

# DON BOSCO AND THE BIBLE

## Part IV

### Source:

*La Bibbia con don Bosco, Una lectio divina salesiana, 1. L'Antico Testamento, Morand Wirth.*

### TOPICS:

- The Bible in the Writings of Don Bosco
- Don Bosco's "Sacred History" Was Meant to Popularize the Science of the Holy Bible
- The Catechism is the Bible of Young People

### THE BIBLE IN THE WRITINGS OF DON BOSCO

#### Biblical allusions and citations

Don Bosco has published around 150 books and pamphlets. A significant number of his writings (a collection of his writings has been published and consists of no less than 38 volumes of about 500 pages each) make references to the Bible. It is true that one can not find there an exposition properly speaking of Holy Scriptures, and not even a commentary of a book of the Bible. However, one can identify in them a great deal of biblical allusions or citations. According to a calculation made by Fausto Perrenchio, one can count 6,000 of them, 2,000 from the Old Testament, 2,000 from the Gospels, and another 2,000 from the rest of the New Testament.

#### Sacred history Church history History of Italy

In the category of school textbooks we find besides Sacred history Church history (1845) which has the New Testament for its roots. Even the History of Italy does not forget to point some contacts with biblical and gospel history. Regarding the latter Don Lemoyne ventured to say that "almost all the chapters close with a sentence from the book of Proverbs" (MB V, 496). This assertion, while it does not reflect the literal truth, does reflect the sapiential character of the book and the frequent reminder of the law of retribution even during one's earthly life.

#### Biographies

Don Bosco wrote a good number of biographies that may be categorized as educative or edifying. He used the Bible to highlight the model he intended to propose for imitation or to show how he was true to the gospel as we see in the Life of Louis Comollo (1844) and later in the Lives of Dominic Savio (1859), of Joseph Cafasso (1960), of Michael Magone (1861), of Francis Besucco (1864) and of Luigi Colle (1882).

We should not also forget the biographies of the deceased Salesians whose exemplary life was summed up with a sentence taken from the Bible.

#### Lives of Saints

Don Bosco was also an avid reader and an author of the lives of the saints. Writing in 1848 a book entitled "The Spirit of San Vincent de Paul" he almost copied entirely a French author, "inserting only some saying from Sacred Scriptures on which the maxims of St. Vincent were founded". This amounted to 213 biblical citations or allusions.

The Live of St. Martin (1855) sought to connect the many miracles of this

saint to their biblical origin. Biblical allusions and citations to Sacred Scripture appear also in the lives of St. Pancratius (1856), of Blessed Caterina De-Mattei (1862), of Blessed Maria degli Angeli (1865) and of the drama dedicated to Saint Alexis (1866).

### **Devotional and instructional writings**

The Bible is clearly present in his devotional or instructional writings such as "The Devotion to the Guardian Angel" (1845), "The Exercise of the Devotion to the Mercy of God" (1847), "Companion of Youth" (1847), the corresponding female edition, "The Well-Provided Christian Daughter" (1878), "The Key to Paradise" (1856), "The Month of May" (1858), the pamphlet "Bring it with You, O Christian" (1858), and above all, "The Well-Provided Catholic for the Practices of Piety" (1868).

This latter is a thick compilation of prayers and exercises of devotion made by Fr. John Bonetti, published under the control of Don Bosco. It contains about 400 biblical references.

### **Writings for entertainment**

We should not be surprised if there are only few biblical references in those writings meant for entertainment such as "A Pleasant Short Story of an Old Soldier of Napoleon I" (1862) or in theatrical presentations such as "The House of Fortune" (1865).

### **Apologetics**

After the liberal revolution of 1848, Don Bosco's preoccupation was the defense of the faith and of the Catholic Church. His strategy was to prove that the Catholic religion was founded on the Bible.

In 1853 with the support of the bishop of Ivrea, he launched a periodical entitled "Catholic Readings (Letture Cattoliche)" whose goal was to maintain and clarify the faith of the ordinary people and of the youth.

The handbook of Christian formation entitled "The Catholic Instructed in his Religion", appeared in 1853. It contained at least 390 biblical citations, a perfect illustration of his strategy. The book was divided into two parts. The first part shows a father of the family explaining to his children in the course of numerous family gatherings the biblical foundation of the Catholic religion. The second part deals with the true Church of Jesus Christ.

Even the "Il Galantuomo (The Gentleman)", an almanac offered to the readers of "Letture Cattoliche" usually contains some allusion or citation from the Bible.

Other writings of an apologetic nature likewise contain references to Scriptures such as: "Contemporary Facts" (1853), "The Unhappy Life of a New Apostate" (1853) whose attribution to Don Bosco is uncertain, but which has many points of contact with "The Instructed Catholic", "The Collection of Curious Contemporary Events" (1854), "The Jubilee" (1854), "The Two Conferences about Purgatory" (1857), and "Maximinus or The Encounter of a Youth with a Protestant Minister" (1874).

