ran to the cage; the bird was dead. Seemingly, the cuckoo had thrust its head through the wire-mesh in an attempt to escape. It had successfully widened the opening by pushing its beak against the wire, but once its head got through, the wires snapped back into place strangling the bird in its bid for freedom. John showed the dead bird and the cage to his mother.

Again Margaret did not bypass the opportunity to drive home a moral lesson. "Now, you see," she said, "how bullies are beaten in turn by others stronger than they. They don't enjoy their ill-gotten gains for long. The baby cuckoo was not lucky in inheriting some other bird's nest: his misfortune stems from there. Children, whose fathers leave them an ill-gotten fortune, invariably end up badly. You can thank the Lord that your father never kept a penny in the house that was not rightfully his. Always be honest, as your father was."

Another time John found a nest with a little magpie. He brought it home and asked his mother to cook it for dinner. "Not on your life," Margaret replied. "Put it in a cage and make a pet of it." John followed her suggestion. The little bird grew and John amused himself enormously with it, watching it go through an endless variety of funny motions. One day he came home with a basket of cherries and offered one to the bird. The magpie bolted the cherry down, pit and all. Opening wide its beak, it clamored loudly for another. John gave it a second, a third and many more. By now the bird was bloated, yet no sooner had it swallowed a cherry, than it screeched greedily for more. "Take them all!" said John, laughing. At a certain point the bird simply couldn't swallow another cherry; it just stood there, beak agape, gazing pitifully at its little master and dropped dead! John ran to his mother, shouting, "The magpie is dead!"

Margaret remarked grimly: "So now you see how the greedy end up! Overindulgence shortens their lives."

John's fondness for birds and subsequent adventures would fill a book. Several times he ran serious risks even though he could climb trees with the agility of a cat. Once, an accident nearly cost

him his life. One day he and some friends went looking for bird nests on a very old, enormous oak tree in a grove not far from his house. The tree sheltered a nestful of birds that John had discovered some time before. He had been waiting for the fledglings to grow a little more. Now he thought the time was ripe. His friends tried to climb the tree, one after another, but all failed. John made the climb in an instant. But climbing the tree to get a look at the nest and getting at it were two different things. The nest was perched at the tip of a long, thick limb which ran parallel to the ground but which bent toward it at about a quarter of its length. This didn't dismay John unduly because of his experience in walking the tightrope. Step by step, he gingerly made his way to the nest, picked it up and placed it inside his jacket. Now he had to turn around and retrace his steps. After repeated tries John found that he couldn't make it because of the unevenness of the limb. He tried taking a step backward but his foot slipped and he found himself dangling in midair, his hands clutching the limb. He made a mighty effort to grip it with his feet so that he could turn his body face downward by stretching himself out along the limb. Instead, his abrupt movement swung him clear over to the other side, so that again he found himself dangling in midair. John pondered his dangerous plight but could see no way out. Even worse, he felt the strength slowly petering out of his arms.

Below, his terrified companions shouted words of encouragement, each advising him on the best way he might get down safely. Now and then, John would look down, and the height scared him. After vainly struggling for about fifteen minutes, he made a final effort to swing himself up on the limb. He failed, and utterly exhausted, let himself drop. His position was such that he was bound to hit the ground head first. But while falling through the air John jerked his head back, somersaulted and fell upright, hitting the ground feet first with a violent rebound. His playmates, panic-stricken, ran to his side, believing him to be dead or at least seriously injured, but when they got there John was already sitting up.

"Are you hurt?" they asked, anxiously.

"I hope not," John replied.

"Are the birds dead? Shall we divide them among us?"

"They're here and they're alive!" said John. Then opening his jacket, he added, "Here they are, but they've cost me dear, all too dear!"

He began to walk toward his house. But after taking only a few steps he stopped, unable to go farther. His stomach hurt terribly, his arms and legs shook. He gave the birds to his friends, so that his mother might not find out about the mishap, and left them. On the way home, he felt feverishly hot and faint. He could just about drag himself forward.

Joseph was the first person he met, and he said to him: "I think I must be sick! My stomach hurts." Finally, he managed to reach the house and immediately went to bed. Margaret was quickly at his side, sent for a doctor, brewed some camomile, and made him comfortable and warm. When the doctor came John didn't tell him what had happened because his mother was present.

At his second visit, they were alone and John told him the whole story. "But why didn't you tell me all this yesterday?" exclaimed the doctor.

"My mother was here," replied John, who loved and justly feared his mother, "and I was afraid that she would give me a real beating."

The doctor then applied appropriate remedies. It took John about three months to recover fully, after which he fearlessly resumed his daring feats. Yet, whenever he passed by the ancient oak tree he shuddered with fear at the thought of what could have happened.

Some time later, after he had already begun to attend school at Morialdo, there was another incident related to birds, which not only revealed, as many others already did, John's extraordinary sensibility, but also his precocious resolve to consecrate to God all his affections without exception.

John was about ten when he caught a beautiful blackbird and put it in a cage. He taught it to sing by whistling notes into its ear for hours on end until the bird learned them. The bird was his all. It won his heart so completely that nearly nothing else mattered: at play, at study, even in school, the blackbird banished all other thoughts.

But alas, nothing lasts forever here below. One day, after re-

turning home from school, he ran immediately to play with his blackbird. To his great shock he found the cage bespattered with blood, and the poor bird lying there in shreds and half-devoured. A cat had seized it by the tail and in the attempt to drag it out of the cage, had pulled it apart and killed it. John burst into tears at the gruesome sight and was inconsolable for several days. At last he began to reflect on the cause of his sadness, on the foolishness of focussing so much affection on a bird and on the worthlessness of earthly things. Thereupon, he made a resolution amazingly beyond his years: never again to attach his heart to the things of this world. This resolve, once made, he kept faithfully until he met young Louis Comollo at Chieri.

John could not resist the candor and simplicity of Louis' ways and struck up a tender and intimate friendship with him. Although this relationship was primarily spiritual in character and directed solely toward their mutual spiritual improvement, John was to repent even of this attachment. He suffered so much at his friend's death that he again resolved that God alone henceforth would possess his heart. From his own admission we know he had to do violence to his own nature to keep this resolve, even in his later years among the fine boys at the Oratory.

In his own memoirs, which we shall discuss later, he wrote about this, almost in self-reproach, for the guidance of his spiritual sons, lest they fool themselves in contracting friendships which, though spiritual at their inception, can later become a fatal trap for unwary souls.

A wondrous glow emanates from these utterances of Don Bosco. They shed light on his whole youth and reveal very many hidden virtues. A heart capable, in the most turbulent years of adolescence, of detaching itself from human affections in order to dedicate itself entirely to God and of persevering in such a resolve, could not possibly have been blemished by any sin.

To John Bosco one may truly apply what Sirach writes of himself: "I stretched forth my hands toward heaven [for wisdom] and bewailed the sins of which I was not aware. I fixed on her my soul's desires, and with its cleansing, I discovered her. At first acquaintance with her, I gained understanding, such that I shall never forsake her (51, 19-21).

## CHAPTER 15

### *The First Dream*

WE are now about to enter that phase of John's life in which the Lord deigned to reveal his vocation to him. But first we must give the sources on which we base the veracity of what we have already written about John Bosco or have still to write.

Our first source is the testimony of Father Secundus Marchisio, a Salesian from Castelnuovo d'Asti,<sup>1</sup> who in 1888 spent three months in his own hometown securing all possible available information on John Bosco before the latter went to Chieri for his studies. Father Marchisio visited every town and hamlet where Don Bosco had lived as a boy, interviewing the aged inhabitants who had known him well. He carefully recorded all this information and, as we read it today, we marvel at the reputed high degree of virtue attained by our beloved Founder.

Our second source of testimony comes from Father Joachim Berto, Father John Baptist Francesia and Father John Bonetti, who visited Chieri in 1889 to interview all those who had known young Bosco as a student [prior to his entrance into the seminary]. Very favorable reports were assembled from these eyewitnesses.

Then comes the testimony of John's seminary companions who spoke and wrote of him in terms that would do honor to a saint. All these documents are in our possession. All information concerning Mamma Margaret has come to us directly from Don Bosco himself. For more than six years we spent almost every evening in friendly conversation with him. He very rarely repeated himself. Yet, if ever I happened to question him on matters previously discussed and already carefully recorded, I was amazed to hear him repeat the substance of these incidents in which his mother had figured, and quote her words with the exactness of one reading

<sup>1</sup> Now renamed Castelnuovo Don Bosco. [Editor]

them in a book. The same can be said of many other matters that he graciously confided to me and that I have recorded for my beloved confreres.

Another source on hand are a few valuable notebooks Don Bosco kept. These precious manuscripts recount his life story up to 1855. Actually Don Bosco was most reluctant to write about himself. Perhaps he was mindful of the admonition of the Holy Spirit: "Let another praise you, not your own mouth . . ." (Prov. 27, 2). But in 1858 Pius IX urged him to do so and in 1869 literally made it an order. In view of this, Don Bosco obediently set himself to this task before the beginning of 1870. He kept these memoirs carefully concealed throughout the rest of his life. They were uncovered after his death when an inventory of his private papers was made; they constitute an admirable testimonial of humility. He describes, with utter simplicity, what he believed were positive signs of divine intervention in his mission and in his works. This narrative concisely describes his apostolate. It takes us first to his childhood days in Castelnuovo and Chieri, later to Turin and to the Oratory. He says nothing in self-praise. Rather, like Moses and St. Paul, he criticizes severely several things he did. This self-incrimination could easily lead to false conclusions for anyone who does not know him intimately or who is unacquainted with what his contemporaries thought of him.

One of his first entries is a reference to a dream. We shall quote it here in full, just as we shall later cite verbatim many passages from his own personal narrative. The manuscript is entitled: *Memorie dell'Oratorio dal 1835 al 1855. Esclusivamente pei Socii Salesiani. Per la Congregazione Salesiana.* [Memoirs of the Oratory from 1835 to 1855 for the Exclusive Use of Members of the Salesian Congregation.] In the preface to the manuscript Don Bosco tells us why he wrote the memoirs of the Oratory.

"I have been urged several times to write the history of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. Although I could hardly refuse this invitation considering the source whence it came, nevertheless, I felt some repugnance for the task because too often it would mean writing about myself. Now an explicit order from the Holy Father himself precludes any further delay on my part. I shall try to give a confidential and

detailed account of things that may help define or foster the work that Divine Providence has chosen to entrust to the Society of St. Francis de Sales. Before all else I must state that whatever will be written is intended exclusively for my beloved Salesians; no one is authorized to publish any of the contents before or after my death. You may ask what good it is supposed to accomplish. It will serve as a guide for the future from the experience of the past. It will serve to show how God Himself has guided all things at all times. It will afford pleasant diversion for my sons as they read of the things in which their father took part. And they will read them all the more willingly when I shall no longer be among them, after I will have been called by God to render an account of my deeds.

“If I have expressed myself with too much complacency in certain instances and, perhaps, with a touch of vainglory, be indulgent. I am writing as a father who enjoys sharing his experiences with his beloved sons. They, in turn, are interested in knowing the little adventures that befell him, for they know that he loves them dearly and always strives to work for their spiritual and temporal advantage in matters both great and small.

“These memoirs are grouped into ten-year periods, because within each period some outstanding and significant development occurred in the history of our Congregation.

“My dear sons, when you read these memoirs after my death, remember that your father dearly loved you. Before leaving this world, he left these memoirs as a token of his paternal love. Remember this and pray to God for the eternal rest of my soul.”

Note here how Don Bosco effaced himself by stating that God had entrusted a great mission, not to him personally, but to the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales.

In His great mercy God usually reveals by some sign the special calling of those whom He has destined to do great things for the salvation of souls. It was so with John Bosco, whom God continued to guide in every stage of his life and in his every undertaking. In Joel it is written that when a life-giving new Church will replace a barren Synagogue, God will spread his spirit over all men, and “. . . old men shall dream dreams . . . young men shall see visions . . .” (3, 2). So it was with John Bosco. In his memoirs he describes his first dream as follows:

“When I was about nine years old I had a dream that left a profound impression on me for the rest of my life. I dreamed that I was near my home, in a very large playing field where a crowd of children were having fun. Some were laughing, others were playing and not a few were cursing. I was so shocked at their language that I jumped into their midst, swinging wildly and shouting at them to stop. At that moment a Man appeared, nobly attired, with a manly and imposing bearing. He was clad with a white flowing mantle and his face radiated such light that I could not look directly at him. He called me by my name and told me to place myself as leader over those boys, adding the words:

“‘You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows, but with gentleness and kindness. So begin right now to show them that sin is ugly and virtue beautiful.’

“Confused and afraid, I replied that I was only a boy and unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment the fighting, shouting and cursing stopped and the crowd of boys gathered about the Man who was now talking. Almost unconsciously I asked:

“‘But how can you order me to do something that looks so impossible?’

“‘What seems so impossible you must achieve by being obedient and by acquiring knowledge.’

“‘But where, how?’

“‘I will give you a Teacher, under whose guidance you will learn and without whose help all knowledge becomes foolishness.’

“‘But who are you?’

“‘I am the Son of Her whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.’

“‘My mother told me not to talk to people I don’t know, unless she gives me permission. So, please tell me your name.’

“‘Ask my mother.’

“At that moment I saw beside him a Lady of majestic appearance, wearing a beautiful mantle glowing as if bedecked with stars. She saw my confusion mount; so she beckoned me to her. Taking my hand with great kindness she said:

“‘Look!’

“I did so. All the children had vanished. In their place I saw many animals: goats, dogs, cats, bears and a variety of others.

“‘This is your field, this is where you must work,’ the Lady told me. ‘Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong. And what you will see happen to these animals you will have to do for my children.’

"I looked again; the wild animals had turned into as many lambs, gentle gamboling lambs, bleating a welcome for that Man and Lady.

"At this point of my dream I started to cry and begged the Lady to explain what it all meant because I was so utterly confused. She then placed her hand on my head and said:

"'In due time everything will be clear to you.'

"After she had spoken these words, some noise awoke me; everything had vanished. I was completely bewildered. Somehow my hands still seemed to ache and my cheeks still stung because of all the fighting. Moreover, my conversation with that Man and Lady so disturbed my mind that I was unable to sleep any longer that night.

"In the morning I could barely wait to tell about my dream. When my brothers heard it, they burst out laughing. I then told my mother and grandmother. Each one who heard it gave it a different interpretation. My brother Joseph said:

"'You're going to become a shepherd and take care of goats, sheep and livestock.'

"My mother's comment was: 'Who knows? Maybe you will become a priest.'

"Dryly, Anthony muttered: 'You might become the leader of a gang of robbers.'

"But my very religious, illiterate grandmother, had the last word: 'You mustn't pay any attention to dreams.'

"I felt the same way about it, yet I could never get that dream out of my head. What I am about to relate may give some new insight to it. I never brought up the matter and my relatives gave no importance to it. But in 1858, when I went to Rome to confer with the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, Pius IX asked me to tell him everything that might have even only the slightest bearing on the supernatural. Then for the first time I told him the dream that I had when I was nine. The Pope ordered me to write it in detail for the encouragement of the members of the Congregation, for whose sake I had gone to Rome."

After this dream John became all the more determined to get some kind of education that would enable him to become a priest and assist youth. But the family's severe financial straits raised serious difficulties. John soon met the opposition of his stepbrother Anthony who wanted him to become a farmer like himself, and who did not take kindly to the idea of his younger brother devoting himself to his studies.

Don Bosco had intentionally related only a very small part of this dream. It came back to him over and over again for a period of eighteen years. Toward the end of his life he stated that when this occurred, the general setting was always the same; but with each repetition there were always many new additions. He added that with each new vista he was able to envision not only the establishment of his Oratory and the spread of his work, but he also foresaw the obstacles that were to arise, the stratagems of his enemies, and the way to overcome them. He confessed that this is what kept him constantly serene and certain of the success of his undertakings.

Thus, this dream was not simply a singular favor, but a true mandate, a strict obligation that God had enjoined him to assume. I would compare it with the vision of the young prophet Jeremias. He, too, had answered the Lord: "Ah, Lord God, I know not how to speak; I am too young." And the Lord said to him: "Say not: 'I am too young.' To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. . . . They will fight against you, but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." (Jer. 1, 7-8, 19).

What exactly was the nature of John Bosco's mission? Unquestionably it was to be a multiple apostolate! The foundation of two religious families, the Society of St. Francis de Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; the spiritual welfare of boys all over the world through festive oratories, hospices, agricultural, vocational, and technical schools, resident schools, junior seminaries to train youth for the priesthood in all lands, the *Sons of Mary Project* for adult vocations to provide for dioceses having a shortage of priests; Catholic day schools to counteract the influence of irreligious teaching in secular schools; the Catholic press with many printing plants to produce millions of copies of wholesome readings, devotional books, history books, novels, apologetics and expurgated editions of textbooks. Further, his mission was to arouse the lethargy of Catholics through the monthly appearance of the *Bollettino Salesiano* [the Salesian Bulletin]. With a circulation of 200,000 in several languages, it gave publicity to what was being done through Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin.

Don Bosco's mission also included the establishment of the Association of Salesian Cooperators, 200,000 strong,<sup>2</sup> who not only were to assist Salesian work with alms, prayers and moral support, but also act as a link between the Bishop and laity, between pastor and parishioners in activities both spiritual and social. It was also Don Bosco's task to establish missions in various continents: the Americas, Asia and Africa. Finally, it was his task to rise to the defense of the papacy on several occasions. To John Bosco we could apply these words of the Scriptures: "*Constitui te super gentes et super regna . . . Dedi te in murum aeneum . . . regibus . . . principibus . . . sacerdotibus et populo terrae.*" ["I set you over nations and over kingdoms . . . I have made you a wall of brass . . . to kings and princes, priests and people" (Jer. 1, 10, 18).] This was the full significance of the dream.

<sup>2</sup> Present statistics (1964): 305,660 Cooperators in 772 centers. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 16

### *Humble, Steadfast and Strong*

**I**N John's dream a gentle voice had enjoined him: "Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong." This was to be a blessing for both body and soul. Indeed, it is written: "Better a poor man strong and robust than a rich man with wasted frame. More precious than gold is health and well-being, contentment of spirit than coral. No treasure greater than a healthy body; no happiness, than a joyful heart" (Sir. 30, 14-16).

It was enjoined upon John, therefore, to acquire that humility that brings peace and perseverance in virtue. This humility John could with divine grace acquire; but steadfastness of heart and strength of will, keenness of mind and physical prowess were not within his power to gain. Yet, this, too, he needed in order to acquire the necessary fund of knowledge that would make it possible for him to cope with the tasks Divine Providence was preparing for him, without succumbing prematurely to exhaustion. Seemingly, therefore, the voice not only gave him advice but also conferred a special gift on him. We shall deal with John's intelligence and remarkable memory in greater detail later on. He liked to visit St. Peter's chapel and others nearby, as well as the parish churches of Buttigliera and Capriglio to listen to the sermons there. He had such a retentive memory that on his return home he could repeat verbatim to his mother and brothers everything he had heard. The neighbors would often gather around him on these occasions and admire his prodigious memory and remarkable intelligence.

With a mere glance at John's physical appearance, one could see in it a God-given strength. He had a lithe build, was of average height with narrow shoulders. His hands were slender, smooth and soft. And yet, it was not long before he gave evidence of unusual

strength. This strength he developed by continual exercise—he worked indefatigably at his stunts and his farm chores.

John tested himself by cracking peach and apricot pits between his teeth. He could crush walnuts, hazelnuts and almonds between the thumb and index finger of either hand. Without much effort he could snap metal rods that were used as balcony railings into small pieces. When lining up his friends for gymnastic drills, smilingly he would send anyone who fell out of line reeling to the rear by the strong grip of his arm.

Some events that occurred much later in John's life require mention at this point. If we followed a strict chronological sequence we would often have to interrupt the flow of narrative even at most important moments. At Chieri, for instance, he used his strength to dissuade anyone who tried to force him into games he did not care for. On his way to class one day, during his last year of high school, four of his companions suddenly ambushed him by jumping on his back. John let them have their fun, and as soon as all four were upon him, he grabbed the hands of the topmost boy and squeezed down so tightly that the other three boys were helplessly pinned against him. Straightening up, John then carried the yelling boys into the playground for everyone to enjoy the spectacle. Then he carried them back into class with the utmost ease. The boys never again dared to bother him. At that age John could easily carry twenty *rubbi*.<sup>1</sup>

One day during his first years as a priest in Turin, he was walking on the porticoes of the outdoor market and noticed a crowd in front of the entrance to a draper's shop. By that time Don Bosco knew the names of all the vendors, porters and urchins who frequented the marketplace. He was quite at home in their company and, considering the times, this should cause no surprise. Egged on with curiosity he elbowed his way through the crowd and witnessed two huge growling and snarling mastiffs engaged in a vicious fight. Because of the dog fight the onlookers were afraid to enter the shop. Don Bosco pushed his way to the front of the crowd. At that moment one of the dogs backed into the doorway and crouched ready to spring.

<sup>1</sup> The *rubbio* was a Piedmontese weight measure equivalent to about 20 pounds, [Editor]

“Shut the door quickly so he can’t get out. I’ll take care of this one!” Don Bosco ordered a young salesclerk.

“Watch out. It’ll bite,” warned the boy.

“Don’t worry,” replied Don Bosco. “Do as I say.”

Don Bosco firmly seized the dog by its rump and the nape of its neck. He then swung it aloft for several minutes. Barking furiously, the dog struggled to escape. Shocked by such daring, the spectators feared that the dog would attack them once it was let loose. But Don Bosco, holding it firmly by the nape of the neck, lowered it to the ground, and dragged it to the center of Milano Square toward the bridge. There, he freed the dog and gave it a vigorous wallop on its rump. With a loud yelp, limping and panting the dog dashed away from the crowd. That resounding wallop had broken the animal’s spirit. Canon [Joseph] Zappata who had witnessed the scene went up to Don Bosco and said: “Don’t you consider this rather unbecoming for a priest?”

“Dear Canon,” replied Don Bosco respectfully, “someone had to do it. No one else made a move, so I did.”

Another incident occurred in 1846 or 1847 when Don Bosco was going to Biella to preach a retreat. During such trips, he laid artful plans to win over coachmen and stable boys into his confidence. Once this was done, he instructed them in their religion and encouraged them to approach the sacrament of penance. To gain their confidence, he would display some of his physical prowess, something that never failed to impress them. We shall see later how successful he was in his priestly work among them.

One day he was in Santhià [a small town near Turin]. While waiting for the stagecoach to be readied, he rested against the wall of the inn, very close to the horses while they were being changed. The coachman warned him several times to move away, for one of the horses would bite anybody who approached. Don Bosco replied: “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt me.” Suddenly the horse moved toward Don Bosco and cornered him against the wall. It lunged at him, but never had a chance to open its mouth. Using only one hand, Don Bosco gripped its jaws so firmly that the horse could not shake itself free, no matter how wildly it tossed its head. It reared furiously and kicked frantically, but Don Bosco held him in a viselike grip. People crowded around to watch in mingled fear

and wonder. Meanwhile, Don Bosco quietly ordered the coachman and a stable boy to fetch a rope and tie the horse's rear legs. Once the legs were securely bound and Don Bosco had room for movement he slowly loosened his grip. As he climbed into the coach, everybody asked: "Who is this priest that has such a powerful grip?"

A year or so later, Don Bosco was a guest of a local high school instructor, Father Matthew Picco. Several porters arrived delivering a piano tightly crated with metal strips. Father Picco, very anxious to examine the piano immediately, was unable to find a hammer, or pliers or any tool to open the crate. Don Bosco examined the metal bands and then closed his grip around them. The metal straps gave way and were forced open. The metal strips were all broken free in this manner. Next he wrenched open the nailed boards of the crate. Father Picco stared in speechless amazement as metal snapped and wood splintered.

Once, while in Paris in 1883, Don Bosco was invited to dinner by a family of the nobility. Toward the end of the meal, hard nuts were served and the guests waited for the nutcrackers. During the conversation, Don Bosco picked up selected nuts, cracked them between his two fingers and offered them to the dinner guests. They were delighted at being served by a man whom they held in such great esteem. Thinking that Don Bosco had been shelling the after dinner nuts with a nutcracker, they were amazed when they noticed that he was shattering the shells with his fingers. Some remarked with admiration. "It must take a special gift from Mary Help of Christians to crush nuts like that!"

In 1884, overworked and exhausted, Don Bosco had been confined to bed. His doctor decided to test his strength with an ergometer. Before doing so, he said: "Don Bosco, grasp my wrist with all your might."

"Doctor," replied Don Bosco, "you might be sorry!"

The doctor insisted: "Don't be afraid of hurting me. Grasp it as hard as you can."

Don Bosco consented and gripped the doctor's outstretched hand so strongly that he drew tears from him. The doctor, who had not suspected such strength in his patient, bore it for a moment, but then uttered a sharp cry of pain. Don Bosco's grip had almost

forced blood from the doctor's fingertips. Then he told Don Bosco to grip the instrument.

"Listen, doctor," warned Don Bosco, "if I grip this thing, I'll break it."

"No matter how strong you are," replied the doctor, "you won't be able to break this steel ring."

"Very well, then you try your strength on it first." The doctor firmly grasped the instrument and it registered at 48.

"Now let this good Father<sup>2</sup> who has been nursing me try it too," said Don Bosco.

The priest complied and the needle rose to 43.

"Now it's your turn!" the doctor said to Don Bosco.

Don Bosco gripped the ergometer and the needle rose to its maximum mark of 60. But Don Bosco felt that it was not registering his full strength. In utter amazement, the doctor declared that he had never before met a patient who after a long illness displayed such remarkable vigor.

Don Bosco made use of his extraordinary strength on a very few occasions, and then only out of sheer necessity, or for some good purpose, or, sometimes, to amuse friends, but never in self-defense. The wonder of it was that he was able to demonstrate it without any seeming effort, in his usual calm and relaxed manner. There was no fuss; it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world. We shall see how his strength gradually was used up in continuous sacrifice to the glory of God and for the good of his fellowmen.

<sup>2</sup>The "good Father" was none other than Father John Baptist Lemoyne, the writer of these Memoirs. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 17

### *First Festive Oratory*

ON his trips to the village market with his mother, John had become acquainted with several boys in the various nearby hamlets; he readily made friends with a host of other lads when he began to attend the parochial Sunday school. From all the neighboring hamlets they were drawn to him as by a magnet. Though young in years he instinctively studied the personality of everyone he met. He seemed to understand what was on their mind simply by looking at them. As John grew older, this habit of character study made him very perceptive. In a casual manner all his own he learned to anticipate a need, chide a friend at an opportune time for faults unnoticed by others, or support decisions as yet unspoken. His companions became very fond of him, but they also developed a salutary fear of him. This was yet another gift which God had bestowed upon him: "As one face differs from another, so does one human heart from another" (Prov. 27, 19).

John was always on the alert to lend a hand to one in need; never was he known to have hurt anyone. His companions valued his friendship, a friendship they could count on when involved in typical boyhood scrapes. His daring and physical prowess made even older boys think twice. Whenever an argument arose or a fight broke out, his companions would always call on John as their arbiter; his decisions settled their issues. Even fifteen and sixteen-year-old boys would come to him with their problems and ask for his advice. Among his friends the catchword was: "John said this! John wants it this way!" His word was law.

But perhaps the real reason for John's popularity lay in his superb gift as a storyteller, a gift that held his youthful audience spellbound. The youthful storyteller would recall anecdotes heard in a sermon or catechism class, and would regale them with the

stories he had read in the *Reali di Francia*,<sup>1</sup> in *Guerrin Meschino*,<sup>2</sup> and in *Bertoldo e Bertoldino*.<sup>3</sup> These books provided John with an endless source of material. John read every book that he could lay his hands on, but these were the only ones he could find in peasant homes. Sometimes he would spin even taller tales of fantasy. Like his mother, John never failed to adorn a tale or anecdote with a moral. When his friends caught sight of him they would run up to him and beg for a story. And he was just beginning to understand the books he read. Gradually, adults began to join his circle of listeners. Thus, it happened that John, either on his way to and from Castelnuovo, or at other times in a field or meadow, would frequently find himself amidst a swarm of people listening intently to him, a young unschooled lad gifted with a prodigious memory. He had no formal education, but to these simple folk he was a veritable sage. At this point in his memoirs Don Bosco remarks. "*In regno caecorum monoculus rex.*" [Among the blind the one-eyed man is king (Erasmus, *Adagia*).] Sometimes, as he sat magister-like in the midst of a crowd of boys, passersby from other hamlets would stop in amazement for a look at this lad who commanded the attention of all his little friends with such authority. "Who is he?" they would ask. "That's Margaret's son," somebody would answer.

During winter people vied with one another for John's presence and his stories as they whiled away their time in stable and barn. Young and old alike assembled with keen anticipation of spending endless hours listening to John read aloud to them from the *Reali di Francia*. He would stand on a bench so that everyone could see and hear him. There was, however, a prior commitment to be fulfilled. The "story hour" would be prefaced by the Sunday sermon. The Sign of the Cross and a Hail Mary would always precede or follow the storytelling.

This incident occurred in 1826. A neighbor, Catherine Agagliati, was such an avid listener that whenever she heard that little John was holding his "story hour," she would drop whatever she was

<sup>1</sup> A 15th-century historical novel by Andrea da Barberino about the knights of the Charlemagne era. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> A 15th-century novel by Andrea da Barberino about a poor but courageous knight in search of his parents through many lands. [Editor]

<sup>3</sup> A 16th-century novel by Giulio Cesare Croce about a sharp-witted yokel. [Editor]

doing and hasten to the spot. One day, she was so impressed by what she heard that she said to Mamma Margaret: "The good Lord will help your son become a very important man. What a pity if such intelligence were to be wasted."

Margaret replied: "As the Lord shall wish, so it shall be!"

On Sunday afternoons especially in the summer, neighbors and visitors gathered around John. Graybeards now began to mix unabashedly with the country lads. As these gatherings were taking on more significance, John began to entertain the crowd with tricks he had picked up from charlatans at the village fairs.

There was a meadow in Becchi dotted with several trees. John used to stretch a rope between two of them and anchor it firm and tight. He would then set up a chair and a small table with a bag on it. A large mat was then rolled out on the ground. As soon as everything was ready and everyone was eagerly waiting for the performance to begin, John would invite them first to recite the five decades of the rosary and sing a religious song. That done, he would stand on his chair and announce: "Now I want to tell you about the sermon the chaplain gave today at Morialdo."

Some members in John's audience grimaced at these terms, others would hedge or mutter that they had no stomach for sermons, while others still began to edge away. Standing on his chair the peasant boy looked like a king on his throne, and like a king he could exact obeisance from the crowd, even from elderly spectators in their sixties.

"All right!" he would shout at his impatient audience. "You can leave if you want, but if you come back while the show is on, I won't let you stay. And I won't let you come back again—ever!"

This threat would silence everyone. No one would leave, and everyone would listen attentively to him. John would then repeat the Sunday sermon he had heard in church that very morning or whatever he remembered of it, or he would narrate a story or an anecdote he had recently heard or read. His listeners would occasionally comment: "My, how he can talk! He's just a boy but he seems to know everything." Everyone was quite content. At the end of his sermon a brief prayer was recited, and then the show would start.

The young preacher had now become a skilled entertainer. He

would execute handsprings, somersaults and walk on his hands. With his bag of tricks literally dangling from his shoulder, he would swallow coins and then retrieve them from the tip of a spectator's nose, multiply balls and eggs, change water into wine, kill a chicken and restore it, crowing lustily, to life. These were his usual array of tricks. His skill on the tightrope was impressive: he would walk it as though traipsing along a path. Leaping and dancing, he would hang now by one foot, now by both, repeating the same trick with one hand or both.

John's brother, Anthony, would come along to watch the performance. He never sat in the front row but would hide behind a tree or in the shadow of the house, occasionally peering out for a look. He, too, laughed at the stunts of the tiny acrobat or he would sneer out contemptuously at him: "What a fool you are to let people make sport of you this way!" he would tell John. But the audience ignored him and laughed heartily at John's tricks, jokes, and chatter, applauding him enthusiastically.

Sometimes when they would be standing there, mouths agape, expecting some new stunt, John would suddenly interrupt the performance and lead them in singing the litany of the Blessed Virgin or saying the rosary, if it had not yet been recited. "There are still lots of wonderful things to see," he would say, "but before we go on with the show let's all join in a prayer together." He inserted this interval of prayer, knowing well that it would have been impossible to do so once the performance was over.

Such shows lasted several hours till nightfall. The young entertainer, utterly exhausted, would then close with a short prayer and everyone went home. Those who had blasphemed or cursed during the performance or refused to take part in the prayers were barred from these shows.

Our readers may wonder: How did John manage to get the money he needed to attend the fairs where the charlatans plied their trade? How was he able to buy the props for his own little shows? There were several ways. He hoarded the few coins that his mother and relatives gave him as well as the tips and gifts he earned by running errands. He was, moreover, quite skilled at catching birds with traps, cages and snares. He knew where to find bird nests, an item in which he did a brisk business. John was

quite adept at making straw hats that he sold to the farmers at the market; he also sold a snare-type wicker cage for catching sparrows, a good device if one knew how to simulate their calls.

Another source of income was his sale of mushrooms and roots used for dyeing fabrics. He had learned how to weave oakum, cotton, linen, hemp and silk well enough to teach such skills to his neighbors who came to him for help. He knew how to knit and at the Oratory he would often mend his own socks. Also, as a snake hunter, John was able to increase his funds. When a snake was found in a field, John was usually summoned to the spot. He would lose no time getting there, and once the snake was in sight he would stun it with a well-aimed stone. If the snake escaped into the brush, he would search till he found it, seize it by the tail and twirl it rapidly through the air. As soon as he reached a tree he would kill the reptile by dashing it against the tree trunk.

Don Bosco himself answers some puzzled readers: "Some of you," he writes in his memoirs, "may ask: 'What did your mother think of the unusual way you spent your time and the public exhibition of yourself as an amateur mountebank?' I will say that my mother loved me dearly, and that my own confidence in her was unlimited. I would not have done a single thing without her consent. She knew and saw everything I did and allowed me to continue. In fact when I needed anything, she was only too willing to supply it for me. My own friends and even members of my audience gladly provided me with what I needed for stunts and tricks."

Thus, Mamma Margaret, with her innate common sense and Christian instinct was unconsciously assisting John in his preparation for the extraordinary mission that lay ahead. Margaret saw to it that John's Christian training should also grow apace. She saw the importance of the role that humility had to play in the lives of her children. She never boasted about her son's talents nor praised him in his presence. She prayed to the Lord for him, just as she prayed for her other sons. She observed everything, said little, pondered much. After all it was not a common sight to see a ten-year-old farm boy win ascendancy over older companions, speak unabashed in public, train himself to entertain an audience, and use this entertainment as an inducement to make them pray and listen to him, a boy, repeating a sermon he had heard.

One day as John was stretching his tightrope before a crowd in his yard, Margaret, lost in thought, watched him with bated breath. Suddenly a neighbor, Catherine Agagliati, appeared on the scene, and greeted her: "What now, Margaret?"

As though aroused from sleep, Margaret turned to her and in a low but earnest voice, asked her: "What do you think will become of my son?"

Catherine replied: "He's certainly going to create a great stir in the world!"

John enjoyed himself immensely at these Sunday gatherings. From the age of five he had begun to entertain the thought of spending his life among boys, of teaching them their religion. This was his greatest desire; this seemed to him to be his life's goal. This natural bent was another sign of his vocation.

In 1825, [as a mere boy of ten], he started on a small scale [what later he would call] a "festive oratory", doing what was in keeping with his age and his knowledge. He followed these lines for several years, his talks becoming ever more fruitful as his knowledge of religion increased. For this purpose, he diligently gathered edifying stories from catechism classes, sermons and books he read, in order to instill love of virtue in all his listeners.

But it was not only his stories, tricks and lovable traits that captured the hearts of so many youngsters. In those early years, and throughout his life to his dying day, there must have shone through his whole countenance the purity of his soul. To meet him, to be near him produced a joy, a peace of mind, a delight and such an ardent desire to become better that it could not be traced to a purely earthly affection. Thousands of boys have experienced this, and it has been confirmed by thousands of others who worked together with him. Once they knew John Bosco, they could no longer detach themselves from him, nor could they ever forget his magnetic personality.

The book of Wisdom has something to this effect: "Better is childlessness with virtue; for immortal is its memory: because both by God is it acknowledged, and by men. When it is present men imitate it, and they long for it when it is gone; and forever it marches crowned in triumph, victorious in unsullied deeds of valor" (Wisd. 4, 1-2).

But the field of action to which Margaret's son had been destined by Providence was far greater than might have been imagined in the beginning. This was becoming obvious and proof of it can be seen in various episodes in which it would seem impossible that a mere boy could be so certain of himself. The following incidents will serve to strengthen this point.

When John was about twelve, a dance was held on a certain holy day at the public square of Morialdo. When it was time for the afternoon church services, John entered the square and began to move about the crowd, among whom he saw many persons he knew. He tried to persuade them to bring the dance to an end, and go instead to church for Vespers. "Look at this child still wet behind the ears, trying to tell us what to do!" someone remarked.

"Who sent you on this nice little errand to act as our preacher or spiritual director?" asked another.

"Just like you to butt into our business and bother us when we're enjoying ourselves!" added a third.

"Mind your own business and don't put your nose where it doesn't belong!" rudely sneered a fourth. And they all laughed in his face. John then began to sing a popular religious hymn, in so beautiful and harmonious a voice that little by little they all gathered around him. A few moments later he moved toward the church, and the others, drawn by his voice, followed him in.

Toward nightfall he returned to the scene of the dancing that had been resumed with wild frenzy. It was getting dark now and John remarked to those who seemed more sensible than the rest: "It's time to go home; this is no time for dancing."

No one listened to him, so he began to sing again as he had done before. At the sweet magic-like sound of his voice, the dancing ceased and the dance floor was soon vacant. Everyone gathered around him and when he had finished his song, several offered him gifts to resume his singing. He refused, but went on singing.

The organizers of the dance who saw their profits vanishing into thin air took him aside and offered him money, saying: "Look, either you take this money and leave, or else we'll give you a beating you'll never forget."

"Just a minute! . . . Do you own this place?" replied John. "You don't scare me, I can do as I please. Some of my relatives

are here, and they are expected home. I'm not doing you any wrong in calling them. Their families are afraid that something unpleasant may happen to them, some brawl or harm. Why keep them worrying? I think you are sensible and decent enough to agree that at this time of night something may get out of hand that you'll later be sorry for. If I'm so worried about this, it's because our village has always had a good name. Am I showing you disrespect in asking for this?"

Such arguments, advanced by a young boy, were amazing. Many stopped dancing and went home. Others, more eager, stayed on a few more minutes, but, being so few, they too decided to call it a night.

It is also said that a singular event occurred at this time, namely, that John challenged some traveling charlatans who were interfering with church services to match their prowess against his. This was to be repeated on several different occasions.

One evening a sermon was to be delivered in the chapel of a hamlet not far from Becchi. The chapel was only partially filled, while the square in front of it was crowded with men whose murmur reached the worshipers inside. Suddenly the blare of a trumpet shook the square. The boys leaped up from their pews and raced for the church door. Nobody could hold them back. The girls followed the boys and shortly afterward they were joined also by the women, curious to see what it was about. John also ran out into the square at such a spectacle, and elbowing his way through the crowd, took up his stand in front. All eyes turned to him because he was already well-known for his acrobatic feats. With gestures, they pointed at the charlatan, as though to tell him that he had a competitor. John had not left the church out of curiosity, but to carry out a plan of his own. He moved to the center of the open space and challenged the charlatan to compete with him in games of skill. The charlatan mockingly looked John over from head to foot, but the crowd's applause at John's proposal made him realize he would damage his own reputation if he were to refuse the challenge. Shouts arose on all sides. "Bravo, good! Show what you can do!"

By general agreement a certain feat was chosen for the test. "I agree," John said, "and now let's talk about the terms. This is what

I propose: If you win, I'll give you a *scudo*.<sup>4</sup> If I win, you are to leave this village immediately and never set foot here again during church services." Everyone, eager for the contest, shouted approval.

"I accept," answered the charlatan, confidently.

As things turned out, John won the contest and the charlatan had to gather his equipment and leave as agreed.

Then John turned to the crowd and announced: "Now, back to church!" And he led them into the house of God.

On another occasion, a stranger was talking to a group of men and boys, telling off-color jokes, and occasionally uttering words that bordered on blasphemy. This scandalous conversation distressed John, but he did not know what to do since he realized that nothing would silence the man or the raucous laughter of his listeners. Two trees stood nearby, a little distance apart from each other. He took a rope and knotted one end. Then he flung first one and then the other end over a branch of each of the trees, and drew the rope tight. He performed this feat in the twinkling of an eye. The crowd, noticing him, abandoned the stranger and gathered around John. He then leaped in the air high enough to catch hold of the rope. Hoisting himself up he sat on it, and then let himself hang head downward, holding on to the rope by his feet only. He then swung himself upright and began to walk back and forth, as though he had a wide path beneath his feet. The show lasted until dark when the crowd dispersed and went home.

Thus, as a boy, John first carried out his mission with the means that Divine Providence had given him. The Book of Proverbs tells us that God's omnipotence is constantly at play in the universe through His creative and conserving power and that He delights in being with the children of men. God began, so to speak, to exhibit John before the world as the instrument that He wanted to use for His glory. ". . . The foolish things of the world has God chosen to put to shame the 'wise,' and the weak things of the world has God chosen to put to shame the strong, and the base things of the world and the despised has God chosen, and the things that are not, to bring to naught the things that are; lest any flesh should pride itself before him . . . Let him who takes pride, take pride, in the Lord" (1 Cor., 1, 27-29, 31).

<sup>4</sup>A silver coin approximately equivalent to a dollar. It was used in Italy until the 19th century. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 18

### *Mamma Margaret's Helping Hand*

**T**HANKS to his good mother's teaching, John might well have repeated the words of Job: "God has reared me from my youth guiding me from my mother's womb" (31, 18). Truly, Margaret's constant aim in life was to do good to everybody when possible and never harm anyone even by the least inconsiderate or unkind word. Of an even-tempered disposition, she bore resentment toward no one. Although very sensitive, she never had occasion to pardon others because she rarely took offense. Charity was such a part of her that she had truly become the mother of all those in need.

Margaret never turned down a reasonable request for help; people seemed to think she possessed an unlimited store of goods. Neighbors would come to borrow live coals, water, or wood. If a sick person needed wine, she was bountiful with it, refusing any compensation. Margaret would graciously give oil, bread, wheat or cornflour to neighbors without any annoyance. Sometimes a needy neighbor, who had already borrowed bread from her, would shyly ask for more bread: "Margaret, I need bread again, but I still owe you for what you gave me last week."

And Margaret would reply: "Forget about that; don't mention it again. Just try to return what I'm giving you today." She would not have it otherwise.

Margaret Bosco's farmhouse was located in a wooded area. Several times even outlaws, famished with hunger, approached the farmhouse in the shadows of night and called out to her in hushed tones for fear of the police. Margaret would come out and the exhausted and hungry bandits would beg her for something to eat. "Don't be afraid," she would say, "but wait a little while. I haven't

got anything ready right now, but I'll put something together for you poor fellows."

Then she would call out to John: "Get some wood, fill the pot with water and bring it to a boil. We'll make some soup for our friends. But be careful not to breathe a word to anyone about this." John quickly did as he was told. When the water began to boil, Margaret would tell him to throw some pasta into the pot.

"I can't find any, Mamma."

"See if there's any flour."

"There isn't any."

"Get some pieces of bread then, and we'll make a soup out of that."

Sometimes there was nothing in the house except very stale bread scraps or leftovers. After pouring the steaming soup into a bowl, Margaret would call in the bandits and sit them in a dark corner of the room where a little lamp cast its shadow. The famished outlaws would gulp down the soup and then would say: "Thank you, Mamma. Now where can we sleep?"

"There's only the garret and some straw. You'll have to make do with that. I have nothing else."

"That's fine. But what about the carabinieri?"<sup>1</sup>

The stable had a skylight.<sup>2</sup> Although it looked like a window, it actually served for access to the hayloft. But anyone unfamiliar with the home would never have suspected that it could be used as an exit. Margaret explained the layout of the house to her "guests" and bade them goodnight. Before retiring, the bandits, deeply moved by her hospitality would try to kiss her hand in gratitude, but she would protest: "No, not that. I only want you to say your prayers."

"Yes! Yes! We will. You can be sure of that," the bandits would answer in unison. And they would noiselessly climb into their hiding-place and spend the night there quiet as mice. Over the years they never gave Margaret the least trouble.

Often, other "guests" would come knocking—the carabinieri,

<sup>1</sup> The carabinieri are the Italian national police. They were established by King Victor Emmanuel I in 1814. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> In most farmhouses of this period the stable and hayloft were connected with the house. [Editor]

and, more than once, only a few moments after the bandits had retired for the night. They had made it a habit to meet at Margaret's house, exchange official messages, and rest a while before resuming their patrol. After greeting Margaret they would inquire about her sons. "How are Joseph and John doing? Are they well?" Then they would call Joseph, who was their favorite. He would come running with glee, and always ply them with questions: Anything exciting today? Any arrests? Where? Who? Why? The carabinieri enjoyed talking with Joseph because he was so lively, talkative and obviously flattered by their company. They were not so chummy with John. He was usually reserved, spoke little and never asked questions. He was all ears but never made any comment.

Often only a door or a plank floor, sometimes only a window with paper instead of glass separated the bandits from the police. They could hear every word the police spoke. Once it actually happened that a bandit was surprised in Margaret's kitchen; the sudden entry of the carabinieri gave him no chance to hide. It was customary for the carabinieri to sit around the table, set with tray and glasses, and wait for Margaret to offer them a drink of wine. This time (as also at other times when they knew very well who was hiding in Margaret's house), although the police recognized the nervous guest gulping his soup in the corner of the kitchen, they completely ignored him. No attempt at arrest was ever made in Mamma Margaret's home. They knew that she extended a helping hand to anyone in distress for charity alone and they had no intentions of involving her in court. On the other hand, it was no easy matter to lay hands on desperate men, armed to the teeth and on the alert. Before giving up their freedom, they would certainly have put up a fierce fight, possibly to the death. The carabinieri realized too that it would be safer to wait for a better moment to make an arrest. Sometimes a carabinieri and a brigand would enter the house at the same time—one through the front door, the other through a back door. The latter would beat a hasty retreat. The police could not help noticing that there had been unexpected visitors in the house and that they had just bolted away. Generally it was Joseph's task to save the situation by his childish chatter while the hunter and quarry were only a few mere steps away from each other.

One day a sergeant major of the carabinieri came to a sudden stop as he entered the Bosco farmhouse. With a fixed glance as though he were listening for something, he said in a loud voice, "There's someone out there!" He pointed to the adjoining room.

Joseph came forward. "That's impossible."

"Somebody's hiding out there!"

"That can't be. Can't you see we're all here?"

"There's someone hiding there."

"I can't see anyone," Joseph answered, barely restraining his laughter.

The sergeant did not pursue his investigation further. He had just wanted to show that he had not been taken in by the unexpected intruder.

Peddlers were another type of visitor who found a welcome in Margaret's house. Since inns were scarce and roads few and bad, anyone who used the country roads on business would have to spend several nights away from home and seek hospitality with some family willing to put him up for the night. Word of Margaret's kindness had spread all through Morialdo and the surrounding area, and her house became a haven of hospitality.

"Have you any room for me, Mamma Margaret?"

"Surely, come in."

"Can I trouble you for something to eat?"

"Leave it to me, I'll fix something."

When the larder was stocked with food, preparing supper was only a matter of minutes. More than once, however, Margaret had to rack her brains not to send her guests to bed hungry. On such occasions, John was always the assistant cook. Once when he had to tell her that there was nothing for the guest, Margaret ransacked the house until she found some millet bread. She broke what she found into the pot and let it boil, but it turned into tasteless inedible gruel. John asked his mother to taste it. She smiled knowingly, went to the stable, and fetched some milk; the result was a coarse but palatable porridge. But it was mostly her courtesy and genuine warmth that made her hospitality so heartwarming. Upon leaving in the morning the guests could find no words to express their appreciation since Margaret always refused any payment that

was offered, saying: "You are my friends and I am not an inn-keeper."

If Margaret treated those in temporary distress so kindly, we can imagine how anxious she must have been for those who were truly poor. John often recalled how a beggar came asking for shelter one winter night when the countryside was covered with snow and ice. The poor man's toes stuck out through his shoes. Margaret had no shoes to give him. But in the morning, when he was about to leave, she made him sit down and wrapped his feet in warm rags. Then she bound the soles of his shoes to his feet with a cord tied around his ankles, Roman fashion. She did it so skillfully that the beggar had no trouble walking in the snow. Margaret could rightfully say to the Lord: "No stranger lodged in the street . . . I opened my door to wayfarers" (Job 31, 32).

A neighbor named Cecco lived in a small house a short distance from Margaret. He was fond of eating but not equally fond of working. As a result, he soon found himself in straitened circumstances and often went hungry. But he dared not beg; shame and fear of rejection and reproach for having been such a wastrel kept the poor wretch alone at home in his solitude. Margaret felt sorry for him. Once in a while she would approach his house, make sure no one was in sight lest he be embarrassed, and drop a few days' supply of bread in through the open window on the ground floor. Several months later she ran into Cecco by chance; he thanked her with tears in his eyes. She offered to bring him some soup now and then and the two connived how it was to be done. She was to give him a signal after nightfall, by raising her voice as if scolding one of her children. As agreed, she would cautiously set a pot of hot soup on his porch, and return home. Again the sound of her sham scolding would indicate that no one was in sight. At this signal Cecco would open his door and whisk in his pot of soup.

Margaret's generosity can never be adequately praised. Her life was one continual act of charity. Although she was constantly giving away what little she had, she was always able to do so. Providence, it seemed, was watching over her; there was always enough for her family especially after she had given away everything she had.

One day she found herself completely out of bread and flour. As she debated what to do, Louis Veglio, a neighbor, dropped in. He sensed Margaret's plight and left hurriedly. He lived in one of a cluster of homes called Filippelli, not far from Becchi. Once home, he called one of his men and told him: "Pick up this sack of flour." The man tried to lift it but could not, protesting that it was too heavy.

"Well, then pour some of it out and make two trips," said his master.

"Where to?"

"Come with me!" He led the man close to Margaret's house. "Take it there," he pointed, "but don't tell the woman where it's from."

The servant obeyed. As he placed the sack before Margaret, he said: "This is for you."

"Who sent it here?" asked Margaret.

"I can't tell you."

Margaret insisted, and the servant soon became entangled in evasive and confused answers. Margaret, however, guessed the donor's identity because she knew whom the servant worked for. At last Veglio himself appeared. From his place of cover he had overheard them. "Listen, Margaret," he said to her frankly. "I sent the flour. I would have preferred to have remained unknown but I see that my man is not good at keeping secrets, so I don't want to make a mystery of it any longer. I have done what had to be done. You have given all you have to the poor and it is only right that others should help when you are in need."

Veglio's wife, Mary, was no less generous. Seeing Margaret giving away to the poor, things she herself needed, she would frequently send over a bushel of wheat, or three or four bushels of corn, and at times even some wine. Often she would tell her: "When you have nothing else to give to the poor come to my house and take whatever you need. After your visits to the sick, let me know if they need anything, and I'll see they get it at once."

Margaret truly was the ministering angel to the sick and dying of the village. John was always at her side, ready to help by running errands, by summoning neighbor or relative, or by gathering medicinal herbs about which he had learned a great deal. She

would visit the sick of the village, assist and nurse them, or spend whole nights at their bedside. She would prepare them to receive the Last Sacraments and when their last hour drew near, she would not leave their side until they had drawn their last breath. The church was some distance away and consequently the priest could not always arrive in time to recite the prayers for the dying. So Margaret herself would recommend their souls to the Lord. Her words were so Christlike, so inspiring and so timely that all the bystanders would be deeply impressed.

Margaret's love of neighbor is not surprising when we realize that she was a woman of prayer. On her way to the fields, during her hours of work, and on her return home she would repeatedly recite the rosary. It was a beautiful sight to see her coming home of an evening, hoe or weeder over her shoulder, leading her two sons by the hand, reciting the *Angelus* to the accompaniment of the distant church bells tolling at the far end of the valley. No chore at home ever prevented her from reciting morning and evening prayers with the family. Indeed, she always invited her guests to join her; this was the sole payment she exacted for the hospitality she extended to them. Bandits, carabinieri, peddlers, beggars, or stray travelers, no one ever dared to refuse her. She had set before them as brothers in Christ all that she had: a loaf of bread, a dish of polenta, a bowl of soup, a glass of wine. Even those who usually neglected prayer would have considered it a show of bad manners on their part to refuse such a reasonable request. It was truly an unusual sight: carabinieri removing their headgear and falling on their knees, or grizzle-haired brigands bowing their heads, repeating the words of the *Pater* or the *Ave*, which they had not recited for many a year. Margaret's heart rejoiced at these moments.

The real purpose of her hospitality—to draw words of praise to the Lord from the lips of those whom she had sheltered—had been attained. These prayers were one day to return to her and her children; they would descend upon them as blessings from above. When passing by her house or remembering her kindness, all those whom she had assisted could well have spoken the words of the psalmist: "The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!" (Ps. 128, 7).

## CHAPTER 19

### *Mamma Margaret's Zeal for Souls*

ONLY those who knew Margaret at close hand could appreciate and adequately describe her firm character. Not only did she personally abhor evil, but she tried to prevent any offense against God even among those beyond her immediate family. Thus, she was always on the alert to halt, prudently but firmly, whatever might cause scandal no matter what the cost.

Sometimes the peasants of a neighboring hamlet, seeking some diversion, would send for a street organ and hold an impromptu dance. The word would spread like lightning from farmhouse to farmhouse. From the hilltops people would shout to one another: "We're going to the dance! We're going to the dance!"

Hearing these cries of glee and the lilting music of the street organ over the hills, Margaret's children would come running up to her, shouting: "Mamma, let's go too!" They could not resist the excitement and the music.

But with her usual smile, Margaret would say: "Stay here and wait for me. I'll go and see what it's all about." If she saw that the entertainment was wholesome, she would tell the children: "Run along, have a good time!" But if she noticed anything, even slightly, improper, her answer was final: "This kind of fun is not for you."

"But . . . but . . ."

"No buts! I will not have you slip into sin and God's punishments. Do you understand?"

Disappointed, the children would become silent. So Margaret would call them about her and tell tales of knights and castles so enchanting and entertaining as to outdo even Ariosto himself. She was so skillful in weaving these stories of knightly adventure that her children had more fun listening to her than being present at

the dance. At nightfall, Margaret would end her storytelling with the words: "Now we'll go to bed. But first let's pray for those who will die tonight, lest their souls be lost." These words had a magical and salutary effect upon the children.

She also looked after the material and spiritual welfare of young girls as though she had made a generous resolve in this respect. Whenever she met any girls shabbily or scantily dressed, she would approach them and say: "Child, don't you realize that your guardian angel walks at your side? Dressed as you are, you make him ashamed to have you in his care!"

"But our family is poor. We have no one to take care of us, or provide us with clothes."

"Well then, come with me!"

So Margaret would take these waifs into her house. She would mend and patch their dresses. Then, with God's blessing she would send them off looking presentable and decently dressed. Although Margaret had to work from morning until night to provide for her family, she never begrudged the very many hours she spent in such charitable ways.

She particularly went out of her way to help those poor girls whom she suspected might be in some danger of losing their virtue. To win their affection and confidence, she would feed them with some bread or polenta or give them little gifts of fruit. Moreover, she encouraged them to come to her when they needed anything. She would treat them as her own daughters, by assisting them every way she could, and always giving them some good advice. Above all, Margaret frowned on [premature] dating. We shall pass over the subtle and delicate means she used to discourage it. She was always on the alert, especially at the evening gatherings in winter. But Margaret never rushed to give advice; she always waited for a chance to talk to the girls alone. Then she would instruct those who needed it how to behave in company. She would point out the impropriety of sitting too close to some individuals and gave the girls useful and timely advice on how to be ladylike in their conversation especially by avoiding coarse gestures and loud laughter.

Thanks to her interest in them, Margaret earned the esteem and respect of all the girls in the neighborhood. On hot summer days

a certain informality in dress prevailed inside the house, certainly without too strict an adherence to the rules of Christian modesty. Whenever Margaret dropped in for a visit, the girls, if not properly attired, would hide or hasten to dress properly upon hearing her voice. They reappeared only if they felt that Margaret would have an approving word for them. Occasionally, some girl was not quick enough: she would then move over to Margaret's side, if other people were present. Margaret would cover the girl's shoulders with her apron and, bending down, would whisper in her ear: "How can you go about in God's sight dressed like that?"

As we know, Margaret willingly offered hospitality to traveling peddlers. She had a special reason for doing so. More often than not, they concealed among their wares indecent pictures or questionable books, which they hawked at fairs. Margaret would ask them to surrender such pictures and literature to her. In their presence, she would then throw them into the fire or [if in doubt], give them to the chaplain at Morialdo. Sometimes the peddlers themselves would burn these objects in order to please her. Though Margaret could not read, she kept a vigilant eye on all reading matter that she saw about her, and would judge its moral contents from the few words that she artfully drew from their owners. As a reward for the peddlers' cooperation in destroying objectionable material, Margaret would treat them not as strangers but as friends. She would invite them to sit with her and her family at table and set before them the best she had in the house. When they left she would always try to make them promise never again to sell pictures or books that could cause spiritual harm, and she easily succeeded since she had won them over by her kindness.

More than once Margaret could not avoid witnessing some grave scandal, and when this happened she acted with courage and vigor. One Sunday, while on her way to church with Joseph and John, she saw ahead of her in the ever more thickening crowd a group of about fifteen or twenty young ruffians. They seemed to be listening to a man, around sixty, who had previously served a long jail sentence for theft. In a loud strident voice, using obscene language, he was telling indecent jokes to the annoyance of passersby. Shocked and angry, Margaret approached the group and called him out by name.

"What do you want?" he asked, turning around.

Speaking softly, Margaret asked: "Would you like your daughters to hear what you're saying?"

"Eh! Why get excited? We have to get some fun out of life. I was only joking. Can't we laugh? No harm in laughing! Besides, that's the world for you!"

"But what you're saying is wicked, isn't it? And if it is wicked, why do you say it?"

"You are too fussy—and a big nuisance, too. Everybody talks like this, so why shouldn't I?"

"Even if it were true that everybody talks that way, it doesn't make it any less sinful! And if you end up in hell, what good is it to say that everybody's doing it?"

At this the man guffawed loudly and his cronies joined in the laughter. Margaret, in a voice charged with emotion, shot back at him: "At your age, with your gray hair, you should be an example to young people and not a cause of scandal. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Then, taking her children by the hand, she left the main road and struck out for the church over a path through the meadows. Once out of sight, Margaret stopped and looked at her children: "You know how much I love you. Yet I would rather have the Lord take you this very instant than see you become like that wicked old man. I would even have the courage to strangle you with my own hands." An extreme measure, no doubt, but understandable to those who love and value the innocence and the candor of their own children. Margaret's words were expressing a profound sentiment: the importance of keeping oneself in the grace of God.

One evening Margaret overheard two older boys indulging in off-color conversation in her front yard. Both were notorious for their bad conduct and insolent manners. Margaret came out of the house and asked them to stop it. They laughed at her. She changed her tone: "Get out of here," she ordered, resolutely. "I don't want you around!"

Instead of leaving, the two boys struck up a lewd ditty.

"This is my house," Margaret declared, "you're on my property so I can order you to leave."

The boys still refused to leave. Instead, they withdrew to the corner of the hayloft, where they continued their offensive song. Margaret did not give up. She sent one of her sons to call someone from the families of the two ruffians. The mother of one of them and the brother of the other came running. A little scene ensued, but, at last, the ruffians were forced to leave. Margaret never again allowed them to set foot on her property.

One day a woman living near Becchi took a male lodger into her home. While all the neighbors murmured loudly about the obvious scandal, Margaret took it upon herself to put a stop to it. She went to the woman's house one evening. John had followed her and was hiding behind a tree not far off. She knocked on the door and called:

"Martha! Martha!"

After a few minutes, Martha peered through the half-opened doorway. "Oh, it's you, Margaret!"

"Yes, Martha, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Go ahead and talk," said Martha, continuing to hold the door slightly ajar.

"Please step outside, so that we can't be heard. I've something very important to tell you, if I may."

"Of course. Go ahead and tell me," Martha said, with some hesitation. Thereupon, she closed the door and followed Margaret up to the corner of the house.

"Are you Martha?" Margaret asked in a low voice.

"Of course I am."

"And you're the daughter of so-and-so?"

"That's right."

"And you're the sister of so-and-so?"

"Of course. You know very well who I am."

"Are you a Christian?"

"What a silly question!"

"Have you been baptized?"

"Why all these questions?"

"And you go to church and fulfill your Easter duty?"

"Yes, of course!"

Then Margaret, stressing each word, added: "You? You? You? Do you understand what I mean when I say *you*? Do you want

to force me to condemn you to hell, when until now you have been my friend?"

Martha, who had understood very well the reason for all those questions, stammered a reply: "But you know my situation, and how poor I am. No one should be surprised if I take in lodgers."

"The only thing that matters in your situation is that you must guard against going to hell," Margaret interrupted.

"But what can I do?"

"Send that man away."

"But it's already night, you can't send people away like that."

"Send him away!" repeated Margaret. "If you don't know how to do it, I'll show you!"

She went up to the door, raised her voice and shouted: "Get out, get out, you servant of the devil! Get out of here! Out! Away! Away!"

Meanwhile, the neighbors, who had noticed Margaret walking to the house, and had surmised her intention, had gathered in a group a short distance away. The stranger, hearing the murmur of their voices and Margaret's order, must have wished he were a thousand miles away. He looked for the nearest exit and dashed out never to return.

