

Don Bosco's Last Years, His Last Illness and Sainly Death From Eyewitness Accounts

Arthur J. Lenti, SDB

Introduction

Don Bosco lay dying stretched immobile on his little iron bed, his faithful sons kneeling around him. It was January 31 of the year 1888.

At about a quarter to two in the morning the agony began. Father [Michele] Rua and Bishop [Giovanni] Cagliero recited the ritual prayers. The death-rattle lasted until a quarter to five. Then, as the Angelus rang out from the bells of our church, Don Bosco's rasping breath quieted down. Half a minute later he was dead. He was in paradise.¹

With these simple and touching words, secretary Carlo Maria Viglietti, chief chronicler of Don Bosco's last years, brings the chronicle of the master's last illness and saintly death to an end.

News of Don Bosco's critical illness of December 1887-January 1888 brought thousands of people from near and far to his bedside. His death itself had worldwide resonance. It seemed in fact that Don Bosco's last illness and death, and the publicity which surrounded them, had the effect of focusing the world's attention on the greatness of the man and of his achievements. Don Bosco's death, however, was neither sudden nor unexpected. He had been suffering from serious chronic ailments for a long time. His condition grew progressively worse, to the point that in 1884, a critically grave illness caused his quasi-retirement and signaled the beginning of a three-year decline toward the end.

Don Bosco's biographers have given good accounts of Don Bosco's last years, drawing on various sources, including eyewitness accounts. This is especially true for his last illness and saintly death. Nor did they fail, in so doing, to dwell on the historic significance of Don Bosco's life and work.²

¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 40f. in ASC 110: Cronachette, Viglietti; *FDBM* 1227 D8. A description of the eyewitness chronicles on which this paper is based is given below.

² First and foremost, Giovanni Battista Lemoyne's *Documenti* [Volumes XXXVI-

The present essay has a rather modest aim. Steering clear of the complexities of a biographical reconstruction, it will simply describe Don Bosco's last years, including his last illness and death, with focus on the person, and with emphasis on words and attitudes. For this it will rely on eyewitness accounts, the chronicles and memoirs authored by Salesians close to the saint. The *Biographical Memoirs* and other Lives of Don Bosco, reliable though they be, do not generally convey that sense of immediacy and the direct perception which those early documents possess. Biographical concerns, as well as hagiographic purposes, have demanded molding and editing of the original material.

Therefore, my chief endeavor (I will not call it research) has been to study the relevant chronicles and memoirs which are held in the Salesian archives.³ The texts in question generally fail to measure up to literary standards. They were largely written under pressure and in great haste; and some were authored by persons who either lacked literary skills or had at the moment no literary pretension. Style, orthography, grammar, punctuation, and handwriting generally leave much to be desired. But they are eyewitness accounts! I have studied and copied these texts carefully, and have produced a transcription of the originals which, though not claiming critical or diplomatic status, can nonetheless claim a high degree of accuracy. For the purpose of this essay, I have translated the original (mostly Italian) texts into what I hope is readable English. This obviously required smoothing over the illiterate features of the texts, although my chief concern has been to interpret and render the original with all possible accuracy.

My presentation will be in three parts. After describing the archival sources (Part I), it will survey Don Bosco's last three years, the period of his quasi-retirement (Part II). Part III will deal more particularly with Don Bosco's last illness and death.

Part I: Chronicles and Memoirs

Which of the numerous early chronicles and memoirs are most relevant to a description of Don Bosco's last years, and particularly to his last illness and death?

By far the most important in this respect are the chronicles and the memoirs produced by Don Bosco's secretary, valet, and constant companion during the last four years, seminarian (then Father) Carlo Maria Viglietti. Next in importance is the memoir left us by Brother Pietro Giuseppe Enria, who served

XXXIX and XLIV, pp. 658-739; in ASC 110: Cronachette, Lemoyne-Doc; *FDBM* 1142-1161 and 1193 E4-1194 B11]. Father Eugenio Ceria draws upon this staggering collection of material for his account in the *Biographical Memoirs* [*IBM* XVIII, 485-587], which includes also, in edited form, the salient data provided by the chronicles.

³ The section of the Central Salesian Archives (ASC) relating to Don Bosco (*Fondo Don Bosco*, Don Bosco files) is available in microfiches (*FDBM*); these have served as my chief resource.

as Don Bosco's sick-room attendant from 1871 on. All too brief, but of great interest, is the anecdotal memoir authored by Father Antonio Sala, financial administrator of the Society at the time. Father Francesco Cerruti, too, also a member of the general council of the Society, produced a brief memoir covering a very restricted period of time. Father Michele Rua, prefect and vicar general of the Society, sent out a number of bulletins meant to keep Salesians abreast of Don Bosco's condition during the crisis of late December-early January 1887-1888. Finally, we have the posthumous work entitled, *Chi era Don Bosco?* (Who Was Don Bosco?), authored by Don Bosco's physician in attendance, Dr. Giovanni Albertotti. It is a work of uneven value, but obviously authoritative when speaking of Don Bosco's illness.

On the other hand, it appears that other Salesians close to Don Bosco and active in important capacities, such as Father Michele Rua, Father Giovanni Bonetti, Father Giulio Barberis, Father Gioacchino Berto, etc., did not produce sustained first-hand chronicles or memoirs referring to the period of Don Bosco's last years. The chief reasons for this apparent failure are to be sought in the fact that they either did not attend Don Bosco on a regular basis or they had delegated the recording task to others. This is largely the case also with Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, who was otherwise actively engaged at this time in collecting biographical material. He did, however, produce a valuable chronicle for the year 1884, known as *Ricordi di gabinetto*. Indeed, this work is one of our chief sources for the crises of 1884 which resulted in Don Bosco's quasi-retirement and in the appointment of a vicar with right of succession; but it extends no further in time. Unfortunately this diary is not available to me.⁴

At this point, it is necessary to describe the work of our chroniclers, with particular attention given to the chronicles authored by Don Bosco's last secretary, Carlo Maria Viglietti, and to the memoirs left by Don Bosco's sick-room attendant, Pietro Giuseppe Enria.

⁴ Father Lemoyne had served as chaplain to the Salesian Sisters at Mornese and Nizza since 1877. He was recalled to Turin in the autumn of 1883 to fill the post of secretary general. He thus also had an opportunity to pursue his ambition, to gather material in view of a future biography of Don Bosco. His 45-volume collection, called *Documenti*, and the first nine volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs* which followed, are his outstanding contribution. His *Ricordi di gabinetto* (office reminders) is a small agenda-calendar book from the year 1846, used in part by Lemoyne during his seminary days, and used again for diary jottings nearly forty years later! The entries of the diary in question refer to the year 1884. It is in ASC 110: Lemoyne 4, but because of its poor condition it has not been reproduced in the *FDB Microfiches*. Hence, it is not available to me.

I. Carlo Maria Viglietti: His Chronicles and Memoirs

1. Viglietti, Don Bosco's Secretary⁵

Carlo Maria Viglietti (1864-1915) was born at Susa. This sizable town is located in the Alps near the French border some thirty miles west of Turin. At the age of twelve Carlo was accepted as a boarder in the Salesian school of Lanzo, where Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne was director. Although a good lad and a good student, Viglietti seems to have been less than exemplary in matters of school discipline, no doubt out of sheer exuberance rather than malice.

From an autobiographical "preface" appended to the chronicle we learn that Carlo Viglietti was born into a rather comfortable family, one of several brothers and sisters, and that Mr. Federico Viglietti and Don Bosco were friends. We are also told how Don Bosco "chose" young Carlo for a special relationship. "When Don Bosco saw me at the [Salesian] school of Lanzo back in 1878 he recognized me and told me that he wanted me 'to be with him.' This he repeated to me more emphatically in June 1880; and in 1882 he explained to me what he meant by 'wanting me to be with him.'" Viglietti goes on to state that after obtaining his high school diploma and foregoing the usual holidays with the family at the villa, in July of that year he entered the novitiate at San Benigno.⁶

In a short autobiographical memoir, Viglietti writes more specifically:

In August 1882, after the spiritual retreat presided over by Don Bosco at San Benigno, my fellow novices were sent to the Salesian school of Borgo San Martino for their holidays to make room for another in-coming group of young people. But the good father asked me to stay on with him and assigned to me the task of drafting a map of Patagonia. I worked at this project faithfully, but I spent every free moment at my good father's side. He would freely relate events out of the past to me, including those extraordinary dreams with which the Lord favored him.

I made my novitiate during the school year of 1882-83. During that year Don Bosco wished to hear from me regularly and would also send me occasional little gifts. That summer, after the novitiate, he admitted me to perpetual vows. After the spiritual retreat, my companions moved to Lanzo Torinese [for the holidays], but Don Bosco kept me with him at San Benigno. Early every morning, I waited for him to come out of his room,

⁵ The Viglietti chronicles are in ASC 110: Cronachette Viglietti; *FDBM* 1222 D2-1251 A11. For biographical details not found in these chronicles I rely on the *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, p. 294, based on the 12-page sketch by Giovanni Battista Francesia, *Carolus Maria Viglietti sacerdos*. Turin (1915?); Francis Desramaut, *Les Memorie I*, pp. 167-171, based on Viglietti files in ASC.

⁶ Viglietti, "Autobiographical Author's Preface" (*Due Parole*) appended to the *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, Notebook 5, pp. 426-434, *FDBM* 1240 D6-E2.

accompanied him to church, and served his Mass. During the day my job was to sit [as receptionist] in Don Bosco's waiting room and see to it that the interviews proceeded in an orderly fashion. [...]

In the autumn of that year [1883] I began my second year of college [at Valsalice]. Now, that same November Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda became archbishop of Turin, and Don Bosco called on me to prepare the Congregation's present for our newly-appointed shepherd; it was to be a huge map of the Turin diocese. I drafted it on detailed military maps, to show clearly all roads, tracks and water courses; parish houses, chapels, churches, and vicarages. The cardinal was delighted with the present. Don Bosco, too, was mightily pleased with the work, all the more so since the map showed his home place and the very house in which he had been born.

I mentioned this matter here only because it was under these circumstances that one day I came into Turin to present the masterpiece to the archbishop. It was on that occasion that Don Bosco summoned me to his room and asked me point-blank: "Would you like to [leave college and] come permanently to Turin as my secretary?" I was stunned and absolutely beside myself with joy at such a proposal; I could hardly believe my great good fortune. Don Bosco went on: "I am leaving for Rome shortly. Be here for me on my return. You shall have to be the *baculus senectutis meae* (my walking cane in my old age)".⁷

After a very serious bout with illness in February 1884 (as will be seen below), Don Bosco overcame the crisis and recovered sufficiently to undertake a trip to southern France, and thence to Rome in April-May on the business of the exemption privileges. On May 17, Don Bosco was back in Turin, where without any doubt Viglietti (not quite twenty at the time) was already waiting to take up his duties as Don Bosco's personal secretary and valet. The first entry of Viglietti's chronicle, with the date of May 20, reads: "I have been called to Turin as Father [Giacchino] Berto's associate in Don Bosco's service. [My duty will be] to accompany Don Bosco everywhere he may have to go. Father Lemoyne has decided to entrust Don Bosco's chronicle to me for the coming year."⁸

⁷ Viglietti, *Short Autobiographical Memoir*, pp. 1-3, *FDBM* 1232 C5-7. Entitled "*Memorie*," this 3-page autobiographical account describes how Don Bosco chose Viglietti as his secretary.

⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, p. 1, *FDBM* 1222 D4. In transcribing his chronicle Viglietti edits this entry as follows: "Don Bosco has summoned me to Turin to help Father Berto and Father Lemoyne. My duty initially is to accompany Don Bosco wherever he may have to go. Consequently, Father Lemoyne has asked me to take over the chronicle" [*Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, notebook 1, p. 5, *FDBM* 1232 C9].

Father Giacchino Berto had been for many years Don Bosco's personal secretary and the Society's archivist; but in 1884 he was already seriously ill with neurosis and would shortly have to be retired [cf. note 81, below]. For Father Lemoyne cf. note 4, above.

But Viglietti was also hearing the siren call of a cherished youthful ideal, the missions. In the eighties the missionary fervor had reached fever pitch among Salesians young and old. The Vicariate of Patagonia and the Prefecture of Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego had been created in 1883, and Bishop-elect Giovanni Cagliero was preparing for his episcopal ordination in December 1884. In his *Original Chronicle*, Viglietti merely inserted a brief marginal note: "I had decided to go to the missions, after having sought other [people's] advice. But Don Bosco said to me: 'You shall not go; you are to be the staff of my old age, and you will close my eyes [when I die]'.⁹" But in his *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle* he tells the story in detail:

I had for a long time wanted very much to devote my life to the missions of [South] America. It would obviously have been a very painful sacrifice for me; but it seemed a noble thing to do, to leave everything, homeland and family, and spend my whole life working in obscurity in those far-away lands. I had already consulted Father Cagliero and other missionaries. They had given me their unanimous support, they had accepted me, and they already regarded me as having joined their ranks. However, when it came to approach Don Bosco and frankly open my mind to him on the subject, my courage had failed. The very thought of having to tell him broke my heart. In this painful predicament, I sought Father Cagliero's advice. He reassuringly told me not to worry, that he would himself take up the matter with Don Bosco.

This evening, then, Don Bosco sent for me and said to me: "Dear Viglietti, I hear that you wish to leave me. Is this true? What did I ever do to you to deserve such a thing? However, if that is your decision, go with my blessing; but you should know that it is not your vocation, to go to the missions." I stood there for a while petrified; then I broke into a flood of tears, and between loud sobs I tried to explain that I had meant to do the right thing, and that Father Cagliero had all along assured me of Don Bosco's approval. I quickly added that I would rather die than leave him against his wishes; this, in spite of the fact that my trunk was packed, and all preparations for my departure had been completed. I fell on my knees and I begged him to dispose of me as he wished, for I had volunteered for the missions solely because I thought that would make him happy.

Then Don Bosco in his gentlest and most loving manner placed his hand on my head; and looking at me with a piercing prophetic gaze, he said: "No, my dear Viglietti, you shall not leave me; you shall stay and help me through the few years that are left to me. You are to be the staff of my old age, and you will close my eyes at last when I pass into eternity."¹⁰

⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, p. 3, "October 4, 1884," *FDBM* 1222 D5.

¹⁰ Viglietti, *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, Notebook 1, pp. 23-25, "October 4, 1884," *FDBM* 1232 E3-5: The last sentence reads in Italian: "No, caro Viglietti, tu non partirai; tu mi assisterai in questi pochi anni che mi rimangono di vita, sarai il

Between May 1884 and January 1888, he served Don Bosco with slavish devotion as his reader, sacristan, attendant and constant companion. Although Viglietti was not Don Bosco's only companion during the last journeys, the secretary's resourcefulness, competence, skills, personality, and irrepressible enthusiasm proved a valuable asset to Don Bosco — in France (1885),¹¹ in Spain (1886),¹² in Milan (1886)¹³ and in Rome (1887).¹⁴

Besides serving as Don Bosco's "man," Viglietti read to Don Bosco (whose eyesight had greatly deteriorated) and took dictation from him of letters, dreams, past recollections, official advice, etc. Having quickly gained a basic knowledge of the Spanish language, he took over Don Bosco's Spanish correspondence. Don Bosco treated him as a son, and Viglietti returned "papa's" love with filial affection and childlike devotion. Don Bosco trusted him completely and took him into his confidence.