For the defense of the Church and of her institutions, Don Bosco wrote "The Life of St. Peter" (1856), and the Life of St. Paul (1857), where we find an abundance of references to the New Testament. Meanwhile the Lives of the

<p><b>Publications on Mary Help of Christians</b></p>	<p>Popes of the first three centuries only occasionally recalls facts or expressions from the Bible.</p> <p>Publications related to Mary Help of Christians increased beginning 1864, the year when the construction of a church in her honor began in Valdocco. These publications made wide use of Sacred Scriptures, but interpreted in an allegorical or figurative sense and directed at exalting the image of the Virgin, as it appears particularly in the “Marvels of the Mother of God Invoked under the Title of Mary Help of Christians” (1868) or in the “Remembrance of a Solemnity in Honor of Mary Help of Christians” (1868).</p>
<p><b>Other writings</b></p>	<p>The last category of writings of Don Bosco is about the Oratory, the Congregation and the Salesian Works, correspondence, circulars, articles appearing in the Salesian Bulletin, conferences, and dreams. They contain either references or allusions to the Bible. There are abundant biblical references in the Introduction to the Constitutions and some of his letters.</p>
<p><b>Good books</b></p>	<p>Don Bosco valued the press in view of the propagation of good books. But what are good books? In circular of 1885, he wrote that good books are those whose thoughts, principles and morals derive from the apostolic books and tradition.</p> <p>“I do not hesitate to call this means (good books) divine for God himself saw them useful for the regeneration of man. They are books inspired by him and which brings to the whole world the right doctrine. He willed that in all the cities and in all the villages of Palestine there might copies of these books and that every Saturday in their religious assemblies they might be read. In the beginning these books were the patrimony only of the Hebrew people, but with the tribes having been sent in exile into Assyria and Chaldea, the Bible came to be translated into Syro-Chaldean and thus, all of Central Asia came to possess it in their own language. With the rise of Greek power, the Hebrews established colonies in every corner of the earth and through the colonies, they multiplied to infinity the Holy Books, and the Seventy with their version of the Septuagint really enriched with these the libraries of pagan peoples.€ Thus, the orators, poets, philosophers of those times drew from the Bible not a few truths. God, principally through these inspired writings, prepared the world for the coming of the Savior.”</p>

**DON BOSCO’S “SACRED HISTORY” WAS MEANT TO POPULARIZE THE SCIENCE OF THE HOLY BIBLE**

<p><b>The beginning of the teaching of Sacred History at the Oratory</b></p>	<p>The systematic teaching of Sacred History at the Oratory started with the definitive foundation of the Oratory at Valdocco in 1846.</p> <p>Don Bosco wrote about the change in the religious program of Sundays and Holy Days in the Memoirs of the Oratory: “Having finished the Mass and having taken away the paraphernalia, I mounted a low desk in order to explain the Gospel which was then changed in order to give way to the regular re-telling of Sacred History. The re-telling was simple and popular in form, with costumes of the times and places, using the geographical names.</p>
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<b>Publication of "Sacred History"</b>	<p>This was very much liked by the boys, the adults and even the priests who were present" (MO, 138).</p> <p>In 1847 he was in the position of publishing a Sacred History for use in schools. This book saw 19 editions or re-prints while the author was still alive.</p>
	<p>What is Sacred History? According to the "Preliminary Notes" is the history contained in the Bible. It is the history of the people of God. In the preface, Don Bosco wrote that his aim was to "popularize as much as he can the science of the Bible which is the foundation of our holy religion", and for this reason "no other teaching is more useful and more important than this."</p>
<b>Originality</b>	<p>To write his "Sacred History" Don Bosco read about a dozen similar works. But its originality was described in the following words by Don Lemoyne: "What is so fruitful in this book is its pedagogical method with which he was able to draw from a scriptural fact an educative maxim and express it in a way adapted to youth" (MB II, 394).</p>
<b>Purpose Method</b>	<p>Why did Don Bosco write this book? "I studied how to compile a course on Sacred History which while containing all the very important information of the Sacred Books but without the danger of evoking inopportune ideas, could present anything to a youth by saying to him: take and read. To succeed in this endeavor I narrated to a number of young people of every level all the facts of the bible one by one, noting minutely what impression the narration made on them and the effect it produced afterwards. This served as a norm for omitting some biblical facts, for just hinting at some others and further explaining others with their respective circumstance. I have also before my eyes many limitations of history and I draw from each what seems to me to be opportune."</p>
<b>Divisions</b>	<p>The Sacred History of Don Bosco is divided into seven periods:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. From creation to the great flood</li> <li>2. From the great flood to the call of Abraham</li> <li>3. From the call of Abraham to the exodus from Egypt</li> <li>4. From the exodus from Egypt to the Temple of Solomon</li> <li>5. From the Temple of Solomon to the exile to Babylon</li> <li>6. From the return to the birth of Christ</li> <li>7. From the birth of Christ to his ascension into heaven</li> </ol> <p>Appendices</p> <p>Appendices were added to successive editions: dictionary of words related to geography; offices and rites that were frequently used in Sacred History; money, weights and measure used by the Hebrews and their comparison to the metric system; and the geography of the Holy Land.</p>

**Theater**

In order to popularize Sacred History, Don Bosco also used other means such as the theater. The Biographical Memoirs of Don Lemoyne has preserved the program of a presentation on August 15, 1848 entitled “The Test of the Sons of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales on the History of the Old Testament”.