One last episode. There was a man who kept a woman of ill-repute in his house. Since he was seriously ill, Margaret paid him a visit. While there, she took the woman aside and most charitably and prudently tried to persuade her to leave and return to her own home, not too far away. She would not hear of it and stubbornly refused to go. Meanwhile, the sick man was on the verge of death and Father Campora, the assistant pastor, was called. In view of the distance, the priest carried the Holy Viaticum with him, to avoid going back for it. Margaret, upon hearing that the priest was already on his way with the Viaticum, was deeply concerned over the man's soul that was soon to appear before God. Afraid that she might not have another opportunity to put an end to the scandal, she returned to the house. The priest was wholly ignorant of the situation and when he arrived, he placed the sacred pyx on a small table. Margaret respectfully approached him and drew him aside.

"I must warn you," she said, "that there is a person in this house whose presence is a scandal."

"And who are you?" asked the priest.

"It is not important to know who I am. I am telling you this because it does not seem proper to administer the Viaticum with that woman still in the house. I have tried more than once to persuade her to leave but unfortunately, without success."

"Are you sure of what you're saying?"

"Talk to her yourself. Question her and by her answers you can judge for yourself whether I'm telling the truth."

The priest immediately sent for the woman, and she appeared before him insolent and brazen. The priest asked her whether the neighborhood rumors about her were true.

"It's just evil gossip," said the woman, "from some who are forever trying to meddle in other people's affairs. They should mind their own business. I mind my own and don't bother about others. I am an honest person and I have my reasons for staying here."

"I did not ask you this. Give me a straight answer." And the priest asked her a very direct question. The woman denied everything at first. But then she became so confused in her replies that he realized Margaret had been speaking the truth. Thereupon he asked the woman to leave the house. She refused. The priest then firmly ordered her out saying: "What? You were his ruin when he was well. Now will you be his ruin even in death? Do you want him to be eternally damned because of you?"

His words put the woman in a serious predicament. The people who had come along with the priest were present. They could not hear this whispered dialogue, but they understood what it was all about. The priest had made it quite plain that unless he were obeyed, he would leave without administering the last rites to the sick man. In those days this would have brought the hatred of all upon the guilty woman. She abruptly decided to leave and went back to her own home. The priest then went to the sick man and, after hearing his confession, gave him the Last Sacraments. He died a good death with signs of true repentance. Margaret had saved his soul. The assistant pastor, before leaving, wanted to know who the lady was that had given him that providential warning without disclosing her name. This intervention won Margaret the

praise of all. They all knew that it was her policy to try all ways and means to save souls.

There was once an occasion when someone dared suggest to her something unbecoming a Christian. Still living are some who witnessed that scene. Margaret rose from her chair and with eyes blazing with indignation she pointed firmly toward him. She was so awe-inspiring that the guilty wretch seemed to shrivel into nothingness before her. Thus must the Archangel Michael have looked when he confronted the prince of darkness with: *imperet tibi Deus*. [May God command you.]

Little John was a witness to all these things and in later years he recounted them to us. He declared that from his mother he had learned to have the highest regard and the greatest love for the virtue of purity, and while guarding it jealously, to strive in all ways to induce others to do likewise.

From all this we can surmise the beauty of Mamma Margaret's soul. Her noble figure calls to mind the words of Sirach: "Choicest of blessings is a modest wife, priceless her chaste person. Like the sun rising in the Lord's heavens, the beauty of a virtuous wife is the radiance of her home. Like the light which shines above the holy lampstand, are her beauty of face and graceful figure" (26, 15-17).

## CHAPTER 20

### *First Communion*

“**M**Y son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate with him; revile him not in the fullness of your strength. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, it will serve as a sin offering, it will take lasting root. In time of tribulation, it will be recalled to your advantage, like warmth upon frost, it will melt away your sins” (Sir. 3, 12-15).

Much in the spirit of this admonition did Margaret treat her aged mother-in-law, and because of this Margaret and her children were singularly blessed. In 1826, the good Margaret Bosco, mother of Francis Bosco and grandmother of Anthony, Joseph and John, reached her eightieth year. As her infirmities increased, she began to look with serenity toward the end. When Margaret realized that her mother-in-law had now become a bedridden invalid she rarely left her side. Both day and night she lavished constant and tender care upon her. A hospital nun could not have done more. Medical expenses went unheeded as she made every effort to comfort the aged woman. Margaret’s close neighbors began to pry and to comment on the mounting expenditures. Finally, they even ventured to reproach her by remarking on several occasions that if she continued to lavish her dwindling funds upon the old woman, she and her children would soon be in want. They bluntly stated that future expense was useless—she had reached the end of her days.

Margaret’s reply never wavered: “She is the mother of my husband, and therefore my own. I dearly respect her and will care for her to the end, as I promised my poor Francis before he died. If everything I have spent can prolong her life for another hour, I will consider the money well spent.” In caring for her mother-

in-law, Margaret was assisted by John in every possible way. As solicitous as any nurse, they both attended to her every need.

By now she had already received the Last Sacraments from her pastor. During the days preceding her death she repeatedly whispered to the children as she had often done in the past: "Remember that happiness and God's blessings will always be yours if you love and respect your mother." Finally, one day she asked that the three boys be brought to her bedside; she had a parting counsel to give them. She exhorted the three lads to obey their mother, to follow her example, and to treat her as lovingly as she herself had been treated. She reminded them that in all these years her daughter-in-law had never once given her any displeasure. On her account, Margaret had not left home, had kept to a simple life despite opportunities within reach that could easily have gained her a life of ease and comfort and on the contrary had accepted this life of sacrifice for her sake. Looking fondly at the children she admitted that she had been a trial to Margaret. Because of her Margaret had endured many hardships and had her patience tried exceedingly. She urged the boys to bring into their mother's life that happiness that Margaret herself had striven so hard to bring into hers.

February 11, 1826 was the last day of her life. At her bedside were Margaret and her three grandsons. Her final gasping words were: "Eternity faces me, pray for my soul. Forgive me if I have at times been harsh with you. I did it for your own good. Thank you for everything, Margaret." She reached out for her, clasped her to her bosom and said: "I kiss you for the last time, but I hope to see you all in heaven." Her sobbing grandsons were taken to a neighbor's house for the night. An hour later this venerable old woman rendered her soul to her Maker.

John was now ten years old and eager to make his First Holy Communion, but since the hamlet of the Boscas was so remote, he was unknown to the pastor. To attend church or Lenten catechism classes in Castelnovo or Buttigliera he would have to walk over three miles each way. St. Peter's chapel at Morialdo, also a considerable distance from the Becchi hamlet, had been without an attending priest for quite some time, so that John had become rather concerned that there was no church or chapel within reach

for him to attend. This lack of spiritual care was also the reason why the Becchi folk gladly listened to the tiny juggler's sermons. Up to now John's religious instruction had been limited to the lessons he received from his mother. It was she who taught John all his catechism.

It was customary in those days to admit children to their First Holy Communion only after they had entered their early teens. Although Father Joseph Sismondo [pastor at Castelnuovo and rural dean] was a pious and zealous priest, his rather rigid ideas on the subject of Penance and Holy Eucharist led him to adhere strictly to the general practice prevailing among other parish priests. Even Joseph Cafasso, now thirteen, who will soon enter our narrative, had not been allowed to make his First Communion. This despite the fact that he was known as a saintly youth and was remarkably advanced in religious instruction. Nevertheless, Margaret did not want any more time to elapse before her son should receive this most important sacrament. She did her best to prepare him, as she had already done, first with Anthony and later with Joseph. Throughout Lent of that year she sent John daily to the catechism class in the parish church. There his conduct was most exemplary. Eager to learn, John immediately memorized the answers of the catechism, even the lengthy ones, after hearing the priest say them once or twice. This naturally aroused the wonder of his companions who became all the more fond of him. The pastor saw that John's diligence augured well for the examination to be held at the end of the Lenten season.

In 1826, Easter Sunday fell on March 26. Because of John's excellent reputation and success in his examination, the pastor decided to make an exception in his case and admitted him to Holy Communion on the day appointed for the children's Easter duty.

Margaret realized that recollection would be impossible if the usual daily routine was followed, so she took it upon herself to help John and prepare him for this great event. She took him three times to confession.

During Lent she had repeatedly told him: "John, my son, God is going to give you a great gift. Try to prepare yourself to be worthy of it. Make a good confession. Do not hold back anything;

confess everything; be truly sorry and promise God that you will do better in the future.”

Don Bosco wrote in his memoirs: “I promised. Only God knows if I kept my promise.” At home Margaret saw to it that he had time to pray and read some spiritual book that she provided. She also gave him those timely pieces of advice that a loving mother can impart to her children.

On the morning of his First Communion, Margaret had John refrain from speaking with anyone. She accompanied him to Mass and Communion and joined him in the preparation and thanksgiving that the pastor, Father Sismondo, led in a loud, moving voice. The rest of that memorable day she set aside for prayer and good reading and allowed no chore to interfere with it.

Among the many things that his mother said to him that day, these stood out in her son’s memory for many years because she repeated them so often: “My dear John, this has been a great day for you. I know that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise Him that you will do all you can to stay this way to the end of your life. From now on go to Holy Communion often, but beware of ever making a sacrilegious Communion. Never leave anything out in your confession. Be always obedient; go readily to your catechism class and to sermons but, above all, shun as a plague anyone who uses bad language.”

Don Bosco later wrote: “I remembered these words of my holy mother, and tried to follow her advice. From that day on I feel that I improved somewhat, especially in obeying and bending my will to others. Up to that time I had been very reluctant to give in to others, and had always had something to say before obeying or following the advice of my elders.”

Meanwhile Margaret ever more felt the need to meet John’s desires to study. His bent in this direction was by now quite obvious. More than once John had confided to her his great desire to become a priest. Often the mother prayed to God to assist her in overcoming the unsympathetic attitude of Anthony whom, moreover, she did not want to antagonize further. Soon her prayers were answered unexpectedly.

In 1825 Pope Leo XII had promulgated the Year of the Great

Jubilee, and over 400,000 pilgrims had journeyed to Rome for this event. In 1826 he extended the privilege of [gaining] the Jubilee indulgence also to the churches outside Rome. Archbishop Columban Chiaverotti had decreed that in the archdiocese of Turin the indulgence could be gained from March 12 to September 12. In hamlets and towns and in Turin itself, the faith of the people was evident as they strove in large numbers to gain the plenary indulgence by performing the required spiritual good works.

In Turin, the Bishop of Pinerolo conducted a spiritual retreat for the King, his court and nobility. [At its close,] the members of the Royal House and the elite of the city, accompanied by the whole Military Academy and the Royal Corps of Engineers marched in procession to the four selected churches, devoutly chanting the Litany of the Saints as any humble group of pilgrims.

This open manifestation of faith also took place in the provinces. A few weeks after John's First Communion, a solemn mission was held in the village of Buttigliera, adjoining the small hamlet of Morialdo. The fame of the preachers attracted the people throughout the countryside. John, too, trooped along with many of his own hamlet to hear the missionaries. The services consisted of a doctrinal sermon at dawn and one on some moral subject toward evening. During the day the people were free for their usual tasks. It was on one of these mild April evenings that John was returning home with the crowd that had attended the mission. Among them was also a certain Father Joseph Calosso from Chieri, a very pious priest. Despite his advanced age, he did not mind walking two and a half miles to hear the missionaries. Father Calosso, doctor of theology, had been pastor at Bruino, and was now in semi-retirement as chaplain in Morialdo. He noticed the hatless, curly-haired youngster who walked silently in the crowd. It was obvious that the boy was deliberately keeping quiet and that normally there would be no tree too high nor ditch too deep for him to try his skill. The priest called him to his side and asked: "What village are you from, son?"

"From Becchi."

"And where have you been? Were you at the mission, too?"

"Yes, Father, I went to hear the sermon."

"A little too hard for you, I imagine! Your mother could have preached you a more practical sermon. Right?"

"That's true. My mother often tells me very nice things, but I like very much also to listen to the missionaries' sermons, and I think I have understood them."

"Did you really understand much?"

"I understood everything!"

"Did you? If you can tell me something about today's sermons, I'll give you four *soldi*. Here they are!" said the priest, holding out the coins.

"Shall I tell you about the first or the second sermon?"

"Either one, so long as you can tell me something. Do you remember what the first sermon was about?"

"Yes, the first sermon was about the need of giving oneself to God early in life and not putting it off till later."

"And what did the priest say about it?" asked the old priest somewhat surprised.

"Shall I repeat the first, second or third part?"

"Whichever you like!"

"I remember the whole sermon very well, and if it is all right with you, I'll repeat it all."

And without further ado John began with the opening words, then went on with the three points stressed in the sermon, namely, that he who puts off his conversion runs the risk of no longer having time, or necessary grace, or will to do so. The good priest let him go on for over a half hour. In the meantime everyone crowded about to listen while they all kept walking.

"Now tell me about the second sermon."

"All of it, or only a part?"

"Only a few words."

"If you'd like to hear some parts, here is one. I was very impressed when the preacher described the meeting of the soul and the body of the damned at the sound of the angel's trumpets, when they will be about to be reunited in order to go before the judgment seat of God, and the horror which the soul will feel at being enclosed again in that disgusting and ugly body that was the instrument of its evil doing."

And at this point John launched for ten more minutes into a long dialogue between the soul and the body, as the preacher had dramatized it. Ever more amazed, with tears in his eyes, the good priest then asked: "What's your name? Who are your parents? How long have you gone to school?"

"My name is John Bosco, and my father died when I was very little. My mother is a widow and has to take care of five people. I can read and write a little."

"Did you ever study Donatus' <sup>1</sup> grammar?"

"I don't know what it is!"

"Would you like to study?"

"Oh, yes!—Very much so!"

"Is anything stopping you?"

"Yes, my brother Anthony won't let me."

"Why not?"

"Because he thinks study is all a waste of time. He wants me to work in the fields, but if I could go to school, I'd study very hard and not waste any time."

"Why would you like to study?"

"To become a priest."

"And why do you want to become a priest?"

"Because then I could get my friends together, talk to them and teach them some religion. They are not bad, but they will become so if no one takes care of them."

The boy's resolute and candid way of speaking made a deep impression on the saintly priest. When they came to the fork in the road where they had to part, the priest asked: "Do you know how to serve Mass?"

"Yes, a little."

"Come and see me tomorrow at my house. I've something to tell you." And with that he bade John farewell.

John arrived punctually at St. Peter's chapel where Father Calosso resided and served his Mass. Later, Father Calosso led him into his study and said: "Now I have to write the missionary's sermon. Do you think you could dictate it to me?"

<sup>1</sup> Aelius Donatus (mid-4th century A.D.), a famous grammarian and teacher of rhetoric at Rome, wrote a large and a small grammar entitled *Ars major* and *Ars minor*. [Editor]

“Sure, I still remember it, but I don’t know all the words in Italian.”<sup>2</sup>

“That doesn’t matter. Just tell me as you know and remember it.”

“If you’re ready, I can start right now,” John said.

Father Calosso sat at his desk and John dictated the entire sermon, from the introduction to the final peroration, astounding the good priest with his prodigious memory.

Even after John became a priest, to his very last days he still remembered this sermon by heart and repeated it several times. When they were through, the chaplain said to him: “Don’t worry, I’m going to take care of you and of your studies. Tell your mother to come here with you for a few minutes next Sunday evening to talk about this and we shall make our plans.”

Margaret’s joy knew no bounds! On the following Sunday she went with John to visit Father Calosso. As soon as she walked in, the priest said to her: “Don’t you know that your son has an astonishing memory? You simply must let him study.”

“I would indeed be very glad to do so,” Margaret answered. “But there are many serious difficulties. You see, I have three sons and he’s the youngest. His older brother is dead set against his studying at all and would give us no peace if that were to happen.”

“That doesn’t matter!” replied the priest. “I’ll arrange everything. Do what you can and what you think is best, but give this boy a chance to study. This is God’s will.”

“I assure you that I’ll do everything within my power to grant his wish, because it is also mine,” Margaret replied, thanking him.

It was agreed that Father Calosso would teach John once a day and the boy would spend the rest of the time working in the fields to please his brother Anthony. But as soon as Anthony learned of his mother’s decision, he flew into a rage. He calmed down only when he heard that the lessons would not begin until after the summer, when most of the farm work would be over.

<sup>2</sup> At this time in rural districts especially, the priest usually preached in the local dialect, not in the official Italian language. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 21

### *Providential Teacher*

AUTUMN came, but John had not yet begun his schooling. Father Calosso grew impatient. One day he met the boy and asked: "Why aren't you coming for your lessons? Why doesn't your mother send you?"

"Oh, it's always the same story. My brother Anthony won't let me."

"He won't? Well, whether he likes it or not, I want you to study. Come to my house tomorrow with your books, and I'll start teaching you."

Without further delay, John entrusted himself to Father Calosso, who, as we already know, had come only a few months before to Morialdo to provide some spiritual care at St. Peter's chapel. John grew so fond of him that he kept no secrets from him. From then on, the boy spontaneously lay bare to him all his thoughts, words and actions. Father Calosso was very pleased because such confidence enabled him to guide the boy more effectively in both spiritual and temporal matters. Don Bosco later appraised such guidance as follows: "I realized then how helpful it was to have the constant guidance of a trustworthy spiritual director, the first I had ever had. Among other things he soon forbade me to practice a certain favorite penance of mine telling me it was not suitable to my age and condition. He encouraged me to go to confession and Holy Communion often and taught me how to make a brief meditation every day, or rather, a short spiritual reading. On Sundays and holy days I spent all the time I could with him and on weekdays would serve his Mass whenever I could. It was from this time that I began to have a taste for spiritual life. Till then I had more or less acted just physically and mechanically without a superior motive."

At this time, too, the people of Castelnuovo were saddened by the death of their pastor, Father Joseph Sismondo, who died on October 3, 1826, at the age of 54. John was among the mourners in the funeral cortege, heartbroken, for this was the priest who had given him the priceless gift of his First Communion.

By mid-October John was already studying Italian grammar. In a short time he finished the course and began to practice with short compositions. By Christmas he had taken up Donatus' Latin grammar. At the start he had some difficulty with the technique of the initial declensions and the first conjugation, but soon that became easy. For John, reading was tantamount to remembering. Everything left an indelible impression upon his memory. Within a month he knew Donatus' Latin grammar inside out. By Easter he had begun to translate a few sentences from Latin into Italian and vice versa.

His teacher told him, jokingly: "If you continue at this rate, soon you'll know everything there is to learn in the world!" And every time he met Mamma Margaret, he would tell her: "Your son has a prodigious memory."

Throughout that period John continued to give his usual Sunday performances, in the stable during the winter and outdoors in the summer. Everything his revered teacher had said or done, his every word, so to speak, came in handy for entertaining his audience. Anthony, however, would not stop grumbling.

Margaret was very happy to see John realize his aspirations. But there were troubles in the offing. Anthony had not interfered with John's studies during the winter months when outdoor farm-work was at a standstill, but as soon as spring came he began loudly to complain that it was not right for him to wear himself out working in the fields while John was taking things easy. There were arguments with John and with his mother. For the sake of peace, Margaret decided that John should go to school in the early morning and work the rest of the day on the farm. But what about his lessons and homework? Where would he find time for them?

"Where there's a will, there's a way." John found time to study while walking to and from school. Likewise, upon his return home, he took the hoe in one hand and his grammar in the other and went off to the fields, studying on the way. Then regretfully he

would set the book down on a clod of earth and start to hoe, weed, or rake the grass with the others, as needed. When there was a break for a snack, he would sit apart and study while munching on his bread. On the way home he would study again. He would do his homework during dinner and supper and finish up before going to sleep.

Notwithstanding John's obvious goodwill and work, Anthony was still disgruntled and kept repeating that he did not want to hear anything more about schooling for the boy. "Who needs Latin here? Latin, of all things! Work is what we need here!"

In vain, Margaret tried her best to make him see that John's help was not needed on the farm and that she herself spared no effort in the sowing, tilling and harvesting of crops. She even promised to compensate him from her own dowry for the work that John was not contributing. But Anthony stubbornly would not give in.

Finally, things came to a head with an ugly explosion. Don Bosco himself describes it:

"One day Anthony said first to my mother and then to my brother Joseph in a tone that was final: 'I've had enough! I'm tired of seeing books around the house. I am big and strong and I never even looked at a book.' Angry and hurt, I then said something I shouldn't have. 'Yes,' I broke in, 'just like our donkey. He is even stronger and never went to school either! Do you want to be like him?' At those words Anthony flew into a rage, but I managed to dodge his anger and a rain of blows, thanks to my quick legs."

A local joyful event helped to ease these family squabbles. Father Bartholomew Dassano, a devout and learned priest was installed as new pastor of Castelnuovo in July, 1827, and some eight days before, Joseph Cafasso, a young man of Castelnuovo, was invested with the clerical habit by Father Emmanuel Virano, the parish administrator.

Who was this young man, whom we have already mentioned and will mention again in the course of this narrative? Don Bosco described him as follows: "Joseph Cafasso, born in January 1811, of good and well-to-do parents, was a model of virtue. His docility, obedience, aloofness from the world, love of study and piety delighted his parents and teachers. He had two outstanding traits:

recollection and an almost irresistible impulse to do good to all. He was happy whenever he could offer some good advice, further a good project or prevent evil. At the age of ten, he was already acting as a little apostle in his own town. Often he would go looking for his companions, relatives and friends, bring them all, big and small, young and old, to his house and there would politely ask them to kneel and recite a short prayer with him. Then, using a chair as a pulpit he would preach a sermon, that is, he would repeat a sermon he had heard or tell some edifying story. He was slight in build, but his voice made up for that. His angelic face and eloquence quite beyond his years filled people with amazement, and made them ask, as in the days of John the Baptist: "*Quis putas puer iste erit?*" [What then will this child be? (Luke 1, 66)].

The fame of this boy's exceptional virtue soon spread throughout the hamlets of the parish of Castelnuovo. John, who had the same inclinations and aspirations, would have enjoyed meeting him and having him as a friend, but circumstances did not make it possible. For some years Cafasso was studying in Chieri, and [when he was home for the summer, there was another difficulty]: Morialdo was rather far from Castelnuovo. Furthermore their difference in age and schooling was no help in striking up a friendship. But Divine Providence would see to it that they should form a holy friendship sometime later. John himself describes how they first met:

"It was the second Sunday of October, 1827, the feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin, the main annual festival at Morialdo. Many were engaged in various chores connected with the festival, others were watching or enjoying the games or other pastimes. I noticed one person only not taking part in the various amusements. He was a young seminarian, slight in build, with gleaming eyes, a friendly air and the look of an angel. He was leaning against the church door, which had been momentarily closed. I was charmed by his appearance, and although I was only twelve, I felt drawn to talk to him. So I went up to him and asked: 'Would you like to watch some of the games going on? I'd be happy to show you around . . .'

"The young cleric smilingly motioned me to get closer and then asked me about my age, my studies, whether I had already made

my First Communion, how often I went to confession, where I attended catechism classes and the like. His kind, edifying way of speaking made a great impression on me and I willingly answered all his questions. Then, almost as a way of showing my appreciation for his gracious ways, I again offered to show him around. 'My young friend,' the young cleric answered, 'a priest finds his entertainment in church services. The better they are performed, the more he enjoys them. Our amusements and our devotions that never grow stale, should always be diligently attended. I am just waiting for the church to open so that I may go in.'

"I plucked up enough courage to prolong our conversation and replied: 'What you say is true, but there is a time for everything, a time to go to church and a time to have fun.'

"The seminarian broke into laughter and ended our conversation with these memorable words which seemed to be his program of action for life. 'One who becomes a priest gives himself to the Lord. Of all the things in this world, nothing should he take more to heart than what may serve the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls.'

"Just then the church was opened and the young cleric said goodbye to me, his little friend, and went in. Greatly impressed by his words and his demeanor, so full of divine love, I tried to find out who he was. I learned that he was Joseph Cafasso, a student in his second year of philosophy at the seminary."

John returned home that day overjoyed, as if he had won a rich fortune. He ran to his mother: "I've seen him, I've spoken to him!"

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Joseph Cafasso. It's really true! He is a saint!"

"Then try to be like him. I have a feeling that one day he may be of great help to you!"

John then told his mother the conversation he had had with Cafasso. Margaret was one to appreciate the loftiness and truth of Cafasso's words and concluded: "Listen, John, a young cleric with such sentiments will become a holy priest. He will be the father of the poor and will lead many sinners back to the ways of truth; he will make many firm in the practice of virtue, and will win many souls for heaven." Joseph Cafasso succeeded in doing just that. As we shall see later, he was not only John Bosco's

model as a seminarian and priest, but also his first and outstanding benefactor.

Winter, meanwhile, was approaching. Outdoor work had ceased and John hopefully resumed his studies with Father Calosso at Morialdo. But he was able to attend his lessons only for a few weeks, because his mother suggested that he stay home. Anthony had not given up his opposition. "The little gentleman wants to study!" he would say to John. "Wouldn't you like to live like a lord while we on the farm eat polenta? Do you think we feel like starving ourselves to pay for your board elsewhere? To blaze with your studies! Get rid of this madness! We don't need professors around here. Go swing a hoe!"

Such abuse flowed freely. If he found John with a book in his hand, he would snatch it from him: if he saw him absorbed in his thoughts, he would ask: "What are you thinking about? Your dreams, maybe? You're going to be a peasant, just like me." He no longer addressed him except as 'the student,' or 'the professor.' John was hurt, to tears at times, but he patiently endured it all. Over him watched the Lord, to whom David had cried in the midst of his afflictions: "On you the unfortunate man depends; of the fatherless you are the helper" (Ps. 9B, 14).

## CHAPTER 22

### *Forced to Leave Home*

**T**HE Lord had great things in store for John Bosco and therefore the Blessed Virgin had enjoined him: "Make yourself humble." For God frowns upon the proud and bestows his grace upon the humble. The Scriptures tell us: ". . . Humility goes before honors" (Prov. 15, 33), and: "The poor man's wisdom lifts his head high and sets him among princes" (Sir. 11, 1).

Up to this time, John had learned the norms of Christian living from his mother and the priests of Castelnuovo, Capriglio and Morialdo. Now the Lord himself wanted to be his teacher in order to make him holy. How was this to be done? Divine wisdom tells us in the Book of Sirach: ". . . At first she puts him to the test; fear and dread she brings upon him and tries him with her discipline; with her precepts she puts him to the proof, until his heart is fully with her. Then she comes back to bring him happiness and reveals her secrets to him. But if he fails her, she will abandon him and deliver him into the hands of despoilers" (Sir. 4, 17-18).

John had a great mind and heart: he was obedient through virtue, not by nature. The poorest man on earth feels like a lord in his own home, like a monarch in his own kingdom. God would deal with John as he had dealt with Moses, who, as a prince of Egypt, was forced to flee to the desert of Sinai and seek asylum with Jethro. There, Moses, reduced to the rank of shepherd, became the meekest man on earth. God, likewise, would prepare John [for his mission] through a long practice of heroic humility. He, too, would have to leave home and for about two years be forced [by circumstances] to work elsewhere as a hired hand. How could he help not feeling keenly this humiliation?

He ardently desired to study, yet for four years not only would every road be barred to him, but even every ray of hope. No

sooner would a glimmer appear than some unforeseen circumstance would blot it away. What was to become of him? Fear and anxiety for the future were to be his lot! How was he to acquire knowledge, as our Lord had told him in his dream? Knowledge, we read in the Book of Sirach, comes to "whoever is free of toil" (38, 24). Farmers and workingmen, though no city could exist without them, are not expected to be priests or theologians, judges or lawyers, teachers or preachers. Yet, all expectations to the contrary, this was the path that John would have to follow to prepare himself for his future manifold mission.

Faced with Anthony's increasingly stubborn opposition, Margaret decided to send John, the innocent cause of this domestic dissension, to live for a while with some people she knew. Should they refuse to take him, then John was to go to the Moglia farm at Moncucco, about two miles from Chieri.

The Moglias did not know Mamma Margaret personally. They were wealthy, whereas the Boscos were poor. But this did not deter Margaret; she knew that all the members of that household had a Christ-like spirit of charity. She was further encouraged by the fact that the mistress of the house was related to the Filippellis of Castelnuovo. Calling John to her side, she gave him opportune instructions with the same loving solicitude that Rebecca had shown in bidding farewell to Jacob about to set out for his trip to Chaldea. Thus, did Margaret send her son away with no assistance other than that of entrusting him to his guardian angel. It was February, 1828.

John left home with only a bundle of shirts and a few books on religion given him by Father Calosso. He was filled with sadness. Bitter cold and the snow-covered ground added to his gloom. He could expect nothing from home, because his stubborn stepbrother would not let Margaret send him anything. He was forced to go looking for work in order to earn his living by the sweat of his brow, no longer comforted by the presence of his mother, whom he held so dear.

It seems that sometime before February, 1828, John had gone to Serra, a hamlet close to Buttigliera d'Asti, where he was warmly received by some friends of his mother. Realizing, however, that he was a burden, since in winter he could not make himself useful,

he soon returned to Morialdo. At any rate, he now set out for Moriondo, where there lived another family who were acquaintances of the Boscós. He begged for a job of some kind, but in vain. They listened to his sad story, sympathized with him for having been forced to leave home and seek work, and wished him better luck elsewhere.

There was nothing else to do now but try the Moglia farm. He arrived there toward evening. He first met the owner's paternal uncle, Joseph Moglia, who in a friendly tone asked him: "Hello, John! Where are you going?"

"I'm looking for a job."

"Good! That's fine! So long, John." And off he went.

For a few moments John stood there, too stunned to say or do anything. Then, recovering from the shock, he walked over to the farmyard, where the whole Moglia family was engaged in preparing osiers for tying the vines. As soon as the owner saw him, he asked: "Whom are you looking for, my boy?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Louis Moglia."

"I'm Louis Moglia. What can I do for you?"

"My mother told me to come and work as a cowherd for you."

"Who is your mother? And why did she send you, so young, away from home?"

"My mother is Margaret Bosco. My brother Anthony always picks on me and beats me and so, yesterday she said to me: 'Take a couple of shirts and handkerchiefs and go to Bausone (a hamlet near Chieri) and try to find a job. If there is no work, then go to the Moglia farm, midway between Mombello and Moncucco. Ask for the owner and tell him that your mother has sent you. I hope he will give you a job.' "

"Poor boy," Moglia replied. "I can't hire you, because it's winter and I'm dismissing cowherds, if anything. We don't usually hire until after the Annunciation! <sup>1</sup> I'm sorry, but you'll have to go back home."

"Please let me stay, for God's sake!" John exclaimed. "You don't have to pay me, just let me stay here."

"But I can't take you in. Anyway, what could you do?"

John burst into tears and kept saying, "Please let me stay, please

<sup>1</sup> The feast of the Annunciation occurs on March 25. [Editor]

let me. I'll just sit here on the ground and I won't move, I won't go away!"

So saying, he joined the others in gathering the osiers scattered on the ground. Dorothy Moglia, Louis' wife, moved by the boy's tears, persuaded her husband to keep the boy at least for a few days, and Louis did not reject his good wife's plea.

His sister Teresa, 15 years old, was in charge of the herd, but she did not like the work. "Listen," she said, "let this boy look after the cattle. I'm old enough and strong enough to work in the fields, and I can do as much as any of you." Her relatives quickly agreed. John lost no time in tackling those chores usually assigned to a farmhand and keeping the stables clean.

Although in later years he often referred to the time he had spent at the Moglias as the most colorful and adventurous period in his life because he then had to face the world alone, he never went into further details when asked, nor did he mention it in his memoirs [of the Oratory]. It was during this time that he trained himself in the practice of solid virtue grounded on humility. Only once was he heard to remark: "From then on, as soon as I woke up in the morning, I began doing *something* right away and this I kept doing throughout the day till bed time." But if he remained reticent, the same may not be said of the Moglias, their neighbors and the parish priest of Moncucco, Father Francis Martino, who succeeded Father [Francis] Cottino. It is from them that we have gathered the information we are about to make known. The words of the Book of Proverbs were fulfilled in John: "He who is attentive to his master will be enriched" (27, 18).

Noticing how thoroughly obedient, clever and hardworking John was, as well as modest and religious, the Moglias began to realize that in this boy they had found a treasure. With each passing day they grew more and more fond of him. Thus, after only one week, Mr. Moglia sent John to Becchi to ask Mamma Margaret to meet him at Castelnuovo the following Thursday in order to discuss the wages to be paid to John. Margaret hastened to the Moglia farm to tell Louis that she was only too glad that he had taken her son into his household and that she did not expect any wages. But Mr. Moglia insisted that besides his board, John should receive a wage of 15 lire per year for clothing—in those days a rather good

wage for a fourteen-year-old cowherd. From that time on John was treated like a member of the family.

From the very beginning, his irreproachable conduct had a beneficial influence on all. During the first few weeks, he would unhurriedly recite his morning and evening prayers kneeling beside his cot or in some corner of the stable. Mrs. Dorothy Moglia, the housewife, unseen, had more than once observed his devout deportment at prayer. Edified by the boy's piety, she taught him the invocations of the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, some of which at that time he was reciting incorrectly, and made him lead the evening family prayers with all gathered before a picture of the Blessed Virgin, which is still a proud possession of the Moglia household. Their hard day's work ended with the recitation of the rosary, in which the family found new strength and necessary grace to carry out faithfully the duties of their state.

Every Saturday John asked Mr. or Mrs. Moglia for permission to go to Moncucco on the following day. His purpose was to attend the first Mass at a very early hour. As John attended also the later Mass and all the other services, Mrs. Moglia, not knowing the reason for such an early walk, decided one Sunday to find out for herself why John went to Moncucco. Arriving before him, she took up a position from where she could watch everything he did. She saw him enter the church, all recollected, go to confession to Father Francis Cottino, the pastor, hear Mass and receive Holy Communion, and then return home full of joy.

At home, where Mrs. Moglia had preceded him, she asked him whether he went to the early Mass because he wanted to receive the Sacraments. But when she saw him uneasy, as if regretting he had been found out, not wishing to embarrass him further, she immediately told him: "From now on don't bother to ask. You have my permission to attend the early Mass." John never failed to avail himself of this permission and received Communion every Sunday and holy day. In those days it was not customary to receive the Holy Eucharist frequently. In John's case there was another drawback: the Moglia farm was over an hour's walk from the church through unmarked paths.

This love of the Holy Eucharist was a sign of his spirit of prayer. He was often seen, indoors and out, wholly absorbed in prayer.

One day, when he was tending the cows not far from the farmhouse, Dorothy Moglia and her brother-in-law, John Moglia, happened to see him lying motionless in the middle of the meadow. Because of the terrain he seemed to be lying flat on the ground. Thinking he had fallen asleep, they called out to him by name. The boy did not stir, so John Moglia walked toward him, repeatedly shouting his name as he got closer. John did not reply. When Moglia was only a few steps away, he realized that the boy was kneeling, a book dangling from his hands; his eyes were closed, his face turned toward the sky and so inexpressibly devout as to cause amazement. Moglia tapped him gently on the shoulder and asked: "Why are you sleeping in the sun?"

John stirred and answered: "I wasn't sleeping." So saying, he stood up, obviously greatly embarrassed at having been discovered in meditation.

He never forgot his grace before and after meals. He introduced this practice among the Moglias who, before John's arrival, sometimes neglected it. They never omitted it in winter, but it was a different story in the summer when they came home exhausted. He also saw to it that the *Angelus* was said three times a day at the sound of the church bells.

One summer day, old Joseph Moglia, a hoe over his shoulder, had just come in from the fields, dripping with perspiration. It was noon and a bell in the distance was ringing the *Angelus*. Too tired to pay attention to it, he threw himself on the ground to rest. But then he noticed John, who had come home a little while before, saying the *Angelus* kneeling at the top of the outdoor stairway. Joseph laughingly remarked: "Look at him! We, the owners have to wear ourselves out working from morning till night, while he peacefully prays up there. That's an easy way to gain merits for Heaven!"

John finished his prayer, then went down the stairs and said to the old man: "Look, you know very well that I have not been loafing. You may be sure of this, that I have earned more by praying than you by working. If you pray, you will gather four ears of corn for every two grains you sow; if you do not pray, you will gather only two ears for every four grains you sow. You, too, should pray if you want to gather four ears instead of two. What

would it have cost you to stop your work a moment, put down your hoe and say the *Angelus*? Then you would have acquired as much merit as I.”

The good old man was really surprised! “Well now!” he exclaimed, “I never thought I’d be getting a lesson from a boy! Yet I still don’t feel right if I sit down at table without first saying the *Angelus*!”

From that day on, Joseph Moglia never left out the prayer. The Moglias, whom John regarded as taking his mother’s place, always accepted his observations in good grace because of the respect, love and friendliness he showed for them. Frequently there were differences of opinion between him and the older folks about various things. A calm discussion would follow: John would argue his viewpoint dispassionately and win them over. His employers and their friends would often repeat: “It’s quite clear that this boy is destined to teach others, even grownups!”

Mr. and Mrs. Moglia asserted that much to their surprise they never once observed in him any childish fault, even the least one. He never indulged in any of the usual boyish pranks, never shoved a companion, nor uttered an angry or derisive word. He never stole fruit, not even a little, nor ever permitted himself any look or gesture that might be considered improper by even the severest critic. Indeed, his deportment was always that of a mature and judicious man. “He was above the other children and we could learn from him!” declared the hamlet folk.

In the beginning, however, he was not spared the sting of spiteful tongues. Often he would kneel among the cows in pasture, not to lose sight of them or perhaps to shield himself from the sun in the middle of the meadow. Some who saw him in that position jumped to the conclusion that he was milking the cows to drink their milk, as dishonest cowherds were wont to do, and they reported him to his employers. The Moglias, prudent people, wanted to find out for themselves and several times watched him. They always saw him reading his catechism. He knew this precious booklet quite well and yet he was forever studying it. Now and then he would interrupt his reading with prayer.

Imbued as he was with the spirit of God, we can surmise how he abhorred not only whatever might tarnish the candor of his

soul, but also whatever he viewed as improper for a boy. Mrs. Dorothy Moglia related how John did not mind looking after her three-year-old son George, who was constantly at his heels both in the fields and at home. He never tired of listening to his childish chatter and fondly attended to all his needs. But when she asked him to look after her five-year-old daughter as well, he answered politely: "Give me boys, as many as you like, even ten of them, and I'll look after them. But I must not have anything to do with girls."

This was the only time that he seemed to dodge a command. Nevertheless, Mrs. Moglia sometimes sat her baby daughter on the ground and went about her work, thus obliging him to look after her. But John, as soon as he thought himself unobserved would withdraw some distance away. At her return Mrs. Moglia would scold him: "You naughty boy! Why won't you look after her?"

"This kind of work is not for me!" John would calmly reply.

At the Moglia farm he continued the practices that he had started at Becchi. With his pleasant ways and tricks he began to attract the few boys of the hamlet, and very soon they were all close friends of his. In winter, when the outdoor work ceased, or on rainy days, or Sundays and holy days, he would gather all his friends together in the evening. They would climb into the hayloft and sit in a semicircle, while John, seated on a pile of hay above them, would teach them the catechism and repeat what he had heard in church. He would tell some edifying story and teach them to say the rosary or the Litany of the Blessed Virgin and to sing sacred hymns. In a word, he taught them all he knew. When the lady of the house asked him why he chose that particular spot to hold his meetings, he would answer: "Up there you don't disturb us and we don't disturb you!" But he was very firm in never allowing girls. In the summer, instead, when the weather was fair, the boys would gather under the shade of a mulberry tree, and their mothers would consider themselves fortunate that John was there to look after their children when they themselves had to leave the house or could not accompany them to the church. John was always ready to accept such a charge and showered his young friends with fond attention and little gifts, suitable to their young age. He would do no such thing for the girls.

During all this time his desire to study was ever in his mind and he could not suppress it. Wherever he went, he took along a bundle of religious books and the [Latin] grammar which Father Calosso had given him. At home he devoted every free moment to reading. When leading the oxen in front of the plow, his right hand held the rope and the left a book, at which he would glance from time to time. Mr. Moglia once asked him why he loved books so much.

"Because I must be a priest!" John answered.

"You a priest!?" the Moglias would say to him after he had on several occasions made this statement. "Don't you know that to study you need nine or ten thousand lire? Where would you get so much money? There, there," they would say, patting him on the shoulder and shaking him in a friendly way, "if you can't be Don Bosco, you'll be Don *Bosc!*"<sup>2</sup>

"You'll see!" John would reply confidently.

Anna Moglia, another sister of Louis Moglia, about 18 years old, seeing that John was determined to become a priest, said to him several times: "But you're poor, how can you study if you haven't any money?"

"I'm not worried about that," John would reply, "because there will be people who will pay for me!" Such firmness of character in the face of so many obstacles was indeed admirable. He pitted his hope against all human hope.

Although the Moglias considered his ambition unrealistic they never raised difficulties. Louis once said to him: "Study all you want, if that's what you like." And when he did not need him, he would relieve him of his work. John would thank him and withdraw to the hayloft not to be disturbed.

One day while Uncle John was ploughing, he spontaneously said to him: "Let's do this: whenever I don't really need you to lead the oxen, you go over to the shade and study." But, John, knowing what his duties were, could not and did not take advantage of his employers' kindness. There was much urgent work to be done and prudence guided all his actions. Besides, how could he progress in his studies without a teacher?

At that time he glimpsed a ray of hope. In September Father [Nicholas] Moglia, Louis' uncle and Joseph's brother, came to stay

<sup>2</sup> A play on the Piedmontese word *bosc* meaning wood.

at the farm. He was a school teacher back home. Having observed with keen interest John's deportment, he offered to teach him an hour each day. John was grateful to him, but unfortunately he derived very little profit from such instruction, since the priest remained in the hamlet only a short period during the fall, when the vintage and the sowing season is at its height. This, too, was a disappointment. Yet, it did not undermine his determination to follow his vocation. The same firmness he displayed the following year, 1829.

As he grew older John perceived ever more clearly the need for someone to take care of boys, and the desire to do so himself grew ever more insistent. Since he went to the parish church of Moncucco every Sunday, it was not long before all the boys, both the privileged ones who went to school and others, gathered about him. Father Cottino, the pastor, a very learned and zealous priest, immediately took notice of John's sincere and singular piety and the good spirit that animated him. He realized how much good John could do to other boys with his games and instructions. So he not only gave him all possible support, but, when John left the Moglia farm, he himself carried on for many years the gatherings which John had begun, later to be known as "festive oratories".

Meanwhile, after much insistence, John succeeded in obtaining the use of the municipal school hall on Sundays and holy days. On these days the boys of the village would gather with the young farmhand as their leader. The meeting would begin with a reading of some devotional book and continue with some entertainment by John. But that was not all. After the High Mass, the boys would stay on and solemnly make the Stations of the Cross and sing the *Stabat Mater*. The pastor was moved to tears at the sight of such piety flowering among the choicest of his flock. Adults, too, were attracted to the church by this novelty, and the good example bore fruit. On Sundays and holy days, John spent the entire day in Moncucco and returned home in the evening, with all the boys of his hamlet singing gaily with him.

Father Cottino, who observed attentively John's every word and deed, could not fail to notice his intelligence and memory, his discernment and aptitude for studies. Occasionally he had a talk with him in the rectory, and came to know his innermost thoughts. As

a result he volunteered to teach him Latin if it could be arranged. John begged the Moglias to allow him the time and offered to give up his small wages. He received permission to go to the rectory a few times when the work was not pressing, but, unfortunately, his school days were very few and far between. The rectory was over a mile away and he could hardly absent himself from the farm for more than three hours without neglecting his duties. Nor did he have the time or facilities to attend to his homework and lessons.

This was another setback in his studies. However, it was not time lost. The Lord was ordaining matters in such a way that it might be said of him: "When the just man fled from his brother's anger, [Wisdom] guided him in direct ways, showed him the kingdom of God and gave him knowledge of holy things; she prospered him in his labors, and made abundant the fruit of his works" (Wisd. 10, 10).

Meanwhile, the solemn events that took place that year, 1829, also nourished his singular piety. Leo XII died on February 10 at the age of 68; on March 31, Pius VIII succeeded him and granted a new Jubilee to all the faithful. On June 20, in Turin, two golden crowns were solemnly attached to the picture of the Blessed Virgin and Child in the shrine of the *Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation]. A few months prior to this event, on April 13, thanks to [Daniel] O'Connell's admirable constancy, the British parliament proclaimed the emancipation of Catholics after almost three hundred years of harsh persecution. That event might well be compared to the exultation of the early Christians of Rome when they emerged from the catacombs after the proclamation of Constantine's edict. The Pope! The Blessed Virgin! The Church! Did John ever think that one day a chapter in his biography would be entitled, "Don Bosco and England"?

## CHAPTER 23

### *His Return*

JOHN had now been at the Moglia farm for almost two years and was deeply grateful to that fine family. The feeling was mutual. As a token of his satisfaction with John's services, Louis Moglia gave Margaret 30 lire at the end of the year 1828 and 50 more in the autumn of 1829. Toward the end of December of that year, Michael Occhiena, Margaret's brother, passed by the farm one morning at about eight on his way to the market at Chieri. He saw his nephew leading the herd to pasture and called out to him: "Hello, John, how are you? Are you happy here?"

"How could I be? I still want to study, but the years go by and I am getting nowhere."

"Poor lad! Cheer up! Leave it to me. I'll see what I can do. Take the cows back and then return to your mother. Tell her that I'll be coming along today to have a talk with her."

"But Mamma will scold me if I go back."

"Do as I tell you, and don't worry. I'll straighten everything out. Just trust your uncle. I'm going to the market now, but on my way back I'll stop to have a talk with your mother, and you'll see that things will turn out just as you wish. If need be, I'll provide the money to send you to school, I'll make up the difference. Well, do you feel better now?"

John obeyed. The Moglias were surprised to see him back with the cows so soon. But they were very understanding and let him go with their best wishes for success in becoming a priest. He was deeply moved at leaving such good people. He kept waving back to them, his friends and benefactors, and their eyes, too, were filled with tears at seeing him go. They had grown very fond of John and as long as they lived they regarded him as their own son. With the highest words of praise they showed their esteem for him

in countless ways, grateful to God for having had John with them for so long a time. His return home left a great void for them. They found comfort in the enduring memories he had left them of himself.

In 1828 John Moglia, [Louis' brother], had taken John along with him to plant four rows of new vines. Bosco was tying them with osiers very close to the ground. The hard work tired him and he complained of pain in his knees and back.

"Don't give up," Uncle Moglia urged. "If you don't want your back to ache when you're old, you must get used to it while you're young."

John went on working and after a few moments he exclaimed: "You know, the vines I'm tying now will yield finer grapes, and more and better wine, and they'll last longer than the others."

Actually, things turned out as he had said. Every year they produced twice as much as the other vines. The latter withered away and had to be replanted several times, while those that John had tied with osiers prospered to the surprise of all until 1890. In his old age, Don Bosco always recalled this event with pleasure and every time George Moglia, or his son John, came to the Oratory he would ask how those vines were doing and express a wish to taste some of those grapes.

Anna Moglia, George's daughter, who married a Joseph Zucca from Bausone, a hamlet close to Moriondo Torinese, often spoke about John to her neighbors, relatives and children. She would tell with delight how John had spent two years in her father's house, living the life of an angel and an apostle. He would often withdraw to some quiet spot in order to read, study and pray. He would teach catechism and tell edifying stories not only to the neighborhood boys, but also to the members of her family. He was so good that everybody listened with eagerness and pleasure. She also stated that several times, while they were working together in the fields, he had said to her in all seriousness and in a grave prophetic tone: "I'll be a priest and then I'll really preach and hear confessions."

Anna did not take his words seriously and would deride him, saying that with those ideas of his and his never-ending reading he would get nowhere. But one day John replied: "You don't be-

lieve what I say and you make fun of me, but one day you'll come to me for confession."

And so it happened, for when John became a priest and founded the Oratory, Anna, for reasons she could never have foreseen, lived in Bausone [near Turin], and she would often travel there and go to the Oratory to visit Don Bosco, make her confession to him in the little church of St. Francis [de Sales], and perform her devotions. Don Bosco always welcomed her as his own sister. These things we have come to know through Father Joseph Mellica, a canon at Buttigliera d'Asti, as related to him by Mrs. Anna Moglia's son and daughter.

But for the Moglias an even more precious memory of John was the remembrance of his good example. Mrs. Dorothy Moglia, trying to induce her teenage son George to frequent the Sacraments, would remind him of John's singular piety. When one day the little boy used God's name with little respect, George Moglia told us that his mother punished him and warned him never again to repeat such a fault. She added: "Behave as John Bosco did. He had respect for God and his elders, he prayed devoutly and commended his soul to God before taking his rest." She was always citing him as a model to be followed, and so did the other mothers in the district.

Fortunate indeed are those boys whose memory is blessed where once they lived!

Walking the long road from the Moglia farm to Becchi, John thought that finally he would be able to follow the path of his vocation to its very end. He as yet did not realize how much of that path he had already traveled. God had first schooled him [at Becchi] for work in the festive oratories, and then had led him through different occupations: spading the ground, weeding, tending cattle, planting vines, farming—a good experience for the future founder of agricultural schools. Ever blessed be the admirable designs of a most loving Providence!

Overjoyed to be home again, John appeared at the door. But the moment his mother saw him she reproached him for having left the Moglia family. She would not listen to any explanation and ordered him to go back and continue his work. John was utterly amazed and disconcerted, but only for a moment. He thought he

had glimpsed some secret, unexpressed thought in his mother's face. He left the house without a murmur and hid in a ditch behind a hedge to wait for his uncle's arrival. Margaret, of course, had put on an act lest Anthony think that she had had a part in John's unexpected return.

Margaret had two brothers, Michael and Francis. Michael was not entirely without schooling; he was a farmer, but, nevertheless, knew some Latin. His brother Francis also had a good store of common sense and commanded respect. Both were very fond of John. Their intervention in the affairs of the Bosco family was a sure sign that the boy had found two champions.

Michael kept his word. On his way back from Chieri he called on his sister. During their discussion Anthony prudently kept silent. John [who must have made his presence known] was called out from his hiding place, and it seemed that all the difficulties had been nicely swept away. All this has come to our knowledge through Mr. Gamba of Buttigliera. A little boy, he had been visiting his relatives at Becchi at that time. He also stated that John had taught him the first rudiments of reading and writing.

Michael accompanied Margaret to the parish priest of Castelnovo, Father Bartholomew Dassano, and begged him to give John lessons at least two or three times a week. But Father Dassano answered that this would be impossible because of the pressure of work in the parish. True, he had two priests helping him but they too were overtaxed and he did not dare to burden them any further. Instead, he advised them to go to Buttigliera d'Asti where the pastor might possibly be able to help them. Michael went alone, but his request was turned down for the same reasons. We do not know why Margaret did not first ask Father Calosso to resume tutoring John. Perhaps she had not yet entirely given up the idea of keeping him away from home, or perhaps the old priest was bedridden, or again perhaps, urgent business had obliged him to leave his chaplaincy and entrust his duties there to some other priest. Whatever the reason, John could not resume his studies. So once again he began to do his share of work in the fields and in the vegetable garden.

He faithfully continued to attend all the church services despite

the distance, and edified all by his good example. On Sundays he eagerly went to the parish church [at Castelnuovo] for Mass and sermon, the afternoon services or any other special devotion. John Filippello, who went to catechism class with him recalled: "Father Dassano, the parish priest, would question us. My companions and I knew very little but John knew plenty, so much so that the pastor would say to us: 'You hardly know your catechism, while Bosco knows it so well that he can recite it backwards.'"

The same Filippello, who was John's lifelong friend and knew him intimately, made also the following statement: "I am convinced that John never committed any deliberate sin. His virtue increased as he grew. Even as a child I had always admired his edifying behavior in church and the devotion with which he prayed. I also noticed his reserve in deliberately shying away as far as possible from girls.

"He stood out among his equals as a good, clean-cut boy. He was zealous and remarkably successful in winning others over to what is good. He was always saying how much he wanted to study so as to be able to do good to souls. The good advice he always gave me and my friends never turned out wrong. He graciously invited us to go to church with him, encouraged us, corrected us and did not hesitate to reprimand even the most unruly. He did everything he could to keep us away from bad companions and to ward off dangerous pastimes. We had accepted him as our cherished guide and leader because he had won our respect and admiration. He moved among us as one having authority. Whenever bad weather prevented those of us who lived far from the church from attending the afternoon services, he would keep us amused either in his home or in the courtyard with his tricks. In this way he could explain something we had heard during the sermon that morning, or teach us our catechism, or tell us some edifying story or read aloud some spiritual book. These gatherings generally ended with the recitation of the Rosary.

"Through this missionary zeal he acquired an extraordinary reputation for virtue. His whole being radiated such candor and modesty that on Sundays and holy days, the neighborhood parents would entrust their children to his keeping as to a true guardian

angel. All the mothers in the neighborhood encouraged their sons to make friends with him because experience had shown that they would become all the better for it.”

“Many such mothers, on their deathbed,” Secundus Matta told us, “would remind their sorrowing children of John Bosco’s example and would bid them promise to pattern their own life upon his, especially in regard to prayer and obedience.”

To sum up, the people of Morialdo, Castelnuovo and other hamlets, among them Father Angelo Savio, now a Salesian, and his brother, Father Ascanio Savio, repeatedly stated this to us: “John’s friends and companions always held him in the highest regard and never once uttered a single word of criticism or reproach against him.” To this very day, lofty is the general regard in which the blameless youth of John Bosco is held in all these towns and hamlets.

A few years ago Brother Joseph Buzzetti and other Salesians brought a number of boys from the Oratory to Becchi for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. They met a venerable old woman who on recognizing them as Salesians exclaimed: “I knew Don Bosco when he was yet a child. At that time I lived here. How good he was! How many times I saw him praying with all his heart and receiving the Sacraments with his face radiant with faith!”

Indeed, all of us may exclaim: “The glory of children is their parentage” (Prov. 17, 6). “Have a care for your name, for it will stand by you better than precious treasures in the thousands; the boon of life is for limited days, but a good name for days without number” (Sir. 41, 12-13).

## CHAPTER 24

### *Father Joseph Calosso*

“**T**HE father of a just man will exult with glee; he who begets a wise son will have joy in him. Let your father and mother have joy and let her who bore you exult” (Prov. 23, 24-25). This is the infallible pronouncement of Divine Wisdom. Despite her rejoicing and her exultation, Margaret had reason to be sorely distressed. She found it very heartbreaking to see her beloved son forced to work for a living. She had just about given up hope that John would have a chance to pursue his studies which would enable him to reach his goal for the good of souls.

Father Calosso, however, had not forgotten his young friend. Having perceived unmistakable signs of a priestly vocation in him he did not wish this vocation to go lost. Free, at last, of various difficulties preventing him from carrying out his charitable plan, he sent for John one fine day. After listening to the boy’s account of his problems during his past few years away from home, and learning how Anthony was as obdurate as ever, he said, “John, my boy, you have put your trust in me and it will not be in vain. So, leave that unreasonable brother of yours; come and live with me. I shall be a father to you.”

John immediately told his mother about this generous offer. Both she and his brother Joseph were very happy about it. Anthony was neither against the idea nor in favor of it. Moreover, Joseph, who had become a very hard worker, had promised also to do John’s share of work on the farm.

Toward the end of the summer John began staying with Father Calosso going home only at night to sleep. “No one,” wrote John, “can imagine how happy I was. For me, Father Calosso was an angel of the Lord. I loved him more than a father. I prayed for him, and cheerfully helped him in everything. What I enjoyed most

was to do something for him that really taxed my efforts. I would have even given my life for him. I made more progress in one day with him than in a whole week at home. And that man of God took such fatherly care of me that he would often tell me: 'Don't worry about your future. I'll help you at all costs. As long as I live you will not lack anything, and if I die, I shall provide for you just the same.' "

Nevertheless, when John arrived home at night he found no peace: jeers replaced bickering. Finally, Father Calosso suggested: "If that's the way things are, go get your clothes and come stay here for good. You can depend on me. I will not let you down."

It was hard for Margaret to see John leave home again, but she resigned herself to his departure since there was no other way of keeping peace in the family. Father Calosso was willing to teach him the complete Latin course and to provide financial help to further his studies for the priesthood. So John moved to the chaplain's house permanently.

Despairing of ever obtaining Anthony's consent—he was now twenty-six—Margaret was determined that John should continue his studies. She was ready to sacrifice everything she possessed to meet his expenses and finally decided to divide the family estate. This involved some problems especially since both Joseph and John were still minors. She talked the matter over with her sister Marianne, not wishing to rush a decision which she had often pondered but never made because it was repugnant to her as a mother. Together they racked their brains for some other solution, but there was none. Her chief difficulty was to settle the dispute in such a way that the division of property would not cause a division of hearts. Marianne generously contributed to the solution of this problem by suggesting to Margaret: "You and I have something of our own. Let's put it together, and so we'll be able to arrange matters without giving Anthony any cause for complaint."

As soon as Anthony heard of the decision, he flatly refused to go along with it, stubbornly insisting that John should be a peasant like himself. But once Margaret had seen the justice of a thing and made up her mind, she was inflexible. She refused to yield, and bluntly declared she was prepared to take the matter to court. Anthony, therefore, gave in to the division of the family property.

Even before the legal settlement was made, he left Margaret and moved his belongings into that part of the house that was to be his by law. However, he demanded of Margaret the assurance that she would give nothing to John, and forbade John to take anything that was part of the family possessions until all claims had been settled. John could lawfully have taken his share of the interest on his father's legacy also for the time preceding the division of the estate, but he submitted to the unjust demand so as not to raise more issues.

Several months went by before the matter was legally settled. The family was thus reduced to just the three of them—Margaret, John and Joseph. A great weight had been lifted from John's heart! Now at last he was totally free to pursue his studies.

Things moved more smoothly now. John felt perfectly happy and desired nothing more. But suddenly disaster struck and again all his hopes were dashed at a single blow.

One morning in November 1830, Father Calosso sent John home on an errand. He had scarcely reached the house and was packing a few shirts when someone burst into the room and told him to rush back to Father Calosso immediately. The priest had been taken gravely ill and was asking for John; he insisted that he had to see him and speak with him at all costs. John ran, almost flew, to his benefactor's side, and found him in bed, unable to utter a single word. The priest had suffered a stroke. He recognized John, however, and looked at him with such a moving expression that the boy was overwhelmed with grief. The priest nodded at something and made an effort to explain; he tried to speak, but his lips could not form a single word. Finally, he took a key from beneath his pillow and gave it to John, intimating with gestures that he was not to give it to anybody and that everything contained in the chest was to be exclusively his. John pocketed the key, unaware of the contents of the chest. With a son's love he gave the old priest his complete attention. Father Calosso died two days later on November 21, at the age of 75. John's hopes died with him.

Some persons who were present at the priest's last hours, said to John: "The key he gave you belongs to his strongbox. The money inside is yours, take it." Others objected that in conscience

he was not entitled to it, since the money had not been left to him in any legal way.

John was in serious doubt. After pondering the matter, he said: "Why risk my eternal salvation because of money! I don't want it!"

Some insisted that the way in which the dying man had sent for him, what he had said when he was well, and the manner in which he had placed the key in his hands, clearly expressed his will, and therefore John was entitled to that money. But John was not fully convinced. Meanwhile, the priest's heir had arrived with other relatives and was searching everywhere for the key to the strongbox. John handed it to him, saying: "Here is the key to the money. Your uncle made me understand that I was not to give it to anybody. Some persons have told me that I had the right to take what was in the strongbox, but I'd rather be poor. I don't want to start any trouble. Your uncle did not tell me clearly that the money was for me."

The nephew took the key, opened the safe and found 6,000 lire. After counting them, he turned to John and said: "I will respect my uncle's will; this money is yours, and I authorize you to take what you want."

John stood deep in thought a moment; Father Calosso had manifested his will in a manner sufficiently clear, and his heir was giving his consent . . . "No, no," John said, at last, "I don't want anything! I'd rather have Heaven than all the riches and money in the world."

"If you won't take anything," the heir answered, "I thank you for your generous and gracious gesture. It's up to you, do as you wish."

And so John took nothing! Perhaps, he had overheard some of Father Calosso's relatives grumbling about some claim or other. In his memoirs Don Bosco sums up this episode simply: "Father Calosso's heirs came and I gave them the key [to the strongbox]."

"Happy the rich man found without fault, who turns not aside after gain! Who is he that we may praise him? He of all his kindred, has done wonders, for he has been tested by gold and come off safe, and this remains his glory . . ." (Sir. 31, 8-10).

Nevertheless, Father Calosso's death was a great tragedy for John. He wept unceasingly for his dead benefactor. Awake, he

thought of him; asleep, he dreamed of him. Shortly after, on November 30, his sorrow was increased by the mournful tolling from parish to parish for the death of Pope Pius VIII. John's grief became so intense that Margaret, fearing for his health, sent him to Capriglio to spend some time with his grandfather. But the good Lord did not leave him long without consolation. In his memoirs Don Bosco wrote: "At this time I had another dream, in which I was sorely reproached for having put my hope in men and not in our good heavenly Father."

Nevertheless, Father Calosso's memory remained stamped forever in his heart. Of him, Don Bosco later wrote: "I have always prayed for this outstanding benefactor of mine and I shall continue to do so for the rest of my life."

## CHAPTER 25

### *School at Castelnuovo*

FATHER Calosso's death at this time of the year not only interrupted John's studies at their very start, but also made it harder for him to attend school in Castelnuovo where classes had been resumed since the feast of All Saints. Nevertheless, Margaret with the help of her brother Michael, who was very well known in Castelnuovo, got through these difficulties, so that around Christmas in 1830 John, now fifteen, began to attend the public school in his own home town, where a Latin course was offered in addition to the elementary grades. On her part, his mother prepared herself for even greater sacrifices and privations in order to assist him in his vocation.