Where and when he found the time to read his theological treatises Viglietti does not say; but in his chronicle he notes (in passing) the dates on which he received various sacred orders, all in the last few months of 1886. A letter of his to Father Giulio Barberis would tend to show that he may also have suffered through some kind of vocational crisis.¹⁵ But he was ordained a priest on December 18, of that year.¹⁶

bastone della mia vecchiaia, e infine chiuderai i miei occhi per l'eternità."

¹¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, pp. 5-78, "March 24-May 6, 1885," *FDBM* 1222 D6-1223 B7.

¹² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, pp. 57-93 + Vol. IV, pp. 1-72, "March 12-May 15, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 C4-1225 B10.

¹³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, pp. 36-45, "September 11-13, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 D6-10.

¹⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 31-83 + Vol. VII, pp. 3-10, "April 20-May 20, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 B3-D11.

¹⁵ The letter describes a tête-à-tête lasting late into the evening, during which Don Bosco spoke to him "words of paradise." Viglietti continues: "The good father loves me so much! I was crying from sheer love, while he held me closely in his arms. Then he ordered me under obedience to speak with you [Father Barberis] and with Father Rua about my ordination" [Viglietti to Barberis, June 14, 1886, in Francis Desramaut, *Les Memorie I de G.B. Lemoyne. Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de Saint Jean Bosco* (Lyons: Maison d'études Saint-Jean-Bosco, 1962), p. 170, note 20.]

¹⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 61, "December 18, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 E6: "Today, with eleven companions, I was ordained a priest by Bishop [Giovanni Battista] Bertagna in the seminary chapel." "December 19, 1886," "Today I celebrated my first Mass for the student community. [...] It seems unreal, to be a priest at twenty-two and-a-half years of age!"

After Don Bosco's death, Viglietti was appointed by Father Rua spiritual director at Lanzo (1890-1896), and then Director at Bologna (1896-1904),¹⁷ at Savona (1904-1906), and finally at Varazze (1906-1912), where in 1907 he lived through the infamous scandal. He died at Valdocco in 1915.

Viglietti reveals himself at every step as a sensitive and imaginative person, and by far the most original of the chroniclers. Although, except for the longer trips, he did not keep a daily record or diary, his chronicles contain an enormous amount of information on Don Bosco's last years, including episodes, sayings, keepsakes, witticisms. They are replete with narratives of dreams, miracles, and other extraordinary happenings. They speak of Don Bosco's triumphal journeys and of his popularity with both the great and the lowly with enthusiastic wonder.

2. Viglietti's Chronicles and Memoirs

As one peruses the collection of the Viglietti chronicles held in the "chronicles" section of the Salesian archives (ASC 110), one immediately becomes aware of repetitions, transcriptions with editing, and various hands — in short, an editorial process. This situation resulted from the fact that Viglietti (writing for future biographers) edited his original chronicle, or sections of it, in stages. He also wrote additional memoirs separately. Obviously, such editorial complexities call for critical evaluation.¹⁸ Here I will merely attempt to sort out and briefly describe this archival material on the basis of internal evidence and the indications provided by Viglietti himself.

[i] *Original Chronicle 1884-1888*¹⁹

Bearing the title of *Cronaca di D. Bosco*, the original chronicle, all in Viglietti's hand, is in eight "volumes," with incomplete pagination by an archivist.

Volumes I, II, III, VII, and VIII retain their cover on which the volume number is expressly indicated. For Volumes IV, V, and VI we have no cover and no indication of volume number, only the title page. But the entry dates and other formal elements clearly indicate that they belong to the sequence.

(1) Vol. I — Cover: *Chronicle of Don Bosco from May 20, 1884 to May 6, 1885, Volume I.* — Title Page: *Chronicle of Don Bosco, by [Salesian]*

¹⁷ Viglietti, *Scrapbook-Style Collection 1886-1896*, p. 79, "September 28, 1896," FDBM 1231 D4.

¹⁸ For example Desramaut has attempted a description of this editorial process in *Les Memorie I, op. cit.*, pp. 171-175, and in "Études préalable à une biographie de saint Jean Bosco, VIII: La vieillesse (1884-1888)," *Cahiers salésiens* 18-19 (1988) p. 80, note 66.

¹⁹ ASC 110: Cronachette-Viglietti, *Cronaca di D. Bosco*, FDBM 1222 D2-1237 D8.

Seminarian Carlo Maria Viglietti, from May 20, 1884 to May 6, 1885 (pp. 1-78).

Note: The first twelve entries, from May 20 to December 31, 1884 (pp. 1-4) are crossed out, for Viglietti (so he states) has kept a separate memoir to complement the daily record kept by Fathers Berto and Lemoyne. This separate memoir may be the *Additional Chronicle 1884-1885* described below.²⁰

(2) Vol. II — Cover: *Chronicle of Don Bosco from May 6, 1885 to March 1, 1886, Volume II.* — Title Page: *Chronicle of Don Bosco, by [Salesian] Seminarian Carlo Maria Viglietti, from May 6, 1885 to March 1, 1886 (pp. 79-150).*

Note: The short entry for May 24, 1885 (pp. 82f.),²¹ is crossed out. Viglietti explains: "The chief purpose of this chronicle is to keep a record of events during Don Bosco's trips. Hence, when he is at home in Turin for a protracted stay I record events separately."

(3) Vol. III — Cover: *Chronicle of Don Bosco, Volume III, from March 24, 1885 to April 14, 1886.* — Title Page: *Memoirs of Don Bosco, by [Salesian] Seminarian Carlo Viglietti, from March 24, 1885 to April 14, 1886 (pp. 1-56 and 57-93).*

Note: As Viglietti himself indicates, the entries March 24, 1885 to February 25, 1886 (pp. 1-56)²² are a repetition (to facilitate reading?) of the same period in Volume II.

(4) [Vol. IV] — Title Page: *Continuation of the Chronicle by Secretary Carlo Viglietti, Barcelona, April 15, 1886 to May 16, 1886 (pp. 1-72).*

(5) [Vol. V] — Title Page: *Continuation of the Chronicle by Secretary Viglietti, from May 18, 1886 to January 20, 1887 (pp. 1-71).*

(6) [Vol. VI] — Title Page: *From January 23, 1887 to May 15, 1887, Continuation of the Chronicle by Secretary Viglietti (pp. 3-83).*

(7) Vol. VII — Cover: *Chronicle of Don Bosco, from May 16, 1887 to December 23, 1887, Vol. VII.* — Title Page: *From May 16, 1887 to December 23, 1887, Continuation of the Chronicle by Father Carlo M. Viglietti, Secretary (pp. 3-80).*

(8) Vol. VIII — Cover: *Chronicle of Don Bosco, from December 23, 1887 to January 31, 1888, Volume VIII.* — Title Page: *From December 23, 1887 to..., Continuation of the Chronicle of Don Bosco by Father Carlo M. Viglietti, Secretary to Don Bosco (pp. 3-41).*²³

²⁰ Cf. note 32 and related text, below.

²¹ *FDBM* 1223 B12.

²² *FDBM* 1223 E12-1224 C4.

²³ The eight notebooks are in *FDBM* as follows: (1) 1222 D2-1223 B7; (2) 1223 B8-E10; (3) 1223 E11-1224 D10; (4) 1224 D11-1225 B11; (5) 1225 B12-E12; (6) 1226 A1-D5; (7) 1226 D7-1227 B10; (8) 1227 B11-D8. It should be noted that each

[ii] Transcribed and Edited Chronicle 1884-1888²⁴

Bearing the same title as the original *Cronaca di D. Bosco*, the transcribed chronicle is in five notebooks, in Viglietti's and two other hands, with continuous pagination, by an archivist (?).

However, Notebook III has what appears to be an "addition" which interrupts the pagination (bearing no page numbers), but which continues the entries in sequence. The "addition" is entitled, "Volume II, from May 18, 1886 to January 31, 1888." This indication leads one to speculate that the transcribed chronicle may have been meant to have a two-volume (or two-part) formal structure: Part I, presumably, from May 20, 1884 to May 15, 1886 (the end of the Spanish trip); and Part II, as indicated, from May 18, 1886 to January 31, 1888 (Don Bosco's death). Hence, the present five-notebook structure may only be its material format resulting from the fact that it filled five notebooks. Be that as it may, for the practical purpose of referencing, the five-notebook format with its continuous pagination may be retained, and the Volume II section (without page numbers) may be treated as an addition to Notebook III. The transcribed chronicle then appears to have the following format:

[I] [Volume I?]

(1) Notebook 1, in Viglietti's hand: *Chronicle of Don Bosco*, by [Salesian] seminarian Carlo M. Viglietti, from May 20, 1884 — to March 1, 1886 (pp. 1-160).

(2) Notebook 2, in Viglietti's hand: [Salesian] seminarian Carlo Maria Viglietti, *Chronicle of Don Bosco, Notebook 2, from March 12, 1886, Journey to Spain* — to April 11, 1886 (pp. 161-217).

(3) Notebook 3, in a second, unidentified hand: *Continuation of the Chronicle of Don Bosco, Notebook 3*. — Note: March 17, 1886-April 11, 1886 (pp. 220-252)²⁵ are a repetition; then there follow in sequence April 13 - May 16, 1886 (pp. 253-315).

[II] Vol. II, addition to and continuation (with no page numbers) of Notebook 3, in the same second hand: *Chronicle of Don Bosco*, by Father Carlo Maria Viglietti, *Volume II, from May 18, 1886 to January 31, 1888*: — This section covers the period May 18, 1886 - May 8, 1887.

(4) Notebook 4: pp. 316-320 in the same second hand; pp. 320-327 in a third, unidentified hand; pp. 327-409, again in the second hand: *Notebook 4, Continuation of the Chronicle of Don Bosco*. — May 9, 1887-January 28, 1888

FDBM frame contains two pages of the small notebooks.

²⁴ FDBM 1232 C5-1240 E2.

²⁵ FDBM 1236 A8-D5.

(pp. 316-409). Note: The final eleven-line paragraph, where Don Bosco reminds his secretary to go to confession, is in Viglietti's hand.

(5) Notebook 5, in the second hand: *Ending of the Chronicle of Don Bosco, Notebook 5*. — January 29-31, 1888 (pp. 410-420).

There follow: a *Conclusion* (pp. 422-424); and an autobiographical "author's preface" entitled, "A Word (*Due Parole*) to My Dear Superiors [...]" (pp. 326-334).²⁶

The Original *Chronicle* and the subsequent *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle* constitute Viglietti's fundamental contribution to our knowledge of Don Bosco's last years. As one would expect, the second work shows great improvement in style, orthography, punctuation, etc.; it also introduces additional material. Obviously, this situation raises critical questions which need not detain us. For the purposes of this essay I rely on the original work by preference because of the immediacy of the eyewitness account. The quality of the writing here varies from entry to entry, ranging from sustained discourse and neatly written text to mere jottings. It is in fact, generally speaking, hasty, if not careless, writing; but it is an eyewitness account close to the event. Referring to his activity as a chronicler, Viglietti writes:

I have written this chronicle as truthfully as I could [...] I have related events as they took place day by day. I set them down as I myself witnessed them, or as they were reported to me by Don Bosco or by others commissioned for the purpose. If I am guilty of any misinterpretation, I beg your kind indulgence. When traveling especially, the work kept us so busy during the day that only late at night could I find the time to jot down a few notes. [...] What has been set down in this chronicle, however, has been written by one who by day and by night never left Don Bosco's side; by one who was privy to all his secrets and who, therefore, can speak more knowledgeably than many about what concerns this saintly man.²⁷

[iii] *Short Autobiographical Memoir*

Entitled "*Memorie*," and already referred to above, this is a three-page autobiographical account, apparently in Viglietti's hand, of how Don Bosco chose him to be his secretary.²⁸

²⁶ The five notebooks are in *FDBM* as follows: (1) 1232 C5-1235 A9; (2) 1235 A10-1236 A7; (3) 1236 D6-1237 D8+1237 D9-1238 E7; (4) 1238 E8-1240 C4; (5) 1240 C5-D2+D3-5+D6-E2.

²⁷ Viglietti, *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, "Conclusion," Notebook 5, pp. 422-424, *FDBM* 1240 D3-5.

²⁸ *FDBM* 1232 C5-7. Cf. note 7 and related text, above.

This memoir also appears, practically word for word, as the introduction to the *Partial Calligraphic Chronicle 1884-1885* (listed below). Here the memoir (pp. 1-5) is entitled: "Introduction. How and When Father Carlo Maria Viglietti Was Chosen by the Venerable Don Bosco as His Secretary."²⁹

[iv] *Diary*

Viglietti's "*Diario*" is not a diary or day-by-day record of Don Bosco's doings, but is largely a collection of episodes, dreams, etc., dating from as far back as Don Bosco's childhood, which Viglietti may have heard from Don Bosco or from others.

This material was entered in a fairly small agenda-calendar book entitled "*La Rimembranza per l'anno 1880*."

The title which Viglietti affixed on the cover is, "Diary, with [Appended] Table of Contents, 1883, 1885." But his title page reads: "Memoirs by [Salesian] Seminararian Carlo Viglietti, 1885."³⁰ All the dated entries are from 1885.

The first entry (undated), on p. 27 of the printed agenda book, is the famous "regimen" developed for Don Bosco for his health.³¹

There follows immediately the only true "chronicle" entry, dated July 15, 1885.

[v] *Additional Chronicle 1884-85*³²

This is a fairly large, untitled notebook (pp. 1-98 and 116-119) in Viglietti's hand, with a few entries by others.

A marginal note by an archivist at the beginning reads: "This notebook, written by Father Carlo Viglietti, contains information and reports which he may have heard from the saint himself. Father G. B. Lemoyne added some items in his own hand, cf. e.g. p. 96."

Lemoyne's writing appears in the additions found on p. 49,³³ pp. 83f.,³⁴ and pp. 96-98.³⁵ There is also a small addition in a third hand, p. 98.³⁶ There

²⁹ FDBM 1247 A4-8.

³⁰ *Diario con indice delle Materie 1883-1885; Memorie per Cura del ch. Viglietti Carlo 1885*, FDBM 1231 D5-1232 C4.

³¹ FDBM 1231 D8.

³² FDBM 1228 E1-1230 C2.

³³ FDBM 1229 C9.

³⁴ FDBM 1230 A7f.

³⁵ FDBM 1230 B8-10.

³⁶ FDBM 1230 B10.

follows a table of contents in Viglietti's hand (with a different pagination, pp. 116-119).³⁷

After two crossed-out [June-1884] entries, this chronicle begins with the entry, "Year 1862" where Don Bosco's "prophecy" is recalled, that one of the Salesians present would become a bishop — a prophecy now [1884] verified in Cagliari."

Then there follows the first true chronicle entry (June 26, 1884) describing the feast of St. Aloysius at Lanzo, at which the bishop-designate presided. For the rest, the chronicle is really a series of episodes dating from various periods of Don Bosco's life, gathered presumably under the date when they were heard.