The presentation consisted of the six periods of the Old Testament and a questioning on how to learn Sacred History.

The intermissions were dedicated to the singing of the hymns to the glory of God, of the Virgin, of St. Aloysius, and in honor of Pope Pius IX and of King Charles Albert. There was even a hymn exalting wine! The presentation ended with the giving of prizes (MB III, 428).

**Summary of Sacred History**

In 1855 Don Bosco also published a summary of Sacred History entitled “An Easy Way to Learn Sacred History” Its aim was “to point out how many truths professed by Catholics but negated by the enemies of our religions are contained in the Bible”.

At the end of the booklet 27 moral maxims taken from the Bible were added.

**THE CATECHISM IS THE BIBLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE****Don Bosco’s work as a young priest**

Don Bosco was ordained in Turin in 1841. He gave himself to the ministry of boys whom he met on the streets, in prison, in construction sites, in offices and in workshops of craftsmen.

He gave them religious instruction, led them to religious practices, without forgetting their material needs and their love for games and recreation which attracted them to gather every Sunday and holy days.

**Oratory of St. Francis de Sales**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the time of St. Philip Neri they called “oratory” all the activities carried out for the welfare of youth assembled in the same place, possibly a church or chapel.

In 1844 Don Bosco placed his oratory under the protection of St. Francis de Sales, the apostle of charity and patience, the inspiration of his educative method which he later called the preventive system.

**Brief history**

1846. The oratory found its permanent home in Valdocco.

1847. Don Bosco opened a boarding house, and began to open small workshops and schools. The oratory grew until it was able to accommodate 800 students and artisans.

1859. Don Bosco founded the Salesian Society in view of the education of the young and the promotion of ordinary people. It began to expand in Piedmont and elsewhere.

1872. The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was born.

1875. The Salesian work began to spread in Europe and in America,

**The Catechism and the Salesian Society**

beginning in Argentina.

1876. The Union of the Salesian Cooperators was established.

1877. He launched the Salesian Bulletin, a magazine to inform and support the Salesian works.

Speaking of the beginning of the Oratory and the birth of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco said one day: "This Society in its beginning was simple catechism" (MB IX, 61).

Every Sunday and holy day time was set aside for the explanation of the Gospel, as it was then called and which was curiously scheduled after Mass. It was really a catechism lesson with examples drawn principally from Sacred Scriptures.

**Don Bosco's ideas about the catechism**

One day Don Bosco said: "For the young the little catechism should be like the Bible or St. Thomas for the theologians. It is the synopsis of knowledge adapted to their age" (MB VI, 838).

**The catechism and the Bible**

Although he implicitly acknowledged that the Bible has become a sort of substitute for the Bible, a book inaccessible to the youth being catechized, he has affirmed the importance of the Bible and its value as source and point of reference.

He himself wrote in 1855 a "Brief Catechism for Children for Use of the Diocese of Turin" and preceded it with "A Summary of Sacred History".

Don Lemoyne assures us that when he taught catechism or held religious instruction, Don Bosco drew from Sacred History, because he was "in love with everything related to it and with great pleasure talked about it" (MB II, 349).

He spent a lot of time "recounting stories from Sacred Scriptures with much gusto and reverence, citing the Sacred Books in order to reason out using the same Word of God" (MB VI, 204-205).

**Companion of Youth**

In 1847 Don Bosco published a "way of Christian life" which he called "Companion of Youth" (literally, "The Youth Provided for the Practice of his Duties, and of the Exercise of Christian Piety, for the Recitation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin and of the Principal Vespers of the Year").

Much later he declared this book as "a book suited to the young, appropriate to their religious ideas, based on the Bible, and which explains the foundations of the Catholic religion" (MO, 148).

The insistence on the biblical basis of this work which enjoyed great success, merits being pointed out.

**Quotations along the porticoes**

In order to complete the catechetical instruction and to render it visible, Don Bosco decided to decorate the walls and arches of the Oratory with writings taken from Scriptures.

In the building constructed in 1856 he had 28 citations from the Bible to be

written on the walls of the porticoes. These were related to confession and to the ten commandments. As his biographer wrote, Don Bosco “wanted that even the walls of his house might speak of the necessity of saying one’s soul”, and justifying this initiative, he said: “Under these porticoes the young at times stay awhile tired from playing or just passing through. Strangers, who come for various affairs at the Oratory, stop here waiting for their appointment. One or the other seeing the inscriptions are drawn by curiosity to read, or just to escape boredom, and behold a good thought which touched them, can in due time produce good fruits” (MB VI, 948-949).

In the building constructed in 1861, he had 7 new quotations from the Bible to be written. They deal particularly with adolescence. Finally, four other quotations were added in 1864 to recall the importance of the salvation of the soul, of prayer, of song and of confession (MB VII, 426).