John was somewhat handicapped by the fact that he had first taken private lessons and was now for the first time attending a public school under a new teacher. He practically had to start studying Italian grammar all over again to prepare for Latin. At first he made two round trips to school a day, both morning and afternoon, in all some 12 miles. This loss of time, of course, had a detrimental effect on his studies and he soon changed his schedule, leaving Becchi in the morning and returning only in the evening. Sometimes he had to trudge to school in a biting wind or in a downpour. At times the ground was covered with snow or slush, and he shivered in the icy cold.

At Castelnuovo he would slip into his shoes again and leave his school satchel and his lunch at the house of a John Roberto. There he would eat his lunch between classes. In very bad weather, he would remain overnight in the village, sleeping in a cubbyhole under a staircase, where a kind family had given him permission to take shelter. This came to our knowledge through Mr. Pompey Villata, who in turn heard it from members of his family.

To keep expenses down and also to watch over John, Mamma Margaret at first agreed to this daily hike to and from school, but since the winter was becoming ever more severe, she soon realized she would have to board and lodge him in Castelnuovo. The fee would be paid in kind—cereals, wine, or other crops, according to the agreement made. Moreover, since John was well liked by everyone at Becchi, it seems that the neighbors feared he might not have the funds necessary for his studies and would occasionally take up a collection among the villagers and give it to Margaret, begging her to accept it for anyone in need. Once, for example, Secundus Matta gave her half an *emina* of wheat. Meanwhile, Margaret had arranged for John to take up lodging with the aforementioned John Roberto, a tailor and an excellent amateur singer of Gregorian chant and vocal music. Margaret accompanied John to Castelnuovo, and, before leaving, she gave him this most timely counsel: "Be devout to the Blessed Virgin."

The curiosity of many townsfolk was aroused by the news that John had come to stay. His reputation had reached Castelnuovo and they wished to make his acquaintance. Several young children of Bishop [John] Cagliero's relatives would stand at the door to watch the boys on their way to school in order to see John Bosco pass by. They still recall his modest, thoughtful look when he would walk by them, either alone, or with a few of his more serious companions, with his books under his arm. He wore an old, ill-fitting jacket—hardly what the well-dressed student would ordinarily wear.

Castelnuovo was the most important town in the area, and consequently many boys gave themselves airs and considered themselves a cut above the simple folk of the hamlets, whom they looked down upon as socially inferior and ignorant. Thus, in the first days, taking advantage of John's quiet ways, they began to poke fun at him and his clothes. Often, they would run after him on tiptoe, tug at the flaps of his jacket and then run off to a safe distance, passing quips to one another: "The pastor must have given him that jacket!" or, "It's really the latest style! Could it have belonged to his grandfather?"

John never lost his temper but patiently endured their rudeness and their taunts. Sometimes he would turn round to smile at them

kindly and say: "You rascals, why don't you behave and leave me in peace? Am I bothering you?" His classmates also made fun of him and gave him a derisive nickname because of his height among so many smaller boys.

But this baiting soon ceased, thanks to his good disposition. Then, too, he had begun to entertain them with his usual tricks. "A kind mouth multiplies friends, and gracious lips prompt friendly greetings" (Sir. 6, 5). Meanwhile, John was able to carry out his devotions here with greater ease than at Morialdo.

Municipal schools were then prevalently religious in character in accordance with the decrees of King Charles Felix issued on July 23, 1822. Boys and girls attended separate classes. A crucifix hung prominently in every classroom. Classes began with morning prayers and ended at noon with the *Agimus tibi gratias* [we give Thee thanks . . .]; afternoon classes started with the *Actiones nostras* [Direct, we beseech Thee, O Lord, our actions . . .], and closed with night prayers. The first half-hour of class was devoted to catechism instruction, as was also the entire afternoon session on Saturday,<sup>1</sup> which ended with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. Teachers had to agree with the pastor concerning the pupils attending Mass before class and going to confession once a month. Further, on holy days, pupils were bound to attend catechism class and religious services in the parish church. Piety is the path to wisdom.

There was only one Latin class for all the boys in all the various high school grades. The teacher was Father Emmanuel Virano of Castelnuovo d'Asti, who previously had invested [Joseph] Cafasso with the clerical habit. Father Virano was a very learned man and an expert teacher, much respected by his pupils. His lessons were so well-adapted to the needs of the individual pupils and so well-planned that willing students advanced rapidly. John's progress amazed his teacher.

One day the teacher assigned an Italian composition on Eleazar, who chose to die rather than give scandal by eating pork meat. John developed the theme so skillfully that nobody could believe he had written it himself. His composition passed from teacher to teacher, and all thought it superb. Finally, it also reached Father

<sup>1</sup> There was a midweek school holiday on Thursdays. [Editor]

Moglia. He read it over carefully, and his opinion was that among the educated people in the area no one was learned enough to write such a fine composition and that consequently it was impossible for young Bosco to have done so. When John heard this, he realized that he had fallen from the good graces of his former teacher. Indeed, by one of those strange, inexplicable changes that sometimes take place in the human heart, Father Moglia got the idea that it would be better for the young peasant boy of Becchi to give up his studies and return to the farm. Why this should happen, only God knows. This new setback again put to the test John's perseverance and trust in God.

Though he was away from his mother, John's love for her, a love inspired by her virtues, was as strong as ever. He did nothing without her permission, and she in turn granted his requests, ever ready to please him. On the other hand, John did not ask for many things and when he did, it was only for those things he really needed.

[John] Roberto and his family had grown very fond of him. Especially Roberto's son, a schoolmate, became a very close friend. Nearly every week Mamma Margaret brought her son a supply of bread. It was quite a long walk for her, but she felt that it was very important to see for herself how John was doing. She did the same, although less frequently, when John was a student at Chieri, and later a seminarian. Joseph always accompanied her to see his brother. The Robertos were invariably happy to welcome Margaret: good-hearted people have a natural affinity for each other. Margaret rejoiced to learn that John was even more faithfully obeying her instructions, and she beamed with pleasure upon hearing from all sides how good he was, how reverent, how devoted to prayer and to the exact fulfillment of his school duties. They all remarked that he was outstanding among his companions for piety and modesty in the reception of the Sacraments and that all admired his deportment in church and diligence in assisting at the services.

For these reasons, Father Dassano had appointed him monitor in one classroom during the Lenten catechism class. Virtue, however, is usually challenged, and that year John, too, had to be on his guard. Some schoolmates of his tried to tempt him to skip classes and go with them for some fun. When John tried to excuse him-

self by saying he had no money, they had some suggestions, stealing it from Roberto or his own mother. To encourage him, one of them added: "It's time you woke up, John. Wise up! If you walk around blindfolded, you can't see where you're going. Now, just get yourself some money and you'll have as much fun as all of us."

To this evil advice John replied: "I am not quite sure of what you're driving at, but are you by any chance suggesting that I steal so as to have fun? Don't you say in your prayers every day: 'Thou shalt not steal?' Isn't that a commandment of God? It's a thief who steals, and thieves come to a bad end. Besides, my mother takes very good care of me. If I want money for things I really need, she gives it to me. I've never done anything without asking her permission, and I don't intend to start disobeying her now. If your friends do these things, they're no good. If they don't, but push others to do them, then they're just rotten."

His words made the rounds among his schoolmates and none ever dared again make similar proposals to him. His teacher came to hear of it, too, and from that day onward took greater interest in him. It was the same with the boys' parents, the wealthier ones included, who, as a result, urged their sons to become his friends and imitate his example. Thus, John was able to form a group of friends who looked up to him and obeyed him even as the boys in Morialdo and Moncucco had done, some of whom still came faithfully to visit him from time to time. His company was a constant lesson in prudence; whatever he did, whether of greater or lesser importance, he did with the greatest care. He weighed his words and never spoke thoughtlessly. Once he had reached a just decision, nobody could dissuade him from it.

Unwittingly, his companions began to imitate him while he strove to make their friendship ever closer and his advice ever more acceptable to them. Whenever he returned to Castelnuovo after a few days rest with his mother at Becchi, he would bring back a supply of fruit they greatly appreciated. This gave him an opportunity to talk with them about religion, and ardently recommend devotion to the Blessed Virgin. John was especially fond of the little church known as the "Castle Church," which stood at the top of the hill. He would climb there alone or, sometimes, with his friends, to pay filial homage to the Mother of God. We may sur-

mise that maybe there he received some signal favor from the Blessed Virgin, for in after years he never forgot that church and the happy moments he had enjoyed there. When John Filippello came to visit him in Turin, Don Bosco never failed to give him a supply of holy pictures to reward the people who went to that particular church to recite the rosary, and to attract young boys there to pay homage to the Blessed Virgin.

This, John continued to do also in later years when he returned home from Chieri for the summer. His reputation was not only always good, but became better every year. Both clergy and layfolk were unanimous in their praise of him. All recalled that from his early adolescence he had nurtured a fervid and constant desire to become a missionary and take care of souls. As previously in Morialdo and Moncucco, so now at Castelnuovo, mothers sang John's praises to their children, even after many years had passed. Bishop Cagliero told us that when he was a little boy, his mother pointed John Bosco out to him as a model, and frequently exhorted him to follow his example.

Thus John's days passed serenely amid good works, study, and the company of his friends. Nevertheless, he was not entirely happy because he was unable to strike a friendship with the priests of the village. Father Bartholomew Dassano, the pastor, was truly a saintly man, learned, charitable and conscientious in his duties. But he was cold and not easily approachable by children. The same reserve marked the conduct of all the other priests. Even as a youngster, John realized how much young people need the help of a friend and how pliable they would be in the hands of those interested in them. He himself greatly felt this need. Frequently he would run into the pastor walking with his curate. Indeed, at times he would purposely plan to meet the pastor when the latter would take his usual evening stroll. John longed to approach him and to hear a friendly word from him, that would indicate his interest in him. As soon as the pastor appeared, John would greet him from a little distance and make a bow when he got closer. The priest would return his greeting gravely and courteously and continue on his way. Never did he utter a friendly word to youngsters to win their hearts and inspire confidence.

In those days a grave demeanor was considered to be a requisite

for ecclesiastics. Such reserve produced fear and not love in John. He felt hurt and frequently said to himself and to others: "If I were a priest, I would act differently. I would look for boys and get them around me. I would want them to know that I care for them and desire their friendship. I would speak kindly to them, give them good advice and dedicate myself entirely to their spiritual welfare. How I would love to have a chance to talk with my pastor, just as I did with Father Calosso. Why shouldn't it be so?" He often gave vent to these feelings with his mother. Margaret knew her son's heart well and appreciated such sentiments.

"What can you do?" she would say. "They are learned men; their mind is full of important matters, and it is hard for them to come down to the level of a boy like you."

"But is it so hard for them to stop a couple of minutes and just say a few words to me?"

"What would you want them to tell you?"

"Something good for my soul."

"But can't you see that they have so much to do hearing confessions, preaching and taking care of the parish?"

"But aren't we, too, their little parishioners?"

"Yes, that's true, but they have no time to waste."

"Did Jesus waste time when He talked with little children, when He scolded the Apostles for wanting to keep them away from Him? Didn't He tell them to let them come to Him, because theirs was the Kingdom of Heaven?"

"I agree with you, you are right. But what can you do about it?"

"Well, you'll see. If I ever become a priest, I will give my whole life to youngsters. They'll never see me looking stern and forbidding. I'll always be the first to speak to them."

## CHAPTER 26

### *Incidents at School*

WHEN things were taking a turn for the better, John was suddenly faced with a new crisis. His teacher, Father Virano, was unexpectedly appointed pastor at Mondonio in the diocese of Asti. He therefore resigned his post as teacher in April of that year, 1831, in order to settle in good time his private affairs as well as those connected with his teaching position. This also afforded him an opportunity to make arrangements for his new residence. His departure in 1832, however, left Castelnuovo without a Latin teacher. Father [Nicholas] Moglia, a kindly and pious man, who as we write is still lovingly remembered, was appointed to replace him. It soon became obvious that he was not one to control five groups of lively boys, differing in age, grade level and intelligence, all of whom had to be taught, in the same classroom, at the same time, subjects pertaining to the various high school grades. Lack of discipline almost cancelled out for John what he had learned in the preceding months. The new teacher, who daily witnessed John's good behavior, had heard his own relatives, the Moglias, praise John to the sky, and, in truth, he did not dislike the boy. Nevertheless, he was convinced that since John came from Becchi he must of necessity be a dolt—a good-natured one, perhaps, but nevertheless a dolt. John, already fifteen, had been placed in the first year of high school: this, according to Father Moglia, was further proof of the lad's scholastic ineptitude.

One day while the teacher was giving a test to determine class rank, John requested permission to do the one assigned to the third year students. Father Moglia burst out laughing: "I must say that for a Becchi boy you are a bit pretentious. What good is anyone from Becchi? Why don't you quit Latin? You'll never understand a word of it. Use your time looking for mushrooms or birds' nests.

That's one thing you should be good for. There's where your talent lies. I think you'll be a great success at that. Why you are studying Latin at all is really odd to me."

But John insisted, and gave no sign of having been stung by those words. But the teacher's reply was even more caustic. However, seeing that John was determined in his request, he finally told him to take whatever test he wanted. He for one was not going to read the nonsense that John would most certainly write.

The third year students had been given a Latin passage to translate. Within the hour John turned in his translation. Without even looking at it the teacher took it, placed it on his desk, and gave John a pitiful smile. But John remained there facing him.

"Please, Father, would you look at it and correct my mistakes?"

"Didn't I tell you that Becchi boys know nothing?" the teacher replied irritably. "I told you that these things are simply beyond you."

At this, several of the pupils jumped up and pleaded with their teacher.

"Yes, read Bosco's paper, please. Let's hear all the nonsense he has written."

Father Moglia, who by now had become quite pliable in the hands of his pupils, met their demand. He took up the paper and read it. The translation was correct. As he put it down he exclaimed: "Just as I said . . . Bosco is a good-for-nothing. He has copied this whole translation from someone else. He must have copied it. This is certainly not his work."

John's schoolmate who shared the same desk with him and who had seen John at work without recourse to books or help from anyone spoke up in his defense.

"Father, you say that Bosco copied from someone else. If he did, there would be a composition that would match his. Why don't you look at our work and see if there is any translation that looks like his?"

This sounded like a reasonable request. And it should certainly have put an end to the matter. But the teacher refused to budge. He quickly reproved the lad who had spoken up.

"What do you know about it? Haven't you heard me say that anyone from Becchi is good for nothing?"

There was no way to persuade him of the truth. In his blind prejudice he cared little about learning the real facts. But the boy who had seen John work on his translation completely on his own told his friends exactly what had happened. As a result, John's classmates not only admired his talent, but very highly regarded his humility and dignity in the face of those abusive words. This incident greatly heightened their esteem and admiration for John and increased his influence among them.

During these school days, John's conduct and demeanor, whether with his school chums or alone, made him a real model of Christian adolescence. He abhorred coarse jokes and games in which typical horseplay was involved, and avoided any familiarity unbecoming a well-bred person. In particular, John took strong exception to a certain game that involved rowdy horseplay; not only did he refuse to take part in it, but he reproved those who indulged in it before or after school hours.

It should be obvious that under Father Moglia John made little progress in his studies from April to the end of the school year. We are inclined to view this as a sad fate that befell John. Yet, thus did Divine Providence ordain events and prepare John for his mission.

At this time, John Roberto, who was also the church choir director, took John in hand. Since the lad was gifted with a fine voice, Roberto undertook to train him in music. In a short time John not only learned to sing Gregorian chant, but also earned a place in the choir. He even started to practice the violin and tried his hand on an old spinet so as to be able to accompany singing on the organ.

In 1831 extraordinary events summoned the faithful to church and afforded the choir an opportunity to give renditions on both joyful and sorrowful occasions. On February 2, a new Pope, Gregory XVI was elected. On April 17, King Charles Felix died. He was the last sovereign in the direct line of the House of Savoy and was succeeded by Charles Albert, head of the House of Savoy-Carignano. Later that year in Turin, Charles Albert would participate in the solemn opening to public worship of the new church *La Gran Madre di Dio*, [the Great Mother of God] which had been

begun in 1818. On August 6 of the same year Archbishop [Columban] Chiaverotti also passed away.

John's music lessons proved a great help to him. Roberto was delighted with his pupil. Through these lessons, he was unknowingly furthering the designs of Providence. For only in Roberto's home could John have developed this gift for music. Such instruction would not have been possible in any other place where his mother might have boarded him, not even in Chieri. It was necessary that a love and knowledge of music should be developed in him, since music was to be the very life of the schools that he was destined to found. The increasing praise that was to rise up to the throne of the Most High, from one end of the world to the other, was to be the expression of the continuous joy that must reign in the hearts of God's children. How many were to be the boys who were later to sing to the Lord: "My lips shall shout for joy as I sing your praises; my soul also which you have redeemed" (Ps. 70, 23).

But his studies and his singing did not take up all of John's time. Anxious to be useful during his free time, he interested himself in tailoring. In a short time he was able to sew buttons, master hemming, as well as simple and complex stitching. Then he learned to cut out undergarments, waistcoats, trousers and jackets. Later, he laughingly remarked to his friends at the Oratory: "I felt I had become a first-rate tailor."

What John had begun as a hobby, he had to continue as a matter of necessity that year. He had to earn his room and board by helping Roberto in the shop, because the division of the family property and Anthony's demands prevented his mother from providing him with money for his board. Moreover, this trade was to prove very useful years later when Don Bosco, at the Oratory, had to ply it for a long time on behalf of his boys. Roberto was so pleased with John's excellent progress that he made him a very attractive offer, hoping to keep him on as his helper. But John had other plans! He wanted to continue his studies. He had taken up these various hobbies only to keep busy and to secure the necessary means to achieve his goal.

Among other skills, John also learned the blacksmith's trade. He worked at it when he saw that [with Father Moglia as teacher] it

was no longer worthwhile to attend his classes. Under the guidance of Evasio Savio, the local blacksmith and an excellent Christian, John learned to work at the forge and handle the sledgehammer and file. He was a keen observer and took notice of the various techniques used in this shop. He was also to acquire other skills years later in other shops. To this practical experience he kept adding a sound theoretical knowledge of every new trade by intelligent and frequent questions.

And at this point we may ask: Who could have placed in the heart of a little peasant boy this bent for so many different trades? Who so unobtrusively disposed that a hobby would at the proper time become a necessary job? Undoubtedly it was the same Providence that, having chosen him to establish festive oratories and agricultural schools, also willed that he found schools of arts and trades. He bestowed so many talents on him in order that the sons of the common people, the orphans in farms and workshops could find in him a man of their own social background who had an intimate knowledge of their needs, aspirations and customs, and would be all things to all of them. Moreover, he was also to be charged with providing for the needs of a countless number of boys, without any fixed income to depend on, but with an exclusive reliance day by day upon Divine Providence. God led benefactors to the Venerable [Joseph] Cottolengo,<sup>1</sup> and to other saints, so that they might place their alms into their hands. He seemed to will, instead, that John should go about and beg from the faithful in God's name, regardless of sacrifice and humiliation on his part.

By nature John was enterprising, active, energetic, ingenious in striving after his goals, calm in the face of obstacles, perseverant and prudent in the choice of suitable means, warm in the conquest of hearts, undaunted by human considerations. This was his training from earliest childhood. At Becchi, in fact, in countless ingenious ways, John had raised the money he needed to attract people to his performances. Now, as a student, prior to his entrance into the seminary, he had to earn his keep. A delightful anecdote of this period, related by eyewitnesses, shows how smart he was in his efforts to earn money for his studies.

<sup>1</sup> Now Saint Joseph Benedict Cottolengo (1786-1842). His feast is kept on April 29. In 1832 he founded *La Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza*, a vast institution at present providing for more than 7,000 persons. [Editor]

One day a fiesta was being held in the village of Montafia. A very high and well-greased pole had been raised in the middle of the square, topped by a hoop laden with prizes. A large crowd watched as the youths, scanning its height, tried to climb it to reach them. Some managed to shinny up a third of the way, others even half, but they soon slid right down again. The bystanders shouted their encouragement to the more daring climbers who seemed the likely winners, but there were only jeers and catcalls for those who failed. A din filled the square.

John had noticed how the contestants, panting without pausing for a breath had attempted to rush up, only to slide down soon after, pulled down by their own weight, unable to go any higher. He chose a different approach. Unhesitatingly he stepped forward from the crowd into the open area around the pole. Slowly and with easy calm he began his climb. Now and then, he would clamp his legs around the pole and rest on his heels. At first the crowd could not understand what he was up to and laughed uproariously, expecting to see him slide to the bottom at any moment like the others. But, as he climbed nearer and nearer the top, a hushed silence settled on the crowd. When he reached it, the tapered pole began to sway perilously. A frenzied applause now hailed the young conqueror. Stretching out his hand, John grasped the first bag that contained twenty lire, then a sausage and a handkerchief, and stuffed them inside his shirt. Leaving some smaller prizes behind that the game might continue, he rapidly slid down the pole, melted into the applauding crowd and disappeared.

This was not the only time that John succeeded in winning such prizes. Needy student that he was, they were to stand him in good stead.

## CHAPTER 27

### *Summer Vacation*

THE scholastic year came to an end but it brought John little satisfaction. He returned home resigned perhaps, but still uncertain about his future. Meanwhile an important development had come about in the Bosco family. Mamma Margaret and Joseph, now eighteen, had formed a partnership with a certain Joseph Febraro. The three were working together as sharecroppers on a farm known as Susambrino belonging to a Matta family. A few years later this farm was sold to Chevalier John Pescarmona. It was located on a hill midway between Becchi and Castelnuovo. Joseph had moved into the farmhouse while Febraro continued to lodge in his own house which bordered the Susambrino estate. Margaret alternated between her own home at Becchi and the new farmhouse, depending on the work that had to be done in the fields and the crops that had to be harvested.

Ever since the division of the family property. Anthony had lived alone in that part of the farmhouse that had fallen to him as his share. He tilled his small piece of land, and hired himself out as a day laborer to anybody who needed his service. John lodged with his brother Joseph who loved him dearly. Now at last, he was able to dedicate himself entirely to his books. He had a small collection of religious works; some had been given to him, others had been loaned by his teacher Father Lacqua, the parish priest at Moncucco, and by Father Calosso. Among these books were the ascetical works of the Blessed Alphonsus Maria de'Liguori<sup>1</sup> and some apologetic works that he was memorizing. Not to be a burden to his brother, John resumed his onetime chore of pasturing the two cows in the valleys below. Sometimes he lent a hand in the

<sup>1</sup> At this time he had not yet been declared a saint. He was canonized in 1839. [Editor]

fields. He also set up a little workshop in a corner of the house, where he kept busy mending his own and his brother Joseph's clothes. He worked, too, at reshaping worn farm tools at the forge.

Febraro's daughter, Rose, who later married into the Cagliari family and became a cousin of Bishop John Cagliari,<sup>2</sup> Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia, was a small girl at this time. She also pastured her cows nearby. She recalled how young John at times would become so deeply immersed in thought that he did not even notice his cows straying into adjacent cultivated fields, and she would drive the strays back to pasture herself. John, grateful for this friendly act, would thank her. On several occasions, he accepted her offer to watch the cows and would then retire to the shade of a willow tree, or behind a hedgerow to pray or read.

Living thus on a remote farm John still found ways to fill in his free leisure hours especially while the peasants enjoyed their siesta. He had imposed on himself a rule never to sleep during the day. "When it is time to leave, tarry not; be off for home! There take your ease, and there enjoy doing as you wish, but without sin or words of pride" (Sir. 32, 11-12).

What I shall relate now may seem trivial, but even small and insignificant details may enhance the beauty of a great painting. For instance, the inspired writer of the book of Tobias tells of the little dog that accompanied the young Tobias on his journey and ran ahead of him on their return home. Likewise [in the legend], when a hunter came upon St. John the Evangelist in the act of caressing a partridge and showed surprise at such childlike simplicity, the saint said to him: "Don't be surprised! This relaxes my soul and helps me to raise my thoughts to heaven."

Adam's dominion over all animals, when he was still sinless, lingers also in those free of sin. There was a hunting dog in Joseph's house that John called *Bracco*. In his free time John taught the dog how to perform different tricks and stunts. He had also trained it to eat bread gently out of his hand. If a piece of bread was too big, John, with mock sternness would say: "Glutton! Do you mean to gulp it down in one mouthful?" The dog would hesitate, and

<sup>2</sup> John Cagliari (1838-1926), one of the first pupils of Don Bosco, was consecrated Bishop in 1884, promoted Archbishop in 1904, and named a Cardinal in 1915. He was the first Salesian Bishop, Archbishop and Cardinal. [Editor]

undecided, look up at his master. Finally, it would content itself merely to lick the bread until John would command him: "Eat it!" Then he would gulp it down.

John also taught the dog to climb up and down the ladder leading to the hayloft. He took a great delight in *Bracco's* puzzlement over this unusual kind of exercise, but the dog got used to it little by little. At other times John would take the dog with him to the hayloft which was quite high. Or he would simply carry it up to the loft, toss it into the hay, then remove the ladder and walk away, calling out the dog's name. *Bracco* would bark and thrash about, looking for an easy way down. Frightened by the height the dog would draw back in fear, but then taking heart he would leap down and joyously run after his master. *Bracco* followed John wherever he went. When John, tired of walking in the oppressive heat, would remove his jacket, he would say: "*Bracco, Bracco, carry my jacket!*" If he delayed in taking it off, *Bracco* would grab the hem between his teeth and tug on it. "*Bracco! You'll tear it. Take it easy, let me give it to you!*" Thereupon the dog would let go of the jacket and John would place it on *Bracco's* back. The dog would then trot for the remainder of the walk, carefully looking from side to side occasionally to make sure the jacket had not fallen off.

On Sundays, after the church services, John would return to his hillside with his friends and entertain them with new tricks of his faithful *Bracco*. John's chums would laugh as he went through a repertory of tricks with the dog. He would then order the dog to leap on the back of a cow grazing a few yards away. *Bracco*, looking perplexed and unhappy, would fix his eyes on his master, almost as if to say: "You don't really mean it, do you?" But when John repeated the order in a tone that left no room for doubt, *Bracco* would crouch and then leap with such vigor at the cow that he would land on the other side. Undismayed, he would try again and this time land neatly on the back of the startled cow. The dog would then sit back on its haunches, careful not to slip off and afraid to jump down without permission. John would purposely walk away, pretending not to pay any attention to him. *Bracco* would begin to whine, as though asking for permission to

be released from such an awkward position. But John would ignore it. Then, *Bracco*, realizing that his master was paying him no heed, would bark loudly, leap to the ground, and run after John as if to reproach him for having left him in that awkward position. The boys all enjoyed this performance with the keenest pleasure.

It will be recalled that as a child, John had once sorely felt the loss of a pet blackbird. It would seem, therefore, that he would hardly have been able to endure the loss of his beloved dog. But he remembered that promise he had made to God. Some relatives at Moncucco asked John if he would give them the dog as a gift. John with good grace agreed at once and he himself brought *Bracco* to their home. *Bracco* was given a joyous welcome. When John saw the dog had become used to his new owners, he quietly left the house, but no sooner had he arrived home, than his faithful *Bracco* walked in, head hanging as if in shame for his disobedience. Slowly and haltingly, with his tail wagging, he crept up to John. But this time John did not smile at him. Instead he said: "Look, *Bracco*, this is no longer your home. So I shan't feed you any more." In reply the dog curled up in a corner of the room and did not budge. A few days later, John's relatives returned from Moncucco to take *Bracco* back with them, but as soon as he was let free the dog again made his way back to Susambrino. When John saw him he went after him with a stick. But *Bracco*, instead of running away, lay down at his feet and rolled over with his paws in mid-air. He would not mind a beating, he seemed to say, so long as he were allowed to remain. John was so greatly touched by this devotion that he decided to keep him.

These peaceful vacation days were gladdened by a welcome piece of news. A papal brief of August 12, appointed Bishop Louis Frasoni of Fossano as Archbishop of Turin. On a Sunday in September, John heard his first pastoral letter read from the pulpit in which mention was made of storm clouds gathering on the horizon. In fact, the civil authorities, flouting ecclesiastical regulations, had ordered that a Requiem Mass be said for a surgeon who had died at Annecy under circumstances that could hardly have been described as Christian. Further, they forbade the Jesuits to print their ordo unless the lessons for the nocturns of the feast of St. Gregory VII were taken from the Common rather than from the

Proper of the Saints.<sup>3</sup> The latter lessons, in their opinion, were detrimental to the King's authority.

Unwittingly the civil authorities were thereby promoting the aims of the sectaries. In their haste to realize their sinister plot the latter had attempted an assault on Savoy in February with two hundred men, but had been driven back by the royal troops. In April the police arrested the accomplices of a new conspiracy hatched by the lawyer Angelo Brofferio and others. Could it be that the sad tone of Archbishop Fransoni's pastoral letter and the first mention of his name may have struck a sensitive chord in John's heart and evoked a joyful presentiment? Archbishop Fransoni was to become a father to Don Bosco, his mainstay and sincere friend when the young priest would found the first of his great works. Truly both were made for each other. This little peasant boy had the same aspirations as the Genoese ecclesiastic of noble birth. Although Archbishop Fransoni had been reared in the midst of luxury and comfort, he would have become a Capuchin monk if his father, the Marquis, had not refused his consent. He did succeed, however, in donning the clerical habit at the age of twenty-five. As soon as he was ordained a priest he devoted himself wholeheartedly to teaching Christian doctrine and hearing confessions. He also joined the diocesan mission band, and amid great difficulties, carried out a very successful preaching campaign in many Alpine districts in Liguria. John, at this time, undoubtedly did not know what were the plans that lay ahead, but a second dream he was to have [shortly after hearing the Archbishop's pastoral letter] may have had some connection with it.

In Castelnuovo John had made friends with a schoolmate named Joseph Turco. Through Joseph he came to know his family. The Turcos owned a vineyard in an area known as the *Renenta*, which bordered on the Susambrino property. John would often stray alone toward that vineyard because it was farther from the road that cut through the valley and, hence, a more secluded spot. He would climb a small slope that commanded a good view of his assigned vineyard as well as that of the Turcos. Unseen, and book in hand, he would keep watch over the grapes. Joseph Turco's father, who

<sup>3</sup> Gregory VII was pope from 1073 to 1085. He was a staunch defender of the spiritual over the temporal power. [Editor]

was particularly fond of John, would often meet him there, and patting him on the head, would say: "Cheer up, John. Be good and the Blessed Virgin will help you."

"I have put all my trust in her," John would answer, "yet I never know what's going to happen next. I would like to continue my Latin courses and become a priest, but mother lacks the means to help me."

"Don't worry about that, John. You'll see that the Lord will pave your way."

"I hope so," John would say. On taking his leave he would return to his usual place, still somewhat dejected repeating, "But . . . , but . . ."

One day Turco and his son saw John racing joyously down the hill through their vineyard. He came to a quick stop before them.

"What's up, John?" Turco asked. "You look so happy, not like the last few days!"

"I've got good news, good news!" cried John. "Last night I had a dream! I dreamt that I would go on with my studies, become a priest, and would be given charge of many boys.<sup>4</sup> That will be my life's work. Now I have nothing to worry about! I shall be a priest."

"But that was only a dream," Turco observed, "and there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip."

"Oh! I'm not going to worry any more," John replied. "Now I know that as a priest I shall be in charge of many, many boys, and I will help them a lot." Beaming with joy he left them, and went to resume his watch on the hilltop.

The following day, on his way back from Mass, he paid the Turcos a visit. Lucy, Joseph's sister, promptly called out to him and her other brothers with whom John frequently came to spend his time, and asked him why he looked so happy. He told them that he had had a beautiful dream, and when they pressed him to tell them more about it he said that he had seen a majestic looking Lady coming toward him at the head of an immense flock of sheep. When the Lady came close to him, she called him by name and said: "Look, dear John, I entrust this entire flock to you."

<sup>4</sup>In 1847 Archbishop Fransoni formally authorized Don Bosco to admit to First Communion and Confirmation the boys attending his Oratory. Shortly after, the Archbishop added: "The chapels of the Oratories shall be considered the boys' parish churches" (*Memorie Biografiche*, Vol. III, p. 196f). [Editor]

“But how can I take care of so many sheep and lambs? Where shall I find pastures for them to graze on?”

The Lady replied: “Do not worry: I will help you.” With this she vanished.

This episode has come to our knowledge through Joseph and Lucy Turco. It corroborates a brief and simple statement in Don Bosco’s own memoirs: “At the age of 16 I had another dream.” We are convinced that there was much more in the dream than the brief passing mention he made of it. The dream was obviously a reward of his firm trust in God. A tangible proof of his heavenly Mother’s assistance was shown to him that very year.

Margaret, distressed over the fact that John had already lost so much time from school decided to send him to Chieri to attend the public school the coming school year. She gave him this joyful news with her usual smile and immediately set to work to pack the things he would need. But John, understanding the difficulties she faced owing to the family’s straitened circumstances, frankly suggested: “If you don’t mind, Mother, let me take two sacks with me and make the rounds of every family in our hamlet. This way I’ll make a collection.”

Margaret gave her consent. This was to be a difficult test for John’s pride. But he overcame his reluctance to go begging and faced its humiliation. These were but the first steps along the arduous road he was to follow until his dying day. “Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God” (Sir. 3, 18). John submitted himself to this humiliation and God exalted him. He knocked at every door in Morialdo. Mothers received him like their own son, and children welcomed him like a brother. He told them of the dire straits in which he found himself. They responded by giving him bread, cheese, corn and a few *emine* of wheat. Such a meager store of provisions certainly could not last him very long.

One day a woman from Becchi went to Castelnuovo on some business matter. In the public square she loudly deplored the parish priest’s inability to help John become a priest. Here was a boy who, in her opinion, could preach far better sermons than all the priests in the parish. Her receptive audience advised her to go to the pastor and tell him about it. The woman agreed and went straight to the

rectory. The pastor, Father Dassano, who knew nothing of Margaret's decision and who expected John to continue his schooling at Castelnuovo, took the matter into consideration. He called upon some wealthy parishioners, collected a sum of money from them and sent it to Margaret. She accepted it most gratefully and with it bought John some badly needed clothes.

Another concern of Margaret's was to find some truly good family with whom she could board John without worry. Probably on the pastor's advice she chose the home of Lucy Matta. This woman was from her own village and was now a widow. She was going to Chieri to look after her own son who was already attending school there. A monthly fee of twenty-one lire was agreed upon. Since Margaret was unable to pay the full amount, John was to make up for it by performing sundry chores. These would include hauling firewood, fetching water, hanging out the wet laundry and similar odd jobs.

John wasted no time in calling on the pastor to express his gratitude. In doing so he was also complying with scholastic regulations of those days. A requirement for official acceptance and registration in the public schools was a statement from the applicant's parish priest stating that the student had submitted his name and had presented himself to his pastor. This procedure placed the student under the supervision of the pastor and upon the pastor would his continuation in school depend. Because of this it is obvious why students in those days respected ecclesiastical authority, set a good example in their village, and were a source of comfort to their families.

## CHAPTER 28

### *School at Chieri*

JOHN had passed the test the Lord in His goodness had given him. At Morialdo, Capriglio, Moncucco and Castelnuovo, he had had frequent opportunities to observe the tendencies and failings, the ways and habits of boys in lonely farmhouses, in hamlets, in villages, small and large. Now he would find himself in a town where crowds of boys, attending school or working, would provide him with new material for observation and give him an opportunity to learn better the field of his future work. His was to be a long and thorny road, but it was to bear much fruit. "A man with training gains wide knowledge; a man of experience speaks sense. One never put to the proof knows little; whereas with travel a man adds to his resourcefulness" (Sir. 34, 9-10).

Yet John still had to go through the life of a student with all its anxieties, difficulties, dangers and privations that he might learn to inspire courage, assist, sympathize with, help and comfort those who, like himself, would strive for the priesthood and have to follow steadfastly a path beset with many tribulations. The life of a student in those days was a lot more difficult than now. Today there are many boarding schools and similar institutions where promising students can find shelter and at little or no expense pursue their studies. Not so in those days when most people were poor. The first problem of rural parents whose sons wished to become priests or get an education was to find them suitable living quarters in the towns or cities. Sometimes two or three students shared a room in the house of the person to whose care they had been entrusted. But for the most part they lived in tiny attic rooms alone, or with a companion. The board or rent, was paid in kind: wheat, corn, or cereals, a *brenta*<sup>1</sup> or two of wine, or also by part-time work.

<sup>1</sup> A liquid measure equivalent in Piedmont to approximately 12 gallons. [Editor]

The landlord would provide the food, usually a bowl of soup, or the boy's family would send him a weekly supply of bread. Often the boys would leave home with several sacks of flour, corn, potatoes and chestnuts: their food supply for the whole year.

No matter how cold the winter, heat was out of the question since they could not afford the prohibitive price of firewood. Poor students had to provide for their needs either by copying manuscripts or tutoring or taking some part-time job. Thus, we shall see John spending a good part of his day in things that in no way fostered his studies, in order to lessen his mother's financial burden. This explains his habit of studying at night and leading a mode of life he described as "dissipated," but which, in view of the results, should rather be considered providential.

On the day after All Souls' Day, 1831, Margaret gave John two *emine* of wheat and half an *emina* of maize, toward part-payment of his board and lodging. "That's all I can give you," she said. "Providence will send the rest!" John Becchis, anxious to give John a proof of his friendship but unable to offer a gift, loaded his cart with John's trunk and his sacks of wheat and maize and brought them free of charge to Chieri.

On the following day Margaret gave John a small bag of flour and maize to be sold in the market at Castelnuovo for money to purchase paper, books and pens, etc. She went with him, while his brother Joseph waved goodbye.

At Castelnuovo they met John Filippello, who was Bosco's age. Margaret had some business to attend to in the village, so she asked Filippello to accompany John to Chieri, where she would join him a few hours later. Filippello agreed. Margaret gave him a few coins, and with John he set out on foot for Chieri. Two hours later they reached Arignano where they sat down for a brief rest. Bosco had been telling his friend about his studies to date, the wonderful things he had learned from sermons, instructions and catechism classes. He had suggested to Filippello works of charity and had told him some edifying anecdotes rounded off with timely observations. At a certain point Filippello interrupted him and exclaimed: "You're just beginning your high school and you already know so much? Soon you'll be a pastor!"

Looking at him intently, Bosco replied: "Pastor? Do you know

what it means to be a pastor? Do you know what his duties are? Whenever he is through with his dinner or supper, he should think, 'I've had my meal, but have all my little sheep been able to satisfy their hunger?' Whatever he possesses above his essential needs, he must give to the poor. And how many other responsibilities he has, and how grave! My dear Filippello, I have no intention of becoming a pastor! I want to study because I want to give my whole life to the care of young boys."

Thereupon they resumed their journey to Chieri. Filippello walked alongside deeply impressed by his dear friend's charity. Years later in 1884, reminiscing over this with Filippello, Don Bosco asked him: "Well, did I become a pastor?"

Margaret soon joined John in Chieri. She introduced him to Mrs. Lucy Matta with whom he was to stay. Then, setting the sacks of cereals down before Mrs. Matta she said: "This is payment for my son's keep. I have done my part, my son will do his, and I hope that you will find no cause to be displeased with him." Then, greatly moved, but full of joy she returned to Becchi.

The town of Chieri, 10 miles east of Turin, lies on a plain gently sloping toward the south, and is surrounded on three sides by rolling hills that protect it from northerly winds. The air is pure. Six gates give access to its beautiful streets lined with churches, impressive mansions, convents, monasteries and educational institutions for the young. Among the latter are the seminary and the old convent of St. Clare converted to a hostel for students attending the public school. The town is also rich in monuments reminiscent of past glories. There are two parish churches: *Santa Maria della Scala* and *San Giorgio*. At the time of our narrative Chieri had 9,000 inhabitants. Twenty cotton mills employed 4,000 workers and several silk mills provided jobs for about 500 more. Its market was among the largest in Piedmont.

It could be expected that anyone who had been reared in the country and had barely caught a glimpse of some provincial town, would be impressed by a town like Chieri; but not John. He did not let himself be carried away by so many new sights. If, as a child, he had already been very conscientious in devoting all the time he could to reading, he did so all the more now that it was entirely up to him to realize his goals. He firmly resolved not to indulge in

anything that might distract him from his studies. He himself wrote: "The first person I met was Father Eustachius Valimberti, of happy memory, who gave me much good advice on how to keep out of trouble. He also asked me to serve his Mass, and this gave him more opportunities to keep giving me good advice. He introduced me to the principal, Father Sibilla, a Dominican, and to my other teachers. Meanwhile, classes had begun. Since the schooling I had received until then had been of a random character, fragmentary and superficial, even though it had provided me with useful knowledge, I was advised to enter a grade corresponding today to the preparatory course for the first year of high school. The teacher, T. Pugnetti, also of happy memory, was very kind to me. He took a personal interest in my work, invited me to his home and, in view of my age and goodwill, spared no efforts to help me.

"My age and size made me stand out among my classmates, and I was anxious to find a way out of this situation. After two months, I managed to reach the head of my class, took an examination, and was promoted to the first year of high school. I was very happy because my new classmates were somewhat older and because my teacher was the good Father Valimberti. Two more months passed, during which I succeeded several times in being at the head of my class. An exception was then made for me; I took another examination and was promoted to second year high.

"Joseph Cima, my instructor, was a very strict disciplinarian. Upon seeing a student as tall and husky as himself come to his class in the middle of the school year, he jokingly remarked to the whole class: 'This boy is either a numbskull or a genius. Which do you think?' Disconcerted by his severe appearance, I replied, 'I'm something between the two. I just want to learn and make headway in my studies.' My reply pleased him and with unusual friendliness he said: 'If you're willing to learn you are in good hands and I shall keep you busy. Don't be afraid, and if you find yourself in difficulties, let me know at once; I'll straighten things out.' I thanked him with all my heart.

"I was in that class for about two months when a minor episode caused much talk about me. One day the teacher was discussing the life of Agesilaus by Cornelius Nepos. I did not have the book

with me, because I had forgotten it at home. To cover up my forgetfulness, I kept Donatus' grammar open in front of me. Not knowing what to do while listening to the teacher, I turned the pages now this way, now that. Some companions noticed it. There was some giggling and then laughter. This was a breach of discipline. 'What's the matter?' asked the teacher. 'What's wrong? Tell me!' Since all eyes were turned upon me, he ordered me to read over the passage and put the words in proper sequence for translation, and then repeat the explanation he had given. I stood up, still holding my grammar, and after repeating the passage from memory I recited the words in their logical sequence with all the comments the teacher had made shortly before. When I was through, my companions almost instinctively cried out in admiration, and loudly applauded. The teacher was fuming, because this was the first time in his experience that he had been unable to control his class. He tried to rap me on the head, but I dodged the blow. Then, resting his hand on my book, he asked those sitting near me the reason for such an outburst. I was about to tell him everything respectfully but the others broke in: 'Bosco had Donatus' grammar in front of him all the time, but he recited and explained the passage as if he were reading from Cornelius.' The teacher took Donatus' grammar from me, and made me continue for a couple of paragraphs. Then suddenly switching from anger to amazement and admiration, he said: 'I shall forgive your negligence because of your amazing memory. You are lucky. Make good use of such a talent.' "

During those high school years John, in addition to his intelligence and memory, had yet another secret talent, extraordinary and very valuable. Such was the opinion of his former classmates who told us the following incidents.

One night John dreamed that his teacher had given a monthly test to determine class rank and that he was doing it. The moment he awoke, he jumped out of bed, wrote out the test, a Latin passage, and began translating it, with the assistance of a priest, a friend of his. Believe it or not, that very morning, the teacher did give a test, and it was the same Latin passage John had dreamed about! Thus quite quickly and without needing a dictionary, he translated it as he had done after awaking from his dream. Of course,

the result was excellent. When the teacher questioned him, he candidly told him what had happened, to the teacher's great amazement.

On another occasion John handed in his test so quickly that the teacher seriously doubted that the boy could have managed all its grammatical problems in such a short a time. So he went over the test very carefully. He was amazed to find it totally correct and asked to see his first draft. John gave it to him and again the teacher was speechless. He had prepared that test only the night before. It had turned out rather lengthy and therefore the teacher had dictated only half of it: yet in John's composition book the test was written out in its entirety, to the last word! How could it be explained? John could not have copied it overnight nor could he possibly have broken into the teacher's house, which was a considerable distance from where John lived. What then? He confessed: "I dreamed it." It was for this reason that his schoolmates nicknamed him "the Dreamer."

We shall not venture an opinion on these happenings nor seek to explain them. An unbroken tradition has made them history at the Oratory. When asked about them, Don Bosco never denied them. Furthermore, he told us of many other similar happenings, some really marvelous. A biographer cannot ignore them, because it would be like writing the life of Napoleon without mentioning any of his victories. *Don Bosco* and the word *dream* are correlative. If this biography were to ignore this fact, his former pupils by the thousands would ask: "What about his dreams?" It is truly astounding how this phenomenon went on in his life for sixty years. After a day marked by many worrisome problems, plans, hard work, he would no sooner rest his weary head on his pillow than he would enter a new world of ideas and visions that would exhaust him till dawn. No other man could have endured this continuous shifting from a natural to a preternatural or supernatural level without serious mental injury. Don Bosco could; he was always calm and deliberate in all his actions.

We are mindful of the words of Sirach: "Empty and false are the hopes of the senseless, and fools are borne aloft by dreams. Like a man who catches at shadows or chases the wind, is the one who believes in dreams (34, 1-2). . . . Divinations, omens and

dreams all are unreal; what you already expect, the mind depicts. Unless it be a vision specially sent by the Most High, fix not your heart on it: for dreams have led many astray, and those who believed in them have perished. The Law is fulfilled without fail, and perfect wisdom is found in the mouth of the faithful man" (34, 5-8). That is very well and to the point. But it is also true that in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the lives of innumerable saints, the Lord in his fatherly love gave comfort, counsel, commands, spirit of prophecy, threats and messages of hope and reward both to individuals and to entire nations through dreams. Were Don Bosco's dreams like those? We repeat that we shall not venture an opinion. Others will have to pass judgment. We say only that Don Bosco's life was an intricate pattern of wondrous events in which one cannot but perceive direct divine assistance. Hence, we must reject the notion that he was a fool, or that he labored under illusions or that he was vain and deceitful. Those who lived at his side for thirty and forty years never once detected in him the least sign that would betray a desire to win the esteem of his peers by pretending to be endowed with supernatural gifts. Don Bosco was a humble man, and humility abhors insincerity. His stories were always and solely directed to the glory of God and the salvation of souls, and were marked by a simplicity that won all hearts. We never heard anything that might suggest a disturbed mind or a desire for effect in describing scenes concerning Catholic truths. Discussing his dreams, Don Bosco said to us many times: "Call them dreams, call them parables, call them whatever you wish, I am sure that they will always do some good."

## CHAPTER 29

### *Among His Schoolmates*

THE Holy Spirit tells us: "Let your acquaintances be many, but one in a thousand your confidant. When you gain a friend, first test him, and be not too ready to trust him. For one sort of friend is a friend when it suits him, but he will not be with you in time of distress. Another is a friend who becomes an enemy and tells of the quarrel to your shame. Another is a friend, a boon companion, who will not be with you when sorrow comes. When things go well, he is your other self, and lords it over your servants; but if you are brought low, he turns against you and avoids meeting you. Keep away from your enemies; be on guard with your friends" (Sir. 6, 6-13).

John, guided by innate prudence, instinctively followed this rule at the very start of his studies at Chieri. This is how he tells it: "As I went through four grades [in two years] I had to learn all by myself how to get along with my fellow students. As I saw it, they belonged to three categories: good, indifferent and bad. I would have no dealings with the last group once I discovered their true character. The indifferent I would frequent only when courtesy or necessity required it. With the good ones I would make friends, but only with the very best would I strike a close friendship. This was my firm resolve. But since, to start with, I knew nobody in town, I decided, for the time being, not to become familiar with anyone, so to avoid even a remote possibility of danger.

"Nevertheless, I had a hard time with some whom I did not know too well. Some wanted to take me to the theater, others invited me to a card game or for a swim or even to a raid on fruit orchards in town or in the country. One was so brazen as to suggest that I steal a costly object from my landlady to have money for sweets. I rid myself of these undesirable characters by keeping away from

them as soon as I discovered what kind of boys they were. My standard excuse for not going with them was that my mother had entrusted me to my landlady and that out of regard for her I did not wish to go anywhere, or do anything without her consent.”

John's faithful obedience brought him also some benefits. His landlady had a son to whom she could not properly attend because of her many duties. When she saw how well John did his house chores, as stipulated, when she noted his common sense, his piety and the other fine gifts he was endowed with, she was delighted to entrust to him her only son, a very lively boy much more intent on fun than on study. She also asked John to tutor him, even though her boy was a grade higher than John.

John devoted himself to him like a brother. With kindness, small gifts and some tricks to amuse him, especially by taking him along to church for prayer and devotions, he succeeded in making him docile, obedient and studious. Within six months the young scatter-brain had improved so much that he not only satisfied his teacher, but also was right up with the best students in his class. His mother was so happy over it, that, as a reward, she gave John free board. Consequently, he now had no other expenses than his books and clothing. John continued to keep the boy under his wing for over two years. The young farm boy had now become the tutor of his fellow students. Providence was schooling him in yet another branch of his future mission. This tutoring he would continue to do during the whole course of his studies, while never neglecting to practice the other skills which, through God's designs, he had acquired previously.

John was constantly busy. When his companions would take time out for recreation he would busy himself with manual work. Near his lodging there was a cabinetmaker's shop, and there he learned to use the plane, the square, the saw and other tools. Soon he was able to make articles of furniture, rustic-looking, to be sure, but good enough for his room. Sometimes he made things for his own use, at other times for his benefactors, for such he regarded those who boarded him.

Meanwhile those companions who tried but failed to entice him into trouble, began to vent their anger upon him with their usual bad manners which, at times, were provocative. John ignored their

tactics and continued to be courteous to them. These boys were usually doing rather poorly in their school work. His friendliness prompted them to ask him either to loan them or dictate to them the assignment given by the teacher. Of John it may truly be said: "My son, conduct your affairs with humility and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts" (Sir. 3, 17). John consented. But the teacher did not approve of it and forbade it as encouraging their laziness. He was fully justified, but his directive hurt the interest that John had in his companions.

One day, the boys who were boarding with him were unable, through ignorance or otherwise, to do their homework. They begged him to help them by lending them his own. To disobey the teacher was unthinkable; on the other hand, he could not bear to think of the punishment that his friends would get if they went to class without their homework. In this predicament John came up with a neat solution: he simply walked out leaving his homework on his desk. Taking advantage of his absence, they pounced on his paper and copied it in no time. Later, in class, they handed in their papers, and the teacher began to go over them. He became furious as soon as he discovered that the papers all read exactly alike. His suspicion naturally fell on John. Under questioning John declared that he had not disobeyed the teacher's order. He explained, however, that since he had left his homework on his desk, probably it might have been copied. The teacher, knowing John, was understanding and could not help admiring his obedience, good-heartedness and cleverness. When class was over he said to him: "I'm not displeased with what you did, but don't repeat the performance." The teacher fully realized John's motives: to lead his companions to good by finding ways and means of helping them even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

After this episode John tried a better way of helping them, namely, to review their lessons with them and tutor them, if necessary. This way everybody was happy and he gained their goodwill, affection and esteem. Little by little, they began coming to him, first to play with him, then to hear his stories or to do their homework. Finally, as in Morialdo and Castelnuovo, they just came for no special reason. It was like a club of their own and they started calling it *Società dell'Allegria*, a most appropriate name because

each one was expected to bring in only those books, topics or games that would add to the general cheerfulness. Everything contrary to it was banned, especially anything not in accordance with God's law. Whoever cursed, took the Lord's name in vain, or carried on improper conversation could not remain a member and was forthwith expelled. John was the acknowledged leader of all these boys. By common consent membership in this club was dependent upon two basic conditions: (1) the avoidance of every word and deed unbecoming a Christian; (2) the exact fulfillment of one's duties whether scholastic or religious.

Among the members of the *Società dell'Allegria* there were some who were truly exemplary in their conduct. Outstanding were William Garigliano of Poirino and Paul Victor Braja of Chieri. The latter, son of Philip Braja and Catherine Cafasso of Brusasco, was born in Chieri on June 17, 1820. As a young boy, he was taught at home by his paternal uncle, Canon Hyacinth Braja. Later he attended the local public school where he endeared himself to his teachers and became a model of diligence and piety to his companions. He was gifted with a remarkable memory and discernment, and his prudence was beyond his years. At ten he had already expressed a desire to study for the priesthood. He enjoyed repeating the sermons he had heard. One day urged by his relatives and friends he memorized a complete discourse. Then, on a platform in the presence of a numerous gathering, like a veteran orator, he declaimed so gracefully as to elicit the admiration and applause of those who had purposely come to hear him.

Often he would advise his friends and relatives to shun fashion and luxury, reminding them of the oft-repeated warning of their pastor, Father Fosco, namely, that luxury was a snare of the devil. Remembering what he had heard, he knew how to say the right thing at the right time to his friends and often he would take on the task of consoling the afflicted.

Don Bosco wrote: "Garigliano and Braja took part in games willingly but never at the expense of their school work. Both were devout and reserved and constantly gave me valuable advice. Every Sunday, after the usual church services, we would go to St. Anthony's church where the Jesuits conducted excellent catechism classes. The illustrative episodes were so well chosen that we never

forgot them. During the week the *Società dell'Allegria* met at the house of one of the members for discussion on various religious topics. Attendance at these meetings was optional. Garigliano and Braja were the most diligent. We passed some time in pleasant recreation, in discussion of religious subjects, in reading spiritual books and in prayer. We advised one another and mutually pointed out personal faults we had observed or had heard others mention. Unconsciously, we were putting into practice the wise admonition: "Blessed is he who has a mentor," or that of Pythagoras: "If you have no friend who will correct your faults, pay an enemy to do so." Finally, the Holy Spirit says: "Better is an open rebuke than a love that remains hidden. Wounds from a friend may be accepted as well meant, but the greetings of an enemy one prays against" (Prov. 27, 5-6). Moreover, not only did we gather in friendly meetings, but we also went often together to Confession and Communion."

It should be noted here that in those days religion was considered a basic factor in education. A teacher using improper or irreverent language, even if in jest, was promptly dismissed from his post. If this was true of the staff, we can easily imagine what would happen to unruly and foul-mouthed students.

Daily attendance at Mass was required on weekdays, and every student had to have a prayer book, which he was required to read with devotion. Classes began with a prayer, the *Actiones* [Direct, we beseech Thee, O Lord . . .] and *Ave Maria*. They ended by saying the *Agimus* [We give Thee thanks . . .] and the *Ave Maria*. On Saturdays everyone had to recite the catechism lesson assigned by the spiritual director. Class ended with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

On Sundays and holy days all the students, in a body, gathered in church. As they filed in, someone would read aloud from a spiritual book. Then there would follow the singing of the Little Office of Our Lady, Mass and explanation of the Gospel. Catechism classes were held in the evening and every pupil was expected to answer the questions asked by the spiritual director. Then there followed the chanting of Vespers and a catechetical sermon. Every pupil was expected to receive the Sacraments. Lest these important duties be neglected, each boy once a month had to hand in a card stating that he had gone to confession, and at Easter, that he had

received Holy Communion. Those who failed to perform these duties, were barred from the final examinations, even though they might have been top students. Also those whom the spiritual director had dismissed from the sodality because of misbehavior, or failure to study their catechism, were dismissed from the school.

A triduum was prescribed just before Christmas with two daily sermons, Mass, the recitation of the Little Office and the Novena prayers. During Lent, pupils had to attend daily Catechism classes before the beginning of the regular school periods. There was an annual retreat for the boys from Friday of Passion week to Holy Tuesday. Each day there were two meditations and two instructions. The spiritual exercises terminated with the reception of the Easter Communion. Each boy had to have a note attesting that he had taken part daily in the retreat.

Such was the religious program for secondary school students as promulgated by King Charles Felix' decree of July 23, 1822. It was based on the principle that education should have a religious character since God is the source of all knowledge and morality. Teaching was under the supervision of the bishops. No one could apply for a teaching post or retain it without presenting every year a certificate from his own Bishop vouching for his good moral character and attesting that he had discharged his duties properly to the benefit of religion and the state. At this time, also, measures were taken to shield young people from the dangers to which today's youth is constantly exposed. The sectaries had introduced and were spreading throughout Piedmont a great number of antireligious, immoral and subversive publications, but Charles Albert wasted no time in putting an end to this. In September 1831, he appointed a five-man commission to prevent the spread of such literature throughout his kingdom. His orders were zealously carried out.

It goes without saying that teachers were very vigilant concerning their pupils' reading matter. Don Bosco wrote: "This strict religious supervision produced marvelous results. Years would go by without hearing a blasphemy or improper conversation. The pupils were obedient and respectful both in school and at home. It was a common occurrence even in very large classes for every pupil to be promoted. In my third year of high school all my classmates passed.

A stroke of good fortune for me was my choice of Father Maloria, canon of the collegiate church of Chieri as my regular confessor. He not only received me with great kindness every time I went to see him, but even encouraged me to receive the Sacraments more frequently, a rather unusual advice in those days. I do not recall that any of my teachers had ever given me any similar encouragement. Anyone who went to confession and Communion more than once a month was considered highly virtuous, and many confessors would not allow it. I think I am indebted to this priest if I was not led astray by some schoolmates, as is often the case with many unwary youngsters in large schools.”

## CHAPTER 30

### *Serving God with Joy*

**S**OLICITOUS of his own and his companions' spiritual advancement John urged them to attend religious services and receive Holy Communion on Sundays and holy days. He had considerable success in persuading even those who did not belong to his *Società dell'Allegria*. On Sundays, after they had all fulfilled their religious duties, and also on school holidays, he would entertain them with suitable games and sleight-of-hand tricks, which they loved and which he had mastered for their sake, to keep them busy, away from idleness and bad companions. Thus they accepted him as their leader.

Often he would suggest a walk, preferably outside the city. Their destination was usually a church or shrine to recite a prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or to the Blessed Virgin. Among the lovely hills surrounding Chieri they would roam from village to village, having so much fun that they did not mind getting home long after their dinner hour.

Sometimes they would set out at daybreak to search for mushrooms in the woods around Superga.<sup>1</sup> There they would spend the day, calling to one another from the crests of hills or the floors of ravines, occasionally breaking into a lighthearted song. Some filled their hats with mushrooms, others made sacks by tying the ends of their jacket sleeves; still others stuffed their shirts with them. Toward evening, they returned home, tired, flushed and soaked with perspiration, but happy and hungry.

<sup>1</sup> Superga is a hill about 3 miles east of Turin and 5 miles from Chieri. It rises 2,205 feet above sea level and is crowned by a basilica, Juvara's masterpiece. It is the burial chapel of the House of Savoy. From the summit of the hill in fine weather one can look down on Turin or at the wide semicircle of the snow-crested Alps that rise like a wall at a radius of 30 miles or more. [Editor]

At other times they would plan to hike as far as Turin, [8 miles], to see the bronze horse in San Carlo Square,<sup>2</sup> or the marble horse in the Royal Palace.<sup>3</sup> With only a piece of bread in their pockets they would set out from Chieri as though to conquer the world. In Turin they would buy four *soldi* worth of chestnuts to eat with their bread. After admiring the two monuments for a while, they would visit some nearby church, then begin their homeward journey happy and content. So little is needed to please young unspoiled hearts.

That year, two outstanding events drew crowds to Piedmont's capital from the surrounding countryside. On April 1, Louis Franson, recently appointed Archbishop of Turin by the Papal Bull of February 24, arrived with great pomp and ceremony to take possession of his see. Later in July a silver statue of the Virgin holding the Infant Jesus in her arms was delivered to the shrine of *La Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation]. It had been made, with contributions from the faithful, by expert silversmiths on King Charles Felix's orders, who had also donated whatever silver was still needed. The Queen Mother, Maria Christina, had contributed two gold crowns for the Virgin and Child. It must have been a moving sight to see for the first time the sacred image as it glittered in the bright sun while it was borne in the annual procession which, to this day, is *the* religious event in Piedmont. Undoubtedly John must have been there, for he himself told us how close to his heart was the shrine of *La Consolata*.

John had never forgotten his mother's counsel when she had

<sup>2</sup> This "bronze horse" is an equestrian statue in cast bronze of Duke Emmanuel Philibert (1528-1580). The monument stands about 26 feet high in San Carlo Square; the statue itself is about 14 feet. The Duke and his steed are so well portrayed and the whole ensemble is so true to life that this statue is rightly regarded as a masterpiece of modern art. One of two artistic bas-reliefs on the pedestal depicts the battle of St. Quentin (August 10, 1557) won by the Duke against French troops; the other shows him in the act of accepting the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (April 1559) by which he was reinstated in most of his hereditary possessions. The Turinese fondly refer to this statue as the "bronze horse."

<sup>3</sup> This "marble horse" is the equestrian statue of Duke Victor Amedeus I in the Royal Palace in Turin. The horse itself was carved out of marble whereas its rider was cast in bronze in 1619. Originally, this monument, commissioned by Charles Emmanuel I, portrayed Duke Emmanuel Philibert, but in 1663, by order of Charles Emmanuel II the Duke's head was replaced with that of Victor Amedeus I and the whole ensemble was set in the middle landing of the grand staircase leading to the royal suites on the second floor. [Editor]

taken him to school in Castelnuovo. "Be devout to the Blessed Virgin." At Chieri his favorite church was that of *Santa Maria della Scala*, larger than any of the cathedrals in Piedmont.<sup>4</sup> It was generally known as the *duomo* because of the size and grandeur of its three naves flanked by twenty-two beautiful altars in as many side chapels. John would go there every morning and evening. Kneeling under the ancient and lofty gothic vaults before the picture of *Nostra Signora delle Grazie* [Our Lady of Grace] he would offer her his filial homage and ask her for graces he needed to succeed in the mission she had entrusted to him. He continued this practice throughout his student days at Chieri. In no small measure, this was due to the presence and edifying behavior of the seminarian Joseph Cafasso during the sacred functions and his kindness in teaching catechism to the children.