[vi] *Scrapbook-Style Collection 1886-1896*³⁸

Lacking a title, this collection comprises a series of printed items: letters (by Viglietti) and articles about Don Bosco published in various newspapers; the printed text of Viglietti's chronicle of Don Bosco's last illness as published in the *Bollettino Salesiano* with the title, "Diary of Don Bosco's Illness;" reviews of Viglietti's later books, in which Viglietti seems to take much pride; and other material. The items are usually introduced by dated introductory comments in Viglietti's hand. The dated entries run from May 17, 1886 to September 28, 1896.

[vii] *Partial Calligraphic Chronicle 1884-1885*.³⁹

This is a partial transcription in large calligraphy of the basic chronicle, with some editing, for the years 1884 and 1885. The five-page "Introduction," has been mentioned above. Each entry is given a summary title in a different calligraphic style. A detailed table of contents is added for easy consultation.

What purpose this elaborately written partial chronicle may have served is not immediately evident.

Thus far Viglietti's records. In evaluating this information, often not attested elsewhere, his character and personality are of some importance in determining the degree of confidence we should place in his reports. He was ebullient to the point of passion, all heart and emotion. His attachment to Don Bosco was at once that of an affectionate child, a devoted servant and a reverent worshipper. Don Bosco's popularity, the tributes paid to him by the high and mighty, the daily experience of the "extraordinary," leave the young secretary gasping in wonder and praise. In reporting such experiences, especially on trips, his enthusiasm sometimes gains the upper hand. But Viglietti is demonstrably quite faith-

³⁷ *FDBM* 1230 B11-C2.

³⁸ *FDBM* 1230 C12-1231 D4.

³⁹ *FDBM* 1247 A4-1250 D3.

ful in reporting the words and the activities of the master. His chronicles constitute irreplaceable documentation on Don Bosco's last years.

II. Pietro Giuseppe Enria and His Memoirs

Next in importance as a source for various periods of Don Bosco's life, but particularly for his final days, is Brother Pietro Enria's fairly extensive autobiographical memoir. His story begins with recalling the circumstances in which, in 1854, young Pietro and his brother Giovanni, orphaned by the cholera epidemic, were given shelter by Don Bosco at the Oratory. It ends with a narrative of Don Bosco's last days and saintly death, as witnessed and recalled by Enria himself, Don Bosco's devoted sick-room attendant. This last section is entitled, "1887. Don Bosco's Last Illness."

1. Enria, Don Bosco's Sick-Room Attendant⁴⁰

As he states in his memoir, Pietro Giuseppe Enria (1841-1898) was born in the little town of San Benigno, not far from Turin. When he was little more than seven years old, his mother died, and his father remarried. In 1852, the family migrated to Turin, and prospered briefly till struck first by a malaria epidemic and in 1854 by the cholera, which left Pietro and his brothers orphans. It is under these circumstances that the child met Don Bosco, when the latter visited the temporary orphanage which the Society of St. Vincent de Paul had set up. Enria touchingly relates how Don Bosco picked him and his younger brother out of the line of orphans and brought them to the Oratory. He was never to leave Don Bosco. At first Don Bosco placed him with an employer in one of the city's workshops, but after the establishment of workshops at the Oratory Enria worked "at home."⁴¹ Eventually he was employed in the Salesian supplies depot run by Brother Giuseppe Rossi, but he also took leadership roles in the activities of the Oratory, as band musician, stage manager, cook, painter, etc. He was always in demand for his practical skills.

More significant for the object of this essay is the fact that he was Don Bosco's attendant through all his major illnesses in the seventies and eighties. When Don Bosco took ill at Varazze in 1871, he expressly sent for Enria to attend him through the two-month siege. In a number of letters written to Brother Giuseppe Buzzetti and to others, as well as later in his memoir, Enria describes

⁴⁰ A short biographical sketch is to be found in Eugenio Ceria, *Profili di 33 Coadiutori Salesiani* (Colle Don Bosco: Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1952), pp. 79-95, and, based on this, in the *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, p. 116. Ceria drew on Enria's own autobiographical memoir.

⁴¹ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 1-23, *FDBM* 932 D12.

his patient's symptoms and condition day by day.⁴² These reports permit doctors today to venture a diagnosis.

Again Enria attended Don Bosco in his two or three-week illness at Sampierdarena in April 1878. Enria had been stationed there at the time. Don Bosco expressed his gratitude in the most affectionate terms.⁴³

In autumn, 1878, Enria was part of the team that founded the Salesian school at Este, and it was there that he made his religious profession and became *de jure* what he had always been *de facto*, Brother Enria.

But Enria's most devoted service to Don Bosco was rendered during the latter's final illness. To this he dedicated the last section of his memoir.

The father's death seemed to forecast the son's own decline. In an appendix to his memoir, he relates that in 1890 he was assigned to attend Salesian seminarian Augustus Czartoryski who was ill with tuberculosis at Lugano, Switzerland. Enria felt extremely depressed, and then he fell ill himself with an ailment of the spinal column. Almost immediately he lost the use of his right hand. The hotel personnel put him to bed. It was then that he prayed to Don Bosco and eventually got better.⁴⁴ He was already a sick man. He died of a cerebro-spinal ailment, in great physical and mental pain, in 1898. But it was during this period that he rendered his beloved master his final service: he testified in the process of Don Bosco's beatification;⁴⁵ and at Father Giovanni Battista Lemoyne's request, he penned his memoir.

2. Enria's Memoir

The Enria files in the "chronicles" section of the Salesian Archives (ASC 110) contain a number of memoirs.

(1) There is a four-page fragment beginning with the words, "In 1854."⁴⁶

(2) A notebook of 95 pages (6 unnumbered pages followed by pages 1-89), records events up to the Varazze illness (1872).⁴⁷ A first, "aborted" beginning

⁴² Enria, *Memoir* ("Don Bosco's Illness at Varazze in 1871"), pp. 99-169, *FDBM* 934 C2-935 C12; and ASC 112: Malattie, Varazze, *FDBM* especially, 430 D12-431 E12; 433 B10-12, D10-E1; 434 A1-2, A7-B2.

⁴³ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 185-196, *FDBM* 935 E4-936 A3.

⁴⁴ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 289-292, *FDBM* 937 C12-D3.

⁴⁵ Brother Pietro Enria appeared as the fourteenth witness in January-February 1893 [cf. Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. III: *La Canonizzazione (1888-1934)* (Roma: LAS, 1988), p. 119]. For this purpose he prepared an extensive written deposition [in ASC 110: Cronachette, Enria, *FDBM* 938 C6-939 C5].

⁴⁶ *FDBM* 931 A12-B3.

⁴⁷ *FDBM* 931 B4-932 D11.

reads: "I, Pietro Giuseppe Enria [...];" the second and real beginning reads: "In 1854 [...]."

(3) A 26-page partial memoir of Don Bosco's last days begins with, "1887, April 20," but remains incomplete.⁴⁸

(4) A composite memoir, of 27 pages numbered in Roman numerals contains an account of Don Bosco's recovery from the illness at Varazze (1872) and of his subsequent triumphal reception in Turin (pp. I-XVI),⁴⁹ followed by a description of "Don Bosco's Last Days" (pp. XVII-XXVII).⁵⁰

(5) These partial memoirs were probably rough drafts for the 285-page memoir which begins with the words, "Pietro Giuseppe Enria, born on [...]," and which spans the years 1854-1888.⁵¹ This is Enria's finished *Memoir*. It is not a chronicle, nor is it a diary written as the events unfolded. It is a series of recollections which he painfully set down at Father Lemoyne's urging in 1893.⁵² In autobiographical style, he first describes how Don Bosco took him in when the cholera raged in the city. He goes on to write about life in the Oratory as he witnessed it; then Don Bosco becomes the real focus of the story. The largest and most important sections of the narrative are devoted to Don Bosco's illnesses, during which (beginning with 1871) Enria attended him. As mentioned above, the last portion (pp. 234-285) of the memoir is devoted to Don Bosco's last illness and death, and is entitled, "1887. The Last Illness."⁵³ This is followed by a kind of appendix entitled, "Events Which Occurred after Don Bosco's Death" (pp. 287-292), recording two graces received, the second one (referred to above) in Enria's own behalf.⁵⁴

Looking superficially at the pages of this memoir, and comparing it with earlier partial drafts, one is impressed with the neatness of the script and the near-total lack of corrections. Enria must have labored hard and long at this project, for writing must have been difficult for a person with hardly any education. When one begins to delve, the author's ineptness in every department of literacy becomes all too evident, a situation which becomes a severe trial for the translator. But there is force and inspiration throughout. This is especially true of the last portion, the eyewitness account of Don Bosco's last illness and holy saintly death. These pages are a veritable outpouring of filial piety, tender love,

⁴⁸ FDBM 937 D3-938 A4.

⁴⁹ FDBM 938 A5-B8.

⁵⁰ FDBM 938 B9-C5.

⁵¹ "Enria Pietro Giuseppe nato il [...]," FDBM 932 D12-937 C8.

⁵² Ceria, *Profili di 33 coadiutori salesiani*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁵³ "1887. Ultima Malattia," FDBM 936 D8-937 C8.

⁵⁴ FDBM 938 C9-D2; and cf. note 44 and related text, above.

worshipful reverence, almost abject humility, and eternal gratitude. Above all, Enria's account enlarges and deepens our knowledge of Don Bosco.⁵⁵

III. Antonio Sala and His Memoir

1. A Word about the Man⁵⁶

Antonio Sala (1836-1895) was born into a well-to-do home. The Sala family owned a textile mill of which Antonio became manager in his twenties. But in 1863, at the age of 27, he decided to join Don Bosco and the Salesians. "The gentle giant," as he came to be known, immediately fell in love with the Spartan life style of the Oratory, with the young people, and with Don Bosco in particular. He was ordained in 1869, and then attended the conferences in moral theology at the pastoral institute known as the *Convitto*. In 1875 Don Bosco appointed him assistant to the financial administrator of the Society, whom he succeeded in 1880. In these capacities he supervised important building projects, particularly, the building of the church of St. John the Evangelist in Turin (1878-1882) and that of the Sacred Heart in Rome (1884-1888).

It was precisely from this last assignment that he was recalled to assist Don Bosco when the latter fell terminally ill at the end of 1887. Sala writes to open his memoir:

On December 29, 1887 I left Rome [...] in response to a telegram worded as follows: "Come without delay. Don Bosco is ill." The evening of December 30 I was at the patient's bedside. Don Bosco recognized me. [...] [I said:] "Here I am, completely at your beck and call; and I will deem it a great good fortune if I can be of service to you." "Yes," Don Bosco replied, "I am happy [that you came]. Now poor dear Viglietti here can have some relief." From that day until his death, I remained on call to go to his room at any time, by day or by night. I might be needed to help move him from one bed

⁵⁵ Enria's chief memoir has already received some attention in the pages of this journal: cf. Michael Ribotta, "Peter Enria Remembers," *Journal of Salesian Studies* 3:2 (1992) pp. 93-108. There, a brief biographical account is followed by an English adaptation, with plenty of editing, of the initial section of the memoir and of two further episodes. Only a general reference is given to the Salesian Archives: "AS 110 Enria, autogr." Specifically, Ribotta's initial section corresponds to Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 1-24 [FDBM 932 D12-933 A11], a section which may be found transcribed in Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale 1815-1870* (Roma: LAS, 1980), pp. 494-506. The two further episodes correspond to pp. 65-69 and pp. 56-58 of the memoir, respectively [FDBM 933 E4-8 and 933 D7-9]. These excerpts afford no more than a glimpse into Enria's mighty work.

⁵⁶ Biographical data are derived from Eugenio Ceria, *Profili dei capitolari salesiani morti dall'anno 1865 al 1950* (Colle Don Bosco: LDC, 1951), pp. 153-162. Cf. also *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, p. 250.

to another, or again I might take my turn at waiting on him, which I was very happy to do.⁵⁷

It was out of this experience that Sala penned his brief memoir. But he continued his service to Don Bosco even after the latter's death. For it was Father Sala who negotiated with a hostile city council to have Don Bosco entombed in a special shrine in the Salesian school of Valsalice.

After Don Bosco's death, Father Sala returned to the affairs of the Society with undiminished vigor. But a general physical deterioration due to premature aging claimed his life in 1895.

2. Sala's Memoir⁵⁸

This nine-page manuscript in Sala's own hand was apparently written in haste with no attention given to correctness of language or beauty of style. It is in fact very hard to read.

The initial note, already referred to above, specifies the date on which Sala took up his sick-room duties (December 30, 1887). This is followed by a dozen episodes, some of which are peculiar to this memoir. They also record some witty quips of Don Bosco and some precious words of his not attested elsewhere.

Thus, the literary defects are amply compensated by the fact that, as Sala indicates, everything was written out of direct, personal experience.

Little need be said about the remaining archival sources and their authors. A note will suffice.

IV. Francesco Cerruti and His Memoir⁵⁹

Francesco Cerruti (1844-1917), a pupil at the Oratory school in 1856 and a companion of [Saint] Dominic Savio, became a Salesian in 1862. After obtaining academic degrees, he served as director and provincial of the houses in Liguria. In 1885, he was appointed by Don Bosco general councilor for schools and served in that capacity until his death in 1917. He is credited with putting the Salesian school program on a professional basis in Italy and elsewhere.

His very brief, five-page memoir on Don Bosco's last illness contains only three entries,⁶⁰ the last of which, dated December 30, 1887, and chiefly devoted

⁵⁷ Sala, *Memoir*, pp. 1f. in ASC 110: Sala, *FDBM* 1222 C5f.

⁵⁸ ASC 110: Sala, *FDBM* 1222 C5-D1.

⁵⁹ Biographical data derived from Eugenio Ceria, *Profili dei capitolari, op. cit.*, pp. 232-255. Cf. Renato Ziggotti, *Don Francesco Cerruti* (Torino: SEI, 1949); and *Dizionario Biografico dei Salesiani*, p. 82.

⁶⁰ ASC 110: Cerruti, *FDBM* 963 A8-12.

to a visit by Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda, archbishop of Turin, is of special interest.

V. Father Michele Rua's Reports

Father Rua, Don Bosco's vicar with right of succession since 1884, was perhaps the person most concerned with Don Bosco's condition, and was a constant visitor to Don Bosco's sick room. During the last crisis in particular, he was constantly at his side and assisted the founder in imparting a last blessing.

He did not leave a memoir or chronicle, but during the first crisis of late December 1887 and early January 1888, he sent out a number of bulletins or reports to the confreres on Don Bosco's condition in the form of circular letters. These eight rather brief calligraphic letters are dated December 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31, 1887; January 2 and 5, 1888.⁶¹

Also of interest is a bulletin on Don Bosco's condition, in French, dated December 31, 1887.⁶²

These reports take us through the crisis of late December, when Don Bosco was despaired of, into the period of his amazing (but illusory) recovery. I am not aware that any bulletins were issued to the confreres during Don Bosco's final crisis in late January, 1888. None are found in the archives.