In the month of May, as a most pleasing gift to his heavenly Mother, he rounded up his most unruly companions and brought them to confession in this same church where twenty canons, among them his own confessor, publicly recited the divine office.

His sterling character exerted an irresistible influence upon the hearts of others. His moderation in eating and drinking, his mortification of the senses, especially of the eyes, singled him out as a model of a well-trained and pure boy. The good devout mothers of Chieri as well as those of Morialdo and Moncucco earnestly wanted their children to associate with him, knowing that by going with John they would grow ever more obedient and respectful toward their parents.

In the midst of his studies and his many activities John did not forget his own family to which he often reverted in his mind with fond recollection. Not only did he bear no grudge toward Anthony who was getting married that year, but on the contrary he nourished a sincere affection for him then and throughout his life.

We have already mentioned that John often had dreams. One day he dreamed that Anthony had fallen ill with fever while baking bread at Mrs. Damevino's, a neighbor. In his dream he met Anthony on the street and inquired after his health. Anthony replied: "I am quite sick, I can hardly stand on my feet. I must go to bed."

<sup>4</sup> It is the largest Gothic church in Piedmont. [Editor]

Next day John told his dream to his companions who immediately said: "You can be sure it's true!"

That evening Joseph [his brother] came to Chieri and John's first question to him was: "Is Anthony better?"

Greatly surprised Joseph replied: "So you already know that he is sick?"

"Yes, I know," said John.

"It is nothing serious," added Joseph. "He fell ill with fever yesterday while he was baking bread at Mrs. Damevino's. He is much better now."

Without giving any importance to this dream, we merely wish to note here that it reveals his inner feelings toward his stepbrother, whose family, according to Father Michael Rua, he was later to aid as soon as he was able.

Margaret made frequent trips to Chieri, taking along a basket of bread and corn cakes for John. Sometimes *Bracco*, the dog, would trot along, too. As soon as the dog caught sight of John he would run over to him and show his delight in a thousand ways. When Mamma Margaret would ready herself to leave, *Bracco* would try to hide in an effort to stay behind with John. Margaret would then remark: "Look how faithful and obedient he is, how affectionate and fond of you. If we had only half as much obedience and love for God, the world would be a much better place, and God's glory would be greatly increased."

For a while it looked as though John would pass the year without any sorrow. But such was not the case. He was to suffer the loss of one of his dearest companions, Paul Braja. On July 10, after a long, painful illness, the boy, a true model of piety, resignation to God's will and lively faith, was comforted by the Last Sacraments and passed away, undoubtedly, to join the angelic St. Aloysius to whom he was so greatly devoted. Several teachers, including Canon Clapié visited him during his illness. The whole school felt his loss keenly, and all his companions attended his funeral. For some time after, many of them together with John, would receive Holy Communion on holidays, recite the Little Office of Our Lady, and the third part of the rosary for the repose of their dear friend's soul. He was mourned by all who knew him—relatives, friends, teachers and classmates. One of his teachers

could not restrain his tears of grief and exclaimed: "I have never wept over anyone's loss, but the death of this young boy moves me to tears."

The boy's father made this entry in the family album: "On July 10, 1832, my son Paul Victor Braja, aged 12, passed on to his eternal rest. I can state with good reason and without a doubt that his soul went straight to Heaven."

Meanwhile the school year 1831-32 was drawing to a close and John returned to Castelnuovo. He had never forgotten his Morialdo friends and had kept in touch with them by visiting them from time to time on Thursdays.<sup>5</sup> As soon as they heard he was coming home for the summer, they hurried well beyond the village limits to give him a rousing welcome and escort him home in triumph. This became a yearly custom from then on and never lost its enthusiasm. It was at this time, too, that John introduced among them also his *Società dell'Allegria*. Only those who had distinguished themselves for good conduct were admitted, and in the fall, those who had misbehaved, particularly by cursing or bad talk, were dropped from the roll.

At home John felt the need of going over some subjects in which he had not done as well as he would have liked. He was not one to do things by halves, nor was he satisfied with only a passing mark. He wanted to learn all he could and learn it well. The fact that he had completed three years of study in one year might seem quite an achievement to some, but not to John. He worried instead whether he had not gone too fast. The documents we have at hand still leave us in doubt whether John took the final examinations of his third year of high school before or after these vacations. His school report for the year 1832-33, dated November 5, 1832, states that John Bosco took his examination and was enrolled *in albo studiosorum grammatices* [among the honor students of Latin]. We do not know whether this was the date of the examination or merely the date on which the certificate was issued.

Notwithstanding, John resolved to make good use of his two and one-half months vacation. He realized he needed competent tutors to coach him in his third year subjects, just as he himself had coached others successfully. After telling his mother of his

<sup>5</sup> A regular school holiday. [Editor]

plan and receiving her assurance that he could board in Serra di Buttigliera, he approached Father Joseph Vaccarino, pastor of Buttigliera d'Asti, hoping to enlist his help in studying the Latin classics. Father Vaccarino was then a young priest, and had been installed in this parish only a few months before on February 5 of that year (1832). His duties, his eagerness to profit from the experience of neighboring veteran pastors by conferring with them at length, and his own need of further studies prompted him to decline. Later, conversing with a certain D. Gamba, one of his parishioners, he exclaimed: "Had I but known then what Divine Providence had in store for this young man, I certainly would not have hesitated to accept this pleasant task. My studies, and any sacrifice would have been a small price to pay, if I could now say: 'I was privileged to teach Don Bosco?'"

Disappointed, John returned to the farm at Susambrino. There he struggled by himself with difficult Latin authors. Passing along one day, Father Dassano saw him tending two cows, a Latin book in his hand. The priest, who had heard that John was looking for a tutor, went over to him, asked him about his studies, and then had him read a passage aloud. He was amazed at the correct pronunciation and the intelligent and effortless reading. Without delay he called on Mamma Margaret and said: "Please bring John to me at the rectory and we'll work out something."

The following day Margaret and John hastened there. By way of testing him further, the priest gave him one of his books and assigned some pages to be memorized. He told him to return after a number of days. John withdrew, only to be back a few hours later. Surprised, Father Dassano asked why he had come back. When John told him that he had already memorized the assigned work, the priest could not believe it and tried to send him home. But John respectfully insisted that he be allowed to prove it. As Father Dassano agreed, John rattled off page after page flawlessly without effort. Father Dassano was flabbergasted. Studying him for a moment, he said: "Excellent! I'll give you lessons, and if you agree, you will groom my horse and take care of it."

The curate who happened to be present joined in: "As for teaching him, I'd like to try it myself. I have great hopes for that boy!"

From then on John went every morning to the rectory for his

lessons from the curate, who was very well versed in Latin and Italian literature. In return, John cared for the horse and stable. Whenever the horse was not needed for the buggy, he would take it out for exercise. Well beyond the village limits on solitary roads he would spur the horse to a gallop, run alongside it, leap upon its back, and with surprising agility, ride standing while the horse continued at a gallop. This was John's only recreation. The rest of his time he spent in studying, entertaining his friends sometimes at Susambrino, sometimes at Becchi, and in the performance of his devotions. John Filippello, [a companion of his] had this to say about John: "During the summer vacation he diligently visited the church in Castelnuovo, where he often went to confession and Communion. He was esteemed and loved by all, and I cannot praise him as he deserves." To John one can then apply the words of the Book of Proverbs: "A good name is more desirable than great riches, and high esteem, than gold and silver" (Prov. 22, 1).

## CHAPTER 31

### *Two Important Events*

**I**N November 1832, John returned to Mrs. Lucy Matta's home in Chieri and again she entrusted her son to his care in exchange for board and lodging. When he checked in at the school, he presented a certificate from his pastor, as required by law, stating that he had attended religious services regularly and had made his monthly confession. Because of his good marks he was admitted without difficulty to the Latin grammar class, the equivalent of the third year in secondary schools. For him this was a veritable triumph. Canon Francis Calosso and Father John Bosco of Chieri [no relation of his] who later taught literature and philosophy at the Military Academy in Turin, and sacred eloquence at the Royal University, often spoke with Bishop John Cagliero about John's remarkable achievement of covering a three-year Latin course in one.

His Latin teacher was Father Dominic Giusiana, O.P. whom he esteemed very highly and who in turn had a lofty regard for John. Dr. Charles Allora of Castelnuovo d'Asti, one of his schoolmates at Chieri, [years later] in 1888 reminisced about John with great delight. He related that as a student John neither boasted of his talents nor showed any affectation or inordinate ambition; his very person radiated an indefinable aura of the supernatural. While still a student, he was the accepted leader of all his companions, and even though he had no official authority, yet in reality he was their superior because they obeyed him in everything. "Already in those days he was a saint," exclaimed Dr. Allora enthusiastically. Besides his other virtues, he gave proof of a high degree of humility in dealing with his classmates.

That same year a student on one occasion secretly got hold of John's notebooks and copied out a sonnet. Changing a word here

and there, he circulated it among the class making it appear as his own work. The youth was savoring everybody's praises when, a few days later, the sonnet fell into John's hands. He did not take offense at the blatant plagiarism, nor did he care to assert his authorship. He did not like to disgrace the boy by exposing the fraud, so he just remained silent. However, he did scribble at the bottom of the sheet these words: '*Estne de sacco ista farina tuo?*' [Is this flour from your mill?] and folding the sheet he returned it to his vain companion.

As his reputation for piety, talent and scholastic success spread, many families sought to engage him as tutor for their sons—his own classmates, as well as those in higher classes. And so it was that John began to tutor in private homes. Although his principal motive was to help others, he did not refuse the small fees he was offered. In this way Divine Providence enabled him to provide what he needed for clothing, linen, school supplies and other items without burdening his family. He was also much in demand for his performances in private homes. He obliged willingly whenever he could do so without hurting his studies or his moral character. More than once have we heard those who had known him at that time exclaim: "He couldn't possibly have been any better." Among his companions he was mentor, peacemaker, and guide in spiritual matters. The *Società dell'Allegria* continued to grow, to the great benefit of its members.

Meanwhile John was almost eighteen and had not yet been confirmed. In those days Confirmation was administered rather rarely in country districts. That year, however, the zealous pastor, Father Vaccarino obtained this great blessing for those who had not yet been confirmed. At once John decided to make use of the opportunity. On August 4, 1833 he was confirmed in Buttigliera d'Asti by Archbishop John Anthony Gianotti of Sassari. His sponsors were Joseph Marsando and Countess Josephine Melina. We have no records extant telling how John prepared himself for the great event, but we can gauge his lively faith by the effects of this Sacrament: the luminous gifts of the Holy Spirit were manifest in him.

Toward the end of that school year, the schools in Chieri were due for an inspection from the Department of Education through its representative Father Joseph Gozzani, a law graduate and a

man of singular merit. He was to head the examining committee being sent to evaluate the scholastic standing of the schools. His name caused some fear among the students because, although he was fair to all, he was known to be strict and unyielding. On hearing of his arrival, the students were quite upset and there was a lot of hubbub and whispered threats. Father Gozzani, calm and level-headed, was not one to be easily disturbed. Forewarned of the cool reception he could expect from the students, he had them all assemble as soon as he arrived and spoke to them promising that he would not be unduly strict. Allaying their fears somewhat, he personally dictated the examination questions, collected the papers, and immediately returned to Turin. When the examination marks were sent back, they were anything but reassuring. Still, all forty-five of John's classmates were promoted to the humanities class, which corresponds to our fourth year. But John found himself in serious danger of being kept back, because he had passed a copy of his paper to others. It was only through the good offices of his teacher, Father Dominic Giusiana, that he was allowed to take another test. He did well and consequently was promoted unconditionally. Indeed, he had ingratiated himself to Father Gozzano who was very generous in allowing him to take another examination. For this John was ever grateful and kept up a close and friendly relationship with this priest. Later, this same professor retired to Multedo Superiore close to Oneglia, his native town, and there busied himself in works of charity; among other things he established a scholarship in the Salesian school of Alassio for aspirants to the priesthood.

The Municipality had at that time the praiseworthy custom of exempting from a school fee of 12 lire one student at least in each class. To qualify for this exemption one had to receive top marks in the examination and in deportment. John was fortunate enough to win this award every year he attended that school. In our archives we have his diploma dated August 22, 1833, and signed by Father Sibilla, the dean of studies, as well as his bi-monthly report cards carrying the signatures of Canon Clapié and Father Piovani, the spiritual directors; Father Giusiana, his teacher; and of the dean of studies, all testifying to his diligence at school and his exemplary conduct.

With the close of the school year 1832-33, Mrs. Matta's son graduated, and John left this hospitable home, where he had been so kindly treated and into which he had instilled long-lasting principles of Christian education and edification. Later when John Baptist Matta grew up he opened a store in Castelnuovo d'Asti, his hometown, where he was also mayor for many years. In 1869, he enrolled one of his sons at the Oratory in Turin which he attended for three years. Don Bosco frequently invited John Matta to dinner and treated him with such regard as to arouse curiosity and wonder in those who did not know this background. It was another example of the undying gratitude that Don Bosco cherished for that family.

When John returned to Susambrino he discovered that the marriage of his brother Joseph brought Mamma Margaret an excellent daughter-in-law, who gave his mother the attention and love that she herself had formerly rendered to John's grandmother. This left him free to go to Becchi, where on Sundays and holy days he taught catechism, reading and writing to the boys of the village. All he asked in return was that they go to the Sacraments once a month. We cannot help but see in this, the beginning of the Sunday and evening schools for poor boys, a new project to go side by side with that of the festive oratories. On weekdays, he devoted a good part of his time to school work and studying the classics. After that he would spend the remaining time in manual work, such as making tables and other needed pieces of furniture. Some of them are still in use to this day. He put shoe-making to good use, a craft he had picked up in Chieri. Though he could not make a fine pair of shoes, he was good at mending them and restoring them to excellent condition. The skill he had acquired by necessity enabled him to accumulate considerable savings. His little workshop, which had a forge, tailoring equipment and a carpenter's bench, was now expanded by the addition of a cobbler's table.

This vacation was marked by a solemn event. On Ember Saturday, September 21, after a spiritual retreat under the direction of Canon Cottino, the saintly Joseph Cafasso was ordained a priest in Moncucco. The following day he celebrated his first Mass at Castelnuovo amid the feasting and rejoicing of the townsfolk. Seeing him ascend the altar, John must have wept in holy envy, espe-

cially since he had long desired in his heart to win his friendship only to have some obstacle always keep them apart. The Mass over, he approached with the others to kiss the consecrated hands of the newly ordained priest. Very probably the warmth of the priest's gaze made him understand that his long awaited wish would be granted, that in him he would find a father, a friend, a counselor and a steadfast benefactor. John could not have foreseen at that time how closely Divine Providence was to tie the two of them in a bond of friendship. Nor could he have known that his would be the task of perpetuating the memory of that day in his writings; even less could he have imagined that he would be in a position to reveal to the world the innermost feelings awakened by God in the soul of that new priest.

Don Bosco wrote in 1866: "Father Cafasso left us in writing the resolutions he made at the beginning of his priesthood. One day, standing at the foot of the Crucifix he said: 'O Lord, [You are] my allotted portion. *Dominus pars hereditatis meae* (Ps. 15, 5). This is my deliberate choice on the memorable day of my ordination. Yes, O God, You are my heritage, my delight, the life of my heart for all eternity: *Deus cordis mei, et pars mea Deus in aeternum*. (Cf. Ps. 72, 26.) Not only do I wish to be all yours, O God, but I want to become a saint. And, since I do not know whether my life will be long or short, I declare that I want to start becoming a saint now. Let the world seek its own pleasures, honors and power. All I want, all I seek and long for is holiness and I shall be the happiest of men if I become a saint, a great saint, and soon.' These were his words, and he kept them."

The sanctity of Father Cafasso's life and teachings was to be absorbed by Don Bosco and hundreds of priests, to sustain them in the struggle with the sectaries then conspiring to subvert State and Church.

Among those groups, the one that gave the most trouble to the civil authority was *La Giovine Italia* [Young Italy], the brainchild of Giuseppe Mazzini, promoted fanatically through the newspaper of the same name. The *Gazzetta Piemontese* in its issue of 1833, No. 99, reprinted a passage from *La Giovine Italia* in which certain instructions were given, and then added on its own: "The pur-

pose of this association is liberty, independence, understanding, equality. We stand for a republic. The newspaper *La Giovine Italia* explains these goals, and one may help the cause immensely by distributing copies far and wide. The spreading of this newspaper will bring over to our side the landlords, and with their assistance, also the peasants. Above all, very cautious efforts should be made to gain the support of country pastors. To win, we must first discover their weak points and then concentrate our attack on them. To succeed in this, it will be necessary never to have had the reputation of being against religion; it will even be necessary to ignore the priest's faults. The banner of Italian independence must stand at the altar alongside the paschal candle, and it must wave from the church steeple; otherwise we will not win the brutal strength of the illiterates to our side. Victory will be ours only when the parish priest will be convinced that Italian independence and religion are one and the same thing and will preach it from the pulpit. We must let the Spaniards teach us how to proceed in this struggle for independence: first, a Christ-topped banner and a priest, gospel in hand, leading the way; and then come poisoned drinking water, ambush and snares of all kinds, deep pitfalls for the enemy and for all those who have failed to destroy everything by fire and sword before withdrawing, nail-studded mats to stop the cavalry, blown-up bridges and roads, street barricades, boiling oil and water, hot coals and ashes—all the stratagems of hell, even worse ones if they can be devised."

Despite vigilant control, these inflammatory doctrines began to spread and make headway among the people, especially eager young intellectuals, as well as the army. Several who were convicted of sedition received heavy penalties. In 1833, a military tribunal in Turin sentenced to death the lawyers Scovazzi and Cariolo of Saluzzo for conspiring and promoting membership in secret societies advocating the overthrow of the government; the same sentence was passed on six soldiers indicted for high treason. In Chambéry, that same year, there were several executions; in Genoa, a physician, Rufini by name, was arrested and committed suicide in prison; blood was shed also in Alessandria and other cities of Piedmont. Harsh sentences notwithstanding, the secret societies were

not wiped out; they only became more cautious in their activities and in their planning of more daring measures. They chose Piedmont as their base for their operations against the Church.

The government tried to take protective measures, but naked force was not enough. Besides, it could hardly preach against what it practiced. How could the government expect to have its authority respected, when it refused to respect the highest authority, Jesus Christ, represented by His Church?

In 1832, at King Charles Albert's request, an Apostolic Commission, i.e., a Commission of Bishops had been instituted by papal rescript. Its aim was to restore order in all of Piedmont's religious matters. In full agreement with the King and with his assistance they founded the well-known academy of Superga, where the best minds among the clergy, already holding degrees in theology and law, could devote themselves to advanced religious studies. The Commission reorganized the provinces of religious Orders, closed down some monasteries of lax observance and, to promote the observance of Canon Law and remove abuses that had crept in among the clergy, they planned to draw up a set of regulations for all dioceses. They also proposed to place the teaching of theology under the sole authority of the bishop, open minor seminaries, erect centers of learning, and reserve to the universities only the faculties of law, medicine and surgery. City and country schools were to be staffed by the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Charity. But from the very start this Bishops' Commission was opposed by the Senate of Piedmont, which refused to recognize it and would not ratify the papal letters establishing it.

In 1835, the Civil Commission for the approval of textbooks refused to submit to ecclesiastical censors. True enough it banned any publication that was anti-religious or offensive to morality, but at the same time it proscribed books teaching the supremacy of the Pope over the bishops and those opposing Gallicanism. It also closed an eye on those books favoring modern philosophical views of religion and politics, and hindered the circulation of others refuting these errors.

King Charles Albert was a very devout man endowed with common sense and high ideals, strict with himself and well aware of the perfidy of flattery. Nevertheless, because of his propensity to

half measures and his ambition for a united Italy, he was unwilling to break openly with the revolutionaries with whom he had been associated as a young man. For his minister he first chose De la Tour, and later Clement Solaro della Margherita, both of whom were steadfast Catholics. But in his cabinet he also included the liberals, Villamarina and Barbaroux, who ignored the Concordat with the Holy See as well as the laws, directives and regulations regarding ecclesiastical matters promulgated from time to time by the Sovereigns of Savoy.

Not a few theologians shared their views. Having studied Canon Law at the [State] University, they had been imbued with false principles from instructors with Gallican leanings. This was a great evil and its roots ran deep. But to counteract it there was Father [Joseph] Cafasso, a man of God who was to continue the work begun by Father [Louis] Guala in the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi [in Turin]. With his courses of Moral Theology for young priests, Father Cafasso would inculcate in their hearts such respect, love and obedience to the Roman Pontiff, and proclaim his sacred rights vis-à-vis the State with such clarity that he would form a whole new generation of priests scornful of Gallican sophistry and fearless in defending Papal supremacy and infallibility. All the dioceses of Piedmont were to feel the beneficial impact of these teachings based on truth, justice and charity. Father Cafasso was to round out the ecclesiastical formation of John Bosco and make him a strenuous defender of the Church, by giving him sure criteria that would enable him to know the entire complexity of the Church's rights and privileges, both human and divine, as the kingdom of God on earth. Later on, John Bosco, when conversing with priests of the old [Gallican] school, would never fail to speak up in defense of the Pope and the Church. He would do it with disarming charm. It was amusing to see him pause momentarily after a dispute and smilingly conclude: "So that's what they taught you!"

## CHAPTER 32

### *Pattern for Youth*

**D**URING his fourth year of high school, John realized that the time was drawing near when he must make an important decision about his vocation. He had always had a great desire to become a priest, but now he was filled with a reverential awe at the thought of the sublime character of the priestly call. He was overcome by his feelings of personal unworthiness when faced with the pact that man makes with God Himself forever. "Reverence my sanctuary, I am the Lord" (Lev. 26, 2).

At this point in his life, John has left us a written record marked by his admirable humility. "The dream I had at Morialdo," he wrote, "was always on my mind. In fact, the memory of it recurred to me several times in a much clearer manner. If I were, therefore, to have believed in this dream, I should have kept faith with it by choosing the priesthood—a vocation for which I had a strong inclination. But I did not want to believe in dreams. Besides, both my way of life and my complete absence of personal virtue that such a state of life entailed filled me with doubt and made my decision very difficult. If only I had had someone to counsel me about my vocation I would have had a treasure indeed. But this treasure I did not possess. I did have an excellent confessor who was quite concerned about making a good Christian out of me; but when it came to discussing my vocation, he did not want to get involved.

"After reading some books that dealt with the choice of a vocation, I mulled things over in my mind, and then decided to join the Franciscans. If I should have become a secular priest I told myself, my vocation would have been in jeopardy. I would therefore follow the religious life, renounce the world, enter a monastery, and give myself up to study and meditation. Thus, amidst solitude, I would be able to struggle against my passions, espe-

cially my pride, which I knew had sunk roots deep within my heart."

John had been a frequent visitor at the Franciscan Monastery in Chieri. Some of the monks who were perceptive enough to see in the boy rare gifts of intelligence and piety invited him to join their Order. He was assured that the entrance fee that was required of all novices would be waived in his particular case. For the moment this proposal was the answer for his perplexed state of mind. This was especially true since the ever-present problem of his seminary tuition seemed to bar every door.

Mamma Margaret had always given him complete liberty in his choice of a vocation. She had never discussed his future with him; nor had she ever counted on her son for a more comfortable way of life for herself. She had never expressed the least desire to keep him at home with her; nor did she ever intimate that she would eventually like one day to take up her residence with him should he ever become a priest. If on occasion John asked her what her thoughts were on the matter, or what she expected of him, her answer was invariably the same: "The only thing I want from you, John, is that you save your immortal soul."

Because John saw her seemingly unperturbed about it all, he did not think that the moment was ripe for him to discuss his future plans with her. He thought in these terms either because he realized the sacrifice she would have to make if he were to leave her, or because this was a matter that was still in the planning stage.

John knew that an entrance examination was required for admittance to the Franciscan monastery. This would need several months of preparation. He therefore gave thought to assembling the necessary documents from his pastor. Father Dassano complied with this request, but in the process of filling out the documents he asked quite naturally why John should want them. John then revealed the decision he had taken.

Meanwhile the time for his return to Chieri had come. Mrs. Lucy Matta was no longer living in town since her son had graduated. John was forced to seek new lodgings. Luckily, that same year Joseph Pianta, a cousin and friend of the Bosco family and also a native of Morialdo, decided to open a cafe in Chieri. Mar-

garet took this opportunity to ask her cousin to take John into his home. Joseph Pianta agreed and suggested that John could perhaps be engaged as a waiter in the cafe. John agreed gladly to this proposal since this enabled him to be near his teacher, Father [Peter] Banaudi, with whom he was already on very friendly terms.

It seems that when John reached Chieri, Joseph Pianta had not as yet readied his cafe and living quarters. According to the testimony of several elderly townfolk who were interviewed first by Father Secundus Marchisio and, later, by Father John Turchi, a teacher, John appeared to have lodged some time in the home of a man named Cavalli. The latter had allowed him as sleeping quarters a corner in the stable, on the condition that John look after a horse and attend to some chores in a vineyard on the outskirts of town. For these services John had requested and had obtained Cavalli's explicit promise that Saturday nights were to be entirely his. On those nights John went to the nearby church for his weekly confession. This was another proof of John's heroic character enabling him to endure the many hardships in becoming a priest.

This was the year during which he had to undergo his greatest privations even as regards his already meager and coarse meals. It has been reported that a Mr. Ceppi, an iron dealer in Chieri, pressed upon Pianta to speed things up and to provide shelter for John. True or not, the fact is that John was soon lodged with his cousin for whom he became a night watchman and performed various household chores. For this he received no pay, but he did have the free time he wanted for his studies. Besides, his cousin gave him free lodging and soup while Mamma Margaret provided the boy with bread and other food. John's bed was a narrow strip over a small oven that was used for baking pastry. John reached it with a small ladder. But when he stretched out in these confined quarters his feet dangled beyond the thin straw-filled pallet and over the edge of the oven.

Don Bosco wrote later: "This lodging was fraught with danger because of the kind of persons who came to that cafe. But since I was boarding with a true Christian family, and because of my continued association with good wholesome companions, I managed to get along without suffering any real harm."

Sometimes the cafe proprietor had him keep score for the billiard players, a task he accomplished always with a book in his hands. Whenever he heard anyone swear or engage in questionable conversation, his face would assume such a severe look that the words literally died on their lips. At times John was not satisfied with mere disapproving silence; he knew how to get a word in and correct charitably but effectively the guilty party.

As a consequence some of these ne'er-do-wells asked Pianta not to have John mark their scores any longer because his presence embarrassed them and put a damper on their conversation. Indeed, some of these billiard players bluntly insisted: "Get that boy out of here."

As soon as John finished his chores he would take to his books and school assignments. What free time he had, he would use in reading Italian and Latin classics or in preparing drinks or sweets. By the middle of the year he had learned how to brew coffee and make chocolate drinks; he mastered the recipes for making all kinds of sweets, pastries, ices and mixing liqueurs and cold drinks. The proprietor soon realized how profitable it would be to hire John as an employee. He made him a very handsome offer, suggesting that he give up all other occupations and work only in his cafe. But John, who had busied himself with all these things merely not to be idle and as a diversion, firmly turned down the offer. He protested that his one and sole purpose was to continue with his studies. In that cafe John also learned how to cook, thus acquiring another skill quite useful in running a hospice on a meager budget.

Despite these varied activities, John never neglected his daily religious practices. For this, Joseph Pianta personally vouched to Father [John] Bonetti, Father [Joachim] Berto and Father [John Baptist] Francesia in a visit to the Salesian house in Chieri on May 10 in 1888. "It was next to impossible to find a better lad than John Bosco. Every morning saw him on his way to serve several Masses in St. Anthony's church. I had with me at home at that time my aged and sickly mother; it was really impressive to see how kindly he treated her. John would quite often spend entire nights with his books; in the morning I would still find him reading or writing by the light of his lamp." It is said that it was

during these nights that he learned by heart the many passages of Dante and Virgil so well.

John set a good example for the entire neighborhood. Mrs. Clotilde Vergnano, the daughter of the cafe owner, related in 1889 that when she herself was still a young girl, she never saw John idling about in play in the courtyard with the neighborhood boys. She would sometimes run into him on the staircase as he was on his way to fetch water for the kindly priest, Father Arnaud, and he would never look up to stare at her. She also learned later that this same priest, impressed by the lad's reserved ways and edifying conduct, wrote to the pastor of Castelnuovo to obtain a more suitable and safer lodging for John.

Joseph Blanchard personally confirmed that as long as John stayed in Joseph Pianta's home he never joined in the carefree and noisy games in which he himself, then a boy, took part with his friends and brothers, even though he insistently asked John to have fun with them when he returned from school.

John thoroughly enjoyed the company of his chums and was happy when mixing with them, but, nevertheless, he strictly observed the maxim in Holy Scripture: "There is an appointed time for everything . . ." (Eccles. 3, 1). He followed a well-ordered routine and did not deviate a fraction from the rules he imposed upon himself. He had a scheduled time for his meetings with his *Società dell'Allegria*, for the tutoring lessons he gave to friends who asked for his help, for performing those chores for the family sheltering him; for his private devotions, his attendance at church and his reception of the Sacraments.

Naturally there was also time for recreation. How it was spent, we have learned from Canon Joseph Caselle who as a youth together with seven other youngsters was boarding with a local priest, a teacher in the Chieri municipal school. The building, owned by a certain Torta, faced the Pianta cafe.

"Practically every night," Joseph Caselle recalled, "especially on winter evenings after supper, John Bosco used to spend some time with us whenever his work allowed it. We would all wait for him in the hallway, or if the weather was good, in the courtyard. I can't tell you how happily we swarmed around him when he appeared. And he, always full of fun, would start us off laughing with

a joke. Always ready to oblige he would launch out with some charming and yet edifying story; he was able to keep us entranced for several hours without our being aware of it. Sometimes he would repeat some catechism lessons or explain them. Occasionally he would ask in a nice way if we had been to confession and were behaving ourselves. Just because we knew it would please him, we did receive the Sacraments more often than was then customary. So when we told him that we had been to confession, he was delighted, and he would encourage us to persevere in our good spirit. We were actually ready to do anything for him. No matter how late, we were quite reluctant to leave him. Often our teacher himself would quietly tiptoe down the stairs wondering about what John could be telling us to keep us so enthralled. More than once he remarked: 'That boy is a fine example for you. Who knows what he may one day be.' On an evening when John would fail to appear, our spirits were low; our recreation time seemed to drag out and bore us, and we just waited around for our teacher to call us in for prayers. That time spent with us was John's sole relaxation, since he did not have a moment for himself in the entire day. Yet, how well he used it as an occasion to drive home some moral teaching."

It was during this same year that he took on a commitment that was truly Christlike and even heroic. John used to frequent the Chieri cathedral for his various devotions, and in the process he became quite friendly with the head sacristan, a sincerely pious man named Charles Palazzolo. Three times he had walked all the way to Rome in pilgrimage to the catacombs and basilicas. Though already 35, he wanted very much to become a priest. Yet, he had only limited ability, had no financial means to help him through his studies, and was kept constantly on the go with his many duties as sexton. Once he realized how good John was, he entreated the boy to tutor him. John immediately agreed, and he assumed the responsibility of giving him daily instructions to prepare him for the examinations that both of them would have to take before being allowed to don the clerical habit.

Palazzolo had the barest of schooling and not much free time. Yet John, without accepting any kind of recompense, tutored Palazzolo daily in his quarters next to the cathedral. Or at times he

would visit John at his residence for his lessons. John taught him with such painstaking patience and skill, that in slightly more than two years he not only brought him to a point of proficiency, but enabled him to pass his examinations quite successfully when the time came. This incident seems to presage the *Sons of Mary Project* to be established years later to promote adult vocations to the priesthood.

It was during this period that John also met Dominic Pogliano, the cathedral bell ringer. Unknowingly, John had gained this man's admiration because of his devout ways, his apostolic zeal in teaching catechism to his companions, and by his string of games that kept the children entertained and out of harm's way. This good man knew quite well that the Pianta lodging was hardly a place for John to study undisturbed. He invited the boy to the peace and quiet of his own home, an invitation that was accepted very often. This bell ringer affirmed he had never seen a boy so reserved and devout as John. The little table that John used for his studies is a revered heirloom among Pogliano's descendants.

These facts have come down to us from Father Charles Palazzolo himself during the last years of his life.

## CHAPTER 33

### *A Mother's Selflessness*

MEANWHILE, Father Dassano decided to inform Margaret of her son's intention to become a Franciscan. On a December afternoon he called on her and told her how matters stood. He explained to her how much priestly work was needed in the diocese, and how much better it would be if John became a secular priest and ministered to the spiritual needs of a parish. Further, he pointed out that since John had received many remarkable gifts from God, he could surely look forward to a splendid career. "Try to talk him out of the idea of becoming a religious," he concluded. "You're not rich, and you are not getting any younger. Soon you will not be able to work any longer. If your son withdraws into a monastery, how will he provide for you? I'm telling you this, only because I have your interest at heart."

Margaret thanked the priest for taking her into his confidence but said nothing that might reveal her own thoughts on the matter. However, she immediately set out for Chieri to have a talk with John. Smiling in her usual way she asked: "The pastor was good enough to come and tell me that you want to become a religious. Is that true?"

"Yes, Mother. Surely, you are not objecting to it, are you?"

"I want you above all to consider carefully the step you will take. Then follow your vocation without regard to anyone. The most important thing is the salvation of your soul. The pastor urged me to make you change your mind because I might need your help in the future. But I want to tell you that in this matter I am not to be considered because God comes first. Don't worry about me. I ask nothing of you, and I expect nothing from you. Remember this: I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I want to die poor. What is more, I want to make this very clear to you: if you decide

to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit! Remember that well!"

Even in his seventies, Don Bosco could still recall his mother's solemn bearing and her vibrant voice as she gave him that warning. He could never repeat her emphatic words, born of true Christian sentiments, without feeling greatly moved.

But the Lord, who saw Margaret's sincere heart, provided that she should remain with her son and that John should find in her a generous helper in his founding of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.

Meanwhile, no one in Chieri had the least doubt about John's plans. He was always serene and unruffled. He was so calmly dedicated to his studies and so generous and affable toward his companions that it seemed as though his life was free from every anxiety. Yet, in that year when he was studying the humanities [third year high], he was plagued by deep concern because of the uncertainty of his future and underwent privations because of his lack of funds. For his clothing, food and school necessities he had to survive upon the modest and uncertain fees he received from tutoring and on the little his mother was able to send him. When Margaret could not provide for her son, she would appeal to charitable persons for loans, or assistance in the way of flour and other things. Father John Turchi recalls that his father once told him that he, too, had contributed to this work of charity. "No harm befalls the just . . ." says Solomon. (Prov. 12, 21.) John happily accepted God's will, who ordains all things for the good of those who love Him, and concealed the privations that compelled him to fast in a manner even more severe than the Church fast.

One holiday he had planned to treat himself to a good breakfast such as he had not eaten for some time. So after getting some figs, he went out to buy a large loaf of bread. On his way home he ran into a group of his friends playing boccie<sup>1</sup> on the square before St. Anthony's Church, and he stopped to watch the game. Meanwhile, without realizing it, he began to nibble on his bread and, absorbed in the game and in other distractions, he ate the entire loaf. When the game was over, he remembered his breakfast of

<sup>1</sup> Italian lawn bowls played on a long narrow court. [Editor]

figs but, to his surprise, his loaf of bread had disappeared. He searched everywhere, and then suspecting a trick asked his friends about it.

"I didn't see your bread," one of them said.

"I didn't take it," another declared.

Finally, a third exclaimed: "What are you looking for? You ate it all! I saw it with my own eyes. I could hardly believe you could put away such a large loaf at one time!"

John then realized what had happened and burst out laughing. Utterly unaware, he had eaten the whole loaf, nor did he feel any discomfort. Well, he had had his good breakfast. Such an appetite must certainly have been produced by his skimpy diet. That he did not have enough to eat was a well-known fact among his friends.

Joseph Blanchard, among others, often shared his bread and fruit with him. He would tell him: "Take it, John, it will do you good." His brother Leander once complained to his mother that Joseph took the biggest chestnuts from the table to give them to John Bosco.

But the good woman, who was a fruit-vendor, often would choose one of the finest apples in the fruit bowl and tell her son to bring it to John. "Give it to John," she would say. "He's a very good boy and he'll pray for us."

Sometimes John would beg his young friend not to take so much trouble on his account and to keep these tidbits for himself, but Joseph would insist so persuasively that he could not but accept. "Don Bosco never forgot me," Blanchard related later in 1889. "Nor was he embarrassed in acknowledging what little I had done for him when he had been a young man in very straitened circumstances. Eventually I lost track of him. Had I run into him, I would not have presumed to greet him or approach him, convinced as I was that he would not recognize me. How wrong I was! One day I met him amidst a group of priests in Chieri. They had come to pay their respects to him. He was standing in the doorway of the Bertinetti building where he was staying; I was passing by carrying my lunch. As soon as he saw me, he left the group and came over to greet me: 'Oh, Blanchard, how are things going?'

"Very well, thank you, Chevalier,' I answered.

“‘Why do you call me Chevalier? Why don’t you address me as an old friend? I’m just plain Don Bosco, without titles or anything else!’

“‘Excuse me, I thought that by now . . .’ And in the meantime I was trying to edge away, because I was in my working clothes and carrying my lunch. I felt embarrassed in front of Don Bosco, who, I felt, had now become an important person. But Don Bosco said:

“‘Don’t you like priests any more?’

“‘Oh, of course, I like them as always, but I don’t dare stand here dressed like this.’ Thereupon Don Bosco said:

“‘My dear friend, I still remember the many times you gave me things to eat when I was a student. Through Divine Providence, you were one of Don Bosco’s first benefactors.’ He then turned to all the priests and pointing to me, exclaimed: ‘Fathers, I wish to present to you one of my very first benefactors!’ He then told them what I had done for him. His parting words to me were: ‘I want you to know that I still remember all that you did for me.’ Shaking my hand, he added: ‘Any time you are in Turin, come and have dinner with me.’”

About ten years later, in 1886, Blanchard received some disturbing news about Don Bosco’s health and decided to go to Turin and visit him at the Oratory. The doorkeeper saw him enter, and on hearing what his business was, he told him: “It’s impossible to see Don Bosco today.”

“Oh! Is he out?” inquired Blanchard.

“He’s in, but he is not receiving anyone. He’s not feeling too well,” the doorkeeper answered.

“That doesn’t matter. He will certainly see me, because he told me many times to come and visit him.”

“That may be so,” the doorkeeper said in an unruffled tone, “but I can’t let anyone in today. That order applies to everybody.”

“Yes, to everybody except me! I have been his friend since we were boys. Please, don’t do this to me, especially since he is not too well. That’s one more reason why I must see him!”

Won over by such insistence, the doorkeeper conveyed the information that a gentleman wished to see Don Bosco and was told to let him in. When old Blanchard entered Don Bosco’s waiting

room, he was faced by a secretary, who planned to shunt him over to Father Rua [his vicar]. While they were arguing, Don Bosco himself appeared at the door. He had overheard his old friend's voice and had dragged himself to the door to spare him further embarrassment. He took him by the hand, led him inside his room, and had him sit down beside him. He inquired about his health, his family and his business. Then in a voice that bespoke his heartfelt gratitude, he said: "We've known each other for so many years. Now I'm old and sick, but I have never forgotten what you did for me when we were boys. I'll pray for you and you must not forget your poor Don Bosco."

After a half hour's conversation, Blanchard rose to leave because Don Bosco looked very tired. Don Bosco did not feel well enough to go downstairs for dinner, but he saw to it that his old friend was accompanied to the refectory and had him occupy his own seat at the center of the table with the other superiors. There, Blanchard related all the hurdles he had had to go through to see Don Bosco, and how grateful Don Bosco had shown himself.

## CHAPTER 34

### *Uncertainty and Advice*

IN Don Bosco's memoirs mention is made of the fact that he took the entrance examination for the Franciscan novitiate. "As Easter drew near, which in 1834 fell on March 30," he wrote, "I applied for admission to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. I had told no one of my intention. Yet one fine day, while awaiting their reply, a schoolmate, Eugene Nicco, with whom I had a nodding acquaintance, asked me: 'So you've decided to become a Franciscan?' I looked at him in amazement: 'Who told you?' He showed me a letter. 'They've written to tell me that you're expected in Turin, to take the examination together with me, because I, too, have decided to join that Order.' So I reported to the Convent of St. Mary of the Angels in Turin and took the examination. I was accepted in the middle of April<sup>1</sup> and was all ready to enter the monastery at Chieri known as the *Convento della Pace*, when a few days before, I had a very strange dream. I seemed to see a multitude of these friars, clad in threadbare habits, all dashing about helter-skelter. One of them came up to me and said: 'You are looking for peace, but you will not find it here. See what goes on! God is preparing another place, another harvest for you.'

<sup>1</sup>The Franciscan Fathers' [archives in Chieri] still contain the following document, of which they kindly gave us a copy: *Anno 1834 receptus fuit in conventu S. Mariae Angelorum Ord. Reformat. St. Francisci juvenis Joannes Bosco a Castronovo natus, die 17 augusti 1815 baptizatus, et confirmatus. Habet requisita et vota omnia. Die 18 aprilis. Ex Libro II, in quo describuntur juvenes postulantes ad Ordinem acceptati et approbati ab anno 1638 ad annum 1838.*

Padre Costantino da Valcamonica Brescia per Rezzato  
[John Bosco, a young man born in Castelnuovo d'Asti, baptized on August 17, 1815 and confirmed, endowed with desirable and necessary qualities, was accepted in the monastery of St. Mary of the Angels of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (in Chieri) on April 18, 1834. This information is gathered from Volume II of the records of young applicants who were accepted into the Order from the year 1638 to the year 1838.

Father Costantino from Valcamonica Brescia near Rezzato.]

“I wanted to question the friar, but I was awakened by a loud noise and saw nothing more. I told my spiritual director this dream but he totally ignored it. ‘In such matters,’ he insisted, ‘everyone must follow his own inclinations, not the advice of others.’”

The dream and the reply of his spiritual director undoubtedly must have perplexed John. Still he saw no valid reason for changing his mind. During his novitiate he would find out whether or not that religious Order was the right one for him. Furthermore, God had put into his heart a yearning for the religious life, and he felt this desire growing stronger with each passing day. John was certain that God would direct the course of events and thus lead him along the right path. Therefore he went to Castelnuovo to ask his mother’s blessing before donning the Franciscan habit. Margaret raised no objections and, strong-willed woman that she was, took leave of him without showing any emotion.

John also went to the rectory. A few months before, at the beginning of January, Father Dassano had resigned as pastor in Castelnuovo because of a grave dispute with the Mayor over the ringing of the big church bell. Shortly afterward, Archbishop Fransoni had appointed him pastor at Cavour. To replace him in Castelnuovo, the Turin Chancery office had sent Father Anthony Cinzano as Administrator. He was absent the morning when John paid his call. Evasio Savio, a blacksmith, who had long been fond of John and admired his intelligence and perseverance in study and prayer, saw the boy standing outside the rectory door with a bundle of clothes under his arm. He asked him: “Why did you leave Chieri? Does that bundle mean that you’re going to work on some farm?”

“No,” John replied. “I’ve come for my certificate of good conduct. I’m going to become a Franciscan.”

“What for?”

“My mother can no longer help me to pursue my studies. If I become a religious, I may have a chance to reach my goal.”

“Have you had your lunch yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Come to my house. After lunch I’m going to have a talk with the administrator.”

Savio realized how much good John could accomplish in his

native district and deplored the loss that Castelnuovo would suffer by his departure. During lunch he tried to persuade John to give up his plan, which, in his view, had been chosen without mature reflection. It seems that he urged John to seek the advice of Father Joseph Cafasso. He could not have given him better counsel. John was not yet on familiar terms with the saintly young priest, who was then doing postgraduate studies in Moral Theology in Turin, but Father Cafasso was still the only person to whom John could turn with confidence. The saying: "In the heart of the intelligent wisdom abides . . ." (Prov. 14, 33) aptly fitted the saintly priest.

Savio then went to see Father Cinzano, whom he sincerely trusted, and asked him to take an interest in John. He pointed out to the priest that it was high time for everyone concerned to get together and help John finish his studies. Savio was acutely distressed at the thought of the boy entering a monastery. Father Cinzano had heard of John being studious and virtuous. In addition, he had received a letter from a Father Arnaud of Chieri warmly recommending him. Father Cinzano therefore told Savio that he would gladly meet part of the expenses, and advised the blacksmith to appeal also to the Mayor of Castelnuovo, Chevalier John Pescarmona. After this, Savio sent John home, instructing him to return with his mother in three or four days and to put his trust in the Lord. Meanwhile he called on the Mayor, a very generous contributor to works of charity in Castelnuovo. He had founded the local kindergarten, had established six annual dowries of 300 lire each for poor girls of the town and was responsible also for other benefactions. Savio described John's plight to the mayor and asked him to help defray the cost of the boy's education. The mayor agreed readily and suggested that Savio contact also a Mr. Sartoris, who was generous to the poor. Sartoris likewise quickly agreed.

It was finally stipulated that Father Cinzano, Mayor Pescarmona and Mr. Sartoris would each contribute 7 lire a month until the end of that school year. Margaret broke into tears when she came to Castelnuovo with her son and heard the good news. She then returned home to Becchi, her heart full of gratitude to Divine Providence.

This was the substance of the report that John Turco made to

the Salesian Father Secundus Marchisio. Turco stated that he had heard this directly from his father-in-law Evasio Savio, who died on May 14, 1868. Turco's account was confirmed by his brother Joseph.

Father Cafasso, meanwhile, had been giving some thought to smoothing John's path to the priesthood. As soon as John had a chance, he went to Turin and called on Father Cafasso at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi. He told him of his situation and of his decision, and asked his advice. Father Cafasso dissuaded him from joining the Franciscans. "Go ahead with your studies," he advised him. "Enter the seminary and go along with whatever Divine Providence may ordain for you." At one glance, Father Cafasso had grasped fully John Bosco's mission.

Margaret's reaction to her son's latest decision was as before. Her only concern was God's will. Indeed it seemed that God manifested His will by another dream that same year. Don Bosco confided it to Father Julius Barberis in 1870. In Don Bosco's memoirs we find this entry: "The dream I had had in Morialdo was repeated when I was nineteen and other times as well." He seemed to see a Man of lofty majesty, clad in white and resplendent with a most radiant light. He was leading an immense throng of boys. Turning to John, the Man had said: "Come here. Put yourself at the head of these children and lead them."

"But I don't know how to lead or teach so many boys," replied John, "there are thousands of them!"

But that august Personage insisted peremptorily, until John placed himself at the head of that multitude of boys and began to lead them in obedience to the command.

These were the reasons that prompted John to give up the idea of entering the Franciscan Order without, however, being able to stifle an inexplicable yearning in his heart for the religious life. In the meantime he continued the studies he had not interrupted even during this period.

Many will want to know more about this Evasio Savio who had such a great influence upon John's destiny. One of our dear confreres, Father Dominic Ruffino, recalls him thus: "Savio was a good blacksmith, a most honest man, and an excellent Catholic. He remained always a very good friend of Don Bosco. One day in 1862

Savio met Don Bosco in Turin. In the course of the conversation Savio talked about Father Cafasso and other persons boundless in their charity and then of some individuals who, in his opinion, ought to have made better use of their wealth. Don Bosco asked: 'Would you make better use of it?'

" 'I don't know,' Savio replied. 'This is the reason why I don't want to be rich. Do you know what my biggest worry is?'

" 'Surely it must be to live and die in the grace of God!'

" 'No, I'm not worried about death. I take care, though, to be prepared for it when it comes. My biggest worry is this: I am a blacksmith, and I am very much troubled when after finishing a job I have to decide on the price I must charge. As I enter the charge in my book I ask myself: Will the good Lord write down the same amount? If I charge more, won't that be a charge against me? To play it safe, I always charge 20% less than the ordinary rate.'

"His friendship with Don Bosco prompted Savio to help him zealously as much as he could; he also visited him often at the Oratory. Just to give one example, when the *Letture Cattoliche* [Catholic Readings] first came out, they would hardly have been sold in Castelnuovo if their circulation had been handled only through regular channels. The simple, hard-working Savio, despite his limited means and poor education, not only subscribed to them, but took it upon himself to make them known in other villages, heedless of distance, inconvenience and oftentimes expense on his part."

It is indeed true that God, in order to promote his glory always chooses as His best instruments the poor in spirit, the simple and honest in heart.

## CHAPTER 35

### *Talents to the Fore*

JOHN'S distress just at the time he was trying to decide his vocation did not change his tenor of life in the least. Thus, no one, whether schoolmates or superiors had any inkling of how close they had been to never seeing him again. With his usual kindness he continued to explain to his companions the lessons they did not understand and to teach them how to do their homework, thus earning even more their esteem and gratitude. We should also stress the fact that his willingness to help was not restricted to a certain few.

Mr. Pompeius Villata [a resident of Chieri] stated that several times an uncle of his, still alive in 1889, had told him about the predicament of four or five Jewish boys who had to do their homework between Friday and Saturday night. Because of the strictness of the Mosaic Law as taught them by their rabbi, they were unable to do their assignments without violating their conscience or exposing themselves to the ridicule of the whole school because of their apparent negligence. This upset and embarrassed them. John, sympathetically wrote out their assignments every Saturday, thereby sparing them not only qualms of conscience but also the unkind remarks and criticism of their classmates, for in those days, Jews were at best only tolerated in Christian society. The charity shown them was not in vain: John, besides winning their gratitude, had the consolation of seeing one of them receive the grace of conversion to Christianity.

Meanwhile, he did not neglect the poor boys in town. On holy days he looked for them in the streets and squares enticing them all to attend catechism classes. At times he went around looking for the more unruly in their gambling hideouts. He would join them in their games, and when he won he promised to return their money

if they would go to church with him. No wonder he had so many friends! John Marucco, a physician in Chieri, had this to say about him: "I admired him for his reserve, modesty and kindness. I never heard him use improper or angry language. Equally considerate to all, he was especially sought by his companions in the lower grades. None could refuse him. He corrected the faults of his fellow students in such a nice way that they did not resent him. He always passed his examinations with distinction. Teachers and students alike vied with one another to show him their appreciation and to have the privilege of his company. He couldn't have been a better boy."

Dr. Gribaudo, a schoolmate of his, had this to say about him to the Superiors of the Oratory. "His charm so fascinated us that we could hardly wait for the moment to be with him. My companions and I thought we were lucky if we could gather around him to hear him wisely exhorting us to avoid evil and to do good. To give force to these admonitions he always illustrated them with some appropriate example."

Father James Bosco [no relation] added these recollections: "On fine summer evenings some of us used to gather on a small bridge near the outskirts of Chieri, leaning against or sitting on the parapet and awaiting John's arrival. His appearance would elicit outbursts of joy: the boys would crowd around him and listen to his stories, always new, varied and edifying. He spoke so engrossingly that an hour seemed a minute. If he did not come but was detained elsewhere, everyone was keenly disappointed and had to console himself with the hope of seeing him the following evening."

It is a truism indeed that: "A true friend is more loyal than a brother" (Prov. 18, 24). Their attachment to him was so great that their mothers could hardly find a more effective punishment for their misbehavior than depriving them of John's company for a short time.

John was also the life of all their games. We find this in his memoirs: "In the midst of my studies and various hobbies such as playing musical instruments, singing, declaiming, and acting, of which I was fond, I had learned many other games. Cards, taroks,<sup>1</sup> juggling balls, quoits, stilts, jumping and racing—all of them were

<sup>1</sup> An old and popular card game of Central Europe. [Editor]

pastimes very much to my taste, and if I wasn't an expert in them I was at least a good amateur. I had learned several games in Morialdo, others in Chieri, and if my first attempts on the meadows in Morialdo had been only those of a beginner, that year in Chieri I became almost a professional performer.

"All this usually stirred up considerable excitement and wonder because such games were little known at that time and were considered something very extraordinary. I often gave public and private shows. Blessed with a very good memory, I knew by heart many long selections from the classics, especially the poets: Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Parini, Monti and others were so very familiar to me, that I could draw upon them at will. It was easy for me to speak on short notice on almost any subject. In putting on shows, sometimes I sang, sometimes I played an instrument, or I would recite poems I had composed. People considered these masterpieces, but in reality they were extracts from authors adapted to the theme I was treating. For this reason I never gave my compositions to others; those I wrote I also later burned. This constant versifying proved a troublesome habit later, for when I began to preach, many rhymes crept into my sermons without my being aware of it. Everybody noticed that, and it cost me much effort to correct this defect." Memorable in particular were two musico-literary entertainments in which he took part: one in honor of the mayor and the other in honor of the city of Chieri.

A singular event that year enabled him to make good use of his athletic prowess. A certain acrobat was praised to the skies because he had covered the distance from one end of Chieri to the other in two and one-half minutes, a speed almost equal to that of a powerful locomotive. This same man used to save his best acts for Sunday with the result that many young boys went to see him perform and only a few followed John to church. This situation caused John no little grief. He tried to explain to the boys that it was wrong for them to watch a juggler's stunts while church services were going on, but all his pleas fell on deaf ears. Then he sent some people to the man, asking him to stop his show, at least during the services held in St. Anthony's Church. This request only made him laugh. Furthermore, he arrogantly boasted that he could outdo the whole student body of Chieri in any game of skill: he was ready

for a contest and certain victory. All the students resented his insolent challenge. The honor of their school was at stake: something had to be done to make that charlatan swallow his words. All eyes were on John. It would have been a loss of face to back out now, and, besides, he felt that his standing with them would become even greater thereby increasing his chances for doing good for them.

When [years later] we asked Don Bosco why he had acted in the manner we are about to describe, he answered: "To please my companions." Heedless of the consequences his words might bring, he therefore said that to please his companions he would gladly take on the acrobat in any athletic contest which the other might choose. One of them imprudently reported this to the tumbler who scoffingly accepted the challenge. The whole school gave a mighty cheer for its champion. Now that he was committed, John consoled himself with the thought that if he won, his opponent would have to leave town in defeat.

The news that a student was to compete with a professional runner quickly spread through Chieri. The race was to be held on Porta Torinese Avenue with 20 lire as the stake. Since John had no money, some of his friends in the *Società dell'Allegria*, who were better off financially, covered the bet. All the students and a large crowd from the city were present. Judges for the contest were chosen. For greater ease, John removed his jacket. As was his habit in all circumstances of his life, ordinary or otherwise, he made the sign of the cross and recommended himself to the Blessed Virgin. The race began, his opponent taking the lead by a few feet. Soon, however, John overtook him leaving him so far behind that the man had to concede defeat at the half-way mark.

"I now challenge you to a jump, and I'll be happy to see you in a ditch and well soaked," said the charlatan. "But this time the bet will be for 40 lire and more if you like." John's schoolmates again came to his aid and the challenge was accepted. Since it was the man's turn to pick a suitable location, he chose a spot near a small bridge spanning an irrigation ditch. Followed by a mob of boys and men, the contestants went to the designated place. The ditch was wide and full of water. The tumbler jumped first, his leap carrying him so close to the supporting wall that it was impossible to go any further. To avoid falling back into the ditch he had to hold

on to a tree growing near its bank. The onlookers were silent. With bated breath they waited to see what John would do, for a better jump seemed impossible. At this point, John's other skills came to his aid. He jumped, gripped the top of the wall and somersaulted over it, landing upright on his feet. A burst of applause greeted him.

Disdainfully, the charlatan said, "I'm not giving up. I challenge you to any test of skill at your choice." John accepted the challenge and chose to perform with the magic wand, and this time the stake was raised to 80 lire. John put a hat on one end of the rod and then he balanced the other end on the palm of his hand. Then without touching it, he shifted the wand to each finger successively; then to his knuckles, elbow, shoulder, chin, lips, nose and forehead. Reversing the process he ended up with the wand on the palm of his hand.

"You are mistaken if you think that you have me," said the tumbler. "This is my favorite act." Picking up the wand he proceeded with remarkable dexterity to go through John's moves until he came to his lips. Unfortunately, he had a rather prominent nose and it got in the way of the wand, causing it to lose its balance and forcing the tumbler to retrieve it in midair.

The unfortunate tumbler, seeing his money dwindling, almost in a fury exclaimed: "I'll put up with anything rather than be defeated by a mere school boy. I still have 100 lire, and I'll make another bet. The one who will climb to the highest point of that tree will have them." He pointed to a tall elm growing beside the avenue.

Once more the students and John took up the challenge, but feeling sorry for the man, they secretly hoped that he might win as they had no desire to ruin him. The tumbler went up first: he gripped the trunk of the tree and agile as a cat he went from branch to branch until he reached the point where, if he had gone any higher, the limb would certainly have broken. All felt that it was impossible to do any better. "This time you will surely lose," they said to John. Nevertheless, he took his turn and climbed up as high as he could short of bending its top. Then taking a firm grip on the trunk of the tree, he swung his body upwards, his feet rising three feet above his opponent's mark and even over the top of the tree. Who can describe the roar of applause, the joy of John's

companions, the satisfaction of the winner and the acrobat's rage? The students, however, wanted to mitigate his gloom. Feeling sorry for him they offered him a deal: they would return his money on condition that he treat them to a dinner at the Muretto Restaurant. He accepted the terms with relief and gratitude. There were twenty-two of John's friends and they all enjoyed a sumptuous dinner. The tab was only 45 lire, and the tumbler got back 195.

That day, a Thursday, was one of great rejoicing for all and of triumph for John. The tumbler too had reason to be glad since not only had he gotten back most of his money but had enjoyed an excellent dinner as well. Taking his leave, he thanked them all for their generosity and said: "You have saved me from ruin by returning my money, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I'll always remember you with gratitude, but never again will I make the mistake of challenging you."

Dominic Pogliano, the cathedral's bell ringer, had witnessed the contest. When later he described it to his family, he stated that John made such a clean leap across the ditch that he seemed to be borne over by an angel. We, who as late as 1885 [three years before his death], have seen him handling the wand with unbelievable dexterity, are convinced that these accounts are not exaggerated.

Until he entered the seminary, John continued to use these skills to mingle with classmates or other boys when he feared they might indulge in questionable conversation. Affably he would gain their attention, by suggesting some puzzling tricks, such as picking up a coin using only the index and little fingers of the same hand, or arching one's body backward until the head touched the ground, or bending forward to touch the ground with one's lips while keeping one's feet close together. So while some boys were trying these tricks, the others would split their sides with laughter at the contortions, clumsy attempts, tumbles and falls of their friends. Absorbed as they were in these games, they forgot everything else that had crossed their minds before. John would also see to it that they did not leave without having received from him something worthwhile to think about.

Reading about John being so skillful in games, so fearless in taking up a challenge, so unafraid of crowds, in a word, a leader among his companions, one might get the impression that he was

cocky in demeanor or a braggart. Far from it! Several priests, former schoolmates of his, have told us that there was no difference in his demeanor as a young man or as a seventy-year-old priest. He was always gracious, somewhat dignified, reserved in his manner and gestures and sparing in speech. Some of them who visited him at the Oratory after many years would remark in leaving: "He has not changed a bit! He is still the same as when we were in Chieri." So spoke, among others, Father Eugene Nicco of the Friars Minor. Still, Don Bosco frequently had this to say about himself [concerning those years]: "Until I came to the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, I had no real guide in my spiritual life. I always did what seemed best, but I'm sure I would have made greater progress if I had had a steady and diligent spiritual director."

## CHAPTER 36

### *Spiritual Conquest*

**A**BOUT this period in his life Don Bosco writes: “Anyone who saw me spend my time so frivolously might imagine that I neglected my studies. I do not deny that I could have studied more, but I can honestly say that all I had to do to learn was to pay attention in the classroom. Furthermore, I made no distinction then between reading and studying, because I was able to recite with ease anything I had read, or had heard read. Since my mother had trained me to sleep only a few hours, I was able to spend two-thirds of my nights reading by the light of my little oil lamp. Thus I was free to give almost the entire day to doing what I wanted, such as tutoring, often out of charity or friendship, though several students did pay me. At that time there was a Jewish bookseller in Chieri called Elias whom I met when I subscribed to [the loan of] a series of Italian classics. I paid him a *soldo* for every book that I borrowed. I read the whole series at the rate of one a day. I spent my whole fourth year of high school reading Italian authors and my year of rhetoric studying Latin classics from Cornelius Nepos to Cicero, Sallust, Curtius, Livy, Tacitus, Ovid, Virgil, Horace and others. I read them for pleasure and I enjoyed them as if I really understood them. I discovered only later that I had not thoroughly enjoyed them. For when I became a priest and began to explain those famous classics to others, I realized that it was possible to grasp their true meaning and their beauty only after much study and preparation. All in all, my studies, the private lessons I gave and my reading filled the greater part of my days and my nights. It often happened that when it was time to get up, I was still holding a volume of Livy’s *History of Rome* which I had begun to read the evening before. This so undermined my health that for years I felt I was close to death. Thereafter, I always ad-

vised young people to do only what they could and no more. Night is meant for rest. Except in cases of necessity no one should do serious study after supper.<sup>1</sup> A strong man may keep it up for a while, but it will always have some ill effect on his health.”

John’s amazing memory was undoubtedly a special gift of God. He did not let it wilt, but improved it further by constant practice. He committed the books he read to memory from the first to the last line instead of studying only the main points. He concentrated particularly upon books presenting difficulties either because of the language, such as Latin and Greek, or because of their complicated sentence structure and obscure meanings. And he never gave up until he had fully mastered all difficulties. He also read the most famous commentaries on the Latin and Italian classics and all the grammars he could find.

His memory did not deteriorate with age. In the very last year of his life, after audiences which had lasted several hours, Don Bosco would sometimes entertain his two secretaries by reciting a few tercets from Dante or a stanza or two from Tasso. Suddenly he would stop, as though he did not recall the tercet that followed and ask his secretaries to continue. When they were not able to do so, he would give them a cue by reciting the first verse and if they still hesitated, he would finish the whole canto for them as if he were reading from a book. This was his way to relax. His secretaries caught on to this game and sometimes they started reciting some verses chosen at random from the last cantos or from the middle of the Divine Comedy. Never could they catch Don Bosco off guard: he was always able to pick up where they left off.

Two months before his death Don Bosco was riding in a carriage with Father Rua and his secretary. The discussion turned to certain passages of Bible history which Metastasio had taken as the basis for one of his plays.<sup>2</sup> Don Bosco immediately began to repeat with great feeling whole scenes—indeed the most moving ones—from this writer’s work. He did not make a single slip. He had not read Metastasio since his school days.

<sup>1</sup> In those days supper was taken late in the evening and was followed shortly after by the night rest. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), originally Pietro Trapassi, was an Italian poet and the most celebrated librettist in Europe during the 18th century for the *opera seria*. [Editor]

Don Bosco used this gift as an argument to encourage his young students to study hard and to memorize extensively. "If you'll increase your knowledge," he told them, "you will be able to do much good, especially to the young people under your care. But it's no use learning if you can't retain what you learned through the training of your memory. You will forget all too easily." We see here the purpose of his extensive reading. Indeed, his prodigious memory, combined with great intelligence and resolute will, came as an immense benefit to persons of all sorts.

We have already mentioned the kindness with which John treated his Jewish classmates. This would be a fitting place to recall the happy ending of such kindness.

During his third year of high school, while at Pianta's cafe, John had become friends with a young Jew named Jonah, a very handsome lad about eighteen years old. He had a remarkably fine singing voice and was a skilled billiard player. He had first met John in Elias' book store. Whenever Jonah went there, the first thing he did was to ask for John, who was very fond of him and to whom Jonah was deeply attached. He spent every spare moment with his friend, either singing, playing the piano in the billiard room or reading. He liked to listen to the many tales and stories John told.

One day the young Jew got involved in an argument and a fight which threatened to have serious consequences. As soon as he could, he rushed to John for advice.

"If you were a Christian, Jonah my friend," John said, "I would take you to confession at once. But you cannot do this."

"But we, too, can go to confession if we want to."

"You may go to confession, but your confessor is not bound to secrecy, neither can he absolve you of your sins, or administer any sacrament to you."

"If you'll take me to a priest, I'll make my confession to him."

"I could do that, but only after much preparation."

"What kind?"

"Confession remits sins that are committed after Baptism. So to receive any sacrament, you must first be baptized."

"What should I do to be baptized?"

"Take instruction in the Christian religion and believe in Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. After that you could be baptized."

“What would I gain by being baptized?”

“Baptism removes original sin, and also your own sins. It enables you to receive all the other sacraments, and makes you a child of God and heir to the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“Can’t we Jews be saved?”

“No, my dear Jonah. Since the coming of Jesus Christ, Jews cannot be saved unless they believe in Him.”<sup>3</sup>

“If my mother should ever learn that I want to become a Christian, God help me!”

“Don’t be afraid. God is master of all hearts. If He wants you to become a Christian, He will see to it that your mother will agree to it, or in some way or other will help you save your soul.”

“What would you do if you were I?”

“I would begin by taking instruction in the Christian religion. Meanwhile God will smooth the way for what you must do later. Take the catechism and start learning it. Pray God to help you find the truth.”

From that day on Jonah was drawn to the Christian faith. He would go to the cafe and after a game of billiards he would look for John to talk about religion and all the things he was learning in the catechism. Within a few months Jonah had learned the Sign of the Cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed and the main tenets of the Christian faith. He was very happy and his behavior improved every day.

Jonah’s father had died when he was a child. His mother Rachel had heard some vague rumors to the effect that her son might want to change his religion. She had nothing definite to go on until one day, making his bed, she found the catechism that the boy had forgotten under the mattress. She screamed in horror and indignation and took the catechism to the Rabbi. Immediately she suspected John Bosco, because her son had mentioned him often, and hurriedly went to look for him.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah’s mother was the picture of ugliness. She was blind in one eye, stone deaf and almost toothless. She had an enormous nose, thick lips, a twisted mouth, angular chin, and a shrill, cracked

<sup>3</sup> This is to be understood in the sense of willful rejection of the known truth. [Editor]

<sup>4</sup> The reader should not forget that the events here described took place over a 100 years ago when anti-Semitism ran rather high in Christian nations. [Editor]

voice. Her own people called her *witch*, the name Jews give to the ugliest things.

John was startled at her sudden appearance. Before he could recover, the woman spoke up angrily: "I know it's all your fault. You have ruined my son Jonah. Yes, you! You have ruined his reputation. God knows what will become of him. I'm so afraid he'll end up as a Christian, and all because of you!"

John, who had never met his friend's mother, guessed who she was and what she was talking about. He replied quietly that she ought to be glad and grateful for the good he had done her son.

"What good are you talking about? What's so good about making one give up his own religion?"

"Calm down, my good lady," John said, "and listen to me. I didn't go looking for your son Jonah. We met by accident in Elias' book store. We became friends for no particular reason. He's very fond of me and I am very very fond of him. As a true friend I want his soul to be saved and I want him to come to know the only faith in which he can be saved. It is true that I gave him a book to read, but I told him only to study our religion. I also told him that if he became a Christian he would not abandon his Jewish faith, but perfect it."

"If by misfortune he were to become a Christian, he would have to forsake our Prophets, because Christians don't believe in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Moses and the Prophets."

"On the contrary, we believe in all the holy Patriarchs and all the Prophets of the Bible. Their writings, their words and their prophecies are the very foundation of the Christian faith."

"If our rabbi were here, he'd know how to answer you. I don't know either the *Mishnah* or the *Gemara*.<sup>5</sup> What will happen to my poor Jonah?"

With this, she left. It would take too long to describe the aggravation John had to endure or the way poor Jonah was repeatedly attacked by his mother, the Rabbi and his other relatives. They used every possible threat, even violence, against him, but the courageous boy accepted it and continued to study the faith. Since

<sup>5</sup> The *Mishnah* is the traditional doctrine of the Jews as represented and developed chiefly in the decisions of the rabbis before 200 A.D. The *Gemara* is the rabbinic commentary on and interpretation of the *Mishnah*. [Editor]

he was no longer safe in his own home. he had to move and live almost like a beggar. Many people came to his aid, however. To be sure that everything was done properly, John asked a learned priest to look after his friend. Jonah was eager to become a Christian as soon as he was properly instructed. He was baptized with great solemnity thus setting a fine example for the whole of Chieri as well as for many other Jews who later embraced Christianity.

Charles and Octavia Bertinetti were his godparents. This couple gave all possible assistance to the convert who soon thereafter was able to earn an honest living. He led a truly Christian life under the name of Louis and always remained grateful and devoted to John Bosco whom he visited frequently in Turin. We made Jonah's acquaintance in the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales around 1880.

Such were the firstfruits of John's apostolate, the first of innumerable heavenly graces. As the Apostle St. James says: "My brethren, if any one of you strays from the truth, and someone brings him back, he ought to know that he who causes a sinner to be brought back from his misguided way, will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (Jas. 5, 19-20).

## CHAPTER 37

### *Father Anthony Cinzano*

JOHN made rapid progress in his study of Italian, Latin and Greek under the able instruction of Father Peter Banaudi, an outstanding teacher, who had a gift for winning the respect and love of his pupils without ever punishing them. He regarded them as his own sons. They in turn regarded him as a father. To show their appreciation they decided to celebrate his name day with due solemnity. They prepared a program of prose and poetry after which they gave him suitable presents. The affair was a huge success and delighted the teacher. To show his gratitude he took his pupils for a picnic in the country. It was a delightful day: teacher and boys were one in spirit and they vied with one another in expressing their joy. Before they returned to Chieri, the teacher met an acquaintance of his and the two of them walked off leaving the boys to themselves for a short while.

At that moment some schoolmates in the higher grades came along and invited the younger ones to join them for a swim at a place called the *fontana rossa* [the red fountain] a deep, wide canal which supplied water to a mill about a mile from Chieri. John and several friends were against the idea, but lost out. Some of the boys returned to town with John and others went swimming. It was a tragic decision. John and his friends had just got home when first one of their schoolmates and then another came running. They looked frightened.

"Something awful has happened!" they exclaimed breathlessly. "Philip, who pressed us so much to go swimming with him, is dead!"

"But how come?" the others asked. "He was such a wonderful swimmer!"

"It's hard to explain," the boy continued, "but this is how it

happened. Philip was a good swimmer, but he didn't know the treacherous eddies in the canal; to encourage us to go in after him, he dived in first. We expected to see him come to the surface again, but he didn't. We shouted for help, people came running and tried to find his body. It took them an hour and a half, and it was risky!"

This mishap cast a pall of sadness over all. For the rest of the year and the next, nobody even suggested swimming.

Meanwhile, John's third year of high school was drawing to a close. In August 1834, a Professor Lanteri came from Turin for the final examination. John went to see him at once.

"What can I do for you, my friend?" Lanteri asked him.

"Just one thing: give me good grades!"

"Well, I must say you are very frank!" Lanteri said with a smile.

"Of course," replied John. "I'm a good friend of Professor Gozzani's."

"Is that so? Then we'll be friends too!" said Lanteri.

"I would like that," John said, "but you should know that Professor Gozzani did give me good grades."

On the day of the examination John was very well prepared. He replied brilliantly to the professor's questions on Thucydides. Then Lanteri picked up a volume of Cicero.

"What shall we select from Cicero?" he asked.

"Whatever you like, sir," replied John. Lanteri opened the book at random and his eyes fell on the *Paradoxa Stoicorum*.

"How about translating this?"

"If you want me to. And if it's all right with you, I'm ready to recite them from memory."

"Really?"

Without further ado, John began with the title and continued from there. Professor Lanteri was astounded.

"That's enough!" he cried after a while. "Let's shake hands. Now I really want to be your friend." And he passed on to speak affably of matters totally extraneous to the examinations.

John's teachers, particularly Father [Peter] Banaudi, had advised him to start his philosophy course for which he was now eligible, but John loved to study literature. After due reflection, he decided to continue the regular course and to take rhetoric, the equivalent of a fifth year high school course. Several friendly teachers to

whom he turned for advice approved his decision, especially because this would have enabled him to perfect his style and the use of the language. John did not know then that the Lord wanted to be served also by his pen, nor that his writings, so popular with the common people, would be instrumental in saving thousands of souls.

John returned home thanking God for his success in the examinations. As usual, he helped his brother Joseph on the Susambrino farm in every way he could. But he also continued to study his beloved books and to meet with his friends [of the *Società dell'Allegria*]. One day, during the early part of his vacation, he was taking a cow to pasture, book in hand. On the road which crosses the valley, he met Father [Anthony] Cinzano, the acting pastor of Castelnuovo.

The priest was on his way to visit the sick. The youth's appearance so impressed him that he stopped to ask him who he was, and what he wanted to do with his life. When he discovered that it was John Bosco, whom Evasio Savio had already talked to him about, he asked him about his studies and his desire to become a priest. Father Cinzano was so struck by John's answers that a few days later when he was again in that area he sent for him. A few more questions convinced him that a boy with such a clear mind and such deep Christian feelings showed great promise.

"I don't reside yet in Castelnuovo," he told John, "because I would have to absent myself often. But if you want to move in my house and take care of it, I'll give you free lodging. I'll give you your bread and Mary Febraro [the housekeeper] will prepare some soup for you. It will be a convenient place for you to study. Ask your mother's permission and come as soon as you can." John accepted delightedly and went to Father Cinzano's house without delay.

This providential encounter changed the plans John had been forming in his mind. Although abiding by Father Cafasso's advice, he was greatly attracted to the foreign missions mostly because at that time in Piedmont the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, originally established in Lyon, had grown phenomenally in a very short time since its inception. The Society's *Lettere Edificanti* [Edifying Letters] describing the work and sacrifices of its missionaries,

were eagerly read. If John had not had assurances of help from Father Cinzano and others, he undoubtedly would have become a missionary. He himself confided this to Father John Turchi, and there is no doubt that such aspirations were not mere passing fancies. God was making use of human reverses to awaken and intensify a desire that John would keep in his heart until he would be able to realize it. John Bosco was destined to be not only a man of God and a missionary, but a founder of religious Congregations and of missions in foreign countries.

Father Cinzano officially became pastor of the Castelnuovo parish in August after successfully passing a competitive test. John continued his various chores in the rectory throughout his vacation. The priest was impressed by his piety. Being himself a man of letters, he would often talk with John about his studies. They discussed the beauty of the language and the style of the authors and how they should be interpreted, thus widening the boy's horizons. Later on in his life, Father Cinzano often recalled with enthusiasm those first few months as pastor when John was with him.

Once in the presence of some twenty guests, including Joseph Buzzetti and boys from the Oratory, he related that in 1834 he had heard from the townsfolk about John's extraordinary memory and how he could repeat to his friends, word for word, the Sunday sermons. So one Sunday after Mass, Father Cinzano detained the boy to see if this were really true. To his amazement John repeated without once hesitating the entire sermon he had just heard. Father Cinzano described John as a boy endowed with remarkable intelligence and extraordinarily studious. He also spoke of him as virtuous and full of missionary zeal for the moral and religious welfare of his companions. He added that John had often said he wanted so much to become a priest mainly to take care of young people, to whom he was strongly drawn.

From then on Father Cinzano and John Bosco lived in close relationship, like father and son. The priest often brought John to see Father Cafasso and urged the latter to take an interest in the boy. This was hardly necessary, but the good pastor's recommendation was a useful reminder.

Providence was now granting John a period of calm after long years of trial. He had proved himself worthy of the mission for

which he was being prepared by his heroic faith. But his training was not yet completed. He was like a statue that still requires a touch of the chisel here and there; or like a plant, fully grown and about to bear abundant fruit, but which still needs some pruning to increase its vigor and beauty. But this last phase is no longer painful; rather, it is rewarding. And, in John's case, true Christian friendship would complete his training. "A faithful friend is a life-saving remedy, such as he who fears God finds; for he who fears God behaves accordingly and his friend will be like himself" (Sir. 6, 16-17).

At the end of the vacation John prepared to return to Chieri for the course in rhetoric. Father Cinzano arranged for him to stay with a tailor named Cumino. John's food and board amounted to 8 lire a month which the priest undertook to pay with the help of other charitable people, notably Mayor Pescarmona and Mr. Sartoris. As a student, Cafasso had lived for four years in the Cumino house near St. Anthony's Church on the large St. Bernardino Square. John slept on the main floor in a room that formerly was used as a stable or coach shed as needed. He stayed there several months, according to Mr. [Joseph] Pianta and other elderly people of the town. Then Father Cafasso, who still generously helped the Cuminos, his former landlords, obtained for John better quarters and other appreciable comforts.

What we know of John's first acquaintance with Father Cinzano, and the latter's help at the beginning of his pastorship we owe to Father [Stephen] Febraro of Castelnuovo, later pastor at Orbassano. He gave us a written and verbal account of what he had heard from Father Cinzano himself, under whom he served as a curate for some time.

At Chieri, John learned that Father [Peter] Banaudi, his former instructor, had retired after many long years of teaching. His successor was a young priest named John Bosco, [no relation] who was then beginning his own career as a teacher.

## CHAPTER 38

*Louis Comollo*

**H**APPY is he who finds a friend. We read in the Scriptures: "A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds one finds a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond price, no sum can balance his worth" (Sir. 6, 14-15). John Bosco was to experience this happiness upon returning to school that year. It was an enviable phase in his life and we shall let him describe it in his own words.

"At the beginning of the scholastic year 1834-35, while taking the course of rhetoric in Chieri, I happened to be visiting in a boarding house of the late James Marchisio. The conversation centered on the fine qualities of some of the students. The landlord was saying: 'I've been told that there's a saintly student expected in town.' I smiled, thinking he was speaking in jest. 'No, I mean it,' the landlord continued. 'He is a boy of outstanding virtue and I believe he's the nephew of the pastor of Cinzano [Monferrato]. His uncle, the priest, is also well known for his saintly life.'

"I did not attach great importance to these words, but this news awakened some lively expectations among my companions in the rhetoric course. I wanted to meet this youth, but did not know his name. I was to learn it very soon, however, thanks to a remarkable event. For several days now I had been observing a boy of about fifteen, a student who behaved so modestly as he walked through the streets, and who spoke with such charm and courtesy to those who addressed him that it filled me with wonder. My curiosity increased when I had an opportunity to observe the neatness of his work and his punctuality at school. As soon as he had taken his assigned place, he never stirred except to do something that duty prescribed.

"It was customary among students to joke and indulge in horseplay in the classroom while the pupils entered. The wilder ones

among them and those least interested in their studies were particularly fond of such pastimes, and generally acquired quite a reputation for themselves. They would invite this gentle looking boy to take part in their high jinks but he would always excuse himself, explaining that he was not good at that, not skillful enough. Nevertheless, one morning one of these fellows approached him while he was absorbed in a book, paying no attention whatever to the uproar the others were making around him. Taking him by the arm, and shaking him rudely, this companion demanded that he take part in their horseplay.

“‘No, thanks,’ said the youth quietly, greatly embarrassed. ‘I don’t know how. I’ve never played such games before. I would only look very awkward.’

“‘I don’t care,’ insisted the bully. ‘You have to join us, because if you don’t I’ll kick you and beat you until you do.’

“‘You may beat me if you wish, but I don’t know how; I can’t and I won’t.’

“Upon realizing that the boy had no intention of giving up, the bully gripped his arm, shoved him and then slapped him twice across the face. The sound echoed through the classroom. I was disgusted at the sight, and felt my blood boil. I was afraid that the victim would give that insolent companion a taste of his own medicine for he was much older and stronger than the aggressor. But instead, the boy displayed another kind of spirit. Imagine my surprise when the youth, his face still scarlet and smarting from the blow, cast a look of deep compassion on his assailant and said:

“‘If this makes you happy, you may go now that you have had your way. I don’t care and I have already forgiven you.’

“His heroic gesture reminded me of the words I had heard, about a saintly student who was expected in town. I asked who he was and where he came from, and then at once I realized that this boy, Louis Comollo, was the nephew of the pastor of Cinzano and the very same boy whose virtues had been praised in Marchisio’s boarding house.”

Louis Comollo was born April 7, 1817, in Apra, a hamlet near Cinzano. His uncle, Father Joseph Comollo, was the learned and saintly pastor. Louis had shown great inclination to piety already as a small child. As a child he used to gather some of his

friends on Sunday and holy days in order to entertain them with edifying stories. At the age of ten, his reputation was already such that if anyone dared to utter an improper word in his presence, he would be shamed into silence: "Shut up! Louis can hear you."

He would always be reading some spiritual booklet either to himself, or to the other little cowherds, whenever he led the cattle to pasture. Sometimes he would lead his friends in prayers or sacred hymns. To honor the Blessed Virgin, he would give up part of his food saying: "I want to make a gift of this to Our Lady."

On the day of his First Communion he gave away his small hoard of savings and a suit to a poor child. Religious functions attracted him, and he was determined to become a priest. "Priests open the gates of Paradise to others," he would say, "and I hope that I shall be able to open them for myself as well." He had learned the first rudiments of Latin from his uncle, and had attended the third year of high school at Caselle under Father Strumia. Louis Comollo had always been the delight and comfort of his parents. This was the friend whom Divine Providence had prepared for John Bosco.

John and Louis were alike in everything that related to virtue, but different in character. Nevertheless, John felt an irresistible attraction to him. This mutual affection was never to slacken for the rest of their lives. Louis' modest, humble manners, his discretion in never seeking to take advantage of John's confidence in him, or to act too freely with him, were all character traits for which John gave thanks to God.

"He was studying the humanities, and therefore was a grade below me," Don Bosco wrote further, "but we were in the same school and had the same teacher. From that time on we were close friends and I can truly say that, thanks to him, I began to live as a real Christian. I put all my trust in him, and he put his in me. We needed each other. He gave me spiritual assistance, I gave him physical protection. Because of his great shyness, Comollo never even attempted to defend himself against the insults of his rougher schoolmates; but they respected me, even those who were older and bigger than I, because I was very strong and not afraid to take them on.

"This was made all the clearer to them one day when several of

these bullies planned to annoy and beat up Comollo and another harmless boy named Anthony Candelo. I decided to intervene but no one paid attention to me. 'Whoever keeps bothering those two had better watch out,' I said loudly. Thereupon several of the more brazen and strong among them assumed a threatening and defensive stance toward me, while another dealt Comollo two resounding slaps across his face. At that I completely forgot myself. Brute force and not reason was now moving me. I could not grab a chair or a stick because there were none and so I gripped one of them by the shoulders and used him as a battering ram against those bullies. I knocked four of them to the floor and the others lost no time in taking to their heels. But that wasn't all. At that very moment our teacher entered the room, and upon seeing arms and legs waving wildly amid a terrible din he, too, began to swing right and left to restore order. The storm was about to burst over my head, too, when he stopped to ask the cause of all this commotion. After I had told him, he wanted me to reenact my defense. It amused him greatly and he began to laugh. Everybody else joined in and no further thought was given to the punishment I might have deserved."

John told this story with admirable humility. It is easy to understand how he must have felt when he saw this innocent boy being so maltreated. Who would not have reacted as John did, even though less impulsive and warm of heart? "Deliver the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor; let not justice be repugnant to you," says the Holy Spirit. (Sir. 4, 9.) Furthermore, John undoubtedly exaggerated in his account of this incident [when he said that brute force and not reason was moving him].

All his schoolmates who told us about his youth were unanimous in describing him as a model of gentleness and forbearance. And we know how he patiently endured being beaten and insulted without retaliating. Furthermore, if the teacher wished to see the scene reenacted, the scuffle must have had the character of a legitimate defense and not immoderate vengeance. He would not have expressed such a wish if either the boy he used as a battering ram or those that were knocked down had been hurt in any way. Whenever Don Bosco himself repeated the story to his fellow priests during the recreation period, he used to embroider it with such

a subtle mixture of comedy and seriousness that his hearers convulsed with laughter. If, on the other hand, his intervention was an act of uncontrolled temper, then it brings out the heroic efforts he constantly must have made in order to keep himself in check, since all those who knew him during his long life regarded him as being mild-mannered in the extreme.

After the description of the scuffle in the classroom, Don Bosco, in his memoirs, continues as follows: "Comollo taught me many other lessons. 'John,' he said to me as soon as we were alone, 'your strength scares me. Believe me, God didn't give it to you for slaughtering your classmates. He wants us to love one another, to forgive one another and to do good to those who do evil to us.' Mild-tempered as he was he was never seen to quarrel with his companions, but remained patient and affable. I greatly admired his spirit of charity and put myself entirely in his hands, letting him guide me as he wished. Together with another friend of ours, [William] Garigliano, we went to confession and to Communion. We met for meditation and spiritual readings, visited the Blessed Sacrament and served Mass. Comollo knew how to invite us to these activities with such goodness, gentleness and courtesy that it was quite impossible to refuse him.

"I remember that one day, as I was chatting with him, we passed in front of a church and I forgot to bare my head. Immediately, in a very nice way he said: 'John, you're so busy talking with me that you even forget the house of God!' Another time it happened that I used some words of Holy Scripture in jest as I had heard them from other respectable people. Comollo reproached me earnestly, declaring that the inspired word of God was not to be used for fun.

"One day I asked him something about the more important monuments in Chieri, and I realized that he did not know anything about them. So I said: 'Many people come from afar to see them, and you who live here, don't even take the trouble to visit them.' Laughingly, he answered: 'I shall not trouble to seek today that which brings no profit for the morrow.' By that he meant that if those monuments were in any way to help him attain his eternal happiness, which for him represented his tomorrow, he would not neglect to see them.

“One day, during vacation time, we were passing through town returning from a walk, and came to the Piano Square. Here we saw a mountebank who was entertaining the curious and the idlers with his antics. ‘Let’s watch him for a moment,’ two companions said to Comollo tugging him. ‘Let’s listen to him! He is so funny!’ Comollo pulled himself away brusquely from them saying: ‘He may say ten words to make you laugh, but the eleventh word will be evil and cause scandal. Besides, my uncle has told me never to stop and watch charlatans, mountebanks, jugglers, or similar performers. He told me: ‘One may be innocent when he goes to such places, but it would be a miracle if he were to come away unharmed.’”

Don Bosco published this last anecdote in his biography of Comollo. At first sight it might seem almost like an indirect reproach of Don Bosco himself because he had frequently attended similar spectacles as a boy. But if we think it over carefully, it is in no way applicable to him. John’s simple and innocent way of life, his upright conscience and the lofty purpose for which he attended performances of this kind certainly justify what he did in his younger years, without harm to his soul and with great advantage to the souls of others. Throughout his life his motto was: *Ama et fac quod vis* [Love and do what you wish]. Hence, his easy manner, free of anxiety and marked by the full freedom of the children of God. Love [of God] dispels fear. As soon as he had acquired the skills he considered necessary, John stopped attending such spectacles in the public squares. Later he was even to give up his feats of acrobatics when he realized that they were not in keeping with the deportment of one who intended to dedicate his life to God. But he continued with his juggling and conjuring tricks for many years because this was an eminently suitable means by which to attract the young and provide a wholesome form of recreation for them. Indeed, those tricks, when he was a young boy at Becchi, had schooled him for his future mission. They had enabled him to feel at ease and self-assured in controlling gatherings while at the same time maintaining a reserved manner bearing the mark of virtue. People would not have been attracted by an ascetic, penitent figure, especially the kind of people among whom he lived and who were part of the society then emerging.

It is deeply moving and a proof of his great humility to observe how Don Bosco faithfully obeyed his friend's counsels. He stated that thanks to Louis Comollo he learned how to live a truly Christian life. According to Father [John] Giacomelli, however, who was a close mutual friend, the fact of the matter is that Bosco and Comollo admonished each other in their endeavor to correct their shortcomings, and encouraged each other on the road to perfection. Together they sought to employ their time fruitfully and receive the Sacraments regularly and frequently. Comollo had found in John a special confidant with whom to discuss spiritual matters. Don Bosco wrote: "It was a great comfort to him to converse on such matters with me. He talked with great fervor of our Lord's immense love for us in giving Himself as food in Holy Communion. Whenever he spoke of the Blessed Virgin his whole being was suffused with tenderness. After he had told of some temporal favor granted by her, such as recovering from an illness, he would become flushed, and sometimes with tears in his eyes he concluded his story exclaiming: 'If the Blessed Virgin is so generous as regards our fragile body, how much more generous will she not be for the good of the soul? Oh! If everyone truly loved the Blessed Virgin, how happy this world would be!'"

One does not give utterance to such heartfelt feelings except to someone who is capable of understanding and appreciating them. John was just such a one and in his modesty he did not mention his own name.

Louis Comollo could well be held up to youth as a model for his irreproachable conduct, his obedience and docility. At an age whose main trait was and is lack of constancy, he remained steady and constant in the practice of every virtue. He was very reserved and never left his lodging without his landlord's permission. His example inspired the other boys boarding there to lead virtuous lives. He was always even-tempered and cheerful, and never manifested his particular preferences in any way. John, who knew him so well, never heard him complain either of heat or cold, or of food, excessive work or study. Indeed, whenever he had any free time, he would hasten to a schoolmate for an explanation of some scholastic difficulty. He liked to talk about history, poetry, Italian literature and Latin. He did this in so humble and

pleasant a manner that whenever he expressed a personal opinion, it was always manifest that he would defer to the view of others.

As a student, Louis stood out among the more brilliant boys in his class. He was so diligent in his work that his teacher could not recall ever having had any occasion to reprimand him for the slightest negligence.

Assiduous in attending the school religious services, recollected, always attentive to sermons, very devout at Mass, he showed the utmost reverence and respect for priests, never permitting anybody to show disrespect to them even in jest.

On Sundays and holy days, after the school religious services, the boys usually went for a walk, or sought some other pastime. But Comollo, convinced that he could do without those pastimes, preferred to go with John to the children's catechism class which was generally held in St. Anthony's Church.

Every day Comollo went punctually to the cathedral to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. For many months John would make it a point to be there at the same time in order to be edified by his example. This is the way he later was to describe the scene: "Louis usually knelt in a corner near the altar, his hands clasped in prayer, his head humbly bowed, his eyes lowered. He was completely still and oblivious of any voice or sound. Quite often after having finished my own devotions, I wanted to ask him to come with me and accompany me home. No matter how I tried to catch his attention by making motions with my head or passing close to him and coughing, he would not stir until I came up to him and nudged him. Then only would he move as though awakened from sleep, and accept my invitation, albeit reluctantly. He loved to serve Mass whenever he could, even on schooldays; on holidays it was not unusual for him to serve as many as four or five Masses in one morning. Weather permitting, he would attend every religious service that was held in the churches of the city. Although he was so immersed in spiritual things, his expression was never gloomy or sad, but always lighthearted and serene. His affability gladdened all hearts and he often said that he loved greatly the words of the Prophet David: *Servite Domino in laetitia*, [Serve the Lord with gladness]" (Ps. 99, 2)

## CHAPTER 39

### *Quicker than the Eye*

**D**URING his year of rhetoric [1834-35] John continued to be the life of the party wherever he set foot. Everyone was charmed by his good manners and his frank and joyous cordiality. His skill as a sleight-of-hand artist, too, made him a welcome guest in the households of Chieri and at the meetings of the *Società dell'Allegria*. Wholesome recreation is always in order at the opportune time and place. John's conjuring tricks were so interesting that the spectators forgot everything else and hung on his every word or gesture.

One of the tricks that he frequently performed was the fake killing of a sparrow, after which he would pound it in a mortar, place its remains in the barrel of a pistol, and pull the trigger. Lo and behold! The sparrow would fly out whole and sound. Or, at choice, he would pour either white or red wine from the same bottle. One day he wagered that he could make an entire dish of ravioli disappear from the kitchen and make it reappear in somebody else's home. Some furtively made an identifying mark on the dish; others, gripped by curiosity, attentively watched him as he made signs, muttered some mumbo-jumbo and asked lengthy questions. Finally, John announced that it was done and invited everyone to go to a certain house to see for himself. They all rushed there and found an identical dish of ravioli just as he had said. Prearranged, no doubt, but it requires an extraordinary presence of mind to so dominate the thoughts and hold the attention of onlookers that they do not catch on to the trick at the moment of its execution. John was a very talented sleight-of-hand artist. It was nothing for him to hold an audience spellbound by extracting any number of balls from a little box, all of which were much bigger than the box itself, or pulling out an endless number of

eggs from a small bag. But when he would deftly remove a ball from the tip of someone's nose, guess the amount of money people had in their pockets, pulverize metal coins with his fingertips or make his entire audience look deformed or even headless, some people began to think that John was truly a sorcerer. For it did not seem possible that anyone could perform such acts without the assistance of a demon.

His landlord, Thomas Cumino, more and more began to suspect this. He was very religious but he also was fond of practical jokes and good, clean fun. John took advantage of his easygoing nature to play all manner of tricks on him. On one occasion Cumino had gone out of his way to prepare a fine chicken in gelatine for his lodgers on his name day. The covered dish was set on the table but, to the amazement of all, as it was uncovered, a cockerel suddenly emerged from it, cackling loudly and flapping its wings.

On another occasion Cumino had prepared a pot of spaghetti, but when it was time to dish it out, all he found in it was some dry bran. Quite often he would fill a bottle with wine, but when he poured it into his glass it was just plain water, or vice versa. Frequently, fruitcake would suddenly turn into bread, coins in Cumino's purse were transformed into useless, rusty scraps of tin, his hat would become a nightcap, walnuts and hazelnuts were changed into gravel. Sometimes John would make Cumino's eye-glasses vanish before his eyes, and suddenly reappear inside one of Cumino's pockets, although the poor man had been rummaging through them over and over again, even turning them inside out. Or at a mere gesture on John's part, an object that the old gentleman kept carefully hidden, such as his wallet, would suddenly show up before him, while another that stood before his eyes, would as suddenly disappear without a trace. Often John would show him some playing cards and ask him to select one; he would then guess which card had been picked. Or John would tell him to think of a number, add it, multiply it and subtract it. At the end of these operations he would tell his landlord the original number he had picked. All this would stun the old gentleman. Sometimes John would wager that he could conjure up a key, which Cumino for certain knew was elsewhere. The key would then turn up at the bottom of the soup tureen, after the soup had been served.

Such pranks occurred practically every day. All the good man could say in the face of them was: "Men can't do these things, and God doesn't waste time with such nonsense. So it must be the devil's doing." He had nearly made up his mind to ask John to leave. Unwilling to discuss the matter with any of his lodgers, Cumino sought the advice of Father Bertinetti, a priest who lived nearby. He called on him one fine day, almost terrified out of his wits. "I've come to see you about a very serious matter of conscience, Father," he said. "I believe I have a sorcerer in my house!" He told the priest about his suspicions: a long tale of things he had seen, or imagined to see or suspected, and he portrayed them so vividly that Father Bertinetti began to believe them himself. The priest thought that such pastimes might indeed be wizardry. He decided to refer the matter to Canon Burzio, the school superintendent, a highly esteemed ecclesiastic, and dean and pastor of the cathedral. Father Burzio instructed the sexton, a Mr. [Dominic] Pogliano, in whose house John frequently withdrew for quiet study, to summon the boy for questioning. The sexton, who knew John well, sought to reassure the canon on this score but to no avail.

Father Burzio was a pious, learned and prudent man. When John showed up at his house, the canon had just given alms to a beggar and had started saying his breviary. Smiling, he asked the boy to wait a little and then invited him to come into his study. Here he began to question him about the Catholic faith. John answered brilliantly but he could hardly keep from laughing, once he realized the purpose of this interrogation. The priest then asked him how he spent his time during the day, and was very satisfied with his answers. John answered frankly, intelligently and without any evasion. But his examiner was not yet convinced. He continued the interrogation courteously, but with an expression of severity on his face. "I am quite satisfied with your application to your studies and your conduct so far, my boy, but certain stories about you are making the rounds. They tell me that you can read other people's thoughts, that you can guess how much money a man has in his pocket, that you can make people see white when it is black, that you know what is happening at a distance, and so on. That makes people talk about you. Some even suspect that you dabble in sorcery, and that therefore there is something dia-

bolic in it. Tell me now: who taught you these arts? Where did you learn them? Tell me in all confidence, I assure you that I shall not make use of this knowledge except for your own good.”

Without batting an eyelash, John requested five minutes before answering and asked the dean for the exact time. Automatically, the priest put a hand in his waist pocket to look at his watch, but it was not there. “If you can’t find your watch, then please let me have five soldi,” John suggested.

The priest rummaged through his pockets but could not find his purse. “Oh, you rascal,” he cried, indignantly. “Are you working for the devil, or is he working for you? You have conjured away my watch and my purse and I can no longer keep silent. I shall have to report you. You are lucky I’m not giving you a sound thrashing.” During this outburst, John remained calm and unruffled. The canon calmed down a little and said:

“Well, let’s talk it over quietly: tell me how you did it! How could you so neatly relieve me of my watch and my purse? Where did you put them?”

“Father,” John replied respectfully, “it’s really very simple. It’s nothing but the hand being quicker than the eye, or a previous agreement, or a trick prepared in advance.”

“What previous agreement could there have been as regards my watch and my purse?”

“It’s like this. When I arrived, you were giving alms to a beggar. Then you went in and put your purse on top of the kneeler in the other room. When we came into this room, you put your watch on the table. I hid both things. You thought you had both of them on your person, whereas they really were under this lampshade.”

So saying, he raised the lampshade under which lay both objects supposedly spirited away by the devil. The canon had a good laugh and asked John to do a few more tricks. When he caught on to them he was delighted and gave John a little gift and dismissed him: “Go and tell all your friends that *ignorantia est magistra admirationis* [wonderment is the result of ignorance].”

Now that he had been declared innocent of sorcery, John continued to perform conjuring tricks at his lodging house and to amuse the neighboring canons and pastors. Often he was also invited to perform in the homes of well-to-do families and in the

rectories of the surrounding villages. These exhibitions he always put on for friendship's sake. John became particularly famous for his trick of making objects appear in distant places, or of summoning them to him from afar. Because of this particular ability his friends now added the nickname "magician" to the one of "dreamer," which they had already given him.

## CHAPTER 40

### *Eventful Visits*

**A**T Chieri John had also become a good friend of young Hannibal Strambio of Pinerolo, who had once been his classmate. The boy's parents, having already had occasion to appreciate John's sterling qualities of character, invited him to their home for the Easter holidays. John accepted, grateful for an opportunity to breathe some fresh air and spend a few days with his friend.

John has left us an account of this vacation. It is his first and only letter as a high school student. What follows is taken from the rough draft which is the only copy we have.<sup>1</sup>

After describing his arrival in Pinerolo and the cordial welcome he received from Hannibal and his family, he continues:

The following day, the 12th, which was Palm Sunday, I decided to go to Barge about eight miles from Pinerolo. I attended early Mass, had breakfast and was asked by the Strambio family to bring their kind regards to Father Banaudi. En route I admired the many beautiful valleys and villages which looked almost like towns, such as Rosco, Bricherasio, San Secondo and Bibiana, which happens to have three parishes. Finally I arrived safe and sound at Barge.

I asked someone where Father Banaudi lived and I was shown his house. I went and there was told that he was in church. Services were going on, and when I entered he was singing the *Passio*. I stayed till the end, listening to his fine voice. After the service I waited for him in the square. I was watching the people, all strangers to me; mostly young shepherds, good-looking and of nice bearing. Father Banaudi saw me first. He came up to me, took my hand, and embraced me, almost in

<sup>1</sup>This letter runs into 10 pages but the first four are missing. The context leads us to believe that most likely he wrote it after his return to Chieri, and that it was meant for his friends at Castelnuovo. [Editor—*Cf. Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, S. E. I., Torino, 1955, Vol. I, p. 1.]

tears, unable to speak, overcome by the joy of seeing me again. I was equally moved. Once our emotions had subsided, as we walked to his house we began to exchange news with the greatest pleasure. I was his guest for two days and was treated with warm hospitality. It would be impossible to describe just how much I enjoyed myself. I can only say that those were two heavenly days. Wherever we went for a stroll, people invited us to their homes, and if we demurred, they would take us by the hand and lead us in with the utmost courtesy. We paid a visit to the parish priest, the school principal, the mayor and his deputy, and the hotelkeeper Balbiano, who is a relative of the one here in Chieri. They all received us with the most lavish hospitality.

After two days I decided to leave, though Father Banaudi wanted, at all costs, that I should stay longer, even going so far as to hide my umbrella. But when he saw that I was determined to go he gave in and accompanied me on my way for five and a half miles. Then we sat down at the edge of the road for a few more words. When I hinted that I had to take my leave, he began to weep and was unable to speak. I tried to speak, but could not. Then we both calmed down and talked a while about confidential matters, which were to remain a secret between the two of us. After that we stood up and shook hands without a word. Hastening on my way, I reached Pinerolo, where I was again met with great cordiality and was plied with questions about my trip and about Father Banaudi.

Hannibal and I then decided to go on an outing to Fenestrelle, and so we borrowed a carriage from Albert Nota, then a renowned writer of comedies; he graciously had it readied for the trip. We loaded a few provisions, climbed into our seats and set off, slowly leaving Pinerolo behind.

The first village we came to was Porte, nestled among rocky cliffs, then Floè; we stayed all the time on the main road bordering the Chiusone river. This tributary doubles the volume of water of the Po River at this point. Lofty hills rose on the other side of the road. At last we glimpsed in the distance Mount Malanagi or Malandaggio, a very high mountain. It seemed to be covered with snow, but as we drew nearer we saw that it was all white stone. About 1500 people were working the quarries on its slopes.

Very long ropes dangled from top to bottom because the cliff is so sheer that not even a cat could climb it. The workmen climb up these thick ropes whenever they want to do some blasting along the wall of the mountain. At the chosen spot they drive two iron spikes into the hard rock to support a wooden plank. Seated on the plank, they

then bore a hole for the explosive, fill it and set the fuse that reaches down to the ground below. When everything is ready, a bugle warns the workers to skid down the ropes and take shelter at a safe distance until after the explosion. Enormous masses of rock then plunge down into the valley. The great massive columns in the Church of the *Madonna del Pilone* [Our Lady of the Pillar] in Turin came from these quarries. Ten blacksmiths' shops are constantly in operation here solely to make and repair picks, hammers and chisels. After watching for a while we continued on our way. It was rough going for about a mile because the roadbed was rock covered with just a layer of sand. We came then across a rather peculiar village. Everyone here has goiter; the children have it only in one part of the throat, some larger, some smaller, but the older people have it in as many as three and four places. To make these swellings less bothersome, they bind them with kerchiefs, which make them look as if they were carrying under their chin a small sack full of balls.

As regards religion, half of them are Catholics, the other half Waldensians. The Catholic church is topped by a cross: the Waldensians' is without it. The people are coarsely dressed, short in stature, and rather ugly. This area is encircled by a very high mountain, so steep that no one could possibly climb it. Nevertheless, it is inhabited because the people chisel steps and platforms into the hard rock and build their hovels on them. Then around their homes they place soil brought from the valley, and there they plant potatoes, beans and other vegetables.

We stopped for a brief rest in this dismal village, then pushed on toward Fenestrelle. We were already getting close to Monviso, and were in sight of Fenestrelle when a fierce wind arose, driving back our horse. We could not control him or even talk. The wind raised clouds of dust and gravel along the road and blew it in our faces, badly hurting us. An awesome darkness enveloped the whole road. The horse, stumbling and panting, simply refused to go further. We became very worried, and turned around to go back to Pinerolo. But new fears assailed us on the road down from the mountain. Furious blasts of wind threatened to overturn horse and carriage, and send us plunging down the side of the mountain. But Providence came to our assistance, and we noticed a kind of a cave in the mountain along our road. It looked like a safe shelter. With great effort we led our horse into it, and waited for the storm to subside. After about an hour and a half, the wind abated, but by now it was dark. Luckily the moon lighted our way and so we arrived in Pinerolo at about eleven o'clock.

I stayed two more days in Pinerolo, enjoying myself immensely. On

the 16th I decided to return to Chieri. The Strambios entrusted me with several errands and also asked me to greet in their name Father Valimberti. Then I boarded the stagecoach for Turin and from there I continued on my way to Chieri. I had been away seven days and it seemed like seven hours, because both at Barge and at Pinerolo I was treated with the utmost courtesy, even though undeservedly. Forgive me, I am a nobody who . . ." etc., etc.

This was not the only journey John took to Pinerolo. Here we shall anticipate some events for the sake of clarity. Hannibal Strambio was a young man of excellent character and had expressed his desire to become a priest. In the following year, 1836, John wrote to the boy's father as follows:<sup>2</sup>

I have already written several times to your son, Hannibal, whom I consider my best friend, but I do not know whether or not he has received my letters, because I have not had any answer from him. I thought it advisable therefore to write to you, dear sir, and ask you to forward this letter to him.

I do not know whether Hannibal is planning a trip to Pinerolo or elsewhere. Neither do I know whether he is in the seminary or not. He did tell me, though, that he was going to take the examination for the reception of the clerical habit and that we would talk things over on that occasion. But the cholera which was treating this area at that time upset our plans, and I do not know whether or not he took that exam. I am now in my first year of philosophy in the seminary of Chieri. I would very much like to have news about yourself and Mrs. Strambio, whose cordial hospitality on the occasion of my visit to you in Pinerolo I shall never forget. I heard that Dominic was sick, and I do not know whether he has recovered. Please let me have news about all of you . . .

The answer was that Hannibal had indeed donned the cassock. But this was not the path God wanted him to follow. He was about halfway in this theology course when he began to have doubts

<sup>2</sup>This letter bears neither signature nor date but the context clearly indicates that it was written during John's first year of philosophy in the Chieri seminary. [Editor]

about his vocation. For a seminarian of exemplary conduct and delicate conscience such uncertainty is extremely painful. It becomes all the more so when he is without a learned, experienced and saintly counsellor, who can decide unhesitatingly on the right course to follow. It is even more painful if, having found such a spiritual guide, the seminarian fails to put his full trust and confidence in him. The priestly vocation has always appealed to him as the very best, it has always been uppermost in his thoughts, and now he is losing his taste for it. He is toying with other ideals but is afraid of going against God's will. After wearing the clerical habit for several years he lacks the courage to lay it aside and retrace his steps. He does not dare tell to his superiors his inner conflicts for fear they might consider them as motivated by passing whims. He is concerned about his parents and does not want to disappoint them after so many plans and sacrifices to assure his future. He feels uneasy about his companions for they might think he is lightminded and fickle in his commitments. All these thoughts crowd his mind, trouble him and make his life an agony.

Fortunately God does not subject many to such a test. The Church in her experience and wisdom offers the candidates to the priesthood sure means of ascertaining with moral certitude the genuineness of their vocation. Generally speaking, any defection among those in the last years of their theology course is due to unbecoming conduct or culpable thoughtlessness. John's friend did not fall into this category. The exemplary Christian life he led [after leaving the seminary] and the honorable posts he held until the end of his days bear this out. His seminary training provided a motivation for his life. Let us now return to his crisis: he brooded, kept aloof and, being shy, did not confide in anyone.

His deeply religious parents had noticed a change in their son during the summer vacation. They wrote to John, asking him to come to Pinerolo and talk with Hannibal about the problem that was so close to their hearts, his future. "He who is a friend is always a friend, and a brother is born for the time of stress" (Prov. 17, 17). John dropped his own affairs and generously rushed to his friend's side. He stayed with him for several days, and talked to him at length, but without putting any pressure on him, as was his habit when God's will was not manifest. On the basis of his

affirmative but irresolute replies, John surmised that Hannibal probably would not continue his ecclesiastical career. He encouraged him, therefore, not to brood and suggested a course of action to be followed once he made his mind up about his vocation. Hannibal felt at ease again. The following year, sure of his step, he laid aside the clerical habit.

Later he became Italian consul at Marseille, and always remained warmly attached to Don Bosco. When the well-known decrees of expulsion were promulgated against religious Orders, he played an important part in saving the Salesian houses in France.

## CHAPTER 41

### *Time of Decision*

**A**S we have seen, John's teachers were very fond of him. One of them, a priest, happened to be called John Bosco also, though he was no relation. This Father Bosco was very proud of a pupil who so honored his name by good conduct, piety and diligence in studies. Throughout his long career he never forgot the boy. He liked to recall John's exemplary behavior, his talents and his remarkable memory, especially when priests or teachers from the Oratory visited him in Chieri.

Father Bosco told us that one fine day, during the spring vacation, he was taking a stroll in the hills. Suddenly he thought he heard someone speaking in a high monotone, as though reciting passages learned by heart. This was punctuated by a rhythmic thumping on the ground. He went toward the voice because he was curious to find out who it could be. It was young Bosco busily hoeing in the vineyard of his landlord Cumino. On a branch in front of him he had placed a book from which he was studying his lessons. At this unusual sight Father Bosco felt an even greater affection and admiration for his pupil.

Apparently, and this is confirmed by other sources, John worked this way several hours a day during his vacation. We often heard him praise manual labor as an excellent way to preserve both physical and moral health. John was a student, peasant and worker all in one. He had learned to give shaves and cut hair, to save money and to help his friends.

But nothing dampened his enthusiasm for study and he went on tutoring the young people of Chieri. In 1889, a Mrs. Josephine Valimberti told Father Bonetti: "My brother the priest was forever speaking admiringly about one of his pupils, a John Bosco. Although a teacher himself, he had John tutor one of our own

brothers in his third year of high school because he was doing very poorly and caused the family great concern. His young tutor taught him so well and so influenced him that he changed completely. He became serious, studious, attentive and fond of his work. My father was much relieved and my mother constantly thanked God for having led that wonderful boy to our door. At the end of the year my brother was promoted with good marks. The son of Judge Plebano also improved greatly under John Bosco's tutoring. Once the news got around, many other families sent for him to tutor their children.

"John often came to our home for dinner; it was always a happy occasion. He was our guest every Sunday, but we invited him often also on other days to the delight of the whole family. We used to leave for Mass when the church bell rang. Instead of coming with us, John would disappear. The first time he did this, my sister Josephine [sic] thought that he might not be as good as his reputation, and that maybe he was not going to church. But she soon discovered her mistake: John had made a detour to round up the children who were playing in the streets or hiding to avoid going to Sunday school. As we cut across our garden to the Cathedral square, we could see John Bosco surrounded by the many boys he was leading into church. In our family we looked upon him as a saint because he was so courteous, modest and devout, especially when he prayed.

"When he came to visit us in the evening, he led us often in saying the rosary. He taught us by his good example. We were three sisters and we did not always obey mother. Nor did we always pay attention to our school work or chores at home. 'Well,' mother would say, 'tonight I'll tell John. I'll tell him everything and you'll see what he will say to you!' This scared us. As young as we were, we then did everything possible to make mother happy because we were afraid that John Bosco would have a bad opinion of us, even though he was reserved toward us and spoke to us only when necessary. Father, who was in the legal profession, often said that John Bosco could not have been any better; he had every virtue: diligence, discernment, talent, piety and a sincere love for the welfare of people."

We should mention here another singular virtue of his which

up to now we have barely touched upon and which charmed everybody: his moderation in eating, especially when he was invited to dinner by friends or by some pastor. His ordinary fare was very frugal and sometimes insufficient: bread, soup and on occasion some fruit. It would have been quite natural if a boy, as poor as he, ate with a hearty appetite when given the opportunity to do so—not John. He had made a virtue of privation. His hosts never found anything to criticize in his conduct. He was reserved but gracious. He did not seem to notice whether there was plenty or little to eat. He never began until after the others had started and when a dish was put before him, he took only a modest helping. He finished first and drank very little wine which he always mixed with water.

John kept respectfully silent and never interrupted those who were speaking. But if someone engaged him in conversation he would enliven it with his charm and humor. He remained the same from boyhood to old age. The exhortation of Sirach seemed in fact to be engraved upon his heart:

“If you are dining with a great man, bring not a greedy gullet to his table, nor cry out, ‘How much food is here!’ Remember that gluttony is evil. No creature is greedier than the eye: therefore it weeps for any cause. Recognize that your neighbor feels as you do, and keep in mind your own dislikes. Toward what he eyes, do not put out a hand; nor reach when he does for the same dish. Behave at table like a favored guest, and be not greedy lest you be despised. Be the first to stop, as befits good manners; gorge not yourself, lest you give offense. If there are many with you at table, be not the first to reach out your hand! Does not a little suffice for a well-bred man? When he lies down, it is without discomfort. Distress and anguish and loss of sleep, and restless tossing for the glutton! Moderate eating ensures sound slumber and a clear mind next day on rising” (Sir. 31, 12-20).

It was June. Father John Bosco had won everybody’s heart through his kindness, his patience, his friendliness and the way he helped his pupils both spiritually and intellectually. They were all waiting with impatience for his name day to express to him their gratitude. John played the leading role in this show of affection. He had prepared a fine sonnet. But first of all, on the morning of

June 24, he went to receive Holy Communion with Louis Comollo and other friends for the intentions of their professor.

John's tender gratitude for those who helped him was always one of his most salient traits. He has left us an account of this celebration, as he had done for the one in honor of Father Banaudi the year before. Nor did Father Bosco want to be any less generous in showing his appreciation. So he, too, planned an outing for the following Thursday to a spot known as *Prati di Palermo*, about 2 miles from Chieri. Several compositions were read aloud and the professor, deeply moved, thanked his pupils in a speech that was roundly applauded. This was followed by a magnificent treat. Afterward games were happily started and everybody had fun. Suddenly someone noticed that Louis Comollo was missing. Everyone feared an accident because they all remembered too well what had happened the year before, when a fellow-student drowned in the waters of the *fontana rossa* only a few hundred feet away. They began to look for him anxiously and found him only after a long search in a spot no one would ever have suspected: next to a rustic chapel, between a hedge and a column.

"Louis," John said, "what on earth are you doing here? We were all worried about you and we looked for you everywhere. Come along."

Louis looked at him as though he had been interrupted in the midst of a pleasant task and said: "I'm sorry if I've worried you. But I hadn't said my rosary yet and I didn't want to delay this homage to the Blessed Virgin any longer." Much relieved, all the students thanked the professor for his treat and started on the way back to Chieri.

While we admire Comollo's genuine devotion, we can infer from John's words that in a similar situation he would have said his prayers later and he would have remained with the professor and his friends so as not to slight them or distress them. In this he emulated his beloved St. Francis de Sales, who was later to be the patron saint of his Congregation: he did not wish to be a slave to personal devotions.

The school year was now drawing to a close. After reading several books dealing with religious vocations, John was so alarmed at the many perils one faces in the world that he was once more beset

by doubts: should he choose the seminary or a monastery? After much reflection, he again thought of entering the Franciscan Order, so deserving of the Church, and one of her outstanding defenders. He was convinced that this step would not go counter to God's plans for him.

But he was to change his mind, as he himself states in his memoirs: "Something occurred around that time that utterly prevented me from carrying out my plan. And since I was meeting many stubborn obstacles I decided to speak to my friend Comollo. He advised me to make a novena to the Blessed Virgin so that she would guide me in so important a matter. Meanwhile he would write to Father Comollo, his uncle. On the last day of my novena, I went to confession and Communion with my devoted friend. I attended one Mass and then served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the cathedral. Then we went home and found a letter from Father Comollo which read:

"Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants him to do. He must not fear to lose his vocation because aloofness from the world and earnest piety will help him overcome every obstacle."

John had also mentioned his decision to Father Cafasso and to Father Cinzano, his pastor. Both thought he should enter a seminary and not join a religious Order until he was older. Thus, John realized the advantages of seeking advice from experienced and devout people in the matter of vocations. "I followed their wise counsel," he writes. "I applied myself zealously to those things that could help me prepare myself to don the clerical habit. After the rhetoric examination, I took another for the reception of the clerical habit in the very house that Charles Bertinetti had left us in his will and which was then occupied by the dean of the cathedral, Canon Burzio. The examinations were not held in Turin that year, as was customary, because a cholera epidemic threatened the whole region. The capital was spared, however. To thank God and ask for His continued protection, a solemn triduum was held in honor of the recently beatified Sebastian Valfré in St. Eusebius' Church with the Royal Family and the University faculty attending.

“Here I would like to mention something that gives an idea of the spirit of piety found in our school at Chieri. In the four years I spent there, I do not remember ever once having heard any talk or even a single word that could be considered off-color or profane. Of the 25 pupils who took rhetoric with me, 21 became priests, 3 became doctors, and one became a merchant.”

After brilliantly passing his examination for the reception of the clerical habit John took leave of his superiors at the school. Father Bosco and other prominent ecclesiastics told us John had won the hearts not only of his schoolmates but of the dean of studies, of the spiritual director and of all his teachers as well. They all remained very fond of him and regarded him always as their friend and confidant. As soon as he had finished the course in rhetoric, his teacher, a doctor in literature and substitute professor at the University of Turin, asked him to be his friend and to be addressed informally. This shows the great esteem in which the poor peasant boy from Becchi was regarded by his peers and superiors, not only because of his virtue, but also because a certain contrast, evident in everything he did, made him even more likeable.

We shall clarify this point lest the reader form a wrong opinion. John was very active, full of initiative but cautious and deliberate; he had a brilliant mind and fluent speech but was not talkative, especially with Superiors. This was our experience with him as a man: he was no different as a boy. After watching him for so many years or after listening to his contemporaries talk about him, we always recalled these words of Sirach that describe him so well: “Young man, speak only when necessary, when they have asked you more than once; be brief, but say much in those few words, be like the wise man, taciturn. When among your elders be not forward, and with officials be not too insistent. Like the lightning that flashes before a storm is the esteem that shines on modesty” (32, 7-10).

He himself describes what he did when he returned to Becchi. “When I went home on vacation I stopped playing charlatan and devoted myself to serious reading which, to my shame, I must confess I had neglected. Nevertheless, I continued to take an active interest in the neighborhood boys! I entertained them with tales, pleasant amusements and sacred songs. When I realized how many

of them, though older than I, were still ignorant in matters of faith, I took it upon myself to teach them their daily prayers, how to receive the Sacraments and other things important for their age. It was a kind of oratory attended by some fifty boys who loved and obeyed me as though I were their father."

John must have been deeply attached to this small field of evangelical action because he tended it with the zeal of an apostle, for more than four years, during September and October. He humbles himself when he says that he neglected the reading of good books, meaning ascetical books. But can we believe him? To be sure, his days were so full that he could not spend as much time in them as he had done when his only chore was to tend cows. But it seems hardly possible that a boy like John would possess such spiritual wealth and be able to communicate it to others, if he had really neglected this indispensable nourishment of the soul.

As the time approached to don the clerical habit and enter the seminary, John was faced with serious financial problems. He was now twenty-one and only his entrance into the seminary could exempt him from military service. Father Cafasso, who had always helped him, paid a visit to Father Cinzano to see what could be done about getting John gratis into the seminary. They decided to appeal to the generosity of Father Louis Guala, founder and director of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi in Turin, and a great friend of the Archbishop. One fine morning, Father Cinzano sent for John. Without any explanation, he took him to Rivalba where Father Guala was vacationing on his 300-acre property. He was very wealthy and gave generous assistance to all in need. Father Cinzano was so eloquent that Father Guala, after questioning the youth himself, promised to pay John's seminary fees that year. The principal obstacle was thus overcome. All that remained now was to supply him with the clerical habit and accessories that his mother could not afford to provide. Father Cinzano discussed this problem with some of his parishioners, who eagerly agreed to help. Mr. Sartoris supplied the cassock, Mayor Pescarmona the hat; the pastor gave him his own cape! Others donated a clerical collar, a biretta and a few pairs of socks while a good woman of the parish volunteered to take up a collection to buy him a pair of shoes. The good Lord will act thus again in later years.

Through charitable people, He will assist John, His faithful servant, in all his undertakings. We heard Don Bosco repeat more than once: "I always needed the help of everybody!"

Father Cinzano, pastor of Castelnuovo, was a real father to all those youths who later were to don the ecclesiastical habit, among them Msgr. John Baptist Bertagna.<sup>1</sup> But he filled this role to an even greater degree for John Bosco, the first seminarian in his pastorate. He watched over him with special care and affection because he knew intuitively what the boy would some day accomplish. He often uttered these prophetic words: "You'll see, you'll see! This boy will do great things. I shall not live long enough for it, but you will: the whole world will talk about him." This was related by Father Febraro of Castelnuovo, pastor of St. John the Baptist in Orbassano, [near Turin], and John Bosco's classmate during their last year at the seminary.

Thus John was now certain to succeed in his vocation. He could thank God with the words of the psalmist: "For me the measuring lines have fallen on pleasant sites; fair to me indeed is my inheritance" (Ps. 15, 6).

<sup>1</sup> Monsignor Bertagna, an outstanding theologian and professor of Moral Theology at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin was later consecrated auxiliary bishop to Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda, archbishop of Turin. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 42

### *Reception of the Clerical Habit*

**A**FTER he had definitely made up his mind to enter the seminary, John Bosco prepared himself for the great day when he would don the clerical habit. Convinced that his eternal destiny depended upon this choice of his state in life he begged several friends to pray for him. He prepared himself with a novena and other devotions; then, on that day, October 25, [1835], he received Holy Communion. Father Michael Anthony Cinzano, rural dean and pastor of Castelnuovo d'Asti, before the solemn High Mass, blessed the cassock and John donned it.

As related to Father Secundus Marchisio by Father Francis Bertagna of Castelnuovo d'Asti, many boys and young men had come from neighboring villages to witness the ceremony. All admired John's sincere piety and humility. Now we shall let Don Bosco himself describe his feelings at that solemn moment and throughout this first day of his life as an aspirant to the priesthood:

"When the pastor told me to remove my civilian clothes with the words: *Exuat te Dominus veterem hominem cum actibus suis*, I said to myself: 'How much old stuff there is to get rid of. Oh! Lord, destroy all my bad habits.' When later he gave me the collar, he added: *Induat te Dominus novum hominem, qui secundum Deum creatus est in justitia et sanctitate veritatis!* I was deeply moved and added, speaking to myself: 'Yes, my God, grant that in this moment I may truly put on a new man, that from this moment I truly begin a new life fully in accordance with Your Divine Will, and that justice and holiness be the constant objects of my thoughts, my words and my actions. Amen. Oh! Mother of God, be my salvation!'

"After the church ceremony, the pastor wanted to have a little celebration. He said he would take me to Bardella, near Castel-

nuovo, where they were holding the annual fiesta in honor of St. Raphael the Archangel. He meant well, but his invitation was not at all to my liking. What impression would I make, if not that of a fool, dressed in brand new clothes, eager to show himself off in public? Besides, after weeks of preparation for a day I had so fervently hoped for, it did not make any sense at all for me to sit at dinner among strangers eager to laugh and chatter, to eat, drink and have fun, people who, for the most part, cared only for a good time. I would have felt out of place. What could such people have in common with me who that very morning had donned the cloth of holiness in order to dedicate myself entirely to the Lord? So, respectfully I replied:

“Isn’t there a fiesta in Bardella?”

“That’s precisely why they’ve invited me. Come along!”

“But I don’t know what to do on such occasions. If it’s all right with you, I’ll stay here and have lunch at the rectory.”

“There won’t be any lunch at the rectory. We’ve all been invited over.”

“Then I’ll go home for lunch.”

“That’s too far and they won’t be expecting you. Come along now. Besides, I’ll need a server for Benediction and for odds and ends in the sacristy or in the church.”

“I went along. I knew he was very fond of me and I did not want to displease him. Still, I did not like it. During a fiesta or at a noisy banquet there is always some spiritual danger. I attended all the church services, I sat down at the banquet, I saw all the goings-on of the fiesta, but for me it was a melancholy day.