VI. Dr. Giovanni Albertotti and His Biography of Don Bosco

In 1929 a unique biography of Don Bosco saw the light of day. It was entitled, "*Who Was Don Bosco? A Biographical Sketch of Don Bosco Written from a Physical, Psychological and Pathological Standpoint* by his physician, Dr. Giovanni Albertotti, and published by the physician's son Giuseppe Albertotti."⁶³

Dr. Giovanni Albertotti (1824-1906), was a graduate of the medical school of the University of Turin. After service as physician and surgeon during the First War of Italian Independence (1848-1849), and many years of general practice, in 1871 he was offered the post of resident physician and psychiatrist at Turin's mental hospital, that is, the "lunatic asylum" located but a couple of blocks from the Oratory. In the seventies he also held an assistant professorship

⁶¹ ASC 112: Malattie, *FDBM* 437 D8, 9, 10, 11, and 12; E1, 3, and 5, respectively.

⁶² ASC 112: Malattie, *FDBM* 437 E2.

⁶³ *Chi era Don Bosco?*, ossia Biografia fisio-psico-patologica di Don Bosco, scritta dal suo medico Dott. Albertotti Giovanni, pubblicata dal figlio Giuseppe Albertotti (Genova: Poligrafica San Giorgio, 1929) 100 pages (Giuseppe's introduction, pp. 7-29; Giovanni's text, pp. 33-100), in ASC 123: Persone in relazione con Don Bosco, Albertotti, *FDBM* 532 B1-533 D10.

in psychiatry at the university. As he related to his son, the job at the mental hospital was not very demanding and he had a lot of time on his hand. In fact he was considering returning to general practice. Then he discovered the Oratory, and thus began his life-long relationship with Don Bosco and the Salesians as a physician and a devoted friend. As he describes it, toward the end of July 1871, while on a stroll in the area, he happened by the Oratory at the time of the boys' recreation and was curious enough to inquire about that institution. Father Giuseppe Lazzero, vice-director at the time, satisfied his curiosity. Dr. Albertotti began to visit the Oratory intermittently until 1875, at which time, for a nominal sum, he became house physician for both the Salesians and the Salesian Sisters next-door. He then began regular daily visits.⁶⁴ It was natural that Don Bosco, after his recovery from the Varazze illness in 1872, should become the object of Albertotti's special concern. It was likewise natural, that Albertotti should be the physician in attendance during Don Bosco's subsequent illnesses, the last one in particular. Father Rua, however, did not neglect to engage other physicians for continuous consultation.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, as reported by his son in the Introduction, pp. 9-12.

⁶⁵ The physicians who attended Don Bosco in a consultative, but very important role were Giuseppe Fissore (from 1871), Celestino Vignolo-Lutati (through the eighties), and to a lesser degree Tommaso Bestente (during the last illness). Drs. Fissore and Vignolo, specialists in their fields, appear to hold center stage during Don Bosco's last illness.

Giuseppe Fissore was "professor of internal medicine at the University of Turin and one of the most esteemed physicians in the city" [Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, p. 79, *FDBM* 533 C1]. In 1871, when Don Bosco fell critically ill at Varazze, Father Rua, to leave nothing undone, had gone right to the top and had engaged him for consultations with the local practitioner, Dr. Carattini. During the last illness, Dr. Fissore assumed an increasingly important role; he appears in fact to have been the spokesman for the medical team.

Celestino Vignolo-Lutati (1838-1924) was closely associated with the Salesians (the name also appears as Vignola-Luzzati, but mostly simply as Vignolo). The Vignolos were related to the Vigliettis. Don Bosco's secretary, Carlo Maria Viglietti, was in fact Dr. Vignolo's nephew. Don Bosco was on friendly terms with both families. But what is most significant is that Dr. Vignolo was a specialist in the field of bronchio-pulmonary diseases. A professional journal speaks of him as "the leading medical specialist of his time, and inspector of health services for all the hospitals in Turin."

Tommaso Bestente (Bestenti) had been a student at the Oratory in 1866-1867; but on going through medical school he had abandoned religious practice. In 1881, Don Bosco met him at Turin's general hospital (where Bestente was a resident physician), recognized him, invited him to dinner, and "brought him back." During Don Bosco's last illness Dr. Bestente seems to have played a minor role, for he was the junior physician on the team. But, being a physician of the city's public health office, he was instrumental in obtaining the permit for Don Bosco's special burial at

As far as the biography is concerned, one may at once discount Albertotti's psychological interpretations, for his training in psychology-psychiatry had been in the materialistic tradition. He also came under the influence of his contemporary, Dr. Cesare Lombroso, Professor of forensic medicine, psychiatry, and criminal anthropology in Turin. Albertotti shared Lombroso's theory that human behavior (especially criminal behavior) is the product of heredity, atavism, and degeneracy. Thus, his interpretations of Don Bosco's life experiences and condition tend to stress physical causes.⁶⁶

But other aspects of the biography, such as his evaluation of Don Bosco's state of health, of the nature of the illness, etc., and his comments on Don Bosco's physical condition, are obviously of great interest.

The foregoing is merely a description, claiming no critical status, of the chief archival sources pertinent to our inquiry. These sources will now serve as the basis for a brief survey of the period of Don Bosco's quasi-retirement, the last three-and-a-half years of his life. Viglietti's *Original Chronicle* is our basic source. Enria's *Memoir* is also relevant. The other sources, however, are chiefly concerned with Don Bosco's last illness. As already indicated, it is not my purpose to attempt a biographical reconstruction of this period in Don Bosco's life. While a framework must necessarily be provided, the focus will be on the more personal aspects and events; and these will be presented, as far as possible, in the chroniclers' very words.

Part II. Don Bosco's Bouts with Illness and the Years of His Decline

I. Antecedent Medical History

Don Bosco was seriously, even critically, ill numerous times during his life. In a long and fairly detailed passage of the *Biographical Memoirs*, Father Lemoyne

Valsalice. [For the above, cf. also Michele Molineris, *Vita episodica di Don Bosco* (Castelnuovo Don Bosco: ISBS, 1874), pp. 421-432.]

⁶⁶ In this vein, he writes: "Genetically Don Bosco was blessed with a rather strong physical constitution. His cranial type, the type prevalent in the region of Piedmont, was brachiocephalic. The early development of the cerebro-spinal system as well as of the muscular system, which he inherited principally from his mother, [...] was a determining factor." And he gives Don Bosco's cranial measurements: "Cranial circumference: 550 mm. [21.65 in.]; posterior basal diameter: 190 mm. [7.48 in.]; transverse basal diameter: 170 mm. [6.7 in.]; a considerable degree of oxycephaly" [Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, pp. 80 and 98, *FDBM* 533 C2 and D8]. "Oxycephaly" is a parietal deformity producing some kind of pointed effect at the top of the head.

speaks of Don Bosco's life-long fight against illness.⁶⁷ Referring to his practice of reading late into the night when a student at Chieri, Don Bosco himself writes without further explanation: "This practice so ruined my health that for some years I seemed to have one foot in the grave."⁶⁸ But the episodes of 1846 and of 1871, both of which nearly proved fatal, are well documented. The illness of 1846 climaxed a protracted struggle against a condition characterized by symptoms associated with the respiratory system: weakness, chest pains, blood-stained sputum, intermittent temperatures. This was during the trying time of the wandering oratory. It finally developed into that near-fatal bronchitis-pneumonia which forced him out of oratory work for several months.⁶⁹ The most serious relapse since the illness of 1846 was the Varazze illness of 1871-1872, a siege of nearly two months. Enria's documentation shows this illness to have been a complex conjunction of various diseases, rheumatic seizure, miliary fever, boils, etc. But Enria's reports, tend to show that the chief component, and in all likelihood the root cause, of this complicated condition was bronchio-pulmonary.⁷⁰ There were relapses in 1875 and 1878, the latter of which, of two or three weeks' duration, was serious enough to require Enria's ministrations.⁷¹

II. The Crises of 1884

The just-mentioned relapses suffered after the illness of 1871 were not regarded as critical. The crises of 1884, on the other hand, signaled the beginning of the inexorable slide toward the end, for his whole system was so affected that the condition became irreversible. Since 1871, and probably as a result of that illness, there had developed a gradually crippling spinal ailment and a very painful edematous swelling in the lower limbs. To aggravate the situation, the pressure of constant work and worry continued unrelieved till nearly the end. True, he was no longer embroiled with Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi, and was now apparently enjoying a period of peace. He had the full support and enjoyed the high esteem of the local Church authority, Cardinal Archbishop Gaetano Alimonda in particular. He was moreover comforted by the filial love of many sons and sure of the support of many devoted followers. But Don Bosco still labored under the constant pressure of numerous concerns: the work in South America, financial burdens, the privileges withheld, fear for the future of the Congregation, to mention but a few.

⁶⁷ [*Biographical Memoirs, English Edition*], pp. 151f.

⁶⁸ [*Memoirs of the Oratory, English Edition*], p. 108.

⁶⁹ *EBM* II, pp. 380-387. Cf. also the letter of the Marchioness Barolo to Father Giovanni Borel, May 18, 1846 [*EBM* II, p. 360].

⁷⁰ For Enria's reports on the progress of this illness, cf. note 42 and related text, above.

⁷¹ For Enria's report, cf. note 43 and related text, above; and *EBM* XI, p. 372.

1. February 1884

The year 1884 was decisive. The onset of a first and more serious crisis occurred in February, 1884.⁷² The Salesians close to Don Bosco were very much alarmed; he himself apparently did not expect to recover. On February 8, he included in his *Spiritual Testament* a list of outstanding benefactors, with messages to be delivered to them after his demise.⁷³ Almost immediately he became critically ill with bronchitis. Again, the symptoms recorded were, extreme weakness, chest pains, blood-stained sputum, weakened heartbeat and low pulse. The doctors insisted on bed rest. In writing to Claire Louvet at this time, Don Bosco admitted to being in bad health, and complained particularly of chest pains.⁷⁴

2. Journey to France and Dr. P.-M. Combal's Diagnosis

Don Bosco, however, after treatment and bed rest, did "recover," and against all advice, on March 1, 1884, he undertook a fund-raising journey through southern France.

It was during his stay in Marseilles, on March 25, 1884, that Don Bosco was visited by the renowned Dr. P.-M. Combal, summoned for the purpose from Montpellier, presumably by Father Paul Albera. Dr. Combal's diagnosis and prescription, the French original of which is preserved in the Salesian Archives,⁷⁵ confirm earlier opinions:

Reverend Don Bosco's medical history as related by him to me, and my own examination of the patient, enable me to give the following opinion. He is suffering from a condition, the pathology of which is both general and local.

A. Several general elements should be noted.

(1) A generalized weakened condition with anemia.

⁷² As noted earlier, the chief archival source for this period is Lemoyne's *Ricordi di Gabinetto* [cf. note 4 and related text, above], which is not available to me. Most of this material was included by Lemoyne in *Documenti*, and later edited by Ceria in the *Biographical Memoirs* [IBM XVII, pp. 27-35].

⁷³ *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6* [...], pp. 17-22 and 117-127, in ASC 132: Tacuini, FDBM 748 E9-749 A2 and 749 E1-12. Cf. Francesco Motto, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel Sac. Gio. Bosco a' suoi figliuoli salesiani (Testamento Spirituale)* (Roma: Las, 1985), pp. 25-29 and 44-47. February 8, 1884 was the original date indicated by Don Bosco, later corrected to 1885. For the bequeathal of the *Testament* by Don Bosco during his last illness, cf. note 169 and related text, below.

⁷⁴ Letter of February 14, 1884 in IBM XVI, p. 655. Mademoiselle Claire Louvet of Lille, France, was an outstanding benefactress of the Salesian work. Don Bosco wrote some sixty letters to her, cf. IBM XVI, pp. 641-671 and John Itzaina, "Charitable Mademoiselle [...]," *Journal of Salesian Studies* 1:1 (1990) 35-46.

⁷⁵ ASC 112: Malattie, FDBM 437 B9-12.

- (2) A flux deviation in the mucous areas of the respiratory system.⁷⁶
 - (3) Erethesis of the nervous system.⁷⁷
 - (4) Possible remnants of a marsh fever infection.
- B. Local elements, too, are present.
- (5) Some irritation of the mucous areas of the bronchi resulting from repeated flux deviation.
 - (6) Finally, a slight enlargement of the liver.

Based on these findings, a treatment might be put into effect in accordance with the following prescription:

- (1) Taking a tablespoonful of *Vial* wine immediately before morning and evening meals (calcium phosphate, meat and quinine).⁷⁸
- (2) Taking half a glass of *Vals* [mineral] water from the *Dominique* spring, mixed with wine, during meals.
- (3) Ensuring regularity by taking at intervals (once a week at bed time) a teaspoon of Dr. Soubigou's laxative Vichy powder in one-fourth of a glass of water.
- (4) Adopting a mixed diet of boiled meat and vegetables, soft-boiled eggs, dairy foods.
- (5) Replacing the *Vals* water drunk at meals with *La Bourboule* [mineral] water, for ten days each month.
- (6) Refraining for a length of time from the usual occupations, and above all avoiding the tension arising from prolonged [occupational] pressure.

As may be seen, Dr. Combal prescribed a light, lean diet, joined with a fairly complex regimen of tonic, diuretic and laxative remedies. These palliatives would certainly not have availed in curing "the flux deviation in the mucous areas of the respiratory system." In any case, it is unlikely that Don Bosco, given his traditional peasant's skepticism about doctors and medicines, would have undertaken such an elaborate dietary program. Further, the doctor especially recommended taking a vacation from occupational pressures, a piece of advice that ran contrary to Don Bosco's basic idea of his own responsibilities.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ This expression means an inflammation or damage in the bronchial alveoli tending to prevent the proper processing of the blood. This is bronchial emphysema. Hence the "bronchial irritation" stated in Number (5).

⁷⁷ "Erethesis" means excessive irritation of the nervous system affecting vital organs.

⁷⁸ The "meat" (*viande*) in this preparation is probably tamarind paste.

⁷⁹ Dr. P.-M. Combal's (1814-1888) visit of Don Bosco in 1884 was not to be his last. On the journey back from Spain in 1886, Don Bosco stopped at Montpellier for a few days, apparently to see Dr. Combal, for there was no Salesian work there. Father Rua, who was Don Bosco's companion, may have suggested the layover. Viglietti reports that Dr. Combal (with his family) paid visits to Don Bosco on the

3. September 1884

The crisis of February 1884 had raised fears in Salesian and Church authorities alike. The way Don Bosco dragged himself around in Rome during his sojourn there in April-May drew the Roman authorities' attention to his physical decline. As Don Bosco himself later reported to his council when discussing the appointment of a vicar, Pope Leo XIII had remarked: "Your health is bad; you need help and you need to have an assistant at your side [...]"⁸⁰ This eventually led to the appointment of Father Rua as vicar with right of succession.

Meanwhile, September 14, 1884, marked the onset of a second serious crisis. Don Bosco was forced to leave the spiritual retreat in progress at Valsalice, return to the Oratory, and take to his bed with a painful swelling in his legs and feet. The sources speak of erysipelas, an acute inflammation of the skin.⁸¹ But the more likely cause was the chronic bronchial condition with its

evenings of May 7, 8 and 9. Of this last visit Viglietti writes: "Dr. Combal called and examined Don Bosco in bed, and the visit lasted one hour. Later he said to me: 'In my opinion, the fact that Don Bosco is still alive is the greatest of miracles. Here we have a man who is literally "dead-tired" but who continues to work day in and day out, while taking very little nourishment. He is nonetheless alive'" [Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, p. 62, *FDBM* 1225 B6].

⁸⁰ Council session of Oct. 23, 1884, Minutes by Father Lemoyne, Vol. I, p. 45. *FDBM* 1881 D3.

⁸¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, p. 3, September 14, 1884, *FDBM* 1222 D5. In his *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, Viglietti adds that someone had suggested dabbing Don Bosco's leg with an ointment, and relates an episode which led to Father Berto (who was suffering from a kind of mental illness) being ousted as Don Bosco's attendant:

Turin, September 14, 1884, continued. — I feel I should add the following episode for the record. I did not include it earlier [in the *Original Chronicle*] for fear of hurting poor Father Berto. But it does our dear Father Don Bosco much credit. Don Bosco got to the Oratory from Valsalice at about 5 P.M. Father Berto was not on speaking terms with Don Bosco at the time and he happened to be in a vile temper besides. He demanded to examine our poor patient's swollen leg and asked me how the ailment was to be treated. Then without further ado he took some oil of wintergreen (*giusquiamo*) and began to rub Don Bosco's leg vigorously. Standing outside in the gallery, I could hear Don Bosco telling Father Berto very gently: "Father Berto, that hurts; please stop, you are hurting me." But Father Berto paid no attention and went on with the senseless procedure. At half past six, Dr. Fissore called and, when he had taken a look at the leg, said to Don Bosco quite bluntly: "Who on earth did this? You had better get rid of that ass... of an attendant, or you will not see me again." Don Bosco kept quiet; but I could not refrain from telling the Reverend Father Sala, the financial administrator. Father Sala told me that the general council had decided to get Father Berto away from Don Bosco, because the poor man suffered from neurosis.

related blood disorders. Whatever the cause, the condition was so serious that the general council had raised the question of Don Bosco's death. In the session of September 19, presided over by Father Rua, the discussion dealt matter-of-factly with Don Bosco's funeral and eventual place of burial.⁸²

III. The Period of Quasi-Retirement and Decline (1885-1887)

Don Bosco, however, after bed rest and a period of convalescence, did again "recover." In early 1885, 1886, and 1887 he undertook three extensive journeys: one to southern France and another to Spain (Barcelona), both, for the purpose of raising funds and strengthening the work in those countries; and a third to Rome, for the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart. During this period Viglietti, who was Don Bosco's constant companion, recorded Don Bosco's words and activity faithfully and perceptively. He was especially attentive to Don Bosco's state of health and to the ups and downs to which he was subject. There was no crisis such as a grave or near-fatal illness. There was only a pervasive weakness, an accumulation of ailments, and a progressive physical deterioration. Sheer will-power, however, and the goals he set for himself on behalf of the work saw him through.

Speaking of Don Bosco's physical condition at this time, specifically of the swelling in his lower limbs and of his spinal ailment, Dr. Albertotti writes:

This painful swelling had been developing at least since 1853, and its probable cause lay in a thrombosis suffered in consequence of the bronchial

He had in fact come up to Father Berto's room to speak to him about the matter, but Father Berto had slammed the door in his face. Father Sala then enlisted the help of four strong lay brothers and told them what had to be done. They waited till half past seven, the time of the first dinner seating, which Father Berto was in the habit of attending. Then they forced the lock on the door to his room, went in, and by means of ropes they lowered the contents of the room three stories down to the courtyard: the cabinets containing the archive files, the bed, and Father Berto's other belongings. From the courtyard they moved everything to a room in the building which housed the print shop. Then a new lock was put in for the old room and the door locked. The men moved so quickly that by eight o'clock the deed was done. (Later Father Rua moved into Father Berto's old room, and I was given the room which now serves as chapel.) When Father Berto discovered the switch, he rushed up to Don Bosco's rooms and began shouting and pounding on the door. Don Bosco from his bed of pain could hear his poor friend shouting and was so sorry for him. He said to me: "Poor Father Berto is sick. Take care to show him love and all due respect. He worked very hard for Don Bosco!" [Viglietti, *Transcribed and Edited Chronicle*, pp. 19-21, *FDBM* 1232 D11-E1].

⁸² ASC 0592 0592: *Cons. Sup. Verballi*, Lemoyne I, p. 35, *FDBM* 1881 B9.

disease contracted a few years earlier. The swelling worsened steadily and became critical with the near-fatal [Varazze] illness of 1871, which was probably responsible for the onset of nephritis. It was further aggravated by a chronic intestinal infection accompanied by diarrhea. [...]

The weakening of the spine may have been in effect as far back as December 6, 1871. This was the [Varazze] illness in which a variety of conditions already present, chiefly rheumatic and cardio-pulmonary in nature, were aggravated. As a result the edematous swelling in the lower limbs was also increased. This scenario provides a satisfactory explanation for Don Bosco's condition. The central nervous system first, and then gradually the vital organs, chiefly lungs, heart and kidneys, began to be affected in the illness of 1846, and suffered further deterioration in the illness of 1871, a condition which became progressively worse and finally took his life. It was at first a slow-paced deterioration. By the eighties his body had become a walking pathology laboratory, but one which left his brilliant mind unimpaired and which could not stymie his desire and active striving toward his glorious goal.⁸³

1. The Trip to Southern France in Early 1885

In late March, Don Bosco left Turin for Sampierdarena, the first stop on his way to France. Viglietti writes: "Don Bosco is very cheerful and is feeling quite well."⁸⁴

The trip was a success, but it was also, at every stage, a test of Don Bosco's physical stamina. An entry of the chronicle at Marseilles, the farthest point reached, sums up the situation.

What I admire most in Don Bosco is the extraordinary virtue with which he hides his painful infirmities. At times the pain is very intense and he suffers visibly. But when he cannot hide the pain externally, he smiles and says: "The show must go on: Don Bosco is out of money!"⁸⁵

At the conference of Salesian Cooperators in Marseilles,

Don Bosco was the first to speak, and his words moved everyone to tears. He said that he did not stand before them to deliver a long speech. In the first place, his ill health prevented him from doing so; then, a much more

⁸³ Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, pp. 78 and 82f., ASC 112: Malattie, *FDBM* 533 B12 and C4f. Thrombosis is the coagulation of blood in a blood-vessel. Nephritis is an inflammation of the kidneys.

⁸⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, p. 5, "March 24, 1885, Sampierdarena," *FDBM* 1222 D6.

⁸⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I p. 44, "Marseilles, April 13, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 A2.

eloquent speaker was on hand for the purpose. He simply wished to thank God and, next to him, the Cooperators for their charity and generosity. [...] He had no means of knowing, he continued, whether or not this would be his last visit with them. He might be called by God into eternity. Should that be the case, and should God indeed take him to himself in heaven, his first thought would be to pray Jesus and Mary and all the saints to bless and protect all those who have contributed to the salvation of so many souls.⁸⁶

Toward the end of the trip, Don Bosco was forced to scale down his activity. In Nice, with Father [Giuseppe] Ronchail, Father [Pierre] Perrot, and Viglietti, he was the dinner guest of the Catholic Men's Association, "the choicest nobility of Nice," as Viglietti remarks. "Because of his ailments, Don Bosco was not accepting individual invitations. He was thus making them all happy by meeting them as a group."⁸⁷

Back in Italy, Don Bosco and his secretary, leaving Alassio for Sampierdarena, were late for the train, and the station master delayed the train's departure. "Don Bosco was running;" writes the secretary, "I have not seen him so limber in a long time. And was he cheerful! He turned to me and said: 'Viglietti, what's the purpose of you being here?'"⁸⁸

This unusual spurt of energy may have stemmed from sheer elation. The trip to France had been a huge success. Don Bosco's presence had the effect of mobilizing his cooperators' charity, bringing in large sums of money, most of which he immediately devoted to the local works. Viglietti almost daily notes the amounts collected, the joint offerings of the common folk, and the larger individual offerings of the rich, none more generous than Count Fleury Antoine Colle and family.

2. Summer and Autumn of 1885

However, back in Turin the body, if not the spirit, had to yield. The scorching heat of summer also wore him down. He was forced to seek the cooler climate of the foothills.

Don Bosco moved to Mathi, accompanied by Father [Giovanni] Bonetti, by Viglietti, his secretary (his son, rather!), and by [Salesian] seminarian [Angelo] Festa. The superiors insisted. He is to spend some time here and rest, for he is so weak that he could not possibly bear the summer's heat in

⁸⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol I, pp. 50f., "Marseilles, April 17, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 A5.

⁸⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, p. 66, "Nice, April 27, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 B1.

⁸⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. I, pp. 71f., "Sampierdarena, May 2, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 B3f.

the city. [...] Don Bosco takes his recreation recalling numerous episodes out of the past, while walking in the garden. He seems to be getting better and to be regaining his strength; his appetite also has improved.⁸⁹

Don Bosco's lack of appetite, and his frequent stomach upsets and diarrhea, were a grave concern to Salesians and physicians alike. Dr. Albertotti remarks: "This condition caused grave concern; so that, in spite of his complete indifference to his own health and against his objections, the Salesians ordered a special fare exclusively for him."⁹⁰ In his *Diary*, Viglietti jotted down a regimen, developed perhaps on doctors' advice, designed for the comfort of the master, especially when away from home. It also reveals the secretary's ingenuity.

Half past eleven: vermouth; half past four: chamomile tea. Turn down his bed; remove his [elastic] stockings; have a shoe horn and combs ready for him; set out a glass of water with salt on his night table. When staying at a [Salesian] house, ask for vegetable soup and boiled foods generally to be served to him. Have myrrh tablets available [for after meals]. Arrange for gelatin to be served to him in hot weather. (Make all such arrangements through the director or administrator of the house.) Always have a small flask of sabayon or cream cordial for use when he cannot celebrate Mass or in an emergency. Get him the morning or evening papers. Serve him finger-biscuits at breakfast...⁹¹

In August there were set-backs. "Don Bosco's condition has us all worried," writes Viglietti. "He is suffering from unremitting headaches, from dysentery, and from an eye disease. But he is invariably cheerful: he never complains." Some of his normally scheduled activities had to be canceled. "Because of deteriorating health, this year again Don Bosco missed his birthday celebration and the awards ceremonies [at the Oratory]. Ill health also prevented him from attending the spiritual retreat."⁹²

However, he insisted on attending the novices' spiritual retreat at San Benigno later in August. Viglietti here, as he does numerous times earlier and later in the chronicle, points out how easily Don Bosco is moved to tears, one of the signs of aging.

This morning Don Bosco celebrated community Mass, and everyone was deeply moved. As usual, at the *Domine non sum dignus* he began to cry and could not go on. At the words, *Ecce Agnus Dei*, and during the distribution

⁸⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, p. 83, "Mathi, July 15 and 16, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 B12.

⁹⁰ Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, p. 78, *FDBM* 533 B12.

⁹¹ Viglietti, *Diario*, p. 27, *FDBM* 1231 D8.

⁹² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, pp. 95 and 101f., "Mathi, August 7 and 15, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 C 6 and 9f.

of communion to the community he kept on sobbing loudly. For quite some time now, Don Bosco exhibits extraordinary tenderheartedness. Hardly ever can he refrain from crying during Mass; he cries habitually during Benediction. Even during regular conversation he must avoid sensitive topics, otherwise he starts crying.⁹³

After the spiritual retreat, Don Bosco stayed on at San Benigno. He has been suffering for some time from serious ailments, which are aggravated by his total lack of strength and by the foul weather. I don't recall ever having seen him in so much pain. Yesterday I had to go to Turin on some errand with Reverend Father Lemoyne and Father Ronchail, director at Nice. Before setting out, we stopped by his room to see him. He broke into sobs and began to cry like a baby. He said: "You all run off, and I am left here alone!" But by evening he was in a cheerful and happy mood again.⁹⁴

Don Bosco had experiences which he interpreted as premonitions of his own death. Viglietti writes:

Don Bosco related to me that two or three days ago, after the elevation of the Mass, he was engulfed in blazing bright light which made it impossible for him to go on with the Mass. And as a matter of fact, I recall that, as I was assisting him as usual on the day in question, he came to a stop in the celebration of the Mass and paused in an attitude of confusion and astonishment. Don Bosco further stated that the blazing bright light was then replaced by the thickest darkness. Only when it dissipated could he go on and finish the Mass. Don Bosco then remarked: "Reflecting on this experience, I thought: the darkness which so suddenly replaced the bright light may be a warning that I am to die soon, perhaps immediately. With this thought in mind that very evening I sent for Father [Giulio] Barberis and had him take down certain important memoirs, before they should find me dead in bed in the morning."⁹⁵

As the weather cooled, Don Bosco began to feel a little better. He attended the spiritual retreats at Valsalice in September and then returned to the Oratory and settled down to his restricted activity. He usually kept to his rooms, except for the daily walk which he took leaning on secretary Viglietti and on Father Lemoyne. One of Viglietti's last entries for 1885 is revealing.

⁹³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, pp. 108f., "San Benigno, August 26, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 D1. The words for "Lord, I am not worthy" and "Behold the Lamb of God" are texts of the Communion rite in the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass.

⁹⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, p. 110, "San Benigno, August 30, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 D2.

⁹⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, pp. 111f., "San Benigno, August 31, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 D2f.

Today is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. [...] Don Bosco put in an appearance at dinner with all [the confreres]. Only very seldom does Don Bosco give Benediction nowadays; this evening he wished to do it himself. I noticed that the people [attending the service] began to press forward in order to catch a glimpse of him. And not a few were moved to tears on seeing that venerable old man drag himself along, his body completely worn out from a life of work on behalf of the young.

Earlier this evening, Don Bosco held a conference with the confreres. The circular letter announcing the official appointment of a vicar general for the Congregation was read.⁹⁶ Then Don Bosco spoke. He said that we owe everything to Mary; and noted that all our greatest undertakings were brought into being on the day of the Immaculate Conception. He went on to speak of the Oratory as it was 44 years ago, comparing it to our present situation. He stated that all the blessings bestowed on us from heaven through Mary's intercession were the result of that first fervent Hail Mary which he and that young man (Bartholomew Garelli) recited together in the church of St. Francis.⁹⁷

On the feast of St. Francis de Sales (January 29 at the time), the new chapel set up in the room adjoining Don Bosco's was inaugurated. This chapel was to play an important role during the last illness. Viglietti writes:

A new, little altar has been prepared for Don Bosco. I have set it up in what used to be my bedroom.⁹⁸ Don Bosco said Mass there for the first time today, and I assisted him. Don Bosco has been saying Mass for many years at a closet-altar set in the wall of the waiting room. That was just a closet, a narrow, poorly lighted opening, lacking sufficient space for even one server. I have always believed that Don Bosco's rooms would eventually be regarded as a shrine. Consequently, I did not cease to press, even in the face of contradiction and criticism, for the erection of this special little chapel and altar."⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Cf. note 80 and related text, above. Pope Leo XIII himself, through Cardinal Alimonda, had initiated the process for the appointment of a vicar in October 1884. The decree appointing Father Michele Rua vicar with right of succession had been issued in November of that year. Don Bosco, however, waited one whole year before making the official announcement to the confreres. In the letter, he presented Father Rua as his fully empowered vicar, but he omitted to mention the right of succession [Ceria, *Ep IV*, pp. 347-349].