“Father Cinzano noticed it. On the way home he asked me why I had been so quiet and pensive on a day like that. Candidly, I replied that the religious ceremony of the morning was not at all in keeping with the rest of the day, and I added: ‘Seeing priests overindulging in drink and clowning around, I almost felt an aversion for my vocation. I would never have thought them capable of such behavior. Rather than become like them, I would sooner lay this cassock aside and remain a good layman, or else I would withdraw completely from the world and become a Carthusian or Trappist monk.’

“That’s the way the world is,’ replied the pastor. ‘We must take

it as it is. You have to see evil in order to recognize it and avoid it. Nobody can be skillful in battle without first learning how to handle weapons. We must do the same, since we are constantly fighting against the enemy of the soul.' I remained silent, but in my heart I said to myself: 'I'll never again attend any of these fiestas except for the church services.'

"From that day on, I had to give serious thought to myself. The life I had led so far had to change radically. In the past years I had not done anything bad, but I had been careless, vain, all absorbed in games, tricks, stunts and similar pastimes that gave momentary pleasure but did not really satisfy the heart. I determined to start a new life and lest I should forget, I wrote down the following resolutions:

1. In the future I shall no longer take part in fiestas or fairs. I shall never go to dances or to the theater; nor, as far as possible, will I attend any banquets on such occasions.

2. I shall never again perform sleight-of-hand tricks, stunts or similar acts. I shall no longer play the violin, or go hunting, because I consider these things contrary to priestly decorum.

3. I shall avoid worldliness; I shall be moderate in eating and drinking; I shall not sleep more than necessary for my health.

4. Since in the past I have served the world with frivolous reading, from now on I shall try to serve God by reading religious works.

5. I shall oppose with all my strength anything contrary to the virtue of chastity: books, thoughts, deeds or words. I shall practice, instead, whatever can, even in a small degree, help preserve this virtue.

6. Beside the seminary practices of piety, I shall devote a little time each day to meditation and to spiritual reading.

7. Every day I shall tell some example or some spiritual maxim to my companions, my friends, my relatives, or at least to my mother.

"I made these resolutions when I donned the cassock. To make sure they would remain engraved in my mind, I repeated them in front of a picture of the Blessed Virgin, and, after reciting a prayer, promised to keep them at any sacrifice.

"I was to enter the seminary on October 30, 1835. My small

wardrobe was ready. All my relatives were happy, and I, even happier. My mother, instead, seemed preoccupied. She kept looking at me as if she wanted to tell me something. On the eve of my departure, she called me and said these words which I shall always remember:

‘John, my son, now you are wearing the clerical habit. Mine is the happiness of a mother whose son has been fortunate. But remember that it is not the habit that brings honor to your state in life, but only the practice of virtue. Should you ever come to doubt your vocation, for heaven’s sake, never dishonor this cassock! Rather, lay it aside. I would sooner have a poor peasant for a son than an unworthy priest. When you were born, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies I told you to be devoted to our heavenly Mother; now I ask you to be hers entirely. Choose your friends among those who love her. And if you will become a priest, spread devotion to her.’

“My mother was deeply moved as she spoke and I was in tears. ‘Mother,’ I replied, ‘I want to thank you for everything you have said and done for me. You have not spoken in vain, and I shall treasure your words all my life.’

“I left for Chieri early next morning; in the evening I entered the seminary. Formerly a large monastery of the Filippini Fathers, it had been closed by the French Government and later purchased by Archbishop Chiaverotti of Turin in 1828 and converted into a seminary. Father Sebastian Mottura, canon and dean of the collegiate church in Chieri, was the rector and Father Joseph Mottura, late canon of the renowned collegiate church of Giaveno was spiritual director. I paid my respects to my superiors, made my bed, and with my friend Garigliano, who had also donned the ecclesiastical habit, I had a look at the dormitories, the corridors and finally the playground. On a sundial I read the following verse: *Afflictis lentae, celeres gaudentibus horae*. [Time will fly, if you are cheerful; it will drag on, if you are not.] ‘That’s it!’ I said to my friend, ‘There is our program. Let’s always be of good cheer and time will pass quickly.’

“The following day we started our triduum [for the opening of the school year]. I tried to do it as best as possible. Toward the end, I introduced myself to the professor of philosophy, Father

Ternavasio of Bra, and asked him to tell me what I should do to succeed as a seminarian and gain the goodwill of my superiors. 'Just one thing,' he replied, 'fulfill your duties conscientiously.'

"I took this advice to heart and observed strictly the rules of the seminary. It made no difference to me whether the bell called us to the study hall, to church, to the dining room, to recreation or to bed. My punctuality was noticed by my companions and praised by my superiors. And the six years I spent in the seminary were very pleasant for me; all the more so, because studies were taken seriously.

"In addition, Father Cafasso had made the seminary all the dearer to me. The memory of his exemplary conduct still lingered in that holy place. His charity toward his companions, his submission to his superiors, his patience in enduring others' faults, his care never to offend anybody, his graciousness in making suggestions and helping his companions, his lack of preference as regards food, his unconcern for changes of temperature in the various seasons, his readiness in teaching the catechism to boys, his edifying behavior, his diligence in his studies and practices of piety—all were virtues he had practiced to a heroic degree. It was a saying among his companions and intimates that Cafasso had not been affected by original sin.

John Bosco decided to take his fellow townsman as a model. Cafasso's extraordinary virtue lay in the constant and faithful practice of the virtues needed in daily life. On entering the seminary, John Bosco set for himself the same goal and he was faithful to it throughout his life.

## CHAPTER 43

### *Life in the Seminary*

THE seminary is a sacred precinct where a young Levite hears more clearly the Lord's voice calling him to serve at the altar; it is the holy place where his devotion grows, where his zeal for the salvation of souls becomes more ardent and where he forges those bonds of charity that must unite all members of the Church. It is the training ground where he strengthens his mind and will with virtue and knowledge in order to win the Lord's battles. It is the garden of God where the best flowers of the diocese are gathered to be later transplanted among the people to bring them the fragrance of sanctity. John Bosco eagerly entered this holy enclosure ready to enrich his soul with the graces the Lord was to bestow on him.

This is how he describes this new phase in his life: "I loved my Superiors very much and they were always good to me, but I was not happy because they kept themselves aloof from us. We seminarians called on the Rector and on the other Superiors only when leaving or returning from vacation. Otherwise we never had a chance to speak with them unless it was to receive some reprimand. Every week one of the Superiors would take turns supervising us in the dining room or during our walks, but that was all. This was my only regret in the seminary. Often I would have liked to talk with them and ask their advice but I could not. In fact, when a Superior happened to pass by, inexplicably the seminarians would flee in every direction as though from danger. This increased even more my desire to be a priest soon. Then, I told myself, I would spend my time with boys; I would try to know them well in order to help them, watch over them and make it impossible for them to do evil.

"As regards friends, I followed my beloved mother's suggestion. I associated with those who were devout to the Blessed Virgin,

studious and pious. Here, for the guidance of young aspirants to the priesthood, I must note that although many seminarians are exemplary, some are not. Not a few young men, with little regard to their vocation, enter the seminary with hardly the proper motivation or goodwill. I recall having by chance come upon some very improper conversations. On one occasion, some seminarian was found in possession of irreligious and obscene books. True, such seminarians either left voluntarily or were asked to leave as soon as their true character was known, but in the meantime they were an evil influence on all. I avoided them and associated with several exemplary companions. William Garigliano was one of them.

“The seminary practices of piety were well taken care of. We assisted at Mass every morning followed by meditation and the third part of the rosary. We took turns in reading aloud at meal times. Good books were chosen. At this particular time we were reading the Church History by Bercastel. We had to go to confession every other week, but one could go also every Saturday. We could receive Holy Communion, however, only on Sunday or on some other solemn occasion. Sometimes we did receive the Blessed Sacrament on weekdays, but only through an infraction of the rules. We had to wait for breakfast time, slip unseen into the adjoining St. Philip’s Church, receive Communion, and then rejoin our companions as they went to the study hall or to class. This, of course, was forbidden but tacitly permitted. Our Superiors knew about it, even saw us, but took no action. Thus I was able to receive Communion much more often, and I may rightfully say that this is what strengthened me most in my vocation. [Years later,] Archbishop Gastaldi remedied this situation and we were permitted to receive Holy Communion every day, if properly disposed.”

Not being allowed to receive more often, is certainly a painful sacrifice for those who truly love Our Lord, for He is their consolation, their comfort, their support, their very life. He is the center of their aspirations and therefore they ardently desire to receive Him frequently, and it is heartbreaking for them to be denied the opportunity of being united with Him. This was particularly true of John who felt that he could not do without frequent Communion. So, with other companions he willingly sacrificed his

breakfast and his recreation several times a week, at an age when one keenly feels the need of more food.

Throughout his seminary years John's confessor was Canon Matoria, whom he had already had in high school.

John had a self-imposed rule of never wasting any time. In his studying he did not limit himself to the appointed hours.

"We had very little recreation on school days," he wrote. "We had half an hour for our breakfast of bread and nothing else, not even coffee. Lunch was served at noon, followed by a study period at one-thirty. In the evening there was a half-hour recess after classes. All of us enjoyed fairly good health. When our recreation period was longer than usual, we would go for a walk to some of the many delightful spots around Chieri. These walks were good also for our studies because we would test ourselves in our subjects. Aside from our scheduled walks, we would spend our recreation walking through the seminary grounds, exchanging pleasantries or discussing topics that were of intellectual or moral benefit. Often, during a longer recreation, we would gather in the dining room for the so-called 'scholastic circle.' There we held open forum on matters that had not been thoroughly grasped either in class or in studying our textbooks. I liked this practice very much; it helped me a lot spiritually, intellectually and physically. Because I was older and especially because my companions were very kind, I was appointed chairman and arbiter; my verdict was final. Often certain points were raised that none of us could answer. In that case we took turns in doing research for the right answer within a specified time."

But this did not satisfy John's craving for ever greater knowledge. He was always the first to rise in the morning, wash and dress quickly, make his bed and put his things in order as the rule prescribed. Then he would sit by a window to read for about fifteen minutes until the bell rang for chapel. No matter how bulky the book might be, John would never lay it aside until he had read it through. He read very attentively because he was not reading for pleasure or out of curiosity, but to learn and to remember. He even read the foreword of a book with care because he judged it necessary to know the author's intention and the reasons for which he had written. The first thing he did, though, was to skim through the

table of contents for a bird's-eye view of what the book was about. He gave all the odds and ends of his free time to good, serious reading. For example, he would read during the few minutes before the start of class, during the last fifteen minutes of the ordinary recreation and throughout the entire additional time of longer recreations unless the "scholastic circle" was in session. He would also devote to reading part of the half hour allotted to getting ready for the weekly walk, or going to the cathedral for religious services. On these occasions he dressed quickly and considered the longer time taken by the others a waste. Yet, there was never anything about his dress that could be criticized. Thus, little by little, he managed to read a great variety of books. In his first year he read all the works of [Antonio] Cesari,<sup>1</sup> [Danielo] Bartoli<sup>2</sup> and others. He displayed the same diligence in the use of his time throughout the six years he spent in the seminary thus building vast stores of learning thanks to his intelligence and his memory.

His surprising moderation as regards food and drink was inspired by two great virtues: love of mortification and desire to learn in order to be well prepared for the divine task of caring for souls. He wanted to resume intellectual work within twenty minutes of his dinner [which was taken at noon]. He never complained about what was served, and was annoyed when someone did or tried to help himself from the kitchen or pantry without permission. He and his closest friends did all they could to prevent such things by their example and by their obvious disapproval. If his mother or any of his friends brought him a gift of food, John would always share it with his fellow seminarians. This we have heard from Father [Charles] Palazzolo and Father [John] Giacomelli.

While earnestly practicing virtue and devoting himself seriously to the study of philosophy, John Bosco felt a burning desire to be of practical assistance to the young boys that he gathered around himself when his Superiors sent him to the cathedral to teach them their catechism and prayers. It was at this time that Divine Providence, ever mindful of him, chose to make clearer what kind of mission would be entrusted to him on behalf of boys. Don Bosco

<sup>1</sup> A philologist of the 18th century. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> A renowned preacher and scholar of the 17th century. [Editor]

told this confidentially to a few at the Oratory, among them Father John Turchi and Father Dominic Ruffino.

“Can you imagine,” he said, “how I saw myself during my first year of philosophy?”

“Was it in a dream?” someone asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” Don Bosco replied. “I saw myself as a priest wearing surplice and stole. I was sitting in a tailor’s shop, not sewing new clothes, but mending old ones torn and full of patches. Then and there I did not grasp its meaning. I mentioned this to someone or other but never fully disclosed it until I was a priest, even then only to my spiritual director, Father Cafasso.”

This dream or vision remained indelibly engraved in Don Bosco’s memory. It meant that he was called not just for a select group of innocent boys in order to shield them from evil and make them advance in virtue, but also that he was to gather around himself wayward boys, already tainted by evil and lead them again to the practice of virtue and make them good citizens.

Meanwhile John’s days passed serenely. He enjoyed the happiness that is the lot of those who in a spirit of obedience faithfully carry out their duties. Any priest will fondly recall his seminary years, if he was a good seminarian. This is why John even left us an account of recreation periods he enjoyed within that oasis of peace and holiness.

“Our favorite game was the popular *bara rotta*. At first I enjoyed it very much, but, as it seemed to me rather indecorous, I gave it up. Sometimes we were allowed to play tarok for very small sums of money, and I joined in the card game for a while. But here the enjoyment turned sour. I was not very good at it but I was lucky and won most of the time. When the game was over I had a handful of coins. But the sad looks of the losers made me feel worse than they. I must add that when I played, I became so immersed in the game that even after it was over, I was unable to pray or to study because the tarots were still on my mind. Around the middle of 1836 I gave this up too.”

What mainly prompted this decision was the fact that one day he won a sum which, though not large, nevertheless was rather considerable for the slender means of his opponent. When John saw how

distressed he was, he felt so sorry for him that he gave him back all the money. Then and there John made up his mind never to play cards again and he faithfully kept his promise.

Don Bosco did not think that playing cards was a fitting pastime for priests because it was engrossing, took up time that should have been better spent, and could even be not quite proper. Once he was preaching a spiritual retreat in some town and he was staying at the rectory. One evening after supper, some younger priests invited him to a game of tarok. Don Bosco replied that he was not so good at it. The others were surprised saying that everyone should know such a simple and harmless game.

"I'll do that when I have nothing else to do," Don Bosco answered.

Out of respect for him the priests put the cards away and whiled away the time in useful conversation. In the meantime, Don Bosco with his usual skill removed the cards from the table's drawer unnoticed and slipped them into his pocket. Shortly thereafter he politely excused himself, saying that he still had a few things to do and after wishing them all a good night withdrew to his room. Several other priests followed. There only remained the two who had been most anxious to play.

"Now we're free," they said. "Let's have a game."

They opened the drawer, but it was empty. "Where are the cards?" asked the first one.

"I am sure I put them here!" said the other. As they were unable to find them, they too retired to their rooms, but somewhat disappointed. On the way, they passed Don Bosco's room, still lamenting the missing cards. Suddenly one of them remembered that he had a deck of cards in his bedroom and joyfully told his companion about it. But before they could go in and get them, Don Bosco was on their heels and in a half joking way, sent them to bed. It was a useful lesson for them.

## CHAPTER 44

### *Kindness to Companions*

JOHN soon won the esteem of all the seminarians by his unfailing good cheer, his pleasant way with people, and his willingness to be of help to anyone in need. And he was happy in his new life.

He was always on hand to sweep floors, carry things, pack trunks, make birettas, cut hair and give shaves, mend clothes and repair shoes. He seemed to have become the humble servant of all; in turn, his companions vied with one another in showing their thanks and affection. In addition to his many other talents, John had a way with the sick. As a youngster, he had learned to extract [loose] teeth painlessly and all his companions came to him when in need of this service.

Furthermore, whenever John saw his fellow seminarians in the depths of gloom and doubt or plagued with difficulties in their studies, he assumed the triple role of advisor, friend and tutor. Struggling students found his help of great value. John would summarize the text of an author before examinations when the students were overwhelmed by the bulky treatises they had to read. He generously lent his books to anyone who wished to borrow them, even though purchasing them had cost him many a privation. He often wrote sermonettes for seminarians who had been invited to preach in their parish church during the vacations, but lacked either time or ability. Father Giacomelli recalled that one of his friends had been asked to prepare two eulogies. Aware of the youth's difficulty, John offered to write them for him and later gave them to him to memorize. At the seminary, and even later in Turin, a simple request sufficed to obtain loan of his personal notebooks and sermons which his friends

were free to use as they pleased. This accounts for the loss of many of his manuscripts.

His good taste in entertaining reflected the unalterable serenity of his disposition. During recreation periods he would amuse his fellow students with wholesome jokes and pranks, or suggest that they give the gist of certain Latin sayings, which generally contained a moral teaching. At other times he would perform his magic wand trick. Standing a stick lightly on a finger of his hand, he could maneuver it in any direction at will. He would make it jump or rotate rapidly and then bring it back to a complete rest on the tip of his finger. At the insistence of his friends, he occasionally performed a few conjuring tricks. On this point, the resolution that John had made on the day he donned the cassock never again to do conjurer's tricks had not been approved by Father Cafasso.

John always thought up something new to keep the seminarians amused. One day, for example, he announced that he could shave himself with a wooden razor. Though by now his friends were no longer surprised at John's stunts, this time they were quite skeptical. But John insisted. Gentlemen's bets were made and a time for the test was fixed. At the appointed hour they rushed to his room and found him shaving with a real razor.

"Where's the wooden razor?"

["Well, now,] what's my name?"

"Bosco!"

"Whose razor am I using?"

"Your own!"

"Well, then, this is a *Bosco* razor and you've lost your bet."

The conversation in which the bet was made was in the Piedmontese dialect in which the word "bosco" means "wood." At first his companions were chagrined in being caught in the trap of such an easy pun, but they ended by agreeing that John had won his bet, and all enjoyed a hearty laugh.

John had unbelievable ability to tell a story with an amazingly contagious charm. He could spin a yarn with such exuberance that his audience often doubled over with laughter. But he himself, serious by nature, was never seen to laugh uproariously even in the funniest situations.

On the name day of the Rector of the seminary he was usually asked to present a poem in Greek composed for the occasion. Once when everyone expected something serious, he came out with a comic sonnet. The first verse was in Latin, the second in French, the third in Italian, the fourth in Piedmontese dialect, and so on. No one could stop laughing and there was no point in reading the other compositions.

His companions marvelled at the ease with which he composed or even improvised poems. He never wanted for verses and rhymes. At times, his stanzas, full of spirit, were constructed strictly to rule; generally, however, inspired by poetic impulse, they were not the best in rhyme, foot or rhythm. His verses were made only for a momentary effect, brought about by a striking idea. He was rightly called an extemporaneous versifier. His verses were always inspired by religious or moral themes or by sentiments of gratitude for his benefactors.

His old schoolmates of Chieri did not forget him. On Thursdays the seminary parlor was filled with young students who came with notebooks and school papers to be examined. John willingly corrected, pointed out mistakes, explained doubtful points and went over their lessons with them. He never let them go without some uplifting thought. So Father James Bosco [no relation] tells us.

John always looked forward most to the visit of Louis Comollo, who was in rhetoric class that year. Comollo's friendship was worth seeking. He was alert, gentle, diligent in his duties, irreproachable in his conduct, steadfast in doing good, devoted to prayer and to the Sacraments—a real angel who moved his companions to imitate him. He often visited John in the seminary. How quickly passed the time in which the two, so devoted to God, discussed plans for dedicating themselves to the salvation of souls! Neither kept secrets from the other. Furthermore, in the year they were not together, either from Comollo himself or from friends, John came to know everything his friend did or said and treasured everything in his heart.

Even his old Chieri classmates, now in boarding schools or at home kept in touch by letter. Friendship based on charity is never weakened by distance. [With time] John destroyed most of the letters he had received. Of those still extant we believe it worthwhile

to reprint at least one found in his writing desk. It was sent to him by a companion who was studying philosophy in some boarding school or other. It reads as follows:

To the Cleric John Bosco  
Diocesan Seminary, Chieri

January 26, 1836

Dear friend:

I would have answered much more quickly if I had had someone to deliver my letter to you personally, since in yours you stated you prefer it that way. And so, unwillingly, I had to wait until an opportunity presented itself.

There's not much news to tell you because, shut up as I am between four miserable and narrow walls, it's impossible for me to hear or see anything from time to time that might soften this sickening annoyance and boredom that is always around me.

Let me say it: I am between the devil and the deep blue sea. In other words, our teachers are always hounding us. Our logic instructor is forever talking about meting out punishments and has already done so. Our geometry teacher is a real firebrand. Both of them remind us several hundred times a day that a good number of us will fail the course at the end of the year: it works out that we are scolded daily by one or the other. They tell us they've never had to teach such block-heads like us and wonder aloud whether we have fallen off the moon or were only born yesterday.

You can then imagine how we get along, always badgered like this.

Burzio extends his greetings and I would ask you to please greet all our friends who are there with you.

Your faithful friend,  
A. A.

One does not preserve a letter thoughtlessly, nor does he without reason keep it carefully among other important papers for years. So we do not think we err when we say that this letter was not destroyed solely because it would be a reminder for him always to treat young people kindly and to use every means to make an educational institute a pleasant place to live in. There is no doubt but that John's reply was an encouragement to practice the virtues of Christian

obedience and patience. His way was always to uphold authority, without failing in charity, consoling the suffering, in keeping with the Pauline advice, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12, 15). The writer of this letter became a cleric and the following year, attended the same Chieri seminary with John.

While John advanced in piety, his health was not as it used to be, even though he kept the remarkable strength that his schoolmates had so often marvelled at. He could still snap copper or iron plates with the strength of his fingers. One day the bell for study rang, but the key for the room could not be found. The door was a stout one. The seminarians tried every way, even with picklocks, to open the door—but to no avail. Finally, a locksmith had to be sent for. John had up to now been watching on the side; he came up and asked the superior in charge, "Do you want me to open it?"

"You? How? It's impossible!"

"If you'll let me, I'll shove it open."

"Try it."

While the unbelieving superior watched, John struck the door with such force that the lock was ripped off and the door flew open. Those present were speechless.

This same strength was once almost fatal to him or could have caused him at least serious internal injuries. One day, during the evening recreation, for some unknown reason John walked up the stairs and, against his habit, ran quickly down a narrow, dark corridor. A companion, wearing canvas shoes, was also rushing pell mell from the opposite direction, certain he would meet no one in the dark. Neither saw the other and they crashed head on. John's companion was hurled back, while John remained standing a moment, then collapsed to the floor. The seminarians noticing their absence went looking for them. They found them both unconscious, blood flowing from mouth, ears and nose. They were carried to the infirmary. John did not regain consciousness for hours. His companion was less fortunate: at dawn he was still unconscious. When he slowly recovered consciousness he acted so oddly it was feared his brain had been affected. He shook off his stunned feeling only toward evening, to the great relief of all; both were able to return to their classes without any ill effects.

In the course of our narrative, we shall encounter similar events where illness, accidents or even the evil intent of men would surely have been the end of John Bosco had not Divine Providence intervened. But God in His mercy had assigned him yet fifty-two years of life, to be spent wholly for His glory and for the salvation of souls.

## CHAPTER 45

### *Student and Teacher*

THE happy outcome of his first year in the seminary was summarized by Don Bosco in his memoirs as follows: "My stay in the seminary was pleasant and fruitful, and I enjoyed the friendship of both my companions and superiors. It was customary at the midyear examination to award 60 lire to the student in each class who ranked first in both studies and conduct. I was truly blessed by the Lord because I won this prize every year during my six years in the seminary."

When he left for his summer vacation, his fellow seminarians always felt a desire to see him again in the fall. This we heard several times from some of them.

After he left, he first went to the Moglias of Moncucco, that good family from whom he had received so many tokens of affection. He wanted not only to pay his respects, but at the same time give them a pleasant surprise. The Moglias were threshing wheat when they noticed a priest heading in their direction across the fields. They momentarily stopped their work wondering who he might be. As John got nearer and stopped, as if to catch his breath, they suddenly recognized their old friend and their amazement turned into great joy. After an exchange of greetings with his former employers, who had tears of joy in their eyes, John said: "As you see, I *am* going to be a priest." The Moglias kept him as their welcome guest for several days showering him with hospitality. And their eleven-year-old son George, who watched curiously every move of the young seminarian, stated later that he always saw him occupied with prayer, study or going to church.

After that, John went home, but his stay with his mother was brief for reasons he himself explained. "I always wanted to bolster my knowledge of Greek," he wrote. "I had learned the rudiments

of the language in the classical course, I had studied grammar and had done some translating with the aid of a dictionary. Now a rare opportunity to deepen my knowledge of Greek came my way. In 1836 the cholera broke out in Naples, claiming over 5000 lives, and the disease spread slowly toward Liguria. It was too close for comfort, and so the Jesuits in Turin, earlier than usual, moved their boarding students from *Madonna del Carmine* [Our Lady of Carmel] school to Montaldo where they had a beautiful summer home. This change in plans made it necessary for them to double the teaching personnel, because in Turin they still had to teach the day pupils. Father Cafasso, whom they consulted for possible teachers, suggested that I be given a Greek class. This forced me to study Greek seriously in order to be able to teach it competently. Luckily, among this group of Jesuits, there was a Father Bini, a Greek scholar. His assistance proved very profitable for me. In only four months he had me translate almost the whole New Testament, the first two books of Homer and several odes of Pindar and Anacreon. Seeing my earnestness, the good priest continued to help me during the next four years. Each week I would send him a Greek composition or some translation; without delay he looked it over and returned it with opportune observations and corrections. In this way I became so proficient that I was able to translate Greek as easily as Latin."

Indeed, in 1886, while we listened, he recited entire chapters from St. Paul's epistles both in Latin and Greek, for he knew the New Testament by heart in both languages.

At Montaldo John taught Greek and supervised one of the dormitories for about three months. There he made the acquaintance of several boys from wealthy families. They thought much of him, and later, when the need arose, he was able to count on their assistance. It was his first contact with boys of this class. Prompted by piety and zeal for souls he came to know the shortcomings and dangers to which boys of this social class were subject, and he learned that he could not exercise over them that influence without which it is impossible to help them spiritually. He became convinced then that his field of work was not among the children of the wealthy.

Many years later, on April 5, 1864 when Father [Dominic] Ruffino in speaking about different projects, mentioned also a boarding

school for boys of wealthy families, Don Bosco said: "No, not that! Not as long as I live or have anything to do with it. That would be our ruin as it was of other Orders, whose original purpose, the education of poor boys, was abandoned in favor of the wealthy classes."

Notwithstanding this, years later with painful sacrifice he had to take over the college of Valsalice, at the insistence of the founding committee and at the command of Archbishop Gastaldi in order to spare embarrassment to the Turinese clergy. Only God could properly appreciate it.

Busy as he was at Montaldo, John had no chance during that vacation to prepare himself for the November examinations. Nevertheless, after his return to Chieri, in the few days preceding the examinations, he cut out of his book the treatise on which he would be examined, crammed as much as he could, even though that treatise had not been explained in class, took his exam and passed it successfully.

We cannot characterize this cramming and its results as superficial. John's prodigious memory and follow-up study habits made him grasp thoroughly whatever he studied. He had a mathematical mind and in reasoning proceeded methodically, always starting with precise definitions drawn from the best authors. We who for several years heard his Sunday catechetical instructions can easily bear this out. If his topic was some point of doctrine, virtue or vice, he began with its definition and then one by one cited his arguments for or against. Through this clear presentation his teachings remained indelible in our minds.

Several times we marvelled at his instant replies even though it was many years since he had studied the subject. For almost a year a certain Father [John] Ciattino, a very learned man and Rosminian philosopher, was a guest at the Oratory. He had fled Venice in 1856 for political reasons and had been recommended to Don Bosco. One day, at dinner, the conversation drifted into philosophy and the origin of ideas. After the priest gave his opinion, Don Bosco drew from it a sequel of logical, terse and incontrovertible conclusions that inescapably made a pantheist of Father Ciattino. He stammered some sort of reply, but he could not break the chain of Don Bosco's reasoning. Angered by his loss of face before the others at table, he walked out of the dining room slamming the door, much to the

surprise of those in the room, who had no idea of what it was all about. At supper he was back in his usual place but ate in dour silence. For a while Don Bosco observed him smilingly, then said: "If you please, Father Ciattino, maybe today I offended you unintentionally. I ventured into a subject that is out of my line. I am no philosopher, and please forgive me for contradicting you."

Father Ciattino looked up, smiled, and shaking his finger at Don Bosco said, jokingly, "You, not a philosopher? That's a good one!" Father [John Baptist] Francesia was present when this happened.

About 1875, Father Clement Bretto posed a theological question to Don Bosco. "Animals," he said, "can neither have inherited any guilt nor be able to acquire merit. Why, then, does God permit them to suffer and be unhappy?" Unhesitatingly Don Bosco replied, "Although animals are subject to pain they are not unhappy. Happiness or unhappiness presupposes intelligence, which the animals lack. Therefore, this in no way reflects on God's goodness or His Divine Providence."

Another time some one asked him: "What is fear?"

At once he answered [from the Scriptures]: "Fear is naught but the surrender of the helps that come from reason . . ." (Wis. 17, 11).

On many other occasions, which for the sake of brevity we shall pass over, Don Bosco gave proof of his wide knowledge of philosophy and related sciences. Now making a more comprehensive statement, we can assert that only an assiduous, close observer could adequately assess the extent of Don Bosco's learning in the fields of philosophy, theology, scripture, history, casuistry, ascetics, canon law, physics, mathematics and so on. He was well versed in all he needed to carry out the mission that Divine Providence had assigned to him. Nevertheless, he never paraded his knowledge; on the contrary, from his unassuming demeanor one would hardly suspect it. Only in some casual discussion, when necessary or opportune, it would flash like lightning in the sky, dazzling the unsuspecting. But these flashes were rare; due to the whirl of daily activity that engulfed him, he had little time for scholarly discussions. His words were primarily aimed at instilling in his boys love of virtue and religion.

[Let us now return to Chieri.] Those years in which he was stor-

ing up knowledge, were years of great hardship for him. He lacked even the strictly necessary. He did not even have money to buy indispensable books, and from time to time he was obliged to borrow them from his close friends. He had only one cassock and he took great care of it. If stitches gave way, he would mend it immediately lest it rip. A can of shoe polish would last him a whole year; on weekdays he would even find more economical ways to shine his shoes. They were so worn-out and patched all over that they were hardly fit to wear in public. Maurice Capella, the seminary door-keeper, stated that often he loaned his own shoes to John when he went out for the weekly walk or to the cathedral.

John could easily have applied for help to his pastor, Father Cinzano or to Father Cafasso, but in this regard he preferred to follow the teaching of St. Francis de Sales: ask for nothing, refuse nothing. He would rather go without something than bother his benefactors for things he considered not strictly necessary. No doubt he was moved by great love of evangelical poverty. Whoever lived at his side for a long time can bear out that he was utterly detached from comforts and riches. Huge sums of money were entrusted to him by Divine Providence, but he always used them exclusively for the benefit of others; nothing ever for himself. His ideal was the poverty of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

## CHAPTER 46

### *Esteemed and Respected*

LOUIS COMOLLO donned the clerical habit in the summer of 1836 and he, too, entered the Chieri seminary in the fall. Thus he rejoined John Bosco, who was now beginning his second year of philosophy with ever greater enthusiasm. His tuition had been halved as was customarily done for good and needy students. Their former friendship bonds were strengthened anew and they truly became one heart and one soul. In writing about John we cannot help making use of Comollo's biography which John wrote later and in which he referred to himself simply as a close friend. In quoting it, we shall insert John's name when called for and will give now and then at least a hint of the virtuous life he himself led without ever saying a word about it.

From the very start of the school year, Comollo had written on a slip of paper, used as a bookmark, the following program of daily life: *He does much who, though doing little, does what he must; he does nothing who does much, but not that which he should do.* He kept it in the book that he would use most during the day. Comollo obeyed promptly even in the least things. As soon as the bell rang, he would immediately interrupt whatever he was doing; for him the bell was the voice of God. He abhorred backbiting or passing judgment on others. No one ever heard him utter a word contrary to his self-imposed principle: either *speak well of others, or be silent.* In recreation or on weekly walks with his classmates he enjoyed talking about scholastic subjects. In addition, during his study periods, he would mentally make a list of things not very clear to him in order to discuss them with John and get a full explanation.

Whenever the seminarians attended solemn services in the cathedral, they felt free to omit the rosary. Not so Comollo. As soon as the services were over, and the others enjoyed their recreation, he

would retire to the chapel with John to pay tribute to his good Mother by reciting the rosary.

Very devout to the Blessed Sacrament, he availed himself of every opportunity to receive Holy Communion. When it was time to go to the altar rail, he was completely absorbed in lofty and pious thoughts. Slowly and devoutly he approached the altar rail with eyes lowered, and received our Lord with great feeling. Back in his pew, he was so moved with love that he seemed almost beside himself. His prayers were punctuated by sobs, tears, and suppressed moans. This would last till the end of Mass, when Matins were intoned. John tried to restrain Louis' outward show of emotions lest they offend the sensibility of others, but Louis would answer: "I feel so full of joy and love for our Lord that I would choke if I didn't give myself some outlet."

At other times he would say: "When I receive Holy Communion I experience a joy so delightful that I find it impossible to understand or explain it."

John respected Comollo's ardent devotion. But he himself felt an inner aversion for any peculiarity that might attract the attention of others. His devotion was no less ardent than Comollo's, but it manifested itself in a different way. After receiving Holy Communion he would return to his place, and kneeling upright, head slightly bowed, eyes closed, hands clasped before his breast, he would remain motionless until he had finished his prayer of thanksgiving. No sigh ever escaped him; only now and then his lips would move as he murmured a prayer. Yet, the lively faith that shone on his face made one gaze at him in admiration.

For Comollo even the most simple and insignificant things became a means to practice virtue. He had the habit of crossing his legs and resting his elbow whenever he could, at table, or at his desk. To deny himself comfort, he wanted to correct even this habit; so he begged John to call it to his attention whenever he saw him do it and to inflict some penance upon him. John did as requested because even then his own conduct was a source of edification to all. He never allowed himself the comfort of crossing his legs, or stretching out in his chair. John always sat erect, never leaning against the back. Whenever his hands were not employed otherwise, he kept them clasped in front of him. This self-control formed the

basis of their exterior deportment, which so impressed and edified anyone who saw them, either in church, study hall, classroom or dining room.

In his memoirs Don Bosco makes passing remarks about his friend in words that unwittingly reveal the inner beauty of his own soul and his own deep humility: "My recreation was frequently interrupted by Comollo. He would catch hold of my cassock, and ask me to go with him. He would lead me to the chapel for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament on behalf of the dying, or to say the rosary, or the Little Office of Our Lady for the souls in purgatory.

"This wonderful friend of mine was a blessing to me. Whenever necessary he would admonish me, correct me, or comfort me with such tact and charity that somehow I almost enjoyed giving him such occasions in order to savor his correction. We were quite close to each other and I felt naturally drawn to imitate him. I was far behind him in virtue, but I owe it to him if I was able to persevere in my vocation without suffering any harm from worldly-minded companions. There was only one thing in which I did not even attempt to imitate him—self-denial. It amazed me to see this nineteen-year-old keep rigorous fasts throughout Lent and other prescribed periods; fast every Saturday in honor of the Blessed Virgin, often skip breakfast, occasionally feed only on bread and water, endure both mockery and abuse without ever showing the slightest resentment and all the while carry out to perfection even the least of his school or church duties. All these things astounded me and made me realize that in my friend I had an angel, a stimulus for good and a model for any seminarian."

Despite John's humble words, he was certainly the equal of Comollo and worthy of his friendship. Let us hear what some of John's fellow seminarians had to say about him. Father John Francis Giacomelli of Avigliana, who was always an intimate friend of Don Bosco, describes how they became friends: "I entered the Chieri seminary a year later than John Bosco. The first time that I sat in philosophy class I saw a seminarian in front of me who seemed much older than the rest. I figured that he was some ten years older than I. He was very handsome, had curly hair, but was pale and thin and looked unwell. In my opinion, he would hardly last till the end of the school year. I was wrong. Even though his health re-

mained rather delicate, he seemed to take on new strength with each passing day. Of course that seminarian was our own Don Bosco. I took a strong liking to him and also felt sorry for him. He, too, seemed to feel sorry for me because of my embarrassment at being hazed by some classmates.

“I had come to the seminary a month later than the others. I didn’t know anybody there, and during the first few days, wandered about like a lost soul. John approached me the first time he saw me alone after lunch, and kept me company throughout the whole recreation period. He told me a whole string of amusing stories in order to distract me in case I might be homesick. As we talked, I learned that he had not been too well during the summer vacation. He was very helpful to me. Among other things I recall that I had a poorly made biretta, somewhat out of proportion. This made me the butt of some jokes. Neither I nor John liked that. He had the skill and the tools and so he fixed it up for me. It was then that I began to admire his good heart.

“His company was edifying. Several times he invited me to church with him to recite Vespers or some other prayer in honor of the Blessed Virgin. He talked readily of spiritual matters. One day, during recreation, he took me into our classroom where he explained to me the hymn in honor of the Name of Jesus. He invited me to recite the five psalms honoring that adorable name, and pointed out how the initials of each psalm formed the word *Jesus*. I was deeply impressed by this particular devotion of his which was new to me. Another time, talking about the *Ave Maris Stella*, he commented on the words *tulit esse tuus*. ‘This verse,’ he said, ‘refers to our Lord who was born of the Virgin Mary; but when we say *tuus* of Jesus, we remind Mary that we, too, are hers. Since Jesus came to save mankind by taking on a human body in her most pure womb, all Christians are adopted brothers of Jesus and therefore Mary’s children as well. From the first moment of the Incarnation we began to belong to the Virgin Mary. That is why we say to her: *Monstra te esse Matrem*: Show us that you are our Mother, our help, our protectress.’ Is this not an indication that he already had in mind all that he realized later through Mary Help of Christians?

“Even then John Bosco already showed a great interest in boys and enjoyed being with them. Many boys of Chieri, several of whom

two years before had been schoolmates of his, would come to visit him, every Thursday, attracted by his charming manner. At the usual hour, we would all hear the doorkeeper shouting: 'Visitors for Bosco of Castelnuovo!' Thereupon he would go downstairs, chat happily with them, as they grouped around him like children around a father. They discussed school, their progress, their prayers. John never failed to give them some good advice: he also led them to the chapel for a short visit and always showed them how much he cared for them. More than once, after taking leave of them, he said to me: 'We should always inject some spiritual thought into our conversation. It is a seed which in time will bear fruit.' "

This is also the counsel of the Holy Spirit: "Let your conversation be about the Law of the Lord" (Sir. 9, 15).

"John was called *Bosco of Castelnuovo*," Father Giacomelli continues, "to distinguish him from another seminarian by the same surname, who later became director of the *Rosine* Institute in Turin. In this connection I remember a little incident which, though unimportant, impressed me. The two Boscos were joking about their names and wondering whether they should use some nickname for clarity's sake.

"The other Bosco said: 'Bosco means wood. I like *nespolo* [nes-po-lo] wood, so call me *Nespolo*.' <sup>1</sup>

"I, instead, like *sales* [sa-les] wood which is soft and flexible, so call me *Sales*.' <sup>2</sup>

"Was he perhaps already thinking about the future Society of St. Francis de Sales while he tried to imitate the benignity of this Saint? Sensitive as he was even in minor things, he would easily have been carried away by anger if he had been less virtuous. No other seminarian (and there were many) was so prone to flare up. It was evident, nevertheless, that John fought earnestly and steadily to keep his temper under control.

"He was a model student. I admired his great diligence in studying and his deep sincere piety. I never saw him take part even in those pastimes permitted by our Superiors. Instead he would spend his recreation either reading, studying or carrying on an instructive

<sup>1</sup> *Nespolo*, medlar in English, is a small Eurasian tree of the rose family widely cultivated in Europe. Its wood is hard and knotty. [Editor]

<sup>2</sup> Piedmontese for *willow*. [Editor]

conversation while walking up and down with his companions. Or he would pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. In all the five years that I was his fellow seminarian, he never failed to narrate daily some episode from Church history, the lives of the Saints, or of the Blessed Virgin, our most loving Mother.

“His companions loved him and regarded him as their best friend. If someone in our group behaved in an indiscreet or bullying manner toward him, John would skillfully put him in his place and then hold him at bay with his dignified manners. Whenever there was even the slightest dispute or clash of opinion among us, John would intervene and restore peace between the contenders.” Thus Father Giacomelli.

Msgr. Theodore Dalfi of San Maurizio Canavese was another of John’s fellow seminarians. A secular priest in the Turin archdiocese and a pastor, he later joined the Vincentian Fathers and survived Don Bosco. He was an excellent and very lively seminarian whom Divine Providence was to send later to Palestine, Egypt and other regions of Asia Minor on four separate occasions for biblical studies, which eventually appeared in print in four large volumes. He writes about John Bosco as follows: “In 1836, after a three-year study in pharmacy, I donned the clerical habit. I entered the Chieri seminary on the eve of All Saints’ Day. The first friend I made was John Bosco. I also met his inseparable companion, Louis Comollo. In fact, since I wanted to choose someone to be friends with, I first approached Comollo who just happened to be there, but after a few days I dropped him. Quiet as he was, my company would have been a penance for him.

“John Bosco, though a friend to all, was on intimate terms only with a small group of classmates, other seminarians he knew because they hailed from villages near his home. From the very start, he had formed with them a kind of club, and, because he was older, he acted as their father, master and mentor. Among these was Comollo, whom I nursed the night before his death, Zucca who came from a nearby village, Picchiotino, Anthony Avataneo and [Joseph] Burzio from Poirino, as well as Ronco from Chieri, and a few others no longer living. They usually spent their recreation listening to his tales mainly after supper.

“I made the most of the recreation period until the very last

minute, to make up for those three years in a laboratory and pharmacy. *Bara rotta*, a mock skirmish between two groups of players, was my favorite sport. How many times I tried to pull John from his tiny corner and drag him into the game teasing the life out of him! It was no use! He didn't even get mad! He would just say: 'Oh! you Dalfi, you Dalfi!' That took the wind out of my sails and I had to let him go. No one ever saw him run about, nor do I remember ever seeing him play cards or read novels or poetry.

"On weekdays, during our afternoon recreation, after barely a quarter of an hour, he would always be called to the parlor where, with the Superior's permission, he tutored some of the town boys for a modest fee that helped him in his personal needs, since he had no other means of support. [It became a ritual.] The door bell would ring, the gong would sound a few times, and finally there would come the call: *Bosco of Castelnuovo*. The students would pick it up and re-echo, *Bosco of Castelnuovo, Bois de Château neuf!* John would laugh, and unhurriedly he would walk to the parlor. His only free time was his story-telling hour after supper in the evening.

"I can say that I never saw him angry, though at times he had every reason to be. Instead he always laughed things off and took them as a little teasing, joking or hazing. Never did he take offense.

"It is very regrettable that those who were most frequently in his company and could have told us far more about his intimate life are no longer living."

In the above account Msgr. Dalfi mentions a group of seminarians gathered around John Bosco. This little club aimed at the perfect observance of their scholastic and religious duties. Its principal members were William Garigliano, John Giacomelli and Louis Comollo. "These three companions were really a treasure to me," Don Bosco wrote. The scholastic circle, which had been formed the previous year, was still flourishing, and several new members had joined it. Discussions were held in Latin, as Comollo had suggested, and dealt with philosophical problems not understood thoroughly by the students while in class. This was highly useful because it accustomed them to handle this language with great ease in scholastic matters. Comollo was famous for asking questions. He usually sparked the discussions with useful research and anecdotes,

but was truly a gentleman in never interrupting a speaker. Indeed, when he himself was talking, he would often stop midway to let others talk.

There was Dominic Peretti, a seminarian who later became pastor at Buttigliera: he was extremely talkative and quick with his answers. Garigliano instead was a good listener and only occasionally expressed some opinion or other. These discussions required great attention in class in order to follow closely the lessons given by the professor. Thanks to them John acquired a thorough knowledge of logic, metaphysics, ethics, mathematics and physics, as we shall see during the course of this narrative. "As iron sharpens iron, so man sharpens his fellow man" (Prov. 27, 17).

What follows corroborates all we have just said. In his second year of philosophy John ran the danger of losing a two-month tuition discount because he was competing in a test against an extremely talented rival. Both of them had topped the other competitors and had obtained equally excellent marks, in oral and written exams. It was suggested that they split the prize between them. John agreed, but his rival, although well-off, hesitated. The professor gave them another test, a very difficult one. John was the winner. He again won the prize every year.

In his studies John labored under a misconception that might have had disastrous results had not a fortunate occurrence disabused him of it. He wrote: "Accustomed as I was in high school to reading the classics and absorbing the elaborate presentation of pagan mythology, I could find no pleasure in the simpler style of ascetical writings. So I gradually came to believe that style or eloquence could not be found in religious works. In my eyes even the writings of the Fathers of the Church, apart from the religious principles that they set forth clearly and energetically, seemed to be the result of rather limited talents. This I had also heard even from priests well versed in literature, but rather prejudiced, because of ignorance, toward these great luminaries of the Church.

"One day at the beginning of my second year of philosophy I went to visit the Blessed Sacrament. I had forgotten my prayer book and so I picked up the *Imitation of Christ* and read several chapters on the Blessed Sacrament. After paying close attention to those sublime thoughts and their clear and ordered presentation of truths,

I began to say to myself: 'Whoever wrote this must have been very learned.' I read and re-read that little golden book, and it was not long before I realized that there were more doctrinal and moral precepts in any one of its verses than in the huge volumes of the ancient classics. After reading this book, I lost all taste for pagan literature. I then turned to Flavius Josephus' *The Antiquities of the Jews* and the *History of the Jewish War*. I read also Marchetti's *Ragionamenti sulla religione* [Dissertations on Religion], the works of Frassinous, Balmes, Zucconi and many others. I also enjoyed reading [Claude] Fleury's *Histoire Ecclésiastique*, not knowing that I was not supposed to.<sup>3</sup> But I reaped greater benefits from the works of Cavalca, Passavanti, Segneri and Henrion's *Church History*, which made a great impression on me.

"You may ask where I found time to study with so much reading. The answer is that my memory still stood me in good stead. A careful reading of the subject matter and close attention in class was all I needed to take care of my school work. The rest of my time I could give to other reading. My superiors knew it and left me entirely free."

We might add that he also was studying the Fathers and Doctors of the Church with great zest, especially St. Augustine, St. Jerome and St. Thomas. He actually memorized several volumes of this prince of philosophers and theologians. In the remaining four years that he spent in the seminary he read and studied the whole Bible, the Commentaries on the Scriptures by Cornelius a Lapide and Tirino, and delved also into the Bollandists. He borrowed these books and any others he wanted from the seminary library, and in the summer, from pastors. Indeed, it was providential that for some time Don Bosco should be unaware of the beauty of religious works whose appreciation would have required a greater intellectual maturity than a first-year philosophy student usually has. His love for the classics was a necessary culture for one who was destined to found educational institutions. Monsignor Pechenino, an intimate friend for many years, declared that Don Bosco was admirably versed in every branch of Italian and Latin literature. But every-

<sup>3</sup> Although expressed moderately and with restraint, Fleury's judgments are tinged with Gallicanism especially as regards the Papacy. [Editor—Cf. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VI, p. 104]

thing has its season. In Sirach we read: "He [the wise man] explores the wisdom of the men of old and occupies himself with the prophecies . . ." (39, 1).

Meanwhile John Bosco was completing his second year of philosophy, richer in knowledge and dearer to his fellow seminarians and his many friends in town. One of the latter, a certain Brosio, wrote to Father [John] Bonetti as follows: "I recall that when I was still a boy at Chieri, Don Bosco, who was then a seminarian, was highly esteemed as a cleric of great virtue not only by us young boys, but also by men and older people. He was liked by all because he cared so much for youngsters. He was forever in our midst charming us with his affability and warm affection. One might say that he literally lived for young people. Whenever the seminarians passed on their way to the cathedral for religious services, everyone would stop to catch a glimpse of him and people would point to the curly-haired seminarian, 'curly' for short, the nickname we boys had given to John. His pleasant and easy manners encouraged me to try and get to know him better. I found it very easy. I happened to know very well the relatives of Louis Comollo, Don Bosco's inseparable friend. Taking advantage of this, I visited Louis Comollo, and as I had expected, I achieved my purpose. It was not long before I had become Bosco's friend, too, and our friendship lasted until his death."

Two events gladdened John's heart that year. During the month of April, Archbishop Fransoni made pastoral visits to the parishes of Chieri and Castelnuovo and the other rural parishes of the area. We may surmise that Father Cinzano [pastor and rural dean] in giving him a report on his clergy, mentioned also the young seminarian John Bosco. From Chieri and Castelnuovo, the Archbishop passed on to the deaneries of Gassino and Casalborgone and then returned to Turin. He was scheduled for sacred ordinations but instead fell seriously ill. He quickly recovered and then withdrew to the peaceful environment of the Chieri hills for some convalescence as the guest of a distinguished priest. He needed the rest also because he had been overactive in many fields during the past few years and had experienced many tribulations in resisting the exorbitant demands of the Gallican court. Cabinet members seemed to direct all their energies to fomenting discord between Church and State as a pre-

text to restrict more and more the former's jurisdiction. In 1836 a royal decree ordered all charitable institutions to open their books for auditing by a royal commission invested with many powers. The State did not recognize such institutions, contending that they were lay organizations and as such completely subject to civil authority. Another decree forbade the Visitation Nuns to open a house in Thonon, notwithstanding the Holy See's permission. Minister Barbaroux vetoed the publication of a large number of synodal statutes of the Aosta diocese; the Senate claimed jurisdiction over cemeteries, although these sacred places were properly under episcopal jurisdiction, and finally, certain sentences passed by ecclesiastical courts were declared not binding. King Charles Albert listened to the Archbishop's protests, tempered some decisions taken by his ministers, and applied to the Holy See for some desirable concessions. The Council of State had proposed to take away altogether from the clergy the keeping of civil records but the King was averse to it and opened negotiations with the Church. The Council of Trent had been the first to bring some order into family life, by prescribing that in each parish, records be kept of the birth, baptism, marriage and death of each parishioner. Hence, this matter was certainly within the competence of the Church. The Holy Father, however, without prejudice to this right of his, arranged matters to the satisfaction of the King and the latter made the papal decisions a state law that same year 1837.

It is quite likely that, while Archbishop Fransoni, weary of these struggles, was recuperating in the peaceful surroundings of Chieri, John paid him his first filial homage and thereby awakened in the Archbishop a vivid affection that he would never forget. We cannot otherwise understand how Archbishop Fransoni would so readily grant John such a rare and not easily obtainable privilege, namely, early ordination.

Don Bosco had another heartening experience around that time. In a pastoral letter dated August 5, Archbishop Fransoni announced to the faithful that the King had graciously approved the collection of alms on behalf of the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith*. The pastoral letter explained the aims, advantages and spiritual favors granted by the Holy Father to all who enrolled in the Society and fulfilled its obligations. We should remember that

it was one of Don Bosco's ideals to dedicate himself to the foreign missions. We can then surmise that new horizons were opened to him and ever more ardent became his zeal for the eternal salvation of countless souls, so effective, indeed, that one day new pages would be added to the already glorious history of the Catholic Foreign Missions.

## CHAPTER 47

### *Seminarian on Vacation*

IN the course of our story we have often had occasion to admire Don Bosco's humility. In his memoirs he accuses himself of faults, which are really not as bad as he makes them appear and which stem mainly from the inexperience and impulsiveness of youth. As we pondered over the rather contradictory views of Don Bosco and of his contemporaries in this matter, we came to the following conclusion: Don Bosco wished to give an object lesson, through his own life, of those shortcomings to which young people are prone. He wanted to emphasize in this manner the perils that may be encountered by boys, students and seminarians, who are anxious to do what is right, but do not know how to go about it. They are like admonitions and instructions that a father gives to his children to encourage them in their daily struggle against the promptings of self-love, pride, emotions and other obstacles and urge them to strive after perfection through humility, obedience, piety and study in order to become ultimately the faithful servants of the Lord, ready for any good work that will be entrusted to them.

Several episodes that took place during John's summer vacation confirm our belief. He wrote: "Summer usually presents serious dangers for seminarians, especially if they are protracted as was the case then when they lasted from the feast of St. John the Baptist [June 24] until after All Saints' Day [November 1], that is, four and one-half months. I spent my time in reading and writing. But since I did not know how to organize my time, I wasted a good deal of it. I tried to while away some of it in manual work. I made spindles, pegs, children's toys, boccie and bearings. I mended clothes and shoes and repaired fittings and furniture. I also did some masonry work and bound books. At home I still have a desk, a kitchen table

and some chairs I made that summer—my masterpieces. I also scythed, harvested, pruned, gathered grapes and made wine.

“I had worked at such jobs on previous summers before entering the seminary. I also took care of the usual group of boys, but I could do that only on Sundays and holy days. I would assemble them in my yard in the evening, and after a few games, I would give them a brief talk. I enjoyed teaching catechism to many of them who were already sixteen or seventeen years old and still completely ignorant of their religion. I also taught some of them how to read and write with good results. The desire, indeed the yearning, to learn drew boys of all ages to me. The lessons were free of charge but I demanded regularity, attention and monthly confession. At the start a few of them dropped out, because they were unwilling to accept these terms, but ultimately it was better that way for those who stayed.

“When I said that vacations are dangerous, I was speaking for myself. An unsuspecting seminarian may often find himself in grave danger without even being aware of it. This happened to me. Once, on a village feast day, an uncle of mine invited me to his house for a banquet. I did not want to go, but he insisted I was needed for the church services. So I accepted and served Mass and helped out with the singing. Then the banquet started. Things went all right for a while, but as soon as the guests began to feel the effects of the wine, they began to talk rather freely. As a seminarian I would not stand for that and so I tried to remonstrate, but in vain. So I got up from the table and took my hat, ready to leave. My uncle would not let me. Thereupon someone else began to talk even more offensively and insulted the others at the table. Things went from bad to worse: there were shouts and threats amid a loud din of china and silver. There was nothing else to do but get out of there as fast as possible. When I got home I firmly renewed the resolution I had already made, namely, to keep away from worldly affairs to avoid falling into sin.”

Oh! How true are the words of the Holy Spirit: “Headache, bitterness and disgrace is wine drunk amid anger and strife. More and more wine is a share for the fool; it lessens his strength and multiplies his wounds. Rebuke not your neighbor when wine is served, nor put him to shame when he is merry: use no harsh words

with him and distress him not in the presence of others” (Sir. 31, 29-31). Under such circumstances one must either go along with the crowd or be silent; in that case it is better to stay at home. [We read in the Book of Proverbs:] “Consort not with winebibbers” (23, 20).

“An equally unpleasant episode, but of a different nature, occurred at Croveglia, a hamlet of Buttigliera. Another uncle of mine (whose name was Matthew, and who lived to the age of 102), invited me there for the feast of St. Bartholomew [the local Patron Saint]. Again I was to help at the church services, sing, and play the violin. This had been my favorite instrument but I had already given it up. Everything went well in church. The dinner was at my uncle’s house since he was the chairman of the festivities. So far nothing objectionable had occurred. The pastor also was at table with us. After dinner, the guests asked me if I would play something for them. I declined. They insisted, saying that they simply had to hear my ‘masterly’ performance. I replied that I had left my violin at home.

“‘That’s easily remedied,’ one of the guests interjected, ‘so-and-so right here in the village has one: I’ll get it and then you’ll play.’

“In no time he was back with it. I still tried to get out of it. ‘Well, let’s do this,’ one of them said, ‘I’ll be the soloist and you’ll play the accompaniment.’

“Fool that I was, I did not have the courage to refuse. So I began playing, and continued for quite a while. Suddenly I heard whispering and shuffling of feet, as though many people had gathered. I went to the window and saw a crowd dancing gaily in the front yard to the sound of my music. Words cannot express the indignation that seized me at the sight.

“‘What!’ I cried to the assembled guests. ‘Do you expect me to promote this kind of entertainment after I have spoken so often against it? Never! Here, take this violin at once back to its owner, thank him and tell him I don’t need it any longer.’

“I then got up and went home. Then I took my violin, trampled on it, and smashed it into a thousand pieces. Never again did I play such an instrument, not even at church services. I had made a sol-

em promise and I kept it. Later I taught others how to play it, but without ever handling it.

“One more episode will suffice. During the summer I used to go hunting for birds’ nests, in the fall I would set snares with birdlime and cages, and sometimes I hunted with a gun. One day I was chasing a hare from one field to another and from vineyard to vineyard. I climbed hills and roamed through valleys for hours. Finally, I caught up with the poor animal. My shot broke its ribs and the poor thing fell on the spot. I was filled with deepest sorrow. Friends of mine came running at the sound of the shot. While they gloated over the kill, I cast a glance at myself and noticed that dressed as I was, without cassock, in shirt sleeves, with a coarse straw hat, and over two miles from my home I looked just like a poacher. I felt very embarrassed so I apologized for my appearance and returned home quickly. I once again gave up hunting in any form and this time, with the help of our Lord, I kept my promise. May God forgive me for such behavior.

“These three episodes really taught me a lesson. From that time on I gave myself with stronger resolve to a life aloof from worldly pursuits. I became firmly convinced that anyone wishing to devote himself truly to God’s service must give up all worldly amusements. True, such amusements are often not sinful, but one thing is certain: worldly dress, speech and behavior are always a danger to virtue, especially the delicate virtue of chastity.”

This is how Don Bosco, in his humility, appraised his vacation. Very different was the opinion of those who saw him at that time. The assistant pastor, Father Ropolo, stated: “During the summer vacation, the seminarian Bosco took every possible precaution to safeguard the ardor and spirit of the seminary. In the quiet of the Susambrino farm and at Becchi he kept himself constantly busy with study and suitable manual labor that was beneficial to his health. These activities were necessary. He was never idle. Moreover, he faithfully carried out all the practices of piety proper to a seminarian: meditation, spiritual reading, the rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, daily attendance at Mass and frequent Communion. Since he lived far from the parish church, he was not always able to attend the early Mass because of his poor state of

health and other reasons. So he would come to the last Mass at eleven o'clock, at which he received Holy Communion, to the great edification of the people. He was always willing to serve at the altar. Every Sunday he taught catechism to the young men, with great zeal and a keen sense of satisfaction. Whenever the church bells tolled for the dying, he immediately hurried off for the church, some two miles away, where he would don a surplice, take the *ombrellino* and escort the Blessed Sacrament to the home of the sick person, no matter how far. Nor did he consider himself excused from listening to the sermons. Rather he was so attentive that afterwards he could repeat them word for word to his fellow seminarians, to their utter amazement. His demeanor was always reserved and impeccable because he knew how important it was to set a good example. Consequently his fellow villagers held him in great esteem."

John spent a good deal of his time with Father Cinzano, who loved him dearly. John was always ready to perform some service in the rectory. At the same time all the books in the pastor's library were at his disposal. The good priest was well versed in philosophy, theology and history, and maintained a lively interest in the study of literature. A Latin scholar, he had all the classics, which he constantly read and studied even though already advanced in years. This scholarly priest had a very high opinion of John, often remarking that ever since he had known him he had always detected something extraordinary in him.

A thing that greatly contributed to this reputation was John's great self-control. John Filippello [a friend of his], recalls that one day Bosco was waiting in the rectory reception room to speak to the pastor. There were also two other students who had come to get some document or other. They began to poke fun at Bosco. Someone urged John to put those two blockheads in their place, but he replied: "Let them have their fun. They're young and, besides, their laughter does me no harm."

Professor Francis Bertagna gave us this report: "When John was at Susambrino, several times a week five or six young students of Castelnovo would go to him for tutoring, either together or separately, and at different hours. Some needed tutoring in the subjects they had studied the year before, while others needed to

prepare for the course to which they had been promoted. A few parents paid a small monthly fee which enabled John to buy clothes for himself; others gave nothing and John tutored their children out of pure friendship or for charity's sake. But the first lesson he taught them was to love God and obey His Commandments, and he always closed his lesson by exhorting them to pray, to fear offending God, to avoid sin and the occasions of sin."

Up to the time of his ordination John Bosco climbed every day to the top of a hill covered with vineyards belonging to the Turco family in the area known as Renenta. On top of the hill there was a grove of trees in whose shade John spent many hours. There he quietly pursued those supplementary studies for which he had no time during the school year: in particular, Calmet's *History of the Old and New Testament* and his geography of the Holy Land.<sup>1</sup>

He also studied Hebrew and became proficient in this language. In 1884, in Rome, to our great surprise, we heard him discuss the grammatical structure and meaning of certain phrases of the prophets with a priest who taught Hebrew. Together they compared some parallel texts in different books of the Bible. He also became interested in the translation of the New Testament from the Greek, and began to prepare some sermons, [basing himself on the original texts.] Anticipating the need of modern foreign languages, he also began to study French, which was his favorite language, besides Latin, Italian, Hebrew and Greek.

Several times we heard him say: "I pursued my studies in Joseph Turco's vineyard at Renenta."

This he did to prepare himself for his mission of educating the young. In fact, one day Joseph Turco, his close friend, asked him: "Now you're a seminarian and soon you'll be a priest. What will you then do?"

John answered: "I have no inclination for parish work, whether as a pastor or curate. But I would like to gather around me poor and abandoned boys, teach them and give them a religious education."