⁹⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, pp. 128f., "Turin, December 8, 1885," *FDBM* 1223 D11.

⁹⁸ Cf. note 81, above.

⁹⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, pp. 133f., "January 29, 1886," *FDBM* 1223 E1f.

3. Don Bosco's Trip to Spain (Barcelona) in Early 1886

As spring stirred in the air, Don Bosco began to talk of a new fund-raising trip.

These past days, Don Bosco has been repeating the proverb, "Hunger drives the wolf from its lair." Therefore, in spite of his being physically so run down and in such poor health, he is now forced to undertake yet another trip, one that will take him perhaps as far as Spain. We are already discussing a departure date.¹⁰⁰

[i] *Passing through Southern France*

Don Bosco, accompanied by his faithful secretary and by Fathers Francesco Cerruti and Antonio Sala (who were going to houses in Liguria on business), left Turin on March 12 for Genoa. He would then travel by stages along the Italian and French Riviera to Marseilles, where he would be joined by Father Rua. From there the trio would proceed to Spain, with Barcelona as their destination. At every stage, the days are filled with interviews, visits, Cooperators' conferences, religious celebrations, receptions, graces, blessings, great crowds, good collections,... episodes and vignettes of all sorts! Again and again, we are told: "Don Bosco is dead-tired, but undaunted and in good spirits."

One evening at Sampierdarena Don Bosco sat chatting with the confreres.

By and by the conversation turned on to the subject of emotional sensitivity. Don Bosco confessed that he can no longer pray for our missionaries during holy Mass without experiencing an overpowering rush of emotion. He begins to choke up and to cry, and is unable to go on with the Mass. Only by thinking of something funny, like *Gianduia*, can he regain his composure.¹⁰¹

Viglietti devotes a long entry to Don Bosco's visit to "Her Majesty Olga Nikolajewna, Queen of Württemberg," at her villa near Nice. The secretary is always impressed with, and proud of the fact that the great ones of this world pay homage to Don Bosco. But he ends on a touching note. As Don Bosco was leaving, "the ladies stopped whatever they were doing, or peeped out of doorways, and with real compassion watched Don Bosco shambling painfully down the halls."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. II, p. 149, "March 1, 1886," *FDBM* 1223 E9.

¹⁰¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, p. 60, "March 15, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 C6. *Gianduia* was a popular droll marionette character.

¹⁰² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, p. 68, "March 27, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 C10.

After a two-day stay at Toulon, the honored guests of Count Colle and family, our travelers went on to Marseilles. "The newspapers carried the news of Don Bosco's arrival at Marseilles; hence, there is an enormous crowd of people wanting to see him."¹⁰³ At the end of an exhausting week filled with feverish religious and social activity, "Don Bosco feels extremely tired." Father Rua had meanwhile joined the group. "With Father Rua's advice, we decided to leave for Barcelona on Wednesday [April 7] at 5 o'clock in the evening, in a specially reserved compartment. We shall reach our destination in seventeen hours [April 8]."¹⁰⁴

[ii] Barcelona

After a day of rest Don Bosco received an official welcome from the youngsters of the Salesian vocational school of Sarriá (Barcelona).

The youngsters entertained us nicely with the band. [...] Don Bosco gave some candy to each of them. Those lads are overjoyed at having Don Bosco in their midst. Papa is quite well; the pain of his ailments seems to have subsided. He is very cheerful.¹⁰⁵

A couple of days after his arrival, Don Bosco had the famous dream, the Barcelona Dream. This is the fifth and last of the great missionary dreams, the one in which the Lady-Shepherdess showed him twenty mission stations on a line stretching from Santiago (Chile) through the center of Africa, to Peking (China). Viglietti recorded the dream as he heard it from Don Bosco.¹⁰⁶

The "Barcelona Diary," as this section of Viglietti's chronicle is called, presents a Don Bosco totally available and at the mercy of adoring crowds and of special friends and benefactors. Viglietti goes to great lengths in his descriptions of the charismatic figure of the master and of the popularity he enjoys. Receptions, conferences with huge crowds, endless streams of people wishing to

¹⁰³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, p. 73, "April 1, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 C12.

¹⁰⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, p. 74, "April 3, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 D1. At this time there were only two foundations in Spain: the orphanage of Utrera, near Sevilla (1881), and the vocational school (*talleres*) at Sarriá, near Barcelona (1883). The director here was Father Giovanni Branda, who some two months before had experienced a nocturnal visit by Don Bosco which he interpreted as a bilocation. He could not, however, elicit a confirmation from Don Bosco.

¹⁰⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, p. 81, "April 10, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 D4.

¹⁰⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. III, pp. 84-87, "April 11, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 D6f. For a discussion of this dream, cf. Arthur Lenti, "Don Bosco's Missionary Dreams [...]," *Journal of Salesian Studies* 4:1 (1993) pp. 17-26.

see him, speak to him, and have his blessing: these are daily occurrences. Church authorities, religious superiors, and civil dignitaries flock to pay their respects. People of the nobility vie for the honor of having him as guest and of placing their coaches at his disposal. Then there are special people, the beneficent families that currently support the Salesian work, and will in the future ensure its expansion and success. First-ranking among them are the families of Doña Dorotea de Chopitea and of Don Luís Martí-Codolar. They truly take Don Bosco and his young secretary to their hearts.

Viglietti begins Volume IV of his chronicle with the words: "I am happy to be able to begin this new volume of my little journal with a report of a day which will remain indelibly imprinted on our memory." There follows a 6-page report of the grand reception given in honor of Don Bosco by the Catholic Men's Association in new premises. The report ends with the comment: "Don Bosco felt extremely tired. He said that in the midst of the honors conferred on him, his one thought was: 'My! What little knowledge it takes to make the world go round!'"¹⁰⁷ But the collection was good!

A little later, speaking of "thousands and thousands" of people who wished to see Don Bosco, Viglietti writes:

Today we were forced to post a notice at the church's door specifying the times when he will appear to impart the Blessing of Mary Help of Christians. His health has been none too good.

Don Bosco is completely out of breath and has no strength left in him, merely from the effort entailed in giving blessings and in saying, *Dios os bendiga!* [May God bless you.] Every morning, no sooner is Mass over than the people who fill the church surge forward. Don Bosco takes time to bless them and then goes up to his quarters. His waiting room is filled with a new group of people eight or ten times by turn. To all he gives the blessing and the medal of Mary Help of Christians.

This morning there was a veritable invasion of people! Seven packets of medals were distributed in a single hour. At Mass, with standing room only, people stood pressed together like sardines. Don Bosco gave communion to four or five hundred people, then he had to surrender the ciborium to others."¹⁰⁸

A few days later Don Bosco attended the conference held in the parish church of Belén, truly one of the highlights of the trip. "Don Bosco avers that never did he witness such a spectacle, not in Italy, not in France, not even in Paris."

¹⁰⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, pp. 1 and 6, "The Great Day of April 15, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 D11 and E2. "What little knowledge [...]," spoken in Latin: *Quam parva scientia regitur mundus.*

¹⁰⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, pp. 8f. and 21, "April 18, 20 and 26, 1886," *FDBM* 1224 E3 and 9.

According to Viglietti, over twenty thousand people crowded into a church which in reality can hold at most four thousand standing! They all came to "see" Don Bosco, for the venerable old man merely sat quietly and spoke but a few words. When the program was over,

the crowd rushed upon Don Bosco in a frenzy, in order to see him at close range or touch him. But they spirited him away. Once safely back in the carriage, we crossed the square where a numberless crowd of people awaited Don Bosco's passage, bareheaded in spite of the heavy rain! [...] The collection amounted to ten thousand lire, which topped the seven thousand collected in Paris in the church of the Madeleine.¹⁰⁹

Another highlight of the Barcelona sojourn was the gift made to Don Bosco of the *Tibidabo* hill. "The owners unanimously voted to make over to Don Bosco a whole mountain, the highest of the range which surrounds Barcelona. Its name is *Tibi Dabo*, and it is 'given' to honor Don Bosco on his visit to the city." This was on May 1. A couple of days later, the property was legally made over, and the papers were signed at a reception given in Don Bosco's honor at the villa of Don Luís Martí-Codolar, at which also the boys of the Salesian school were present. It was at this reception that the famous photograph that will forever be associated with the Barcelona trip was taken. The deed to the *Tibidabo* property was publicly tendered to Don Bosco on the occasion of a conference held in the church of Our Lady of Mercy, a church beloved of the people of Barcelona. In accepting the gift, Don Bosco promised to build a church on that mountain top, a monument in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.¹¹⁰

The "Barcelona Diary" comes to an end with a breathtaking description of Don Bosco's last day at Sarriá. The leave-taking was a protracted affair. After the celebration of Mass, crowds of people laid siege, wanting a last glimpse and a last blessing. The authorities, the nobility, the special friends came in endless

¹⁰⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, pp. 33-37, "The Great Day of April 30, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 A3-5. For the sum collected, cf. *Ibid.*, p. 38, "May 1, 1886," A6.

¹¹⁰ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, pp. 40, 45f. and 50f., "May 1, 3, and 5, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 A7, 9f., and 12.

A group of Catholic men had bought the mountain top known as *Tibi Dabo* ("I will give," a reference perhaps to Mt 4:9) to keep a non-Catholic partnership from acquiring it and building a "health resort" on it. Don Bosco, of course, did not live to keep his promise. A Salesian community was established on the mountain top in 1912. The church and buildings, begun in 1926, and the bronze statue of the Sacred Heart, were damaged or destroyed during the Spanish civil war in 1936. The present monumental church, built over many years, was dedicated on October 26, 1961. This marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of Don Bosco's acceptance of the gift and of his promise to build the church [Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano* 85:23 (Dec. 1961) pp. 400-409].

lines to say good-bye. There were embraces, kisses, tears. And the ladies would not let Don Bosco's young and handsome secretary go!¹¹¹

The return journey took our travelers from Barcelona to Gerona, then on to Montpellier.¹¹² From there they entrained for Tarascon and then followed a northeastern route to Valence and Grenoble, and finally to Turin and to an enthusiastic welcome-back celebration.

4. Back in Turin in the Latter Half of 1886

No longer sustained by the euphoria of the French and Spanish crowds, Don Bosco's body capitulated. "His arms are so sore that he can move them only with great effort. [...] His flesh smarts from the stings, and the racks, and the crowns of thorn, and the crosses endured."¹¹³

The public feast of Mary Help of Christian was celebrated on May 29.

Don Bosco is under siege by the crowd, is out of breath and cannot even stand up any more. He smiled and whispered to me: "I wonder if one might dispense a few whacks out of devotion?" This morning after Mass he was truly drained of strength; he could not say another word. Gasping for breath with great effort, he called me over and asked me with a smile: "Would there be someone in Turin who makes bellows? I need a pair to help me breathe!"¹¹⁴

His nights were often restless and troubled with nightmares:

For some nights Don Bosco has been dreaming of being attacked by monsters. He dreams of cats which change into dogs, of bears which change into lions, of serpents which take the shape of demons. And they attack him viciously. Last night he kept yelling for a good half hour. He kept calling: "Viglietti! Viglietti!" At first I refrained from interfering for fear of breaking up some beautiful vision [he might be having]. But on second thought, knowing how sore his chest would be from yelling and how tired his mind,

¹¹¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. IV, pp. 53-59, "May 6, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 B1-4.

¹¹² It was on this occasion that Dr. Combal visited Don Bosco again on several evenings [cf. note 79, above].

¹¹³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 1, "May 19, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 B12.

¹¹⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 6, "May 29, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 C3. The quip about the "whacks out of devotion," spoken in Piedmontese: *Chissà se dui pugn per divusion as polu dese?*

I woke him up. He thanked me sincerely: "Thank you, my dear Viglietti," he said. "You did me a good turn. These dreams upset me so much!"¹¹⁵

On the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24, Don Bosco celebrated his name day in the family.

This morning Don Bosco celebrated Mass in the church, at St. Peter's altar. As on the feast of Mary Help of Christians, I assisted him. After Mass, he had some breakfast in the confreres' dining room. He had not been there for breakfast for these past 25 years. At half past nine, the alumni came to offer their gifts. [...] Yesterday evening, Father Lemoine presented Don Bosco with a beautiful work of his, the Life of Mamma Margaret."¹¹⁶

As usual, the summer heat forced Don Bosco out of Turin, to Valsalice in the hills, and later to Pinerolo, where he was to spend a month at the bishop's summer villa. He was back in Turin for the retreats at San Benigno and Valsalice. But again Viglietti remarks: "Don Bosco has little strength left in him, and he finds the excessive heat unbearable."¹¹⁷

In September, Don Bosco spent a couple of days in Milan for the Cooperators' conference, at which Father Luigi Lasagna, on a visit from the missions, was the speaker. It was again a memorable experience.

Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament brought the proceedings to a close. We then had to walk the length of the church (longer than any in Turin) in order to reach the carriages. Archbishop [Luigi Nazari di] Calabiana [of Milan] walked with Don Bosco and supported him on one side, while I supported him on the other. The throng of people stood in admiration at the sight of the Archbishop helping Don Bosco. They were saying, "How they love one another!" It took all of twenty minutes to walk the length of the

¹¹⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 11, "June 15, 1886," *FDBM* 1225, C5.

¹¹⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 16, "June 24, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 C8. It appears that Lemoine had for some time been planning to write a short biography of Margaret, perhaps for the *Catholic Readings*. It is likely that Don Bosco himself was his chief source. When in 1885 Lemoine began to assemble and print the *Documenti* this material was included. Don Bosco approved of the project. As a matter of fact, when, on passing through France on his way to Spain in 1886, he was a guest of Count Louis Colle in Toulon, the two discussed the biography, and the Count offered to defray expenses of publication. Lemoine then reworked the material collected in *Documenti* and produced the popular biography entitled, *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco. Racconto edificante ed ameno* [Moralistic Family-Life Vignettes from the life of Margaret Bosco. An edifying and entertaining narrative]. Torino: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1886.

¹¹⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 33, "August 31, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 D4.

church. When we reached the carriages, the throng of people had already filled the large square and the nearby streets. The great throng broke into loud acclamations, "Long live Don Bosco! Long live the Archbishop!"¹¹⁸

At this point in time, conflicting reports about Don Bosco's condition appeared in the press. That Don Bosco was a sick man was now common knowledge. Some papers even reported his death.

This morning a telegram was received from the editor-in-chief of the Paris newspaper *La Croix* which we found quite inexplicable. It read: "Accept our most heartfelt sympathy for your irreparable loss. We would appreciate information regarding Don Bosco by return telegram." It was addressed not to Don Bosco, but to the Superior of the Salesian Congregation. This led us to believe that newspapers in France had been carrying the news of Don Bosco's death. The following telegram was dispatched in response: "I am well, and cannot understand the reason for your expressions of sympathy. I thank you for your concern. Bosco."

All the newspapers carry the notice that Don Bosco is critically ill. Don Bosco, however, has for some time been feeling much better, thanks be to God. This evening Father Margotti [editor-in-chief of *L'Unità Cattolica*], alarmed at the reports published in the papers, called on Don Bosco."¹¹⁹

In the good autumn days, Don Bosco enjoyed a ride into the country.

Every day for the past month, weather permitting, I have had the trap made ready and have taken Don Bosco out for a ride. The coachman heads for the country. Once out there, we get off, and Don Bosco takes a walk with me, conversing pleasantly all the while. This gives him a little relief. This evening on our way back, we chanced to meet the cardinal's carriage. The cardinal got off, came over to our carriage, greeted Don Bosco, and stopped to chat for a while; then he returned to his own carriage. We drove home full of admiration for the cardinal's goodness.¹²⁰

As noted earlier, Carlo Viglietti was ordained a priest on December 18.¹²¹ But the relationship remained unchanged. He continued to be Don Bosco's "faithful dog" (*cagnotto*) and "papa's favorite son."

¹¹⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 41, "September 12, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 D7.

¹¹⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 46, "September 21 and 22, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 D11 and 12.

¹²⁰ Viglietti, *Original chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 59, "November 4, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 E5.

¹²¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 61, "December 18, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 E6. Cf. note 16 and related text, above.

As for Don Bosco, for a while things seemed to be going fairly well; but as the year came to an end they took a turn for the worse. On December 31, Viglietti writes:

This year for the first time Don Bosco failed to come in person, as has always been his custom to do, to present the New Year's gift to the confreres. He sent Father Rua instead. Don Bosco has been feeling extremely weak for days now. Yesterday he insisted on hearing confessions. I advised him against it, in accordance with the doctors' recommendation. He said to me: "I see you are afraid to go to confession, am I not right? I know why: you have done something really bad." Then smiling he took my hand in his and said: "My dear Viglietti, if I cannot hear the boys' confessions, what else can I do for them? I promised God that I would work for the good of my youngsters until my dying breath."¹²²

5. Don Bosco in Early 1887

One of the first entries of the new year seems to set the mood for what was to follow.

Someone brought to my attention that, when at table for meals, Don Bosco speaks very little, and appears to be always deep in thought. The other day, as he was watering down his wine, I heard him whispering to himself. He said: "Jesus also, on the cross, willed that his blood should be mixed with water."¹²³

Viglietti closes Volume V of his chronicle by reporting the Dream of the Handmaid of the Lord, a comforting dream which Don Bosco had on two successive nights.¹²⁴

The next fifteen entries take us through spring and present us with a Don Bosco still engaged and alert, certainly, but weakening by the day. The frightening dreams and nightmares also persisted, arising out of his fears for the future of the Congregation. One occurred at the beginning of April.

¹²² Viglietti, *Original chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 63, "December 31, 1886," *FDBM* 1225 E7. The New Year's gift (*strenna*) in Salesian practice is usually in the form of a spiritual keepsake or message.

¹²³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, p. 68, "January 4, 1887," *FDBM* 1225 E10. Don Bosco is referring to John 19:34.

¹²⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. V, pp. 69-71 and 72f., "January 4 and 5, 1887," *FDBM* 1225 E10f. and 12. In the first night, the Handmaid of the Lord, speaking in Latin assured him that [Salesian] seminarian Louis Olive would get well. She returned on a second night to give Don Bosco advice regarding the Congregation. Don Bosco thought it important enough to want to set it down in writing himself. Don Bosco's autograph is in ASC 132: Autografi-Sogni, *FDBM* 1347 C10-D3.

Yesterday in the evening Don Bosco told us that the previous night he had a frightening dream, and that was the sole cause of the extraordinary weakness and of the very painful discomforts he was experiencing. This morning he had a frightened look about him, and told me that last night he had not a moment's rest, merely thinking of the vision he had. He added that if the boys were to hear an account of it, they would either embrace a life of holiness or they would faint away from sheer fright.¹²⁵

At this time also, Don Bosco suffered a relapse, minor by comparison with the great crises, but which marked a further stage in the downward slide.

This evening at about 7 o'clock, Don Bosco became gravely ill, and I was frightened. He had lost his speech, his breath came only with great difficulty, nor could he move his limbs. I had to undress him in a hurry and put him to bed. He seemed unaware of what was happening.

This morning Don Bosco was unable to celebrate Mass. He got up late, took a little coffee, and vomited it immediately. But gradually he regained strength and now he is feeling better. He took his noon-day meal with the others. But this evening he went to bed earlier than usual.

This morning [Holy Thursday] Don Bosco celebrated holy Mass in his little chapel. He gave holy Communion to me and to others, and then kept the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, because tomorrow [Good Friday] he wants to receive Communion from me."¹²⁶

6. The Last Journey—to Rome

Apparently the "recovery" was good enough for him to undertake the last and probably most demanding of all his trips, the journey to Rome for the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart. Accompanied by Father Rua and by his faithful secretary, on April 20 he left Turin, and by stages the group proceeded to Florence.

Father Rua and the rest of the company went to the Salesian school. Don Bosco and myself were the guests of the Marchioness [Girolama Uguccioni Gherardi]. In her house Don Bosco is always treated lavishly, but at the same time everyone regards him as one of the family. He himself always addresses the marchioness as "mother."¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 22f., "April 3, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 A11. There follows a five-page description of a frightening nightmare on hell.

¹²⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 29 and 30, "April 5, 6 and 7, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 B2 and 3.

¹²⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, p. 43, "April 25, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 B9.

Arezzo was the next stop, and they were the guests of the archbishop. "Don Bosco is not known in Arezzo; hence it is hoped that this will be a day of real rest for him."¹²⁸

The group arrived in Rome on April 30. On May 1, Viglietti writes:

This morning Don Bosco said Mass in a room next to his own, where a beautiful closet-altar has been set up for him. When he got to the Last Gospel, the altar drapery caught on fire and burst into flames. I jumped on the altar and made several attempts to smother the flames with my bare hands, but did not succeed. Finally I put out the fire with two kettles of water. But as a result I burned myself badly; my hands are in bad shape.¹²⁹

Activity in Rome was unremitting. Church authorities, civic dignitaries, and bishops from various parts of the world kept calling on Don Bosco. A festive banquet for many illustrious guests was held on May 8.

Don Bosco rose to speak, and among other things he eulogized [the late] Father [Giacomo] Margotti. Others also rose to speak, extemporizing eloquent and heartfelt discourses in English, French, and Spanish [as well as Italian]. The festive dinner was held especially to honor Father [Michele] Rua, Don Bosco's vicar; he was the object of sincere and well-deserved accolades. At a certain point, the doors were thrown open, and the youngsters of the Home sang beautifully in honor of Father Rua on his name day.¹³⁰

The pages of the chronicle for the next few days are filled with long lists of illustrious visitors. At one point Viglietti reports:

Don Bosco is dead tired; he is completely exhausted. He cannot wait, so he avers, to get back to Turin. He plans to be on his way on the seventeenth [after the consecration of the church on May 14], with a single stop-over at Pisa.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, p. 49, "April 29, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 12.

¹²⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, p. 50, "May 1, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 C1. In the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, a "last gospel" (which was always the prologue of the Gospel of John) was read after the blessing and before the final prayers.

¹³⁰ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, p. 53f., "May 8, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 C2f. Father Giacomo Margotti, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *L'Unità cattolica*, had died recently.

¹³¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 58, "May 11, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 C5.

On May 13, the eve of the consecration of the church, Pope Leo XIII received Don Bosco, Father Rua and Father Viglietti in special audience, for all three a signal token of affection on the pope's part, but for Viglietti altogether a "glorious and memorable experience." After a four-page description of the Vatican and of the preliminary protocol, Viglietti reports that the Pope received Don Bosco in his private room and that, to make Don Bosco more comfortable and to put him at ease, he took an ermine rug from his bed and draped it over Don Bosco's knees.

He then affectionately took Don Bosco's hand in his and inquired after his health. Don Bosco replied: "I am an old man of 72, and this is my last trip and the conclusion of all my activity." But the Holy Father reminded Don Bosco that he was still young compared to his own 78 years, and that he hoped to see his dear Don Bosco again in the future. "As long as I am still alive," the pope assured him, "you have nothing to fear." "Holy Father," Don Bosco countered, "Your word is infallible, and I accept your good wishes." Then Leo XIII inquired about the [Society's financial] burdens (*gravami*), about the houses, and especially about the missions, in which he showed great interest. Finally, he asked Don Bosco if there was anything he could do for him. Don Bosco discussed these and other matters at length with the pope; but the conversation concerned the church of the Sacred Heart in particular, which was due to be consecrated the next day.¹³²

After the pope's further words of advice, Fathers Rua and Viglietti were introduced, and then the audience came to an end.

Saturday, May 14, was the day of consecration. Viglietti writes:

This morning, at half past seven, His Eminence [Lucido] Parocchi, Cardinal Vicar of Rome, arrived for the consecration of the church. The ceremony lasted six hours without interruption. [The ceremony over,] Father [Francesco] Dalmazzo celebrated the first Mass. [...] At 1 o'clock the Cardinal Vicar came over from the church and embraced Don Bosco. Dinner was then served to a great number of illustrious guests. Don Bosco toasted the Cardinal Vicar's health, thanked him for all he had done for the [Salesian] Congregation as its protector, and spoke of him with real

¹³² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 68f., "May 13, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 C10. A recent entry in the chronicle of the house of the Sacred Heart in Rome reads: "The day before the consecration of the church, Friday, May 13, 1887, the very day of the papal audience, Don Bosco arranged for seven orphans to be given shelter that very night. This he did to obtain the Lord's blessing on the work." This information (the source of which is not indicated) was recorded by the late Father Antonio Dejala, director from 1975 to 1981. It was kindly made available to me by the present director-pastor, Father Mario Fabbian.

warmth. His Eminence responded with a beautiful speech. He congratulated Don Bosco and praised his decision to open the church for worship, even though work was still in progress.”¹³³

Pontifical Masses were celebrated on the next few days by Roman prelates, and the Oratory choir, come from Turin for the purpose, performed the music. On Monday, May 16, after the scheduled pontifical, Don Bosco came down to the church, and offered Mass at the altar dedicated to Mary Help of Christians.

Poor dear Don Bosco! Over fifteen times he paused, deeply moved and in tears, unable to continue. I was assisting him as usual, and each time I had to intervene and call him back to the celebration. After Mass, a throng of people pressed around him to kiss his hand. They were also deeply moved. As he came to the sacristy, the people who were crowding the first room asked for his blessing. ‘Yes, yes,’ Don Bosco agreed; but as he turned to pronounce the blessing, he broke into loud sobs and covered his face with his hands. ‘Yes, I bless, I bless,’ he murmured in a choked voice, and turned away. [...]

Later I asked Don Bosco why he had been so moved during the celebration of Mass. He said to me: “There rose vividly before my eyes the scene [of my boyhood days at Becchi] when at the age of ten I dreamt of the congregation. I could so clearly see and hear my brothers and my mother arguing over the dream, that nothing any longer [seemed real].”¹³⁴

In the next entry, Viglietti writes:

Today Don Bosco wrote the following letter to the Holy Father, [Pope] Leo XIII: “Most Holy Father: I am about to depart from Rome greatly comforted and encouraged by the truly charitable and fatherly reception accorded to me by Your Holiness. The church and the school of the Sacred Heart are now in operation. [...] The home for poor orphan boys has not yet been completed, but hopefully it will soon be, if God grant me life. We still have a debt of 51,000 lire outstanding on the façade of the church. If Your Holiness should be in a position to settle at least part of the bill which is still due, our financial situation would be stabilized. All our orphan boys, 250,000 of them, daily offer prayers for the continued well-being of Your Holiness. [...]”¹³⁵

¹³³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VI, pp. 78-80, “May 14, 1887,” *FDBM* 1226 D3f.

¹³⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 3-5, “May 16, 1887,” *FDBM* 1226 D7f. The last sentence is left incomplete.

¹³⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 6-8, “May 17, 1887,” *FDBM* 1226 D9f. Cf. also E. Ceria, *Epistolario* IV, 377. The number of “orphans” given is remarkable in view of the fact that the Salesians had only some 60 houses worldwide

After a stop-over at Pisa, where Don Bosco and Fathers Rua and Viglietti were the guests of the archbishop, they were back at the Oratory the evening of May 20. "Father Rua gave the solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, it being [the beginning of] the triduum [preparatory to the feast] of Mary Help of Christians. Don Bosco insisted on going into the sanctuary for the Benediction."

7. Summer and Autumn of 1887

Dr. Albertotti must certainly have been on hand to check Don Bosco out after the exacting and tiring trip. He writes:

Don Bosco got back to Turin in a greatly deteriorated condition. Before the trip, the sagging of the spine caused him to walk stooped forward and forced him to position both arms behind his back in order to keep his balance; now he needed also to lean on a cane. He could no longer walk unaided, for he would stagger dangerously with each step. This was due to the progressively worsening spinal condition as well as to edematous swelling in the lower portion of his legs.¹³⁶

Again, to relieve the swelling, some quack advised the use of "a certain herbal liniment," which Viglietti identifies as "oil of wintergreen (*giusquiamo*)," to be applied at bedtime. Although Viglietti was more than careful in its application, the doctors quickly put a stop to the experiment.¹³⁷

The unseasonable heat became a problem, for immediately Don Bosco experienced loss of appetite and difficulty in breathing. They moved to Valsalice in the hills, and later, in July and August, to Lanzo, where the cool mountain air gave him some relief. Viglietti remarks: "Don Bosco is feeling pretty good, but he has constant nightmares which disturb his sleep at night."¹³⁸ But by the middle of August, he had again taken a turn for the worse:

These past days, Don Bosco has been suffering from a complex conjunction of ailments which saps his strength. What a pain to see him suffer. He is so short of breath that he is unable to talk. This condition prevented him from attending the alumni dinner [in Turin]. He could not have made the trip. Today a group of Salesian superiors and youngsters from the Oratory came

at the time.

¹³⁶ Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, p. 78, *FDBM* 533 B12.

¹³⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 17 and 20, "June 3 and 5, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 E2 and 4.

¹³⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, p. 29, "July 7, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 E8.

to greet him on his birthday. He also received many telegrams from the houses and from the Cooperators.¹³⁹

September came, and there was no improvement. Don Bosco, however, insisted on attending the spiritual retreat at Valsalice. At this time, Don Bosco seems to have expected some important event to happen soon, some kind of counterrevolution. Viglietti notes: "Don Bosco said repeatedly: 'I am awaiting with great apprehension the important events of 1888 and 1891.'"¹⁴⁰ Perhaps these premonitions were based on his assessment of the political situation, or on dreams (though no dream of this kind is recorded). He expressed himself more clearly some time later:

This morning, after I had read the newspapers to him, Don Bosco remarked: "Just wait and see; if not by the time of the pope's jubilee, certainly some time in the near future, a crusade will be formed against the revolutionaries. There may not be any blood shed, but they will have their backs to the wall and will be forced to give back to the pope what is his by right."¹⁴¹

Viglietti tells us that Father Lemoyne was quick to weave his imaginative skein of speculation on the subject.