Another time he confided to him what he had learned in a dream, namely, that in due time, he would gather a large number of boys in a certain place and provide for their temporal and spiritual well-

<sup>1</sup> Augustin Calmet, O.S.B. (1672-1757), a celebrated French exegete. [Editor]

fare. He did not go into details, but most likely it was the same thing that he told his spiritual sons at the Oratory for the first time in 1858; among them Cagliero, Rua, Francesia and others. In the dream he had seen the valley below the Susambrino estate transformed into a big city. Gangs of boys were running through the streets and squares shouting, playing and cursing. John could not stand that, and quick-tempered as he was by nature, he scolded them and threatened to hit them if they would not stop it. They paid no attention whatever and so he began to strike out. They lost no time in jumping him and pounding him fiercely. John had to take to his heels. But suddenly he met a Man who ordered him to stop and go back to teach those boys how to be good and avoid evil. John complained that they had already beaten him up and would do it again and worse if he went back. Then this Man introduced him to a Lady of very noble aspect who was coming forward. He told John: "This is my Mother. Listen to Her."

The Lady looked at John intently and lovingly and then said: "If you wish to win over these boys, do not hit them: be kind and appeal to their better selves."

Then, as in his first dream, he saw the boys transformed into wild animals and then again into sheep and lambs, and he himself their shepherd by the Lady's order. The Prophet Isaia had envisioned something similar: "Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself that they might announce my praise" (43, 20).

Perhaps this was the time when he envisioned the Oratory with all its buildings ready for him and his boys. One of his fellow seminarians, a Father Bosio of Castagnole, who later became pastor at Levone Canavese, paid his first visit to the Oratory in 1890. The Superior Chapter accompanied him on a tour of the House. Passing through the courtyard, the priest looked around at the many buildings enclosing it and then exclaimed: "What I see is not new to me. In the seminary Don Bosco described it all to me, as if he had seen with his own eyes what he was telling me. It is just as he described it." And the good priest was greatly moved while reminiscing about his schoolmate and friend.

Father Cinzano, too, told Father Joachim Berto and others that

John, while still a seminarian, had told him in no uncertain terms, that in due time he would have his own priests, young clerics, students and artisans, and even a nice brass band.

At this point we cannot refrain from dwelling briefly on the logical development of the various dreams that wondrously followed one another. At the age of nine, John Bosco first learned of the great mission that would be entrusted to him; at sixteen he hears the promise of material means for sheltering and feeding countless boys; at nineteen a peremptory order makes it clear that he is not free to refuse the mission entrusted to him; at twenty-one he is told about the type of boys whose spiritual welfare he must especially look after; at twenty-two a big city, Turin, is pointed out to him, as the field and headquarters of his apostolic labors. We shall see how these mysterious instructions will continue as needed until the completion of God's plans. Can one say that such dreams were mere dreams? Let us mention just one episode that shows how dear John Bosco was to God and how effective in obtaining the Blessed Virgin's help even in those days. The area of Castelnuovo was frequently ravaged by storms; the entire grape harvest had been lost for ten consecutive years. The Turco family lamented this misfortune with John who was then still a seminarian. He replied with humble assurance: "Don't be afraid. As long as I'll be here at Renenta, there will be no more hailstorms. Let's simply pray to the Blessed Virgin and she will protect us." The fact is that for a number of years there were no more hailstorms. According to Joseph Turco, John was responsible for God's blessing on that district.

## CHAPTER 48

### *A Sermon, A Visit, A Dinner*

WHILE John was happily spending his vacation in manual work, studying, tutoring and gathering boys on Sundays for church services and recreation, he received one day an invitation to preach on Our Lady of the Rosary in the neighboring village of Alfiano. With his pastor's consent and offer of assistance, he accepted, and for the first time he ascended the pulpit, happy to dedicate the firstfruits of his preaching to the Blessed Virgin who had shown herself to him as mother and guide. He developed his theme starting with that most effective of all prayers in honor of the Blessed Virgin, the prayer that Leo XIII would incessantly promote, convinced that through it he would be able to achieve the restoration of the social order. There is a reason for this remark of ours and the reader will see it as our story unfolds.

Meanwhile Comollo had not forgotten his friend and wrote to him: "I have already enjoyed two months' vacation and despite the very hot weather my health has improved. I have already studied those parts of Logic and Ethics that we did not cover in class. I would like to read Flavius Josephus' work that you suggest, but I do not think it will be possible, since I have already started a book on the history of heresies. I hope to do that next year. My room is a most delightful place. I laugh, exercise, study, read and sing. If you were here, my happiness would be complete. I am enjoying the company of my dear uncle at meals, recreation and walks. Notwithstanding his age, he is still light-hearted and keeps telling me jokes and anecdotes that I enjoy immensely. I am expecting you at the appointed time. I wish you a happy vacation, and if you are a true friend, pray to the Lord for me."

John accepted Comollo's invitation. Since he had never been to Cinzano he went there with friends: his fellow seminarian Gari-

gliano, the local judge, the town clerk and a surveyor named John Baptist Paccotti. They had all planned to have a nice dinner with the pastor. When they arrived, however, friends told them that the pastor and his nephew had gone to Sciolze for the usual monthly conference with the dean of the area. What then? Forget about the dinner? Give up the idea? Not that! Comollo's uncle, the pastor at Cinzano, was a venerable old man of 80. More than once, when in Chieri or Castelnuovo, he had invited John to visit him at Cinzano and make himself completely at home, but the housekeeper, a thrifty faithful servant fully in charge of domestic affairs, certainly was not going to invite the first comer in for dinner, still less a large group, when the pastor was away and she had no instructions on the matter. John realized the need of a diplomatic approach, if there was to be any dinner. Nevertheless, he assured his friends that everything would turn out favorably.

Since he did not know the housekeeper, he asked about her name and disposition. Then with Garigliano he knocked at the rectory. The housekeeper, to whom John was a perfect stranger, received him coldly, and lost no time in telling him that the pastor was not at home.

"Oh, too bad," John said with his inimitable charm and candor. "And we are such long-standing friends. If only Mrs. Magdalen were here. I've heard she is quite courteous and gracious. But, of course, the pastor would not think of going to Sciolze without her; she is too indispensable. That's also the reason why I dropped in, to pay my respects to her, but I guess I'll have to do it some other time. Anyway, when you see her would you please give her my best regards?"

Flattered, the good woman interrupted him with a modest smile: "Magdalen did *not* go to Sciolze."

"She didn't? Impossible! People gave me to understand that . . ."

"I tell you Magdalen didn't go, because *I* am Magdalen!"

"What? Oh! So you're the one who runs the rectory."

"Oh! No, I'm just a servant."

"Don't say that! What could the poor pastor do without you? We all know how you take care of everything and manage the household for him. Father Comollo can't find words enough to praise

you for the wonderful way you look after him and try to please him in every little thing.”

“That’s just because he’s so kind. I do what little I can . . .” exclaimed Magdalen, overcome at such praise which, incidentally, was well deserved. “I’m only sorry that the pastor is not at home just when you come to visit him. But I’m sure he’ll be back this evening.”

“Yes, it’s too bad. I had planned to spend the day with him, but now that’s out of the question. Well, I’ll be off now, but I’ll come back soon. Meanwhile, I’m very happy to have paid my respects to you, Mrs. Magdalen.”

“But where are you going? Have you had your lunch yet?”

“No. But don’t trouble yourself about that. I’ll manage . . .”

“But where can you go?”

“Well, that’s a good question!”

“Come in, then, and make yourself at home.”

“Oh, but the pastor is not in . . .”

“That’s true, but *I* am in. Father Comollo is very hospitable and won’t mind at all. Please come in!”

“But you have so much to do. I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Not at all. I’ll be delighted to fix something for you. Just leave it to me.”

“To tell the truth, I’m not alone. I’ve five or six friends down in the village.”

“They are welcome too.”

“But how can you take care of so many?”

“Don’t worry. There will be plenty for all.”

“I see that all those nice things they say about you are really true. But there is one more thing I should tell you: my friends are rather important people and . . .”

“They’ll be quite satisfied, you’ll see.”

“Ah, but there is one thing that, maybe, you can do nothing about: some good wine! I bet the keys to the wine cellar are locked up in Father’s room.”

“In Father’s room? I’d like to see that happen. Everything is under my control.” So saying, she jingled the keys attached to her apron.

“Here they are! Do you think I’d give you water to drink?”

Magdalen went off to prepare the meal and John sent for his friends. They were not long in coming and all sat down to a generous and exquisite meal graced with choice wine. It could not have been any better. John, however, was somewhat worried because he had not anticipated such an elaborate dinner, but he could hardly complain! “Long live the landlady of the house! Long live Magdalen!” cheered the guests. It was a day of triumph for the good woman.

Nevertheless, they all realized that things had gone a little too far. Magdalen hastily cleared the table and John’s friends went home, all determined never to say a word that might compromise the housekeeper. Father Comollo and his nephew returned from Sciolze shortly after and gave John a hearty welcome. But neither his friends nor John during Louis’ lifetime ever mentioned the dinner to either of them. After Louis’ death, John finally told Father Comollo about it, and he had a good laugh.

This little episode, which we heard from Don Bosco himself, reveals his special talent for bending other people’s will to his own. His affability and deep knowledge of the human heart enabled him to win over to his point of view even those who were antagonistic, stubborn, discouraged or just difficult. When he realized that appealing to propriety, charity or duty would be ineffectual, he would very subtly set about enlisting the other person’s self-love but without a trace of either flattery or deceit. He played upon this chord until he achieved the desired result. A word of praise from him, a fond reference to some former praiseworthy deed, a gesture or a word of esteem, confidence, trust, and respect, invariably overcame any obstacle or hostility, and he was thus able to obtain what he wanted from either his confreres or from strangers.

Space does not permit us to describe all the incidents, at times amusing, other times moving and even heroic. We ourselves have seen people overcome their reluctance, set their intentions aright, and perform noble and enduring acts of sacrifice and self-denial of which no one would believe them capable. It was Don Bosco’s tact that effected such wonders. [In the Book of Proverbs we read:] “The lips of the just know how to please” (10, 32). [And Sirach

says:] "The flute and the harp offer a sweet melody, but better than either a voice that is true" (40, 21).

John then remained a few days at Cinzano. Comollo's angelic conduct, his frequent reception of the Sacraments, and his devout attention at church services constantly increased John's admiration for him. Louis shared John's interests and inclination and, like him, was zealous in teaching catechism to the neighborhood boys in church or even in the streets. The two friends talked at great length about spiritual matters, their plans for the future and their studies. Comollo was astounded at John's prodigious memory, and expressed the view that few others in the world had been endowed with such a gift by God. John had read seven volumes of Flavius Josephus' *History of the Jewish War* only once. One day, he took them from the pastor's library, and handed them to his friend saying: "Just tell me the title of any chapter and I will recite the whole chapter for you."

Comollo did as he was asked, and John repeated it from memory from beginning to end with amazing promptness. After this chapter, he recited others. "Now," John continued, "ask me about any event in the book."

Comollo glanced at the index and asked a question about the first topic that caught his eye. John knew it so well that he repeated it flawlessly. "Now," John continued, "open those volumes at any page you like and just tell me the first words on the first line, even if it is in the middle of a sentence." Comollo complied and again John recited it as if he were reading it from the book. Finally, Comollo would merely mention a certain event, and John would tell him on which page and what section of the page it appeared. He had already given similar demonstrations to his pastor, Father Cinzano, who later used to tell the Oratory boys about it when they came to visit him on their excursions.

We have innumerable other proofs of his prodigious memory. In 1870, when Don Bosco was in Lanzo writing *L'Orfanella degli Apennini* [The Little Orphan Girl of the Apennines] he sent one of his priests to look up a certain book by Bercastel, describing to him more or less what the book looked like. The book and the information he was seeking were found without delay, though it must be noted that he had not read that book since he had left the seminary.

Don Bosco had a thorough knowledge of countless books. His memory saved time and trouble to his fellow-Salesians when they approached him for sermon material, or when they were preparing for examinations or writing books. He could always suggest several books, recommend the most reliable author, and give pertinent advice about drawing the best possible results.

Once, in 1865, Father Cagliero had to substitute for a priest who could not keep an out-of-town engagement for a sermon on a little known saint. Father Cagliero knew nothing about this saint. Don Bosco at the time was not in Turin, and the sermon was scheduled before his return. In his predicament Father Cagliero wrote to Don Bosco. The latter replied immediately and referred him to the volume and page of the Bollandist collection he should consult.

Although Father Cagliero was used to Don Bosco's unerring accuracy in such matters, he read Don Bosco's letter to a fellow-Salesian and the two set out for the library to verify the information received. The specified volume was consulted, the reference checked—it proved exact in every detail.

## CHAPTER 49

### *A Born Storyteller*

PEACE and joy always pervaded the life of John Bosco. Even in the midst of the harshest ordeals, when already a priest, if he seemed overcome for a moment by depression, his jovial spirit would reassert itself instantly with a flow of witty remarks or entertaining stories. One can say that a day rarely passed that Don Bosco did not spread his spirit of mirth: this happened at public gatherings, in his talks to his pupils, in the company of the Salesians and young men as they gathered about him, on his journeys, in home or mansion—in a word, wherever he appeared. Being a shrewd observer of the world around him, he had an inexhaustible fund of amusing stories. His untroubled conscience and his complete trust in Divine Providence never allowed him to give way to discouragement or sadness. He brought joy and laughter wherever he went. In this he was constantly guided by the Biblical teaching: “Do not give in to sadness, torment not yourself with brooding; gladfulness of heart is the very life of a man, cheerfulness prolongs his days. Distract yourself, renew your courage, drive resentment far away from you; for worry has brought death to many, nor is there aught to be gained from resentment” (Sir. 30, 21-23). Don Bosco’s gladness of heart was also reflected in his countenance as though St. Paul’s exhortation were constantly ringing in his ears: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice” (Phil. 4, 4).

Now and then we must interrupt our narrative in order to recall several small incidents. They further demonstrate the inexhaustible vein of good humor that gladdened any company in which Don Bosco found himself. Some wiser head may object that such things are trivial and might be better omitted. As a matter of fact, we were originally inclined to do so. However, we have concluded that no statement carries weight without the support of evidence. We are

writing with no pretension save that of recording factual events. We have especially in mind our Salesian confreres who will welcome every detail concerning their spiritual father, therefore, we have decided to continue our policy of relating these incidents in much the same way we personally heard them from Don Bosco.

One day the pastors of the area gathered [in Castelnuovo] around the rural dean, Father Cinzano; and Bosco, then a seminarian was in their company. John was asked if he had any interesting story for them about seminary life. For a long while he looked as though absorbed in serious thought. Then, giving in to their persistence he began to talk in all seriousness about the heroic virtue of some seminarians, concluding his talk by citing some examples: At the end of a spiritual retreat two seminarians at the height of unusual fervor, resolved to flog each other in a spirit of penance several times a week. At their first meeting, one seminarian took off his mantle and the other with a makeshift whip struck him a light, preliminary lash. "Harder!" his companion ordered, whereupon he received a second but still light stroke.

"Make it harder" exclaimed the would-be penitent.

At that his companion dealt him such a vigorous lash that the thongs of the scourge left welts on his skin. The victim screamed with pain and flew into a rage. "Is that the way to do it?" he yelled. "You clumsy ox!"

"How dare you insult me that way!" cried the other and unceremoniously lashed at him again. Whereupon they went for each other and began scuffling until their companions came on the scene and separated them. This brought their mutual unheroic penance to an end. Since John was so adept in telling funny stories with a straight face, the unsuspecting priests were caught off guard by the conclusion of the story. They almost split their sides with laughter. Don Bosco used to repeat this story quite often to drive home the lesson that what is contrary to regulations brings disorder and lamentable consequences in its wake, unless circumstances demand it and superiors give their consent.

On another occasion Father Cinzano was singing a solemn Mass in Castelnuovo on a special feast day. A certain Dominic Barba was directing a small choir. Dominic himself had a superb voice and an excellent ear for music but that was all. Despite this limitation, he

kept up appearances by regularly turning the pages of his music score like an experienced choir director. He attached great importance to his reputation as a professional singer, and would not tolerate any nonsense in this matter. On this occasion he solemnly put on his glasses and leaned over the railing of the choir loft to make people realize that he was about to give forth with his melodic voice. He then cast a condescending glance at his companions, raised his hand and signaled the introductory bars of the *Kyrie*. But, alas, his wild gesticulations knocked the spectacles off his nose. Those nearest to him could not refrain from laughter.

"*Kyrie!*" intoned Dominic and, in a whisper to the person next to him: "Pick up my glasses!" The man bent over to retrieve them but took advantage of that momentary respite to give vent to his mirth.

"*Eleison!*" continued Dominic. Soon out of patience, he hissed desperately between notes "Hurry up!" to the man on his knees, now convulsed with laughter and supposedly looking for his spectacles. Finally they were retrieved. The choir director angrily set them on his nose, muttering something between "*Kyrie*" and "*Eleison*" and continued singing. It required herculean effort on the part of the choir members to get back on key and save the situation. John had witnessed the incident but he acted as though nothing unusual had happened and kept a straight face throughout. Later while dining with the pastor, he described the scene with such comic artistry that Father Cinzano burst into an unrestrained laughter, so hearty and prolonged that his sides began to ache. Pressing his hand against his side, he kept repeating between outbursts of laughter. "That's enough, enough!" But he could not stop laughing and had to give up all idea of continuing with his meal. Every time that Father Cinzano recalled this incident, he would again laugh so much that he had to forbid John ever to remind him of it; such fits of laughter were actually harmful to his health.

On another occasion about this time, Bosco was invited by the pastor of a nearby village to assist at some solemn church services which were to be held there by Bishop Michael Amatore Lobetti of Asti. The mayor of that village was not a polished or educated man, but he could not pass up such an opportunity of increasing his prestige. He consequently appealed to Bosco to compose a sonnet for him to read in the bishop's honor. John did as he was asked,

and when giving the sonnet to the mayor he advised him to read it over thoroughly before venturing to recite it in public.

"Just leave it to me! You'll see!" replied the good man. When the bishop arrived, he was met at the edge of the village by the local clergy, the municipal authorities and the villagers. Although the mayor was arrayed in his Sunday best, and stood at the head of the welcoming party, the bishop, who failed to recognize him, affably addressed the parish priest, who had greeted him with a speech of welcome. Unwittingly he had turned his back on the representative of the community. The mayor's impatience was revealed by his sullen countenance and ill-humored gestures. Annoyed that someone of his exalted rank should be ignored in this way, he took hold of a fold of the bishop's cloak and tugged at it lightly.

"Your Excellency," he said, "the mayor's here."

The bishop turned around. "Oh! And where is he?"

"I am the mayor."

"Why, your Honor, forgive me. I did not recognize you."

"If you will permit me, I have something I wish to read," the mayor answered with a bow.

"Certainly. I should very much like to hear it," answered the bishop.

A temporary chapel of decorated poles and green boughs had been built for the occasion. The bishop was escorted to it and took his place among the clergy and other dignitaries of the village. The mayor remained standing before him in the center with the people silently huddled behind their mayor. With impressive manners he adjusted his spectacles, blew his nose, and then searched in his pocket. A look of dismay came over his face as he was unable to find the paper on which the sonnet was written. Frantically, he searched again and again, turning his pockets inside out, but found nothing. His embarrassment sent a ripple of amusement running through the crowd. The mayor turned his eyes toward John who had withdrawn into a corner with the other clergy. His glance seemed to ask: "What now?"

While waiting for the bishop's arrival, the poor mayor had stood aside studying the sonnet. At the sound of the exploding fireworks and the cries of "Long Live the Bishop!" he had been gripped by the excitement and had raced to take his place at the head of the

welcoming committee. Meanwhile the sonnet had been left on the table in the improvised chapel. But this had been completely forgotten. John, who was standing near the table, saw the paper. Quickly he retrieved it and handed it to the mayor, who drew a great sigh of relief. Upon regaining his air of importance, the mayor cleared his throat and was ready for his recitation. The sonnet had been written on the inner left side of a folded sheet of paper. Distractedly the mayor had inverted the folding so that now the front page carried nothing but the mayor's name, which Bosco had placed at the end of the sonnet, and the inside pages were completely blank. So he read aloud: "*Your most humble and obedient servant, the Mayor of B. . .*" following it up by his name and surname. Though things were still under control at this point, the mayor was unable to proceed. Without even thinking of looking at the back page, he exclaimed: "But, that's all it says! Bosco! Bosco! Come here! You wrote it. Tell me what I'm supposed to read."

The crowd was whispering and tittering at the hapless mayor. The bishop barely succeeded in keeping a straight face. To save the situation, the pastor immediately arose and delivered a few complimentary words of praise for the bishop and led everyone toward the church. Later at lunch everyone joked about the hapless mayor who was not among the guests. To the immense delight of the bishop and the clergy, Bosco was called upon to explain what had taken place. But the mayor took umbrage at John and accused him of instigating this embarrassing predicament.

John spent serene, happy and undisturbed days in Piedmont. At this time the Blessed Virgin protected this region from an epidemic of Asian flu which struck down 5500 lives in Rome, and 200,000 in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies that year. The city of Turin expressed its gratitude for this protection by erecting a granite column topped by a marble statue of the Blessed Virgin in the little square beside the shrine of the *Consolata* [Our Lady of Consolation].

Meanwhile the summer vacation was drawing to an end, and John kept his promise to pay another visit to the Moglia family. Mr. Louis Moglia, who knew that Mamma Margaret did not have too much room in her house, had wrested a promise from John that he would come and stay with him often. John kept his word and

every year during his vacation he would visit these good people, staying on for a week or two. Once he remained even two months. He was delighted to spend time with the boys in the house and with the neighborhood lads. He taught them catechism, and counseled them with useful advice as befitted their age, need, and shortcomings. As he did everywhere, here, too, at the Moglia farm he distributed holy cards and medals to the boys. But he never gave any to girls, since he did not want them chirping noisily around him. George Moglia slept in the same room with John. He related how John would make him say his prayers before going to bed, and would admonish him gently if he had noticed any action or word which merited reproach. He would often exhort him to love, cherish and obey his parents. Once when George told him how a young man in the village had mistreated his father, John answered with great severity: "He who fails to respect his father and mother will draw down upon himself the curse of God."

Since he thought that George might be a possible vocation to the priesthood, he would often tell him: "The best thing that one can do in this world is to bring lost souls back to the path of virtue and to God." That same year Mr. Louis Moglia bought him a new hat because the one Mayor Pescarmona had given him was already quite worn and frayed; while Mrs. Dorothy Moglia, who regarded him as her own son, knitted several pairs of socks for him, a gift she was to make for him every year. John's name constantly cropped up in every conversation in that farmhouse. They knew that he excelled at the seminary where he was esteemed and beloved by the superiors. Father Cottino, the pastor of Moncucco, would pay an occasional visit to the Moglia family and always bring them news of John, delighting in the pleasure occasioned by such news. In turn, John never missed an opportunity to show his affection and gratitude to this family. In fact, Nicholas Moglia, retired teacher of Castelnuovo, recalled in particular that he was immensely delighted by the great affection which his former pupil always displayed toward him.

## CHAPTER 50

### *A Student of Theology*

IN the fall of 1837 John began his first year of theology. His instructors were Father Prialis and Father Arduino; the former lectured in the morning, the latter in the afternoon. Father Arduino, who hailed from Carignano, later became a canon, pastor and rural dean in the collegiate church of Giaveno [not far from Chieri].

At the midyear examinations, Louis Comollo also won the 60 lire award for scholastic and moral excellence. "I was his intimate friend," wrote Don Bosco, "for as long as God spared him. I considered him saintly and very dear to me because of his goodness and uprightness. I did all I could to emulate him. On his part he was grateful to me for helping him in his studies."

If it is true that friendship joins those who are one in sentiments or aspirations or makes them one, then it may be said that John must have harbored the same sentiments of candor, piety and virtue as Comollo. This was confirmed by James Bosco, [no relation] a seminarian in his second year of theology, in 1837-38. In the presence of Father Rua, Father Francesia, Father Lazzero, Father Bonetti and Father Lemoyne, he once said: "John never failed to receive Holy Communion every Sunday. His humility was outstanding. He used to confide in me unreservedly and tell me all his secrets. He would ask my advice when in doubt or before acting, even if he had already made up his mind, and he would do as I suggested. He was always very correct and reserved in his deportment, always occupied in some manual or intellectual task. During recreation he never ran around or laughed boisterously. Instead, he would stroll, absorbed in thought, either by himself or with some close friends with whom he would converse about useful topics. In the evening he would associate with a few of the better students. He was deeply interested in Church history to which he was particularly drawn.

He often deplored the fact that many Church historians ignored the achievements of the Popes while dwelling at length on minor figures. It likewise hurt him whenever the deeds of certain Popes were treated with little respect."

In this connection it is pertinent to note that as soon as Rohrbacher's Church history was published, he carefully read all seventeen volumes. He also read Salzano's work, regarding which he once stated that if that work had been in print when he was still a seminarian, he would have kissed every page of it, so pleased was he with the respect shown toward the Papacy by this great Italian historian. Thus, guided by wise criteria and enriched by his study of Bercastel, Henrion, Fleury, Rohrbacher, Salzano and the Bollandists, he set about writing his own popular history of the Church for young people.

His historical studies in no way hindered his study of theology. The "scholastic circle" was kept active with discussions on the more difficult problems and the acquisition of the most precise terminology. Father Giacomelli recalled that Bosco was always extremely alert: not a single error or even the least inaccuracy escaped him. Once a fellow seminarian made a rather sweeping statement about original sin. John immediately corrected him and silenced him with sound reasoning. His readiness to defend the dogmas of the Church on any and every occasion remained undiminished throughout his life. His keenness and wide range of knowledge in these matters astounded all who heard him.

Nor did he neglect the study of literature. James Bosco has also told us about a literary club of which John was the leading spirit. This club numbered some twelve or fourteen seminarians who discussed languages, classical authors and even etiquette. The members met on holidays and, sometimes, during recreation periods to read their compositions about history or literature in poetry and prose. After the reading they would appraise it as to contents, form, and delivery, especially if it was a sermon. John was so meticulous in his corrections that he earned the nickname of "the Grand Master of Grammar."

Another very outstanding trait of his was his great reserve in everything relating to modesty. One day, at one of their meetings, a composition was read in which complimentary phrases were used in

reference to two women not specifically mentioned. When he was asked to give his opinion, John remained silent a moment, and then remarked: "The composition as a whole is good, but women are mentioned in it twice in terms unbecoming to a seminarian." As a matter of fact the writer of that composition did become a priest but later, unfortunately, joined the sect of the Old Catholics.

The year passed peacefully in these pursuits and studies. John continued, as in the past, to nurse the sick seminarians. This offered him opportunities to ply doctors with questions and learn about the incubation period, symptoms and phases of many illnesses. He also learned how to prepare and administer required remedies; this was to stand him in good stead in his future mission.

The following incident attests to his knowledge in this field. A doctor, whose son was sick, came to see him one day. John began talking of different diseases and plied him with questions.

"But tell me," the doctor interjected, "were you a doctor before coming to the seminary?"

"No, I wasn't," Don Bosco replied, "I'm asking only to learn."

"Well," the doctor added, "only a medical student could ask that kind of question!"

When school closed, John went home. Only two friends came to visit him during that summer: Giacomelli from Avigliana, who would remain overnight, and Louis Comollo. The latter came several times but stayed just for the day and John returned his visits. They also wrote each other frequently. Aware of the importance of a good friendship, Mamma Margaret did everything she could to give his friends a warm and generous welcome. They liked it and always looked forward to the next visit.

"I want my dear John to cut a good figure with his friends," Margaret would exclaim.

A few days after he returned home, Comollo sent John the following note: "I must talk to you about something which on the one hand, makes me very happy, but on the other, embarrasses me. My uncle has asked me to give a sermon on the feast of the Assumption. My heart overflows with joy at the thought of speaking about our Blessed Mother. On the other hand, aware of my limitations, I realize how unfit I am to sing her praises worthily. Be that as it may, I am going to obey with the help of Her of whom I am to speak. I

have already written the sermon and know it almost by heart. I am coming to see you on Monday, and I want you to listen to it and then give me your honest criticism of both subject matter and delivery. Say a prayer to my Guardian Angel for my trip. Good-bye . . .”

“Comollo came punctually,” Don Bosco writes in his memoirs, “and spent the whole day with me while my mother and relatives were in the fields harvesting. First of all, he had me read his sermon, then he made me watch his delivery. After a few hours of pleasant conversation, we realized that it was time for dinner. We were alone and had to take care of ourselves. ‘No trouble at all,’ Comollo said, ‘I’ll light the fire, you put the pot on, and we’ll find something to cook.’

“‘That’s a good idea,’ I answered, ‘but first let’s go and grab a chicken. That will provide our consommé and entrée, as my mother suggested.’

“We soon managed to catch a young cockerel, but who had the courage to kill it? Neither of us. We finally decided that Comollo should hold the bird’s neck over a smooth tree trunk while I would sever it with a small sickle. We did as planned, but when we saw the head severed from the body we didn’t have the heart even to look at that poor chicken. ‘We are acting like fools,’ Comollo said after a while. ‘The Lord enjoined us to use the creatures of the earth for our good. Why should we be so upset?’ We retrieved the bird without any further qualms, and after dressing it, we cooked and ate it.

“I would have liked to go to Cinzano to hear Comollo’s sermon, but I too had a sermon at Alfiano the same day and so I went the following day. Everybody was praising Louis’ sermon. ‘He preached like a saint,’ someone told me.

“‘Oh!’ said another, ‘he looked like an angel! He was so unassuming and so forceful!’ Others exclaimed: ‘How well he spoke.’ Some remembered the main thoughts and some even the very words he had used. His uncle saw in it the handiwork of God.

“Knowing Comollo’s great shyness, I asked him how he had managed to do so well and he told me: ‘Just as I was about to face the congregation, I felt my strength and my voice leaving me, but our Blessed Mother helped me. I again felt strong and confident and

delivered the sermon from beginning to end without the slightest hesitation. That I owe to the Blessed Virgin. Praise be to her!

"I still have a copy of his sermon. Although Comollo consulted several books, he wrote the sermon himself. His are the sentiments that inflamed his heart with love for the great Mother of God."

In going to Cinzano to congratulate his friend on his sermon, John had not anticipated that on that very same day he would have to preach from the same pulpit to the people who the day before had heard Comollo. Don Bosco's memoirs continue as follows: "That day (August 16) was the feast of St. Rocco, an occasion for relatives and friends to exchange invitations to dinner and have a little feast. For this reason, St. Rocco's feast day came to be called "*pignatta* day" meaning "cooking." On this day an incident took place which showed the extent of my audacity. It was already time for dinner and the preacher for the afternoon church services had not showed up yet. The church services started and still no preacher. Trying to be of help to the pastor, I approached the several priests who were taking part in the festivities and begged them to volunteer for a brief sermon to the people who by now were thronging into the church. But nobody did! 'What!' I said, 'are you going to disappoint these people? They are expecting a sermon on their Patron Saint.'

"Annoyed by my insistence some replied tartly: 'You're a fool! If you think it is so easy to extemporize, why don't you do it?' Everybody clapped. Stung in my pride, I answered: 'I wouldn't have thought of coming forward for this, but now I will.' While a hymn was being sung, in those few minutes I organized my thoughts. I reviewed mentally what I had read about St. Rocco and then climbed into the pulpit. According to the common consensus, that was the best sermon I ever gave!"

Joseph Turco, who often accompanied John to different villages where he went to preach, was in Cinzano on that occasion and this was his comment: "The way it sounded, the sermon was well thought out and the delivery was of the kind you expect in a seasoned orator. All the pastors were amazed."

A similar incident occurred some time later. We came to know of it through Father Anthony Cinzano, pastor of Castelnuovo. A very solemn holy day was being kept at Pecetto [near Turin]. The

afternoon church services were about to start, but the guest preacher had not arrived, having been suddenly taken ill. All pleaded lack of time for preparing a sermon and inability to extemporize. In this emergency, the pastor turned to John and said: "You do it!" John asked for a breviary, read the "lessons" for that festivity and mounted the pulpit. The sermon was a great success. Several of the congregation, conversing with the pastor of Castelnuovo the following day, spoke very highly of it and of the talented orator.

And what did Don Bosco think of his own sermons? Generous in praising Comollo's sermons to the sky, he had this to say about himself: "After my first year of theology I preached again at Capriglio on the feast of the Nativity of Mary. I don't know what good it did, but I received so much praise that it went to my head. Luckily I was soon disillusioned. After this sermon about the Nativity of Mary, I talked to one of my admirers, more intelligent looking than others, and sounded him out on what he might have understood. According to him, my sermon was about the souls in Purgatory! I also asked the pastor of Alfiano, Father Joseph Pelato, his opinion about the sermon I had preached there on the Rosary. A saintly and scholarly priest, he said to me:

"It was a very fine sermon, well thought-out, well-phrased, and sound in objective. You are on the right track as a preacher."

"Do you think the people grasped what I said?"

"I doubt it. Very few, if any, understood it, beside my brother, who also is a priest, and myself."

"How come? I said plain things, easy to understand."

"Easy for you, but not for them. When you skim over the Scriptures and philosophize on certain events of Church history you are way over their capacity to understand."

"What do you suggest then?"

"Give up the literary style, speak in their own dialect, when possible, or even in Italian, but a simple Italian. Instead of philosophizing, use illustrations, similitudes, short stories, plain and practical. Always remember that people understand little and that the truths of our faith are never sufficiently explained."

"I kept this fatherly advice as a guide for the rest of my life. As things to avoid, I have saved those sermons in which I now see nothing but vanity and affectation. I am grateful to God for this

merciful lesson, which bore fruit in my sermons, catechetical instructions and writings in which I busied myself even then."

John returned to Cinzano a second time, in the summer of 1838, to discuss with Comollo several matters regarding the coming school year. In his biography of this saintly youth, John wrote: "One fine day I went with Comollo for a walk on a hill overlooking a vast expanse of meadows, fields and vineyards.

"'Look,' I said. 'What meager crops this year. Poor farmers! So much work and almost in vain.'

"'It's God's punishment,' he answered. 'Believe me, it's because of our sins.'

"'I hope the Lord will grant us more abundant crops next year.'

"'I hope so, too. Lucky those who will be around to enjoy them.'

"'Come, let's put gloomy thoughts aside! It's too bad for this year, but next year we'll have more grapes and better wine.'

"'For you!'

"'Do you mean that you will go on drinking water as usual?'

"'I hope to drink a much better wine.'

"'What do you mean by that?'

"'Oh, skip it . . . the Lord knows what He is doing.'

"'You are not answering my question. What do you mean by: I hope to drink a much better wine. Are you planning to take off for Heaven?'

"'Well, if only through God's mercy, of late I do long to go to Heaven. I feel such a yearning for it that it seems impossible that I may stay here much longer.'

"Comollo said this with great cheerfulness at a time when he enjoyed excellent health and was getting ready to return to Chieri."

At the end of the vacation he set out for the seminary. At a certain point along the road where his village would disappear from sight, he stopped for a long look. He was unusually pensive. His father came over to him asking:

"'What's the matter, Louis? Don't you feel well? What are you looking at?'"

"'I feel fine, but I can't take my eyes off Cinzano.'"

"'Why? Don't you like to go back to the seminary?'"

"'I certainly do and I can't wait to be again in that abode of peace, but this is the last time I can look at my village.'"

His father asked him once again if he were feeling all right, or would not rather return home . . .

“Oh, don’t worry,” he answered, “I’m just fine. Let’s go. Let’s be cheerful. The Lord is expecting us.”

This, John came to know from Comollo’s father as soon as they arrived at the seminary.

Such melancholy premonitions worried John. Eager to see God’s ministers increase in number and save more souls, John regretfully feared to lose such a promising vocation.

He keenly appreciated the singular favor bestowed on him by God’s call to His service. In his conversations with boys at Chieri, Castelnuovo and other places he always found the right moment to instill in them a high regard for the priestly vocation and the serious obligation to obey such a divine summons. He shared St. Paul’s wish: “For I would that you all were as I am myself; but each one has his own gift from God, one in this way, and another in that” (1 Cor. 7, 7). And he often wondered what gift God might have in store for his young friends. If he noticed in them a great love for that virtue which makes men like unto angels, he regarded that as the surest sign of a vocation. He would then study them closely to see if they showed any leaning toward the priesthood: if not, with appropriate words he would kindle their desire for it. If this inclination was already there, he fostered it with wise counsel, leaving to God the task of bringing it to bloom.

At this time he was already beginning that mission which was to be his life’s goal and work. Thousands of vocations among boys would have borne no fruit but for his care. Don Bosco would have made any sacrifice to prevent even one of them from being lost. In later chapters we shall describe his amazing conquests. He was not always successful: God alone, of course, knows his preordained designs and the secrets of the human heart. Be that as it may, Don Bosco’s zeal even at that time was greatly beneficial to souls.

We already have had occasion to speak of Hannibal Strambio, who, together with his two brothers Dominic and Peter, had been John’s schoolmates in the high school at Chieri. In 1838 Peter received a letter from John exhorting him to become a priest because of his mild and quiet disposition, his diligence and his excellent conduct. Sixty years later, Peter Strambio, who was then a retired

councillor of the Prefecture and bore the title of Chevalier, told Father Francis Cerruti: "I did not follow Don Bosco's advice because I did not feel called to the priesthood. But I have always fondly recalled that invitation; its memory has helped me in the course of my life. I still have his letter and guard it jealously, for whenever I read it over I again feel as deeply moved as I did then, at the thought that a schoolmate and friend like John had such a good opinion of me. Words cannot express how much my brothers and I thought of him. Several years later we were at Camagna and he came to visit us. We welcomed him with heartfelt joy. During his stay a terrible fire broke out in a neighboring farm. With his usual calm, Don Bosco gave a hand in salvaging the household goods. Not only that, but when the fire was put out, he brought a heaping dish of polenta for the farmers' supper. I said to him: 'Don Bosco, you are so good that you could work miracles; do something about this fire . . .'" John's schoolmates and friends firmly believed that he was a saint: this explains why his words and letters meant so much to them.

## CHAPTER 51

### *Death of a Friend*

**A**T the beginning of the scholastic year 1838-39 a new professor, Father John Baptist Appendini, a very saintly priest of Villastellone who later became a monsignor, took over the chair of theology at Chieri. Between him and John, who was his pupil for three years, there developed a bond of friendship that was to last to the end of his life. In the meantime God in his mercy had brought together in the same classroom three clerics, Giacomelli, Bosco and Comollo. Their friendship was not to be marked without a grave sacrifice on their part: the unblemished soul of the saintly Comollo would soon return to its Maker. Meanwhile Giacomelli was in a position to appreciate even more Bosco's progress in his studies. He writes about him: "John was a model student. He had a prodigious memory, but he also studied hard. Often he did not limit himself to the textbook, but would consult other authors as well. He was not slavish in studying them and sometimes would change their line of reasoning and form independent opinions of his own now and then at variance with those of the book. I remember a time when a professor scolded him for it, saying, "Why don't you follow the textbook like the others?"

That was one of the things to which John found it hard to adapt himself. Many years later, when commenting on it, he said, "During the theology course we must insist that the students apply themselves diligently, and we must see to it that the treatises are understood thoroughly, not superficially. Indeed, most students should learn faithfully from the textbook, but this should not be demanded of those who are known to be serious students who apply themselves, understand and constantly give correct answers when interrogated."

In that second year of theology John had the distinction of being appointed sacristan of the seminary chapel. This minor appoint-

ment was a valued sign of the Superiors' esteem and carried with it an income of 60 lire. This took care of half of John's yearly fee; Father Cafasso paid the other half. John's sacristy duties consisted in looking after the cleanliness of the chapel, the altar and the sacristy. He had to see also to the neatness of lamps, candles and everything else used for divine worship. John's outstanding conduct and earnestness in study had earned him this appointment, as we gathered from Father Cagliero who heard it from Father [Joseph] Fiorito, the dormitory prefect. This task was also to give him an opportunity for growth in virtue.

Father James Bosco wrote: "The seminarians in the philosophy department and those in the first two years of theology were drawn to him as to a magnet, while those in the upper grades had a higher or lower opinion of him according to their own personality. Anyone who becomes outstanding for knowledge or virtue is bound to be the object of petty jealousy. At first he may not notice it, but soon it will show itself in words or gestures and he will become aware of it. Magnanimous and humble, John overlooked such petty annoyances. His equanimity was not ruffled even when some young clerics mocked and mortified him and scorned him for keeping himself apart from them. His job of sacristan earned him the nickname, 'the oiler' in allusion to his daily task of getting the oil for the sanctuary lamp. John ignored this name-calling and went about his business with his usual poise, but he was not insensitive."

Father Giacomelli told us the following incident. One day, in an argument, a companion said to John in a jeering tone: "You, silly lamplighter." A flush of anger spread over John's face, and he walked away without uttering a single word. Those present were shocked at that uncalled-for insult which they considered serious, and one of them sharply reprimanded the offender.

Meanwhile, Comollo, notwithstanding his premonition of a premature death, had given his full attention to studies and had again won the 60 lire award at the midyear exams. Outwardly he was his usual jovial self whether at work or at play; still John detected something mysterious in his conduct. He noticed that Louis was engrossed in prayer and other practices of piety more than before; that, especially, he received Holy Communion more frequently. Sometimes he heard him exclaim: "Oh, how I would like to hear from our

Lord, when I am about to die, those consoling words: *Euge, serve bone et fidelis*. Well done, good and faithful servant [Matt. 25, 21]. To increase his horror of sin he would meditate on hell.

But let us hear Don Bosco describe it. "He spoke of Heaven with great transports of joy. One of the many beautiful things he told me was this: 'When I am alone and not busy with anything, or awake at night, I think up the most delightful excursions. I picture myself on top of a high mountain from whose peak I am able to see all the beauties of nature. I gaze upon sea and land, villages and cities and the wonders in them. Then I lift up my eyes and admire the clear sky studded with countless stars. What a magnificent sight! Then I seem to hear soft, buoyant music resounding through the hills and valleys, and while I stand entranced by these pleasant sounds and sights, I turn around, look up and contemplate the city of God. Then I get closer to it and finally enter the gates. All the wonderful things that pass before my gaze, you can imagine yourself.' Describing his walk through Paradise, Louis would then give me a detailed description of all he saw.

"That year I also managed to learn from him his secret of praying without distractions. 'Do you want to know how I prepare myself for prayer?' he asked. 'It is very simple and in a way strange. I close my eyes. I imagine I enter a large room handsomely adorned. The ceiling is supported by pillars, and I imagine God in His infinite majesty seated on a splendid throne, at the end of the room surrounded by His angels and saints. I find this imaginative presentation very effective in raising my mind to God before Whom I prostrate myself and pray with all reverence.' "

During Lent the seminarians made their spiritual retreat. John put all his heart into it. "It was in that year (1839)," he wrote in his memoirs, "that I had the good fortune of meeting [Father John Borel], a very zealous priest, who had come to preach the spiritual retreat. He came into the sacristy with a cheerful look and made some remarks both humorous and spiritually uplifting. When I observed how he prayed before and after Mass, his devotion and recollection in offering the Divine Sacrifice, I immediately recognized in him a most worthy minister of God. We all admired his preaching: his sermons were plain, lively, clear and inspiring. Everyone agreed that he was a saint. We all vied for the privilege of con-

fessing to him, consulting him about our vocation, and receiving some good word as his special memento. I also approached him for guidance in spiritual matters. At the close of the interview I sought advice especially on how to safeguard my vocation during the school year and particularly during the summer vacation. He replied: 'Shun the world and receive Communion frequently; by these means you will preserve and strengthen your vocation and become a good priest.' This retreat, preached by Father John Borel made history in the seminary; his teachings, both public and private, were remembered and recalled for many years later."

The morning of March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, John was on his way to the chapel, when he met Comollo who was waiting for him in one of the corridors to tell him that the end had come. This took John greatly by surprise because just the day before, they had walked up and down for quite a while and Louis had seemed in good health. In a voice charged with emotion, Comollo continued: "I feel ill and the thought of dying frightens me." John urged him not to worry, saying that though such things were not to be taken lightly, nevertheless, they were not imminent, and that he still had plenty of time to prepare himself. With this they entered the chapel. Comollo still managed to hear Mass but right after it, he fainted and had to be carried to bed. It was then, according to Father Giacomelli that John told his fellow seminarians that Comollo would die of this illness.

"When the services were over," wrote Don Bosco, "I went to visit him in the dormitory. As soon as he saw me among the others, he motioned to me to get closer and then he said, 'You told me that my end was far off and that I would have time to prepare myself; but it is not so. I am sure that soon I shall have to appear at God's judgment seat and that I have little time to prepare. Do you want to hear the naked truth? We shall have to part.'

"I still urged him not to be upset and to banish those thoughts, but he interrupted me saying: 'I am not afraid or overconcerned, but there is no getting away from the fact that I have to be judged and irrevocably so, and this makes me uneasy.'

"His words made me very sad. Throughout the day I was anxious for news about him. Whenever I visited him, he always repeated: 'Soon I shall have to appear at God's judgment seat. We shall have

to part.' Without exaggeration, he must have repeated this phrase more than fifteen times in the course of that day."

"The following day, Monday, his fever kept him in bed. He had predicted that the doctors would make the wrong diagnosis and so it was. He was up on Tuesday and Wednesday, but in a melancholy frame of mind, entirely engrossed in thoughts of God's judgment. Wednesday evening he felt ill again and went to bed never to rise again.

"When I went to see him on Holy Saturday evening, he said: 'Since we must part, and in a little while, I shall have to appear before God, I wish you would stay up with me tonight.'

"It was March 30, the vigil of Easter. Father Joseph Mottura, our spiritual director, seeing that the patient's condition was worsening, willingly gave his consent. 'Be watchful,' Father Mottura told me, 'and if you notice any serious danger call me immediately. Observe also any symptoms and tell the doctor about them tomorrow.'

"At eight his fever was rising rapidly; at 8:15 it soared so high that he became delirious. At first he made low moaning sounds as if frightened by some phantom or other terrifying sight. About half an hour later, he became half conscious and, staring at the bystanders, he cried out in a loud voice: 'Oh! the judgment!' Then he began to struggle so violently that five or six of us could barely hold him down. This went on for almost three hours, before he finally regained full consciousness.

"For a long time he lay as though absorbed in deep thoughts. Then that look of sadness and terror, which had plagued him those last few days at the thought of God's judgment abandoned him and once more he seemed to be his old self, tranquil and serene. He laughed, talked and answered all questions; one might have thought that all danger was past. Someone asked him what had brought about such a sudden change: only a little while before he had been so sad and now he was so jovial and smiling. The question seemed to embarrass him. Then looking to make sure that no one would overhear him, he whispered to me:

" 'Until now I was afraid of death because I feared God's judgment. It terrified me; now, instead, I feel calm and I'm not afraid any longer. I will tell you all confidentially as my friend. While I was in terror of God's judgment, I seemed to be transported in an

instant to a deep, broad valley, where furious, howling winds brooked no resistance. In the center was a bottomless pit spouting blazing flames like an immense furnace. From time to time, souls, some of whom I recognized, would tumble into that pit causing great balls of fire and smoke to shoot up to the sky . . . I was so terrified at the sight that I began to scream for fear of being hurled into that frightful abyss and I tried to turn back in flight, only to be confronted by a multitude of horrible monsters coming at me to throw me in . . . In utter panic I unconsciously screamed even louder, and then I made the sign of the Cross. At this act of faith, all those monsters tried to bow their heads, but since they could not, they writhed in agony and withdrew somewhat from me. Still I could not escape from that terrible place. Then I saw a huge mass of armed men coming to my aid. Fiercely they attacked those monsters: some were killed and torn to pieces and the rest hastily took flight. Free of all danger, I began to walk through that broad valley until I came to the foot of a tall mountain. It could be climbed, but only by a ladder on whose every rung huge serpents were poised ready to strike. I was too frightened to try, for fear those snakes might devour me, but there was no other way to go up. Downhearted and exhausted, I was about to faint when a splendidly dressed lady, our Heavenly Mother, I think, took me by the hand and raising me to my feet, said: "Come with me. You have done much to promote my honor and you have invoked me many times. So it is just that you should now receive due reward. The Communion you have received in my honor have delivered you from the snares set up by the enemy of souls." She then motioned to me to follow Her up that ladder. As She climbed, all the serpents turned their deadly heads away, and did not look again in our direction until we were some distance away. On reaching the top, I found myself in a delightful garden, where I saw things I never imagined existed. I was now safe, and the gracious Lady spoke these words: "Now you are out of danger. My ladder is the one that will lead you to [God], the Supreme Good. Courage, my son, time is short. The flowers that make this garden so beautiful have been gathered by angels to make a crown of glory for you, so that you may take your place among my children in Heaven." Then She disappeared. These things filled me with such joy and peace that now, far from

fearing death, I long for it and hope it will come soon, so that I may join the angels in singing the praises of Our Lord in Heaven.' Thus, for Louis Comollo.

"Whatever one may think of what we have said, the fact remains that, whereas formerly he greatly feared appearing before God, now, instead, he greatly desired that moment. Without a trace of sadness or melancholy, he was all smiles and cheerful, never too tired to sing psalms, hymns or sacred songs.

"Although his illness seemed to have taken a turn for the better, toward morning I thought it advisable for him to receive the Last Sacraments, especially since it was Easter Sunday. 'Gladly,' he replied, 'but since I am so ill, I would first like to see my confessor, even though I feel my conscience is clear.'

"His Communion was truly an edifying sight. As he finished his confession and prepared for Viaticum, the Rector, escorted by seminarians, entered the room carrying the Blessed Sacrament. Louis was deeply moved at this sight, color returned to his cheeks, his countenance changed, and he cried out in transports of holy joy. 'What a beautiful sight! Such a resplendent Sun set in so many stars! See the great multitude prostrate before It not daring to lift their faces. O, let me kneel with them, that I, too, may adore this [divine] Sun never seen before.' So saying he tried to rise, straining to approach the Blessed Sacrament. I tried to hold him back. Tenderness and surprise filled my eyes with tears, I did not know what to say, what to suggest. He redoubled his efforts to reach the Host and was not satisfied until he had received It. For a while he lay motionless, rapt in love for our Lord. Then he abandoned himself to new transports of joy, uttering fervent short prayers for quite a while. Finally, in a lower tone of voice, he called me and asked me to speak only of spiritual things because he felt that the remaining moments were too precious to be wasted in idle talk and should all be spent in praising God; on his part he would ignore everything else.

"Now the patient seemed tired and sleepy and so we let him rest. The seminarians had all gone to the cathedral for the solemn Easter services. After a short while, Comollo awoke. Seeing that we were alone he spoke to me as follows: 'Here we are, dear friend, about to leave each other for a while. We thought that we would be comforting each other during the ups and downs of life, giving each

other aid and counsel in everything that might have contributed to our eternal salvation, but this was not in accordance with the holy and forever adorable plans of God. You have always helped me in all matters, spiritual, intellectual and material. I am deeply grateful. May God reward you for it! Now, before we part, I want to leave you some thoughts, in memory of our friendship. Friendship does not consist only in complying with a friend's request during life, but it also means carrying out after death whatever has been promised. Hence, the solemn pact we made of praying for each other's eternal salvation should last until we are both dead. Therefore, I want you to pledge under oath that you will pray for me as long as you will live!' At these words I felt like weeping but I restrained my tears and gave him my solemn pledge. Then after some words of advice, he concluded, 'There is just one more thing that is close to my heart. If on your walks, you should pass my grave and hear some fellow seminarians say: "Here lies our Comollo," please suggest to them a Pater and a Requiem for me, that my stay in Purgatory may be shortened. There are more things I'd like to tell you, but I feel worse and I can't. Recommend me to the prayers of our mutual friends and pray for me. May God be with you and bless you! One day, God willing, we shall meet again.'

"That Easter evening he could hardly speak he was so exhausted. Then his fever rose, and he was seized by painful convulsions so violent that we could hardly restrain him. Yet, though delirious and racked by pain, he would calm down at once if one said to him: 'Comollo, for whom should we suffer?' He promptly would reply, 'For Jesus Crucified.'

"Never once complaining about the excruciating pain he suffered, he got through the night and most of the following day. From time to time he would sing with a voice so steady that one would have believed him to be in good health. He sang the *Miserere*, the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, the *Ave Maris Stella* and other sacred hymns. But since singing was too exhausting for him, we suggested some prayers. He would then stop singing and follow our suggestion.

"On April 1, seeing his condition deteriorate, the Spiritual Director thought it advisable to administer the Anointing of the Sick. Comollo, who shortly before seemed to be in the throes of death, now became fully conscious and made all the responses to the pray-

ers. He did so again at 11:30 P.M. when the Rector of the Seminary, Canon Sebastian Mottura noticing that a cold sweat was beginning to bathe Comollo's face, gave him the Papal blessing.

"Once he had received all the comforts of religion, he no longer looked seriously ill, but rather seemed to be a patient convalescing. He was fully conscious, serene and tranquil. Joyfully he kept repeating short prayers to Jesus Crucified, to Mary Most Holy, and to the saints, so much so that the Rector remarked: 'He needs no one to recommend his soul to God; he is doing it well enough himself!' At midnight Comollo intoned the *Ave Maris Stella* and sang it steadily to the end, despite the pleadings of his companions not to tire himself out. He was all absorbed in his thoughts and his face wore such a heavenly expression that he resembled an angel.

"When one of his fellow seminarians asked him what consoled him most at that moment, he replied, 'What I did out of love for the Blessed Virgin and the Communions I received.'

"On April 2, at 1:30 A.M. he was so exhausted that he could scarcely breathe, though his face still was serene. After a while, he rallied again, summoned what strength he still had left and, gazing heavenward, in a halting voice he broke into words of such loving trust in the Blessed Virgin that all those present were moved to tears. Noticing his pulse weaken, I realized that the time was near when he would soon leave the world and all of us, and I began prompting whatever words I thought best under the circumstances. His eyes were fixed on the Crucifix he held in his folded hands; a smile was on his lips, as he listened attentively and made efforts to repeat the words I prompted to him. Some ten minutes before expiring, he called me by name and said, 'If you want something for eternity, I . . . goodbye, I am going . . . Jesus and Mary, into your hands I commend my soul.' These were his last words. His stiffening lips and thickening tongue rendered speech impossible, and all he could do was move his lips in silent prayer.

"Two deacons, Sassi and Fiorito, read the *Proficiscere* [Go forth from this world, O Christian soul . . .]. After that, [they read the other prayers for the dying and] when they came to the holy names of Jesus and Mary he smiled pleasantly as if seeing something wondrous and beautiful. Then, without a movement, his spotless soul, soared heavenward, as we believe, to rest in the peace of the Lord.

It was two o'clock on the morning of April 2, 1839. In five more days he would have been twenty-two.

"That night," as James Bosco reported, "a seminarian from Bulgaro, named Vercellino, who did not belong to John's dormitory, suddenly woke up and shouted, 'Comollo is here, Comollo is here!'"

"Awakened by his cry, the others in the dormitory asked him what had happened. James Bosco, the dormitory vice-prefect tried to quiet him down, but he kept repeating, 'Comollo is dead!' In vain his fellow seminarians insisted that it could not be so, because just the night before he was much improved. 'But I have seen him,' Vercellino persisted. 'He came in and said, 'I've just died!'", and then he vanished.'

"While the others were trying to convince him that he had been dreaming, in came the deacons Sassi and Fiorito, who that night had been on duty at Comollo's side.

" 'How is Comollo?' everyone asked.

" 'He's dead,' they answered.

" 'When did he die?'"

" 'About twelve minutes ago.'

" 'Amazing indeed! It had not been a dream after all!'"

## CHAPTER 52

### *A Solemn Promise Fulfilled*

**A**T daybreak, the news of Comollo's death spread consternation throughout the seminary. Yet all found comfort in repeating to one another: "Comollo is already in Heaven, praying for us." At the same time, they vied with one another in trying to get some object which had belonged to him, as a remembrance of such a well-liked and esteemed companion. That morning, the Rector of the seminary, deeply impressed by the unusual events at the young man's death and somewhat distressed that he should be buried in the common cemetery, went to Turin to see the civil and Church authorities, and he received permission to bury Comollo in St. Philip's Church adjoining the seminary.

On the morning of April 3, a long, solemn procession of seminarians, faculty, canons, other clergymen and an immense crowd of people wound through the streets of Chieri as Comollo's remains were brought to the church. The Rector of the seminary sang the Mass to the accompaniment of solemn and mournful music. After the service, the body was placed in a tomb under the sanctuary floor in front of the main altar, as though the good Lord had wanted near Himself, even in death, one who, when alive, had shown so great a love for Him in the Blessed Sacrament.

Hardly had Comollo been buried than he again appeared in a dormitory full of seminarians. Here is how Don Bosco described this astonishing event: "Louis and I were close friends and fully confided in each other. Hence we often spoke of what might easily happen to one of us at any moment, namely that we must part in death.

"One day while recalling what we had read in the lives of some Saints, we remarked, half jokingly and half seriously, that it would be a great comfort indeed if the one of us who was first called into

eternity could return to give news of himself to the other. We spoke about this a number of times and so, one day, we promised to pray for each other and agreed that whichever would be the first to die, he would come back and bring news of his eternal salvation. I was not fully aware of the import of such a promise and I must admit that we acted very rashly. Never would I suggest such a promise to anyone. Still, as far as we were concerned, this was a sacred promise we intended to keep. We renewed it again and again, especially during Comollo's last illness, always, of course, under the condition that it was pleasing to God and permitted by Him. Comollo's last words and his last look at me had assured me that he would keep our agreement.

"Several companions of mine knew about it and were anxiously waiting to see it carried out. I, too, was very eager, because I hoped it would bring me comfort and temper my grief.

"It was the night between April 3 and 4, the night after his burial. I was sleeping with twenty other theology students in the south dormitory facing the courtyard. I was in bed, but not asleep, and I was thinking about our promise. Almost as though I had a premonition of what was about to take place, I was strangely afraid.

"At the stroke of midnight, I heard a dull sound at the end of the corridor. As it drew nearer, it became sharper, more lugubrious and louder. It sounded [successively] like the rumble of a heavy cart drawn by many horses, or of a railroad train, or like the boom of a cannon. I cannot adequately describe it except as a composite crashing sound so vibrant and, somehow, so violent that it terrified and rendered me speechless. As it drew closer to our dormitory door, the very walls, ceiling and floor of the corridor re-echoed as with the roar of crashing steel slabs being shaken with great force. And yet the rumble gave no clue as to where it came from. It was like trying to pinpoint the position of a locomotive by the trail of smoke it leaves in the air.

"All in the dormitory were startled but nobody dared say a word. I was petrified. The din was getting closer and ever more frightening, but still it sounded outside the dormitory. Then the door was flung open, the roar grew in intensity, and a slim, flickering, multi-colored light, which seemed to modulate the sound, pierced the darkness. Abruptly all noise ceased, the light flared more brilliantly

and Comollo's voice was clearly heard. It was more frail than it had been when he was alive. Three times in succession he called out: 'Bosco! Bosco! Bosco! I'm saved!'

"At that very moment a light flooded the entire dormitory and the sounds which had ceased were again heard ever louder. It was almost as though a thunderbolt had struck the house and it was collapsing. Immediately again all noise ceased and the light vanished. My fellow seminarians leaped out of bed and fled wildly in all directions. A number huddled together in a corner of the room to boost their courage. Others grouped themselves around the dormitory prefect, Father Joseph Fiorito of Rivoli. They spent the night this way, eagerly awaiting dawn. All had heard the noise; several heard the voice, but not the words themselves. They kept asking one other what the noise and the voice could have meant. Sitting on my bed, I told them to calm down, assuring them that I had clearly heard the words 'I am saved.' A number had heard the voice directly above my head and this became the accepted version at the seminary for a long time afterward.

"I was so shaken and frightened that, at the moment, I would rather have died. As far as I can remember, this was the first time that I really was afraid. This too was the beginning of an illness that brought me to the edge of the grave and left me in such weak health that I did not fully recover until many years later.

"God is almighty but merciful and, generally, He does not heed such agreements. But, at times, in His infinite mercy, He permits their fulfillment as in this case. I would never suggest any such thing to anyone. Whenever we attempt to breach the supernatural, especially when it is unnecessary for our eternal salvation, we are bound to suffer the consequences. We are certain enough of the existence of the soul: we need no further proofs. We should be content with what our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed to us."

As late as 1884, when Don Bosco reprinted an account of Comollo's life, a number of people who had witnessed this apparition were still living. It should also be noted that the galley proofs of the first edition of Comollo's biography which mentioned this happening were read and corrected [where necessary] by the Superiors of the seminary and by those seminarians who had seen the event. Father Joseph Fiorito himself recounted it several times to the Su-

periors of the Oratory. News of the event also filtered outside the seminary. A number of people heard of it through Dominic Pogliano, the cathedral bell ringer, who vouched for its truthfulness.

The loss of his friend had deeply upset John. This, together with the fright he experienced at the time of the apparition, broke his health, already undermined by long vigils in study, and, in his own words, it nearly led him to the grave. In these circumstances, a seminarian, not of John's dormitory, rather young, lively and light-headed, was annoyed by John's constant seriousness, and often would go up to him and repeat teasingly: "Bosco, Bosco, Bosco, I am saved!" This was like reopening a painful wound. The joke was entirely out of place, but John would merely smile back, and playfully shake his finger at him without saying a word. Later this same cleric became a good and zealous priest. He recounted this episode to illustrate John's forbearance and the self-control he exercised over his naturally impetuous temperament.

At the end of June, still in poor health but eager as ever to sanctify his vacation, John went home for the summer. Mr. and Mrs. Moglia wanted their son George to become a priest. So when John came to see them at their farm they asked him to take George to Susambrino and keep him there with him throughout the vacation as a brother. John taught him daily for three months and even gave him his own mattress to sleep on. Other boys from Castelnuovo joined George in the Latin classes. The families of two of the lads paid him five lire, so that John could buy himself clothes, hosiery and a pair of shoes for the next school year. Francis Bertagna, who later became a professor and received the title of Chevalier, took lessons from John for two successive summers.

George recalled that from time to time John would take his eight or ten pupils on hikes to different places. Once they all hiked to the Moglia farm to spend a pleasant day with that good family. On the way they met two poorly dressed youngsters. John stopped to ask them: "Where are you going?"

"To look for some food," they told him.

John was moved. He looked at them and said: "If that's the case, come with me." They did. This reveals his generous heart. One day it would be his task to gather poor and neglected children under the wings of God's limitless providence.

With so devoted a teacher, George made great progress both that summer and the following one. At the end of the latter vacation, however, he told John quite frankly that he had no inclination at all toward the priesthood. "Do as you think best," John told him. "You can save your soul in any walk of life as long as you live like a good Christian. But remember always to correct the wrong you see in others. See that the bad do not corrupt the good. By your good example, both in word and in deed, try to save souls, no matter what state of life God will call you to. Prevent or stop bad talk and blasphemy and admonish those who talk that way, particularly if there are children present who might take scandal."

Meanwhile, John had not forgotten Father Comollo. He went several times to Cinzano to comfort him and be comforted in turn, as each would recall the amiable traits and virtues of Louis, their departed nephew and friend. On occasion the good old priest, who loved John dearly, invited him to preach a sermon for some special festivity. John accepted, and while in Cinzano, he started writing Louis' biography with the intention of publishing it in due time to perpetuate the memory of that saintly young seminarian's virtuous life.

In the midst of these many duties and his faithful attendance at church services, John found great comfort in visiting Father Cafasso. The latter came each fall to his father's house in Castelnuovo for a respite from his priestly and teaching duties. For the past year, he had taught Moral Theology at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi in Turin.

[We read in Sirach:] "If you see a man of prudence, seek him out. Let your feet wear away his doorstep" (6, 36). John did just that, both at Castelnuovo and in Turin. The young seminarian listened eagerly to the words of his saintly friend with whom he had much in common. Must we not believe that Father Cafasso's joy over St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori's canonization, which took place that year, was shared by John?

This glorification of St. Alphonsus presented to the bishops a real model of loyalty to the Holy See. It also lifted on high a brilliant torch of Catholic moral principles that would drive away the dark despair of Jansenism. Love of God and trust in Him and union with Christ's Vicar on earth were to strengthen the faithful in the

struggle of good against evil, whose forces were unceasingly readying themselves to overthrow all religious, moral and social order.

In fact, under the guise of science, to avoid police attention, conventions were held in Pisa in 1839, in Turin and Genoa in the following years, and lastly, at Casale in 1847. While scientists innocently talked about science, art and agriculture, the members of various secret societies were making secret agreements among themselves on ways and means [of overthrowing the government] and establishing a republic in the not too distant future. Their first step was to be the overthrow of the Papacy.<sup>1</sup> The rulers of the Italian States, duped by the sectaries and unaware of the real nature of these Scientific Conventions, favored, praised and supported them, fearing only the imaginary usurpations of their rights by the Pope. Pope Gregory XVI, with deep insight, saw through the sham and alone opposed them. As though foreseeing the future, he gave a warning to the princes by solemnly approving the veneration which the Piedmontese people from time immemorial had shown toward Humbert and Boniface of Savoy, who had gained their immortal crown of glory by giving to God that which belonged to God.

The King of Kings, the Lord of Sovereigns, had given all nations for all time to His Church, His Kingdom on earth in order that she should teach them, baptize them and train them to observe whatever He had commanded. Hence, a Christian Sovereign is in the Church, but not above the Church. He must respect and obey her in spiritual and moral matters as well as in all things related to her divine and human structure. The Church embraces all kingdoms. Catholic nations are within the framework of the Church over which the Roman Pontiff presides in full authority. In a conflict of authorities, "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5, 29).

This papal approval of popular devotion to the two Princes of the House of Savoy and its significance were properly emphasized by a very solemn triduum in the Cathedral of Turin on June 28, 29 and 30 by order of Archbishop Fransoni. Charles Albert, a magnanimous King, loved the Church no less than these two ancestors of his. True enough, he aspired to be King of Italy; he knew what the liberals

<sup>1</sup> Predari [Francesco], *I Primi Vagiti della Libertà in Piemonte*, Milan, [Vallardi], 1861, p. 126.

in the various Italian States were after; he was seeking their favor and using them for his own ends; he was even mustering the means for the war of independence; but he had no intention of hurting the Roman Pontiff.

He had called several religious Orders into Piedmont and had taken them under his protection; he wanted the young brought up according to religious principles; in all circumstances he proclaimed his loyalty to the Pope and the Holy See and in this same year (1839) he had requested and obtained the appointment of an Apostolic Nuncio in Turin for a closer and more direct contact with the Holy See, the first appointee being Archbishop Vincent Massi, titular of Thessalonica.

In 1840, when the Supreme Council of Sardinia urged Charles Albert to abolish Church tithes in that island and provide for the support of the clergy in some other way, the King ruled out any action on the matter without the previous consent of the Pope.

Again in 1841 he had recourse to the Pope and came to an agreement with him in regard to restricting the privilege of forum and the personal immunity of members of the clergy. Consequently, crimes [by ecclesiastics] were to be tried in State courts, whereas civil offenses remained under the jurisdiction of Church tribunals. Should a death sentence be passed on an ecclesiastic, [his] Bishop had the right to examine the court proceedings and sentence. If he found any irregularity or definite facts in favor of the defendant, he was to refer the sentence to a committee of three bishops within the State for review. If the episcopal committee found that the defendant's guilt had been sufficiently proved, the latter was to be degraded<sup>2</sup> and the sentence carried out within a month.

The King's regard for the Holy See in such matters was also apparent when he promulgated the new Civil Code in 1837. After stating in its introduction that his aim was to give his beloved subjects one single body of laws consonant with the teaching of the Church and the basic principles of the monarchy, he decreed: "The Apostolic, Roman Catholic religion is the only religion of the State. The King is honored to be the protector of the Church and to pro-

<sup>2</sup> A canonical punishment in the Roman Catholic Church by which a clergyman is perpetually deprived of all office, titles, benefices, and ecclesiastical rights and privileges. [Editor]

mote the observance of its laws in matters of her competence. The highest State officials will watch diligently to maintain perfect harmony between Church and State . . . Other religions already existing within the State are merely tolerated.”

On October 26, 1839, the Penal Code was promulgated. It imposed jail sentences for disturbing, interrupting or preventing religious services in church or outside; for insulting a priest in the exercise of his duties; for blaspheming God, the Blessed Virgin or the Saints; for attacking the official religion of the State in speeches or writings, books or other printed materials. It also reaffirmed the laws on the observance of Sundays and holy days. Anyone destroying or defacing sacred vessels, relics or images in churches and their dependencies or even outside of these places during public religious services was to be put to forced labor, temporarily or for life. If such crimes took place under other circumstances, those guilty were to be jailed. There was the death penalty for profaning consecrated Hosts.

The King's zeal for God's honor explains his deep friendship with Venerable Cottolengo.<sup>3</sup> The King enjoyed talking familiarly with him about the latter's works of charity embodied in the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* [the Little House of Divine Providence]. This also explains Don Boscós' love for the King as we shall see later.

Like every good Piedmontese of the day, Don Bosco had been brought up to uphold the King as the representative of Him by whose favor Kings reign. We know for certain that he prayed then and thereafter for his King and the royal family. He would shirk no sacrifice, even the greatest, if his duty as a faithful subject called for it. Even under circumstances that were painful to him as a priest, Don Bosco never uttered a hostile or disrespectful word. He constantly conducted himself in accordance with St. Peter's teachings: “Be subject to every human creature for God's sake, whether to the King as supreme, or to governors as sent through him for vengeance on evildoers and for the praise of the good” (1 Pet. 2, 13-14).

<sup>3</sup> See footnote on p. 175. [Editor]

## CHAPTER 53

### *Closer to the Goal*

THE air of his native village did little to improve John's health. Nevertheless at the beginning of the school year, 1839-40, he returned to his studies and to his assignment as sacristan in the seminary. His health was run down, but not to the point of losing the strength which in his first dream he had been asked to acquire: "Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong."

One evening, during recreation, after telling, as usual, some edifying stories for the diversion of his companions, he went on to describe the sleight-of-hand tricks he had performed as a boy, including his challenge to the tumbler. Many seminarians who had not studied with him at Chieri, among them, John Giacomelli, found this difficult to believe. It made John exclaim: "So you don't believe me? I'll show you!" Thereupon he took a very heavy wooden chair, lifted it off the ground with only one arm and performed a few tricks with it, balancing it on his chin by only one leg while he strolled leisurely around the room. Giacomelli was flabbergasted at his dexterity and strength and cried out in admiration: "Well, now I have to believe you."

Nevertheless, John's health continued to deteriorate. He had been ailing now for a year, and at last was forced to take to his bed. Any food caused him nausea, and he was bothered by chronic insomnia so that doctors actually gave him up. He had been bedridden for a month when his mother, entirely ignorant of her son's serious condition, came to visit him one day bringing with her a bottle of good wine and a loaf of corn bread. The moment she came into the infirmary she realized how seriously sick he was. When leaving, she wanted to take the corn bread back with her, for she thought it would be too hard to digest. But John so pleaded with her to leave it that, finally, she reluctantly agreed. Left alone, John was seized

with an incontrollable craving for that bread and wine. First he took a small piece of bread and chewed it well. He liked it immensely. Then he cut off a slice, followed by a second and a third, and finally, regardless of anything, he finished off the whole loaf, washing it down with the wine. He then fell into such a deep sleep that he did not wake up once during the night or for two days thereafter. His Superiors feared this might be a symptom of approaching death, but it was not so. When he finally woke up, he felt fine. Traces of his illness lingered, but these eventually disappeared completely during his chaplaincy at the *Rifugio* [Institute] after some vicissitudes and a bad relapse.

John had to return home several times that year in an effort to regain his strength. Thanks to his will power or, more still, to his obstinate application to the study of theology, he was privileged to receive the tonsure and four Minor Orders in the Turin Cathedral on *Laetare* Sunday, March 25, 1840.

During all these years John had never interrupted relations with his old, beloved teacher at Capriglio, [Father Joseph Lacqua], who had instilled in him a genuine spirit of piety. He had always sent him news about himself and had visited him from time to time. We reproduce below a letter which this good teacher wrote to his pupil.

Ponzano, May 5, 1840

My dearest friend:

Your long delay in writing me—longer certainly than you thought or befits our friendship—was more than compensated for, by your long and welcome letter, full of frightening experiences, which you graciously sent me and which I received a few days ago. Truly there can be no blame in omitting or delaying things that are not really necessary. As for myself, my excuse for not writing sooner is that letter-writing, in my opinion, is not a duty of friendship, except when there is reason for it on either part, in which case I shall never be remiss. That you are well and that everything is fine with you makes me and your loving aunt very happy. May Almighty God soon grant you the grace to become a worthy priest in His Church, as I believe you will, judging by your wise and edifying conduct.

This village is like Capriglio in its total lack of the necessary comforts

of life. I live here as though in complete solitude, which, for that matter, has always been my faithful companion. However, I still feel somewhat out of place. If the Lord, as a favor, will prolong my life a little, I shall give the world a hearty kick and bury myself in a monastery. When you decide to pay me a visit, remember to bring with you the three little volumes of the Holy Bible. Please give my regards to Mr. Joseph Scaglia and to his dear family, from whom chance, or I had better say, Divine Providence, has sent me too far away. I reciprocate the good wishes that he sent me through you. Marianne is fairly well, *sicut in quantum* [relatively]. She sends you her best regards and I join her with all my heart. Take care of yourself and keep well. Believe me always,

Your good friend,  
Father Joseph Lacqua

This letter to John reveals the good priest's desire to become a religious, leading us to infer that it was from him that John learned to scorn worldly goods, a thought he so often expressed. Perhaps, it was also from him that he derived the thought, even from childhood, of dedicating himself to God in a religious Congregation. From this letter we also learn how John continued his scriptural studies, thus storing a vast amount of knowledge that served him wonderfully in his great mission.

A few months before the end of the scholastic year, young George Moglia arrived at the seminary on an errand from his father, who wished John to be godfather to the Moglias' newborn son. The godmother was to have been the Moglia's own daughter, but she had refused because she was bashful to appear in church alongside of a seminarian. She finally submitted to her father's stern insistence. John accepted, but when he arrived at the church and heard from Mr. Moglia who the godmother was to be, he said: "That's not necessary. I brought the godmother with me from Chieri."

"So I may excuse my daughter then?" asked Moglia.

"Indeed, you may." The daughter, who had come there most unwillingly, swiftly disappeared from the scene.

"And who will be the godmother?" Moglia asked.

"Our Lady and the Church," John exclaimed, "and that's more than enough!" The newborn baby was named John.

After the baptismal ceremony and a little party, before leaving, John went to pay his respects to the lady of the house, Mrs. Dorothy. She complained of always feeling exhausted and expressed concern over never again recovering her former strength. "Keep up your spirits," John said to her, "and don't worry. You'll live to be ninety."

As a matter of fact, she did recover and trusted John's promise so firmly that a few times later on, even when she fell seriously ill, she refused to take the prescribed medicines, declaring: "Don Bosco told me I shall live to be ninety!" In fact, she survived Don Bosco himself, and died at the age of 91. After Don Bosco's death she recommended herself daily to his intercession, firmly convinced that in Heaven he would listen to her prayers.

John's benefactors found great comfort in believing that by helping him they were cooperating with God's designs. It was also most heartwarming to them to know that he would be ever lovingly grateful. Father Cinzano was well aware of this. John never neglected any opportunity to prove his filial love for his pastor, who had always shown him fatherly affection. He often wrote him affectionate letters from Chieri, and never forgot to present his greetings on his Name day or other anniversaries. Father Cinzano carefully kept all the letters that John had written to him as a high school student, seminarian and priest. When Father Cinzano died in 1870, those who went through his papers, in their haste, inadvertently burned those letters together with other papers considered unimportant. They remembered only too late that many of these letters were signed *John Bosco*. All that remains is a poem which he wrote that year for his pastor's Name day. This poem, like so many others made for different occasions is not without merit. The rhymes, the truncation of the last word in each stanza and many of the verses themselves reveal haste and an effort not to lose precious time, while displaying warmheartedness and eagerness to give a proof of esteem and affection to his benefactors and friends.

On the Name Day of the  
Illustrious and Very Reverend  
Father Anthony Cinzano  
Pastor of Castelnuovo and Rural Dean.

ODE

'Twas the hour when grateful slumber  
Sweetened mortal care,  
And in thoughts of joys more fair  
We forget the toils of the day.

I too was a-bed and slumbered,  
And awoke to a sudden sound.  
I look, I stared, my eyes found  
A figure I'd ne'er seen before.

In linen white his limbs were clothed;  
In his hand he held a wand,  
A garland, all with flowers adorned,  
Which deeply stirred my wonder.

In his right hand a sword of flame  
He twirled, and to me showed the flowers.  
Thunder Lord he seemed in brightness;  
He opened his lips and so spake:

—I am one of the seven Cherubs,  
Who God in His glory surround.  
And no gifts do mortals receive  
Unless I the gift announce.

'Tis I from the heart of sadness  
Who carries sighs to the Most High  
And in easing anguish and sorrow  
Bring peace where was only war.

'Tis I who to Abraham's sons  
Immersed in the shadows of death,  
Announced the glorious fate  
So long sought after, in vain.

This sword is a powerful weapon  
That trims and breaks Satan's claws;  
So that Man may avoid his snares  
And walk the narrow path.

This garland's a blessed token  
Which the Eternal holds in reward  
If faithful unto the end  
They will fight at my side.

Among those faithful and strong,  
 Under my warrior banner is  
 Anthony, so dear  
 And a warrior unconquered.

Good shepherd among Christ's flock  
 Every thought and care intent;  
 He withstands every risk and test  
 In bringing souls to Christ.

Dost thou see this golden book?  
 Already here his deeds  
 Suffice to adorn his brow  
 With lily and with flower.

So saying, Cinzano, he showed  
 To me your well-loved face,  
 And how your holy work  
 Has already reward on high.

In respect I to him turned:  
 Be ready with your aid  
 On this path of fragile life  
 Amid the toils of the faithless host.

Bring him triumph and victory  
 Until the day of his placid death,  
 And blessed be the fate  
 Which will crown his immortal days.

Many things would I have said. But he  
 Gave sign that all prayers were heard.  
 A candid cloud enveloped him  
 For an instant shone: and vanished.

*With homage and great respect. June 13, 1840*  
 John Bosco, Seminarian

Two memorable but widely different events marked the end of that year for John. He himself has left a record of them. "At the end of that year, while still in the seminary at Chieri, I nearly died. It was departure day and everyone was getting ready to go home. It was raining, and I was in the dormitory standing at the window looking up at the threatening sky. I was leaning on the window sill

when suddenly lightning struck with a deafening sound. Bricks ripped from the window frame and struck me in the stomach; I dropped unconscious to the floor. My companions thought I had been killed. They carried me to my bed, and washed my face. I suddenly recovered, smiled and jumped out of bed.

“Now that the school year was over, I thought of trying something which in those days was very rarely allowed; namely, a theology course during the summer. I mentioned this confidentially one day to Father Cinzano, and he enthusiastically approved of my idea. Without saying a word to anyone, I called on Archbishop Frasoni to ask [his] permission to take the fourth year theology course during vacation and the fifth year course in the fall of this same year 1840. I gave as my reason for this request the fact that I was already twenty-four years old. The saintly Archbishop received me very kindly and, after checking on the results of all the examinations taken in the seminary, granted my wish on condition that I cover the complete program; that meant the treatises *De Poenitentia* [The Sacrament of Penance] by Alasia and *De Eucharistia* [The Holy Eucharist] by Cazzaniga. Father Cinzano, my pastor and rural dean was entrusted with the execution of this permission. In two months I was able to cover all the program.”

Meanwhile, John continued to tutor or give Latin lessons. Among his pupils attending that summer was young John Baptist Bertagna, who later became an eminent theologian, a renowned teacher of Moral Theology at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St. Francis of Assisi, Titular Bishop of Capharnaum, and Auxiliary to Cardinal Alimonda, the Archbishop of Turin.

Nor did John neglect his preaching. On July 26, he gave the sermon on St. Anne at Aramengo. This precious manuscript is in our archives. On August 24, almost unexpectedly, he was called upon to deliver the sermon on St. Bartholomew in Castelnuovo itself. On the afternoon of the previous day he had been in the rectory patio with the curate Father Rupolo who was playing boccie with a guest priest. John was leaning against the wall, his arms folded, immersed in thought. Suddenly, Father Cinzano appeared and announced that he had received a letter from the guest preacher. The latter, due the following day to speak on St. Bartholomew before a confraternity of Castelnuovo was informing Father Cinzano

that, for some reason or other, he was unable to come. Therefore, Father Cinzano added, it would be Father Rupolo's lot to deliver the sermon on the holy apostle. The curate tried to ease himself out of it by saying: "One day's notice is not enough. If it were a regular Sunday sermon I could do it, but a sermon on a saint is quite another matter." The other priest also declined the invitation.

Father Cinzano hesitated a moment, perhaps remembering that John had to take an examination soon, but then he turned to him and said: "How about you, John?"

John shook himself out of his thoughts and replied, smiling: "If there's no one else, I am *paratus ad omnia*. [ready for anything]. I'll try."

He did, and his sermon aroused the greatest admiration especially among the priests. His fellow seminarians kept saying: "He can surely give us some pointers." Forty-eight years later, John Filippello, still remembered that sermon so indelibly impressed on his mind, and so also did Father Rupolo himself who confirmed this to us.

John continued to gather the peasant boys of the neighborhood every Sunday and enjoy their company, but it seems that besides being on friendly terms with the notables of Castelnuovo and Chieri, he was also quite welcome in several patrician families of neighboring castles. We say "it seems" because there is no mention of it in his memoirs. However, on the front page of the first manuscript of Comollo's biography he wrote: "Biographical notes on the cleric Louis Comollo, seminarian at Chieri. Dedicated to the young Count, Louis Larissé." This inference is also confirmed by a draft of a letter to a young man who was being tutored at home, a circumstance pointing to the young man's social status. In it John takes him to task for wasting time and admonishes him to make up for it by better conduct and greater diligence.

Castelnuovo, August 28, 1840

I am very sorry, indeed, dear friend, that you were disappointed in your grades and unable to meet your parents' expectations. But if you will look for the true reason for this, you will realize that the fault lies with you. If you had applied yourself earnestly to those subjects that

both at school and in your own home your teacher zealously taught you, you would not now have to envy your companions who have been promoted, nor feel ashamed of yourself. Is it really better to have a nice time during the school year and then flunk, rather than do one's duty and then have the joy of being promoted?

If I were to advise anyone about choosing either alternative, I would exhort him not to count upon the generosity of his teachers, but rather to assume that they are strict, and very strict indeed; he would then be inclined to study hard, and at the end of the year he would be promoted in his own right, and not because of his teachers' kindness. However, many people think otherwise and so it happens that just as many will be forced to regret having wasted their time. They will then realize their failure and will have to return home bitterly disappointed. Now set your mind at rest. Try to remedy the situation by resolving to apply yourself with all seriousness during the coming school year to the subjects that will be taught you. You may then be sure you will find me as dear a friend as even now I declare myself to be,

Your dear friend,  
John Bosco

As we can see, the sphere of John's beneficial influence was expanding as he was getting closer to the realization of his desires and to filling that place in the Church for which Divine Providence had destined him. Meanwhile, he so diligently applied himself to his studies under Father Cinzano's guidance that the good teacher grew weary of making him recite his lessons. Every day John read twenty pages of the authors prescribed. Once read, they remained so firmly impressed on his mind that Father Febraro from Castelnuovo, a fellow seminarian of John's and, later on, pastor of Orbassano, first in writing and then orally gave us this account: "John Bosco covered the five-year theology course in only four years not so much because he was a bit older than his fellow seminarians, but rather because of his keen understanding of theological matters. I was present at his oral examination for admission to the fifth year course. The rural dean [Father Cinzano], who had been appointed examiner by the Archbishop, after seeing how John could give verbatim answers to all of his many questions and objections, was so delighted

and amazed by the performance that he called us young clerics to come in and witness the event. The unusual examination then continued in our presence, although the good Father already had had ample proof of John's worth."

Since September was not far off, John was notified by his Superiors at the seminary to prepare himself for the major order of subdiaconate. This is how he describes in his memoirs this most important and decisive event of his life: "Since my share of inheritance from my father's estate was insufficient for the required ecclesiastical patrimony, my brother Joseph gave all the little he had. I was ordained a subdeacon at the autumn Ember Days Ordinations. Now that I know what virtues are required for such an important step, I am convinced that I was not sufficiently prepared. Since I had no one to guide me in my vocation, I sought the advice of Father Caffasso; he told me to go on and to rely on his word. During the ten-day spiritual retreat in the *Casa della Missione* [Mission House] in Turin, I made a general confession so that the father confessor might form a clear idea of the state of my conscience and be able to give me suitable advice. I wanted to go on to the priesthood, but I trembled at the thought of binding myself for life. Therefore I did not want to make a final decision without the confessor's full permission. From then on I have always done my utmost to put into practice Father Borel's advice: "One perseveres in his vocation and follows it more perfectly if he keeps aloof from the world and frequently receives Holy Communion."

## CHAPTER 54

### *A Long Hike*

**D**URING these vacations John, now a subdeacon, had accepted the invitation to give a sermon on our Lady of the Rosary at Avigliana, his friend Giacomelli's birthplace. Therefore at the beginning of October, the latter came to Castelnuovo to meet him and enjoy a long hike with him to Avigliana, one to be long remembered. Before setting out, John went to say goodbye to Father Cinzano. The latter took leave of him with a phrase that he often used when he heard John preach and noticed his obvious talents for the priestly ministry and his tireless zeal: *In omnem terram exivit sonus eorum et in fines orbis terrae verba eorum!* (Ps. 18, 4) [Through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message].

They made the journey on foot because John always got very sick in coaches. Their first stopover was at Chivasso where they spent the night. Next morning, they continued on to Turin, where they bought chestnuts and bread for a snack, attended to a few errands and reached Avigliana that same day.

Next day, the feast day of our Lady of the Rosary, John, without showing any concern for his sermon, spent the entire morning talking with several priests who had been invited. Giacomelli, however, was worrying for him. Now and then he would go up to John and whisper anxiously: "What about the sermon?"

"There's time for that," John would answer.

Even after dinner, he continued his conversation, especially with Father Pautasso, the pastor who, amazed at John's learning, told him: "I think you will do wonderful things one day!"

When John mounted the pulpit, Giacomelli nervously withdrew to the sacristy to be spared the sight of his friend's failure. But he

soon breathed with ease at John's easy delivery and the ordered and forceful presentation of his arguments.

When John came down from the pulpit, Father Pautasso went up to him and said: "It was wonderful!"

After the feast of the Holy Rosary, the two friends climbed to the *Sagra di San Michele* [St. Michael's Shrine] perched on Mount Pirchiriano, about 2,710 feet high. From here one commands a view of the whole valley of the Cottian Alps and almost the whole of Piedmont. On this mount, at the invitation of King Charles Albert and with the approval of Pope Gregory XVI, the Fathers of the *Istituto di Carità* [Institute of Charity] had established a good-sized community in 1836. (Their Congregation, founded in 1831 at Domodossola by the renowned philosopher Antonio Rosmini, was approved by the Holy See in 1839.) While staffing the ancient church, these good priests zealously ministered to the spiritual needs of the people in the Susa valley as far as the boundaries of the province of Turin. Giacomelli first took his friend to the imposing ruins of the magnificent Benedictine Abbey, the majestic Gothic church and the tombs of several ancient Princes of the House of Savoy. The good Fathers gave them a hearty welcome and John established a long-lasting friendship with them. Father Flecchia, then a young man, who lived to be well over ninety, and the rest of his confreres always remained warm friends of Don Bosco and of his works.

Divine Providence had led John to Mount Pirchiriano. Here, as we shall see, he had a chance to study a new kind of vow of poverty through which his future Salesian Congregation would later escape expropriation by the State. It seems that he had thought of something similar even earlier, as he himself told us more than once. Perhaps Don Bosco had the same kind of intuition as St. Paul of the Cross, who seemed to have foreseen the plundering of all Church properties by the [French] revolution.

Bosco and Giacomelli came down the mount and went towards Coazze, in the heart of an alpine region, where Father Peretti, a cousin of Giacomelli, was pastor. The two seminarians looked so unkempt as, covered with sweat and dust they passed, dead-tired, through the villages, that the children were frightened away. When they reached Coazze at ten in the evening, they simply could not

take another step. Not a sound was to be heard in the village and the doors and windows of the rectory were shut tight. They rang the bell. No answer. They rang again and after a long delay a window opened. Somebody unseen uttered a word or two and the window was banged shut again. Meanwhile, what with the mountain air and their clothes soaked with perspiration, they were shivering and their teeth were chattering. A whole hour they stood there, calling out every so often. At last the window opened again and Giacomelli caught sight of a head peering out cautiously.

"I'm Giacomelli," he shouted quickly, "the pastor's cousin!"

"Is it really you?" the housekeeper asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Of course it's me. Can't you tell?"

"Who's the other person?"

"A friend of mine!"

"Why did you come at this hour?"

Giacomelli was becoming impatient: "Because we couldn't make it any sooner . . . For heaven's sake, come down and open this door . . . We're soaked and will catch pneumonia . . ."

"I'm coming . . . but why come so late?" the housekeeper kept muttering.

They waited a few more minutes in the cold and then they heard the shuffling of slippers. It was the pastor, just out of bed. In a white cap he peered out the window.

"Oh! It's you," he exclaimed. And then to the housekeeper, still unconvinced: "Let them in . . ."

The two seminarians went in and up the stairs. In the meantime the pastor had lit a lamp. He invited them to sit down and launched into a conversation which showed no sign of coming to an end. Giacomelli answered several questions but then, feeling very uncomfortable in his damp clothes, asked his cousin if it were possible to light a fire to dry themselves. "Why, of course," the pastor answered, ordering the housekeeper to fetch some twigs and light a fire. She obeyed, and the two travelers were soon warming themselves up.

They waited hopefully for something to eat but the priest kept on talking and yawning, while the housekeeper, sitting in a corner

of the room, had finally fallen asleep. John, with a smile, winked at his friend; they had had nothing to eat since noon. Giacomelli understood and, interrupting his cousin's conversation:

"Father," he said, "have you got something to eat? We're starved."

"What? You mean to say you have had no supper?"

"What supper could we find along the road except stones?"

"Why didn't you tell me right away? It just didn't dawn on me! Please forgive me. Magdalen, wake up and prepare them some supper!"

The housekeeper woke up and slowly moved to her kitchen stove. In God's good time, a meal was finally put together. They ate and then prepared for a good sleep. There were two beds in one room, but no blankets; only sheets and bedspreads. They went to bed, but since the October mountain air was anything but warm they could not sleep. After a while there was a dialogue:

"Aren't you asleep?" asked one.

"What about you?" answered the other one.

"Are you warm?"

"Are you cold?"

"Try and sleep, if you can!"

"You try to catch some rest."

And then some laughter. The pastor heard them. He got up, rummaged for some blankets and threw them on their beds. It was only toward dawn that finally they were able to warm themselves up and fall asleep.

Don Bosco often told the Oratory boys about this famous hike, touching up his account a little. But he always left out one particular that was later revealed by his friend, Father Giacomelli. The two pastors with whom they had lodged, after hearing John discuss various matters with great accuracy, maturity of judgment and wide range of knowledge, had remarked to each other: "This seminarian will turn out to be something great and extraordinary."

It seems apropos to bring out here a trait of Don Bosco: whether as a seminarian or as a priest, whenever he was a guest (and this happened many and many a time), he never betrayed any dislike, annoyance or fastidiousness. As far as he was concerned, everything

was always fine. Rudeness, forgetfulness, lack of foresight, neglect, inconveniences, stifling rooms in summer or unheated ones in winter, delays in serving meals, disagreeable food, long drawn-out conversations when he was overcome with weariness, all these things he accepted without ever showing annoyance or impatience or permitting himself a complaint. Always even-tempered, he never lost his friendly smile, which showed how pleased he was, just as he would do when his benefactors and friends overwhelmed him with acts of kindness and generosity. He was always grateful for anything that was done for him in the name of charity. His ever cheerful and uplifting speech, his sincere words of thanks and the prayers that he promised to say for them kindled in his hosts a keen desire to show him their hospitality again.

After his return from this journey, John went to Bardella with his pastor to be subdeacon at the church services in honor of the Patron Saint. A wedding banquet had also been scheduled on that occasion and was attended by the pastor and the chairman of the festivities. John held true to his resolution and returned home.

At the end of the banquet which, as usual, was rather gay and noisy, the chairman of the festivities invited the pastor to his own home, and both left. Suddenly the bride reeled over, struck by a heart attack. Consternation replaced the general merrymaking. All treatment proved useless and the woman was pronounced dead. Two days later [as was prescribed by law], her body was placed inside a coffin and taken to the church. A Requiem Mass was sung and the funeral procession set out on foot for the nearby cemetery. As they approached its gates, one of the pallbearers remarked to the pastor: "It sounds as though the dead woman were beating against the sides of the coffin."

"When *you*'ll be dead, you won't be able to do that," the priest answered. Everyone laughed, thinking it had been a trick of the imagination. The coffin was laid in the center of St. Rocco's chapel and the final exequies were sung. Then everybody left except the undertaker and his attendants. As the coffin was about to be lowered into the grave, the undertaker heard distinctly some knocks from inside the coffin. Terrified, he seized a crowbar to pry the coffin open, but suddenly he stayed his hand, paralyzed at the

thought that it was against the law to open a coffin without authorization. So he ran to the village and told the mayor; the mayor called the doctor and all three hurried to the cemetery.

When the coffin was opened, the doctor found that the woman's body was still warm and that her pulse was still beating. He then made an incision in her veins and blood flowed freely. He had her brought back to the village right away but the unfortunate woman never regained consciousness and died a few hours later. John, who had heard about it and had gone back, was a witness to this event. Whenever he talked about it, he would conclude his account by reminding his hearers that truly in this world "Even in laughter the heart may be sad and the end of joy may be sorrow" (Prov. 14, 13).

During these vacations also, John visited the Moglias, this time with Giacomelli. They received a warm welcome and stayed overnight. Don Bosco always kept in close touch with this good family and showed great esteem and love toward its head, Mr. Louis Moglia. He always received him with open arms whenever the latter came to visit him in Turin. His wife, Mrs. Dorothy, was so firmly convinced that Don Bosco's grateful prayers would help her that she always turned to him in her troubles, even the most trying.

George Moglia told us: "Don Bosco was always very grateful to my family for what little we did for him. Very often when I visited him at the Oratory he made me sit at table next to him even when he was surrounded by his most important priests. One day he turned to me in the presence of all his Salesians and dinner guests and said: 'This is my former employer!' During the early times of the Oratory when he had only twenty-five boys under his care, he would bring them every year to Moncucco for an outing. In return, he wanted us to consider the Oratory as our home whenever business brought us to Turin. Whenever we met, he always reminded me to pray, to frequent the Sacraments, to be especially devoted to the Blessed Virgin, to love God and my neighbor and to carry out faithfully all the duties of a good Christian."

Don Bosco's gratitude toward the Moglias included also their lastborn son, John Moglia, at whose baptism he, [then a seminarian] had been godfather. When he grew older he went to school at the Oratory, staying there three years, during which time Don Bosco always had the lad sit at table with him. When the Moglia

family divided the father's estate, John Moglia's share was that same vineyard where his revered godfather had tied the vines as a youngster. The vine was still thriving and bearing abundant fruit after sixty-one years, while all the others had already been replaced. Once it even happened that a farmhand forgot to give this particular vine its regular spray; and yet it bore more fruit than the others. In 1886 Don Bosco expressed a wish for some grapes from that vine and John Moglia brought him a small basketful. This we came to know from John Moglia himself.

In the fall of this year John also made the acquaintance of Joachim Rho from Pecetto. A student at the time, he later became a teacher of [Italian] literature and school superintendent in the Province of Turin. In 1889, in a letter to Father [Francis] Piccollo who, from Sicily, had sent him a copy of his funeral eulogy on Don Bosco, he wrote: "I would like to have seen some reference in your sermon to Father Anthony Cinzano, rural dean of Castelnuovo d'Asti, who hails from our own district. I remember how this good priest gloried in the fact that he had taught Don Bosco and some other parishioners of his during the summer vacations, when they were just seminarians. He was very much interested in them. It was in the very rectory of Castelnuovo that, around 1840, I first met Don Bosco as well as Father Febraro, who later became pastor at Orbassano, Father [Charles] Allora and others with whom I always kept up a close friendship from then on."

Blessed be the memory of this fine pastor who spent happy days in the midst of a spiritual family of seminarians whom he himself had prepared for the priesthood.

## CHAPTER 55

### *Unintentional Self-Portrait*

ON his return to the seminary John was enrolled in the fifth and last year of theology. Because of his exemplary conduct and excellence in studies he was appointed prefect. This was the highest position to which a seminarian could aspire. It gave him authority over his fellow students and made him responsible for their conduct.

We can get an idea of the diligence and earnestness he showed in performing the duties of this respected office from a splendid eulogy he delivered in praise of Joseph Burzio, a young cleric.

Born in Cocconato in 1822, Burzio, after various difficulties, had donned the cassock in October 1840 and entered the Chieri seminary where for one year he had John as his prefect. Moved by a desire for a more perfect life, on September 19, 1841, he went to Pinerolo [near Turin], to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Congregation canonically approved by Leo XII in 1826. There on May 20, 1842, he died a truly holy death, precious in the Lord's sight. The well-known Father Felix Giordano asked John for his testimony on the saintly youth, and in a book, published in 1846, he even then referred to Don Bosco as a most worthy priest. After Don Bosco's death, Father Giordano, besides many other pages in praise of our Founder, which in due time we shall quote, wrote also the following lines that are a testimony to Don Bosco's sanctity:

“Beginning with page 137 of my book entitled *Cenni istruttivi di perfezione proposti ai giovani nella vita edificante di Giuseppe Burzio* [Hints for Perfection Offered to Young People in the Edifying Biography of Joseph Burzio], the reader will find a long letter that Father John Bosco wrote to me on April 16, 1843, about an exemplary young cleric whose prefect he had been at the Chieri seminary.

“There is in his letter, however, much that pertains to the young priest himself who wrote it. It reveals Don Bosco’s own deep piety, love of study, sense of discipline and ecclesiastical spirit. Anyone reading it cannot help noticing that Don Bosco, while describing the life of a saintly young cleric, was unwittingly portraying himself.”

This is the letter:

Convitto Ecclesiastico, Turin, April 16, 1843

[Dear Father Giordano:]

I very willingly comply with your request to record my impressions of Joseph Burzio, whom I remember with fond recollection as a seminarian in Chieri. I do it all the more willingly because I was his prefect and therefore, had the opportunity to observe him closely. I can thus recount my warmhearted memories of him with accuracy.

Briefly, I would say he was a *model seminarian*. I know of no other way to better portray this incomparable young cleric during his one-year stay at the Chieri seminary. What books and pamphlets tell us about the traits and virtues that a seminarian should have, I found in Joseph Burzio. From what I saw of him and was able to see repeatedly, I am inclined to believe that we can desire nothing more of him.

What often stirred my admiration for him was his obvious determination not only to avoid whatever was even slightly unbecoming to a seminarian, but also to perform all his duties so promptly, gracefully and cheerfully as to charm anyone.

From the very moment he entered the seminary he clearly showed he realized the lofty ideal of the vocation he had chosen, as well as his firm resolve to sanctify himself in it. Thereby he ardently and diligently pursued every possible means that could help him reach this goal.

From morning to night he punctually carried out the seminary regimen. To him every regulation was important and he obeyed them all with exactness and fidelity, but in a free and easy manner because he was acting through conviction. He never made exceptions to rules, or became lax in their observance out of human respect.

He politely, or should I say prudently, avoided those seminarians whose behavior was seemingly marked by a scant ecclesiastical spirit; he rather chose as his companions two or three in his own grade who shared his own sentiments. These he made his intimates and they would mutually inspire each other to progress in their chosen calling.

He was unusually earnest in his studies, became engrossed in them

and did everything possible to draw profit from them. He diligently gave his studies all the time set aside for them, never indulging in any kind of outside reading. He eagerly took part in our so-called "scholastic circles" and enlivened them with his contributions. In our discussions, if he distinguished himself in love and eagerness for truth and in being gentlemanly, he did even more so in his discretion in supporting truth.

He liked to spend his recreation time with those who were able to enlighten him and join him in reviewing scholastic matters. If one introduced some other topic, he would just listen. But as soon as the subject turned to matters academic or religious, he was then quick to participate with obvious joy.

He was never idle during our common study period, indeed he had no use for sloth. He would sit at his desk absorbed in his books and completely immersed in the task at hand. Oblivious to any disturbance or idle chatter that might occasionally arise, he did not even seem to be aware of it, nor would he raise his eyes to see what was happening. I believe that this total disregard of trivial distractions, coupled with his concentration and his observance of silence, greatly contributed to his remarkable progress.

His piety, which was truly singular, represented an even greater commitment. I can refer only to those external acts of piety that were visible to all, but anyone who knew how sincere he was and how constant in the practice of virtue, can easily surmise how great and how many must have been the unseen acts of his many virtues.

Thus he never took part or assisted at exercises of piety with indifference or out of habit. On the contrary, he was remarkable for the joy and contentment reflected in his face. As soon as a church service or customary practice of piety, like prayer or meditation began, or as soon as he set foot into the chapel, he immediately would become recollected. From his devout bearing, those who saw him could sense how much his heart was in it and how great was his spirit of faith. Whether Superiors were present or not, Burzio's edifying demeanor was always the same. One could very well say of him: *ambulabat coram Deo*. [He walked in God's presence—Cf. Gen. 17, 1.]

As regards receiving the Sacraments, he not only observed what was prescribed, but was fervently given to them and eagerly availed himself of all occasions to go to confession, namely, every Saturday and on the eve of all holy days.

Besides carrying out with ardor the regular practices of piety, he was very devout (as I was able to notice through his words and acts), to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin, to whom he offered acts

of love and gratitude whenever he had some free moment. During recreation periods, above all, on school holidays, I often saw him take polite leave of his companions and go to church to spend some time in conversing with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and His loving Mother.

In his effort to attain spiritual perfection he requested one of his more devout and trusted companions, to watch him closely as he carried out his duties and freely correct him for any fault he might detect.

As regards piety, let it suffice to say that at the end of the school year, his Superiors rated him "excellent" for his exemplary conduct, a singular honor granted only very rarely in that seminary.

A virtue that was particularly remarkable in him, was the virtue of modesty. It was so unique and so faultless that it defies description; I shall call it more angelic than human. This was not by any means overdone. He simply had such a frank and cordial way about him that while it delighted his Superiors, it also won him the admiration of his fellow seminarians. As for myself, I must confess that I was so attracted by his modest manner and by the candor of his conversation, which reflected the sincerity and purity of his soul, that I often felt urged to approach him and converse with him, although we were years apart in age and in schooling; I was in fact nearing the end of my theology studies.

He was especially remarkable in the way he controlled his eyes, especially when we left the seminary grounds for a walk. Above all, in church or in a procession his modest gaze was approaching the angelic. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that in Burzio one saw fully exemplified that modesty which the Council of Trent so minutely and earnestly recommends to all ecclesiastics in the famous decree: *Sic decet omnino clericos* . . . [It is therefore quite proper that clerics, etc. . . .].

He was courteous and amiable toward everybody. Yet when someone at times tried to pat him affectionately on the shoulders, or innocently tap his face because of his handsome appearance, he would quickly draw back and say "Leave me alone," and immediately go his way.

During recreations he was always very guarded, both in word and deed, in dealing with his companions. Toward his Superiors he had a deep-felt reverence and always spoke of them with the greatest respect. I never heard him complain of the food, as it occasionally happens, or of anything else for that matter. He considered it inconceivable that a seminarian could utter words even slightly improper or uncharitable or critical of Superiors.

Also outstanding in him were his humility and meekness. His irreprouchable conduct earned him for some time the dislike of several seminarians who, suspecting him to be an informer to the Superiors, took revenge by bringing false accusations against him. He endured all, humbly, patiently and meekly and overcame evil with good. All hostility soon vanished. Those who had been mean to him changed their dislike into respect and affectionate friendship.

As I gathered, he had chosen two or three classmates who shared his feelings, and with them he would associate. They encouraged each other in their vocation and if they were not talking about their studies, then it was about spiritual matters, such as the purpose of a priestly calling, and above all, how to avoid worldliness and foster zeal for souls.

I am happy to recall here several remarks he made more than once which may reveal the beauty of his soul.

Once he asked me very confidentially what was, in my opinion, the most effective means of loving the Blessed Virgin ever more and more. I answered him as best I could, and then asked in turn: "Do you think the Blessed Virgin can do much on our behalf?"

He looked at me full of astonishment and answered: "What a fine seminarian I'd be if I doubted it." Then he added: "If it were not detracting from God, I would say that the Blessed Virgin is equal to Him because *quod Deus imperio, tu prece, Virgo, potes.*"

He repeated this several times, meaning that, according to the Fathers of the Church, Mary had become omnipotent through grace, just as Jesus, Her Son, is omnipotent by nature.

Another time I asked him if he liked seminary life. "Very much so," he answered, "after all it's here that I can learn how to become a good priest."

"Do you very much want to be a priest?" I asked.

"I want it more than anything else," he said, "but the trouble is that, before I become a priest, I must first become a saint." He repeated this several times.

You must not be surprised [dear Father Giordano], at such expressions because he always spoke as one very mature in judgment and virtue, and this with anybody. I can truly say that more than once was he, indeed, a great inspiration to me.

In ending this account I would like to quote some remarks made about Joseph Burzio by some of my fellow seminarians whom I have interviewed. One described him as a model of virtue, another as an example of clerical modesty; a third as one who should ever live to give good example, and others as an outstanding youth of incomparable virtue.

Many inquired whether his biography had been published yet and urged me to see that this be done soon.

A seminarian from Chieri, in a letter dated February 24, wrote: "Please let me know whether or not Burzio's biography is already available. If so, please send me a few copies. This earnest request is not only mine; there are many others who feel as I do."

These are my recollections of Burzio's days at the seminary; they, indeed, do not do justice to the genuine beauty and grandeur of his soul, so beloved both of God and of men. His memory will live on in benediction and will ever more be blessed when as we so eagerly desire, his edifying biography will appear in print.

Please accept, etc.

Father John Bosco

P.S. I thought it also advisable to have this testimony of mine read by Burzio's own study hall and dormitory prefect. He wished to add the following:

"I have read Father John Bosco's report on the exemplary conduct of the deceased seminarian [Joseph] Burzio, and I affirm its veracity, although in my opinion I feel that he has somewhat understated the facts.

"I might add further that during the time I was Burzio's study hall and dormitory prefect I never noticed the slightest fault in him. Thus toward the end of the scholastic year, when the Rector of the seminary asked me to hand in the seminarians' marks as regards piety and application to study, I gave Burzio the rating of 'excellent' with regret that there was no higher mark to give him.

"May I congratulate you and express my feelings of satisfaction in knowing that you are writing a biography truly worthy of being handed down to posterity.

"Please accept, etc.

Father Anthony Giacomelli

The words of praise that Don Bosco bestowed on Joseph Burzio redound to his own glory not only because they portray his own life, but also because they recall the close friendship which Burzio enjoyed with John and the deep respect he felt for him, so much so that he would have been very happy to have John also join the Oblates of Mary. Don Bosco, in fact, was still searching for a religious

Order, for he felt that the Lord was calling him to the religious life. He wished eagerly to be a religious because he wanted to obey: the thought of not being bound by obedience and, even more, the possibility of having to command frightened him. Consequently, when the topic of vocation to the religious life came up with Burzio, in whom he fully confided, and this happened often, the latter instilled in him a certain desire to go along, too, and join the Oblates. When on occasion John went to see his friend in Turin in the *Consolata* monastery, which Archbishop Fransoni had entrusted to the Oblates in 1833, and prayed in that shrine so dear to the Turinese, Burzio introduced him to his Superiors. They tried to win John over to their Order and kept in touch with him by mail, but he declined their invitation.

Nevertheless, Don Bosco's friendship with Father Felix Giordano continued. The latter expressed his great affection, attachment and veneration for his dear old friend, Don Bosco, for Father Balma and Father Barchialla, who later became Archbishops of Cagliari, and also for Father Dadesso and other Oblates, in a letter to Father Michael Rua in 1888. Thus, John Bosco had the opportunity to acquire a thorough knowledge of the history, spirit and rules of this Congregation. Its founder, Father Brunone Lanteri, who died in 1830, worked indefatigably for the salvation of souls. He founded several very flourishing Pious Societies to stem evil that was everywhere rampant; to instill in the Piedmontese youth sound principles of faith, morality and loyalty; to spread far and wide books based on sound doctrine and Christian piety. Father Lanteri was truly a holy priest of God and his love for the Pope was his very life. Throughout Pius VII's period of captivity at Savona, he had, at great personal risk, transmitted to him very important documents dealing with Church government, besides generous donations that he had collected for him in Turin. The Napoleonic police began to suspect him and twice subjected him to a fruitless house search. Nevertheless, he was put under house arrest for four years in his Bardassano villa. A learned and popular author of his time, he wrote many pamphlets. When it was dangerous to have them printed, they were copied by hand and circulated among the faithful in order to keep alive their veneration for, and their obedience to the Pope. They underscored the Pontiff's position, by defending his dignity, his

prerogatives and the infallibility of his judgments pronounced *ex cathedra*. Father Lanteri had transfused this spirit into the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. They were to conduct spiritual retreats for the people, study and oppose current errors, dedicate themselves to the formation of young priests, defend and staunchly support the Roman Pontiff. There was nothing of the austere or the monastic in the Oblates' Rule while it stressed the perfection and zeal of the most esteemed and best deserving Orders in the Church.

In leading Don Bosco to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Divine Providence seemed to be putting the last touches to that mysterious process of preparation that had begun in Morialdo. Now, the same Providence was flashing in his mind the idea of that Pious Society which, with an intensified program and even greater variety of purpose, would incorporate all the various phases he had passed through as a child and a young adult. In Father Lanteri Don Bosco could see exemplified the founder of a religious Congregation—totally above political interests, as the times demanded. In the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Don Bosco could see the pattern most suitable to the Congregation that Divine Providence intended him to found and spread over the face of the earth, a Congregation unencumbered by the exterior trappings that might invite the hostility of the enemies of religious Orders.

## CHAPTER 56

### *A Priest Forever*

WE have now come to the end of the first part of our story. John Bosco was making giant strides toward the fulfillment of his aspirations, toward that day for which he had waited so long and so ardently—his ordination to the priesthood. An immense horizon of souls to be saved stretched out before him. But he was weary, in need of help, drained of strength and penniless. “Yet the eyes of the Lord looked favorably upon him, and raised him free of the vile dust, lifted up his head and exalted him to the amazement of many” (Cf. Sir. 11, 12).

Upon his return to the seminary, John took the examination customarily held at the beginning of the school year. As usual, he got an *optime* as we gather from the seminarians’ scholastic record compiled by Father [John Baptist] Appendini: a transcript is in our possession. Before completing his course, however, it was in God’s plans that he should suffer a little humiliation. At a second examination held on February 17, 1841, he rated only a *ferè* [almost] *optime*. Father Lawrence Gastaldi had examined him on a point which he either had been unable to study or had not regarded as being subject matter of the examination. Unruffled, John improvised a non-existent canon of the Council of Trent, with random phrases that came to his mind. “Is that really what the Council said?” queried Gastaldi, astounded at his straight face. Don Bosco chuckled, and the examiner could not help joining in.

John was ordained deacon in 1841 on the Saturday before Passion Sunday. On May 15, he passed his final examination before ordination and scored a *plus quam optime*. It was an ancient custom at the Chieri seminary for all faculty members to convene at the end of each scholastic year for a thorough scrutiny of the conduct of each seminarian. Records of this scrutiny were filed away.

In the Turin Chancery archives there is the roster of the seminarians in 1841 and one finds the following statement next to John Bosco's name in the column reserved for "Remarks": "Zealous and promising."

The school year was now over and John had to leave the seminary for good. For him this was truly a day of great consternation. "My Superiors were very fond of me," he wrote, "and they showed their great benevolence toward me in every way. My companions too were deeply attached to me. We were, indeed, one heart and one soul and therefore this separation caused me much pain. I was leaving a place where I had spent six years of my life, learned discipline, acquired knowledge, and ecclesiastical spirit and had benefited from all the love and affection one could ever wish for."

Before proceeding further, we would like to present here, as a bouquet of flowers, the testimonials of praise bestowed on Don Bosco by his former fellow seminarians. They constitute a veritable tribute of affection, esteem and respect.

Father Anthony Giacomelli: "From the very first days that I met him in the seminary I looked on him as though he were already a priest because of his mature deportment."

Father Charles Allora: "He always was an outstanding example of piety and obedience. All the seminarians held him in such esteem that they looked upon him more as a Superior than as a companion. Already at that time we regarded him highly for his virtue and piety."

Father Francis Oddenino: "Bosco always kept himself busy at every moment of the day. He was an avid reader. His companions used to consult him on various subjects because of his amazing learning. Everyone had greatest respect for his piety and virtue."

Father Alvin Massa, pastor at Corio: "He was a model seminarian."

Father Vincent Sosso, titular canon in the collegiate church of Moncalieri: "In the seminary we used to call him 'Father' because he was so mature, staid and orderly."

Father Grassini, pastor of Scalenghe: "Don Bosco was always the peacemaker among us."

Father John Ferrero, pastor at Pontedarano and later dean of canons in the Cathedral of Biella: "Many of Don Bosco's fellow

seminarians told me that his conduct was truly irreproachable and that even then he was a very valuable *Bosco*.”<sup>1</sup>

Many others constantly repeated: “We always thought very highly of this admirable companion because of his saintly life.”

Father Bosio, pastor of Levone Canavese: “I was his companion for five years at the seminary and for another five years both at the *Convitto [Ecclesiastico]* and at the *Rifugio [Institute]*. I never detected the slightest fault in him; rather I saw him practice every virtue to perfection.”

Msgr. John Baptist Appendini, his former theology professor: “Bosco made great progress at the seminary in both piety and studies, but he did it unobtrusively by his easy-going manners, a life trait of his.”

A Salesian in military service at Giaveno came to know that the local pastor and rural dean, Father Arduino, had been Don Bosco’s theology professor in the Chieri seminary. He made it a point to visit him, explaining who he was and the reason for his visit. “Don Bosco!” exclaimed Canon Arduino as his eyes moistened. “Yes, I do remember him; fervent, diligent and a fine example for everyone. To be sure, nobody could then have foreseen what he is now. One thing is certain; his grave deportment and his diligence in fulfilling his scholastic and religious duties were truly exemplary. How is he now? Please remember me to him when you return to Turin. May his prayers obtain for me the grace of a happy death!”

On May 26, feast of St. Philip Neri, Don Bosco was in Turin to begin his spiritual retreat in the *Casa dei Signori della Missione* [the Vincentian Fathers Institute]. “He made a most edifying retreat,” recalls Father Giacomelli. “He was greatly impressed by the sermons which he regarded as coming from God, and particularly by those [scriptural] phrases that brought out the great dignity that was soon to be conferred upon him.” “Who can ascend the mountain of the Lord? Or who may stand in his holy place?” (Ps. 23, 3). Who may hold himself worthy of becoming minister of God and dealing with His holy and tremendous mysteries? In conversation with his close friends, Bosco showed how deeply concerned he was with the answer of the Psalmist to that question: “He whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, who desires not what is

<sup>1</sup> A play on the word *bosco* meaning wood. [Editor]

vain. . . .” (Ps. 23, 4), serving God and not his passions. “He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, a reward from God his Savior” (Ps. 23, 5).

In one of Don Bosco’s notebooks we find the following entry:

“Souvenir of the spiritual retreat prior to the celebration of my first Mass. The priest does not go to heaven, or to hell alone. If he does God’s work he will go to heaven with the souls he has saved by his good example. If he has been a cause of scandal, he will go to perdition along with the souls that were damned through his scandal. Therefore I pledge myself to keep the following resolutions:

1. Never to go for a stroll unless for grave reasons like visiting the sick, etc.

2. To be very rigorous in the use of my time.

3. To suffer, work, humble myself in all things whenever it is a question of saving souls.

4. The charity and gentleness of St. Francis de Sales are to be my guide.

5. I will always be satisfied with whatever food is presented to me, if not harmful to my health.

6. I shall drink my wine mixed with water, and then only to the extent that it will benefit my health.

7. Work is a powerful weapon against the enemies of the soul. Hence I shall not take more than five or six hours of sleep. I shall take no rest during the day, particularly after lunch. Only in case of illness shall I make an exception to this rule.

8. I shall set aside some time every day for meditation and spiritual reading. During the day I shall pay a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or at least raise my heart in prayer. I shall spend at least a quarter of an hour in preparation for Mass and another quarter of an hour in thanksgiving.

9. I shall never indulge in conversations with women, except to hear their confession or when it is necessary for their spiritual welfare.”

He wrote all the above in 1841. In his well-known memoirs we find also what follows:

“I was ordained on the eve of Trinity Sunday, June 5, by Archbishop Louis Fransoni in the private chapel of his residence. I

celebrated my first Mass in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi where the Rector was my distinguished friend and benefactor, Father Joseph Cafasso. I was anxiously awaited in my native village because there had not been a first Mass there for many years. Still, I chose to celebrate my first Mass in Turin without any fuss at the Guardian Angel altar, a side altar at the left of the sanctuary. It was Trinity Sunday, but the Turin archdiocese was keeping the feast of the Miracle of the Blessed Sacrament,<sup>2</sup> while the Church of St. Francis of Assisi was honoring Our Lady of Grace, following a very ancient custom. I can truly say that this was the most beautiful day of my life. During the *mementos* of that memorable Mass I prayed for all my past teachers, my spiritual and temporal benefactors and, most particularly, for the late and lamented Father Calosso whom I shall always remember as my very great and esteemed benefactor. It is a pious belief that the Lord infallibly grants the grace requested of Him by a new priest at his first Mass. I prayed most ardently for *efficacy of speech* that I might therewith do good to souls. It seems that the Lord truly heard my humble prayer.”

In his humility Don Bosco states simply “it seems.” But all those who knew him were able to see for themselves how abundantly his request was granted. During his priestly ministry, whether public or private, whenever he conversed, preached or heard confessions, he invariably conquered people’s hearts and led them to God. He inspired those who heard him to virtuous and generous resolutions, and sowed the seeds of sanctity in the hearts of many. His words simply charmed the young; if bad, he made them good; if good, he led them on the path of perfection encouraging them to emulate St. Aloysius Gonzaga, whom he pointed out as their patron saint. Very often a simple word of his effected wonders on the will of his listeners and stirred religious vocations into being.

How could it have been otherwise? The infinite intrinsic value of the Sacrifice of the Mass; the obvious desirability of an efficacious means for the sublime mission divinely entrusted to him; the ardent, heartfelt faith, hope and charity with which Don Bosco had celebrated his first Mass deserved it.

<sup>2</sup> See footnote on p. 16. [Editor]

His was the faith, hope and charity that dwell only in the hearts of those who are the most intimate friends of God. We find a luminous proof of this in the seraphic love with which he continued to celebrate Mass until the very end of his days. Very many people told us what we ourselves experienced every day. We heard his Mass many times and our faith was always intensified at the sight of the devotion which breathed from him by his exact performance of the sacred ceremonies, in his clear pronunciation of the words, and in the fervor which accompanied his prayers. This edifying impression was indelible. Wherever he went, even outside Italy, if people came to know where and when Don Bosco would celebrate Mass, a crowd would surround his altar. Many persons undertook long journeys to Turin merely to satisfy at least once this ardent wish of theirs. When [in the Church of Mary Help of Christians] he emerged from the sacristy to say his Mass at St. Peter's side-altar, hundreds of devout worshippers, scattered throughout the church, would leave their places to gather around it. "He's a saint! He's a saint!" they said in hushed whispers when the Mass was over.

On Monday after Trinity Sunday Don Bosco went to celebrate his second Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Consolation, "to thank," as he wrote, "the Blessed Virgin Mary for the innumerable favors she had obtained for me from Her Divine Son Jesus."

"On Tuesday," he continued, "I went to Chieri and said Mass in St. Dominic's Church where my old confessor, Father Giusiana was expecting me with fatherly affection. He was so deeply moved that his eyes welled with tears throughout the Mass. I spent the entire day with him; it was like being in Paradise.

"On Wednesday I offered the holy Sacrifice in the Chieri cathedral.

"On Thursday, the solemn feast of Corpus Christi, I gratified the wishes of my fellow-villagers and returned to Castelnuovo where I sang the Mass and carried the Blessed Sacrament in solemn procession. The pastor invited me to dinner with all my relatives, the clergy and the most prominent people of the village. Everyone shared the joyful event, because all the townspeople loved me and everyone was happy that things had turned out so well for me. I returned to Becchi that evening. As I approached

my home and saw the place where I had dreamed that first dream at the age of nine, I could not hold back the tears that came to my eyes and I exclaimed: 'How wonderful are the designs of Divine Providence! God really did take a poor boy from the soil to set him among the princes of His people' [Cf. Ps. 112, 7].

"When we were alone that day, my mother said to me these memorable words: 'You are now a priest, and you celebrate Mass. You are, therefore, closer to Jesus Christ. But remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not become aware of this immediately, but little by little you will realize that your mother was right. I am sure that you will pray for me every day, whether I be still living or dead, and that is enough for me. From now on you must think only of saving souls; never worry about me.' "

Oh! Such a holy and generous mother! She had made stupendous sacrifices, patiently suffered privations and humiliations of all kinds to help her son become a priest.

And the Lord had spared her that she might one day kiss the consecrated hands of her son. A short time before his ordination, she had climbed high up on a mulberry tree to pluck leaves for her silk worms. The branch supporting her suddenly broke and she fell to the ground, unconscious. Upon regaining consciousness, she was amazed to discover that she was uninjured. While still resting on the ground, the branch which had caused her accident, splintered from the tree and struck her on the forehead leaving a scar for life, but no other injury.

How good the Lord is toward those who fear Him! In how many ways he rewarded Margaret for having so jealously treasured the sacred trust, her son John, delivered into her keeping. It is written: "He who disciplines his son will benefit from him, and boast of him among his intimates" (Sir. 30, 2). [And we may add:] his name shall be immortal throughout the earth.

But Margaret's dearest and greatest reward was to see the flowers of virtue, which she had sowed as seedlings, grow to their full perfection in the heart of her son; to read in his eyes his irrepressible peace of conscience; to savor his unswerving happiness for having faithfully followed his vocation; to know that he was intent solely upon working for the glory of God; to notice the visible and steady assistance of Divine Providence in all his undertakings; to see him

always working for the salvation of souls and the uprooting of sin; to observe in him the fullness of the joy that comes from the awareness of the presence of God as so well described by the royal Prophet: "I will sing to the Lord all my life. I will sing praise to my God while I live. Pleasing to Him be my theme; I will be glad in the Lord. May sinners cease from the earth, and may the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul! Alleluia" (Ps. 103, 33-35).

## ERRATA \*

Page	Line	<i>For</i>	<i>Read</i>
4	22	1823	1821
8	9	Gregory XIV	Gregory XVI
93	11	1870	1874
207	last	Gozzani	Gazzano
208	20	Gozzano	Gazzano
228	26	300	200
236	4	Muretto	Muletto
271	8	Prati di Palermo	Prati di Balermo
295	29	Ciattino	Zattini
302	16	director of the <i>Rosine</i> Institute	spiritual director of the <i>Giuseppine</i>

\* Inaccuracies in the original Italian.

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D.B. Don Bosco  
M.M. Mamma Margaret

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