Father Lemoyne is just the man to propose grand interpretations, and even make prophetic projections, as I would call them. From Don Bosco's dreams and from his words of explanation, one may conclude that the great important events forecast are to begin and end within the time frame of the years 1888-1891. Now, as I recall, our "poet laureate" [Carlo] Gastini, referring in one of his poems to Don Bosco's up-coming golden jubilee in 1891, advanced the idea that perhaps even the pope might attend the festivities. He said it in jest, of course, and everybody laughed; so did Father Lemoyne laugh, at first. But then, so he related, a serious thought occurred to him, and he began his computations: "According to Don Bosco's dreams the pope will be in exile from Rome, and will return only in 1891. There is no way of telling what route he will follow. Perhaps he will come through Turin. His reinstatement will be triumphant, as the whole world will want to see him returned to his throne. Mary Help of Christians, who proved the great and mighty protector of popes at Lepanto and at Vienna, may well in-

¹³⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 34f., "Lanzo, August 15, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 E11.

¹⁴⁰ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, p. 37, "Valsalice, September 2, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 E12.

¹⁴¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 54f. "November 27, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A9. "The pope's jubilee" would be the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination (1887-1888). Don Bosco seems to be thinking of a restoration of the pope's temporal power.

spire the pope to make a stop at her church on the very day sacred to her (May 24). Don Bosco's golden jubilee falls on Trinity Sunday, precisely on May 24, 1891." These are only conjectures, God knows. But what if it should come true?¹⁴²

This is heavy stuff, and it affords a glimpse into a way of thinking — Don Bosco's and of the people around him. Viglietti, however, has some reservations, for he adds: "I set these speculations down in writing, in the event that what appeared to be just a wild dream should come true. If not, discount everything." Toward the end of September Don Bosco's condition had deteriorated further. After mentioning a visit from "two bishops from the United States," Viglietti writes:

For some time now, Don Bosco's health has been slipping visibly. He has frequent headaches and runs a temperature. In the past week, he was able to celebrate Mass on only three days. Yet, he is unfailingly cheerful; he works, he writes, he gives interviews. And whereas it is he who is in need of comfort and support, he is all for comforting and supporting others.¹⁴³

Dreams persisted, some of them expressing his concern for the welfare of the Congregation.

A few nights ago, so Don Bosco told me, he dreamt of Father [Giuseppe] Cafasso. In the dream, Father Cafasso escorted him on a visit to all our houses, including the farthest one in [South] America. [...] Unfortunately he is so tired that he lacks the strength to tell us the whole story.¹⁴⁴

This was late in October. Don Bosco's condition was no better in November.

This year, for the first time ever, Don Bosco's condition prevented him from attending the rosary for the dead which is recited by the whole community in the church. I led the rosary in our private little chapel, and a number of our devoted [Salesian lay] brothers joined Don Bosco in the recitation.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 45-47, "November 18, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A4f. Carlo Gastini (1833-1902) was an early oratory lad who stayed on as a lay worker at the Oratory. He was active on and off stage as an entertainer and was a facile writer of verse for festive occasions.

¹⁴³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, p. 38, "September 28, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A1.

¹⁴⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 43f., "October 24, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A3f.

¹⁴⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, p. 44, "November 1, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A4.

Don Bosco, however, was on hand for the ceremony of the donning of the clerical habit by Prince Augustus Czartoryski, in late November; in fact with great effort he officiated, a last moment substitution for the cardinal archbishop who was ill. Viglietti devotes seven pages to the affair, again showing his fascination with the nobility.¹⁴⁶

8. Foreboding of the End: December 1-20, 1887

Things went from bad to worse in December, and Viglietti's chronicle describes Don Bosco's physical decline toward the final crisis graphically and with gloomy foreboding at every entry.

Don Bosco is afraid that he will soon have to stop celebrating Mass. The poor dear has been saying Mass with painful effort and in a barely audible voice. I have been assisting him in the celebration of the holy Sacrifice for the past three years, and I see now that he lacks the strength for it. For several months he has not been turning [to face the people] for the *Dominus Vobiscum*. And for the past month at the time of the people's Communion he has been taking a seat, letting me distribute the sacred hosts. Likewise, he lacks the strength to recite the Hail Marys and the prayers [at the end of the Mass]. I recite them for him, while he silently follows the recitation. However, on any day when the weather is good, I take him for a walk. With my support he still manages to walk a fairly good distance. Let's hope for the best!¹⁴⁷

Don Bosco had a bad night. This morning he was not able to celebrate Mass; so he assisted at mine, and received holy Communion from me. When I turned to say, *Ecce Agnus Dei*, I saw that Don Bosco was crying like a baby. But he is otherwise in good spirits. This morning, while I was reading the newspaper to him as usual, he kept teasing me and joking about his illness.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 48-54, "Turin, November 24, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A6-9.

¹⁴⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 56f., "December 2, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A10. In the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, the priest would be facing away from the people towards the cross and the tabernacle. But when saying, "Dominus vobiscum" (The Lord be with you), he would turn to face the people. The Mass ended with some prayers recited by the priest kneeling at the foot of the altar.

¹⁴⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, p. 58, "December 3, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A11. In the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, immediately before the people's communion, the priest would turn around, raise a communion wafer and say: *Ecce Agnus Dei [...]* (Behold the Lamb of God).

The departure of the first missionaries for Ecuador and the return of Bishop Cagliero from Argentina in early December were significant experiences for Don Bosco in the midst of his increasing physical decline.

Don Bosco has not been feeling at all well for the past four or five days. Yesterday evening he had a headache and ran a temperature. The doctors ordered him to bed at 6 o'clock. This morning he got out of bed at 8 o'clock. He has not said Mass since last Monday [November 28] but has been receiving Communion.

This evening, in spite of his being so ill, he insisted on going down to the church and attend the missionaries' send-off ceremony. Leaning on me and on [Salesian seminarian Angelo] Festa for support, he walked into the sanctuary, while Father Bonetti was giving the sermon. All the people stood up trying to catch a glimpse of him. Truly the most beautiful and most effective sermon came from poor dear Don Bosco, as he dragged himself along. [After the sermon] Bishop [Basilio] Leto [of Biella] gave the Benediction, after which he addressed the missionaries and imparted the ritual blessing.

Then we all witnessed a most moving scene. The missionaries one by one went up to say good-bye to Don Bosco and to kiss his hand. They were crying, and so was Don Bosco. There wasn't a dry eye in the congregation. The many people that filled the church, women in particular, were moved to tears. Next, the missionaries embraced their confreres and the superiors of the general council. Then they filed down the aisle, while the people knelt to kiss the hem of their cassock or their hand. When the chancel was opened, the people surged around Don Bosco. I heard all kinds of expressions of sympathy for the dear old man. I saw those people approach the man of God worshipfully and with tears in their eyes, and I heard them calling him a saint.

As he crossed the courtyard, Don Bosco received cheers from the youngsters, before he finally retired to his rooms completely exhausted.¹⁴⁹

The sorrow of departure finds compensation in the joy of return. Yesterday the missionaries left for Quito [Ecuador]; today Bishop Cagliero arrived at the Oratory from [South] America. I cannot describe the joyful reception and the heartfelt tribute given him by the youngsters. [...] But most moving was the scene of Don Bosco's meeting with the bishop. The dear old man was confined to his chair in his room [when the bishop entered]. Don Bosco embraced his son holding him close to his heart and cried like a child. He insisted on kissing the bishop's ring. Three gentlemen from Chile, as well as Father [Antonio] Riccardi and Father [Valentino] Cassini came with

¹⁴⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 58-61, "December 6, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 A10-12.

Bishop Cagliero. Everything turned out well, and it was a happy occasion.¹⁵⁰

The entry for the feast of the Immaculate Conception is quite remarkable.

This morning Don Bosco heard my Mass and received holy Communion, but he could not himself celebrate. What a painful sacrifice this was for him, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception! But he is always cheerful. When someone asks him how he is, he invariably replies that he is "just fine." He jokes about his ailments. The sagging in his spine is increasing by the day. But he jokes about it and recites the well-known popular jingle in Piedmontese. "My back, my poor back, you are through with carrying loads." His legs, too, have for some time been a heavy burden to him. And so he made up some doggerel in Piedmontese and he recites it often: "My legs, my swollen legs, straight or deformed, you will always be my stay, till my dying day."

Praised be Mary Immaculate! Yesterday toward evening the bishop of Liège, Belgium [Victor-Joseph Doutreloux], arrived at the Oratory. The purpose of his visit is to get a Salesian house established in his city. Bishop [Giovanni] Cagliero, Father [Celestino] Durando, and the Belgian bishop met with Don Bosco to discuss the matter. But after more than an hour, no decision seemed in sight. Actually, the Salesians' opinion was generally negative, for lack of personnel. But this morning, when I walked into Don Bosco's room to read the newspaper to him, he told me to take pen and ink and write under his dictation the very words which Mary Immaculate had spoken on appearing to him during the night: "It is God's good pleasure, and the Blessed Virgin Mary's, that the sons of St. Francis de Sales go to Liège and open a house there in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. Here [the Oratory] the glories of Jesus began to be publicized; and from here the same glories are to be extended to every Salesian house and every Salesian family, and especially to all the young charges who are or will be entrusted to the care of the Salesians the world over. Given on the day of Mary's Immaculate Conception, 1887." These are Don Bosco's very words. He could not restrain his tears and sobs as he spoke, nor could I as I wrote. These are extraordinary and solemn moments, and one must experience them before passing judgment. They are moments of revelation from heaven. My God!

After a while I took up the newspaper and started to read to Don Bosco. It was a long article on the missionaries recently departed for Ecuador. The article spoke of the Blessed Virgin Mary's protection on our works. I could read no further and began to cry. Don Bosco, too, was crying. I had to set the newspaper aside and walk out of the room. After a while, Bishop

¹⁵⁰ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 62f., "December 7, 1887," FDBM 1227 B1.

Cagliero came up to Don Bosco's room from the church. Don Bosco then sent for me and told me to read to the bishop the message received from heaven. We all began to cry again. Bishop Cagliero said: "Yesterday I spoke against [this foundation]; now there is nothing more I can say, because the decision has been handed down [from on high]. We agreed not to speak of the occurrence to the bishop of Liège for the moment, but only to notify him of our acceptance. Once the foundation is under way, then what prompted Don Bosco's favorable decision might be told. [...] Don Bosco said: "Up to now we have always walked securely. We cannot go astray because Mary is our guide." I also know for a fact that, before leaving his diocese [for Turin], the bishop of Liège had requested all religious houses in that city to offer very special prayers for the success of his mission.¹⁵¹

The doctors had encouraged Don Bosco to take walks or rides in the open air, and he was very fond of this form of recreation. Thus, he would be seen walking slowly with the help of a cane and supported by Viglietti, and others. Viglietti would also take him for rides on the Oratory's one-horse carriage. One such ride took place on December 16, by which time he could no longer walk.

This evening Father Rua and myself took Don Bosco out for a ride. On our way back we sighted the cardinal walking under the porticoes of Victor Emmanuel Blvd. Without hesitation I told our coachman to drive alongside. Then I stepped down, caught up with the cardinal and asked him if he could spare a moment as Don Bosco wished to have a word with him. "Oh! It's Father John, dear Father John!" the cardinal exclaimed. He stepped up on the carriage, and seating himself next to Don Bosco, he embraced him and kissed him affectionately. Meanwhile many people had gathered and were watching the touching scene. I heard people remark: "How they love one another!" The two venerable old men rode together as far as Cernaia Street. There the cardinal got off, and we drove back to the Oratory.¹⁵²

Don Bosco's condition deteriorated steadily during the next four days. Viglietti seems to have had a premonition that this was the beginning of the end.

For the past few days, Don Bosco's health has been getting progressively worse. He can no longer walk and needs to be pushed along in a wheelchair. His shortness of breath is extreme. Consequently he goes to bed at 7 o'clock

¹⁵¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 63-70, "December 8, 1887," *FDBM* 1227, B1-5. The Piedmontese rhymes are: "*Oh schiña, povra schiña / T'as fini d'porté d'baschiña.*" and "*Oh gambe, povre gambe, / Che sie drite, che sie strambe, / Seive sempre 'l me comfort, / Fiña tant ch'i sia nen mort.*"

¹⁵² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 72f., "December 16, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 B6.

in the evening and rises at 10 o'clock in the morning. He hears my Mass and receives holy Communion in bed.

This evening, however, he insisted on going for a ride. He was carried to the carriage in an armchair by Father Bonetti and myself. The ride seems to have been good for him. As we were riding along, he told me to remember, once we got home, to convey this message to all Salesians in his name: "All Salesians, superiors in particular, should treat our domestics with great charity."

This evening the doctor found that Don Bosco's condition had deteriorated greatly. He ordered that he be put to bed.¹⁵³

From December 20, 1887 to January 31, 1888, the day of his death, Don Bosco never again left his sick room, in fact he never left his bed. This is Don Bosco's last illness.

Part III. Don Bosco's Last Illness and Saintly Death

Having surveyed the period of Don Bosco's quasi-retirement and decline, with particular attention to his condition since his return from Rome in May 1887, we will now describe his last days. Viglietti's almost daily chronicle will still give us the basic structure for this survey. But we will also draw on other archival documents discussed above, especially on Enria's *Memoir*.

Introductory Comment of the Nature of Don Bosco's Last Illness

Don Bosco's last illness was really no new illness, but a recurrence, with aggravated symptoms and various serious complications, of the same chronic cardiopulmonary condition. Thus, when he returned from his ride on the evening of December 20, 1887, and took to his bed never to leave it again, Don Bosco entered the last and fatal episode of the illness that had plagued him since 1846, even traceable perhaps back to his student days.

As already indicated, the grave illness of 1846 was due to a bronchiopulmonary condition. The bronchitis degenerated into a bronchial pneumonia. Thus, when Don Bosco was not yet 35, he already had developed a condition of the respiratory apparatus which grew progressively worse and was the cause of repeated relapses, among which the illness of 1871 and that of 1884 were the most serious.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 73-75, "December 20, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 B6f. It may have been the coachman's devoted service that prompted the advice about domestics. Viglietti closes this entry with a marginal insertion: "Before lying down, Don Bosco said to Father Rua: 'About Viglietti, I am handing him over to you. He will be a great help to you.'"

¹⁵⁴ Cf. notes 69, 42, 70, and 71 and related text, above.

As reported by Father Michele Molineris,¹⁵⁵ in 1967 Dr. Gucci, a surgeon and professor of medicine, made a study of Don Bosco's medical history from the records. The recorded symptoms convinced him that Don Bosco had developed a serious case of emphysema. This is an irreversible condition affecting that part of the lungs where oxygen is received and the respiratory gases exchanged. The alveoli are partly destroyed, so that pulmonary ventilation is diminished and breathing is gravely affected. It is this respiratory insufficiency that caused the symptoms described in the various episodes of illness: painfully deep cough, asthma, edematous extremities (e.g., swelling of legs and feet), rheumatic conditions, cyanosis (blue coloration), weakened or irregular pulse, with further complications involving the heart because of the diminished flow of blood to the myocardium.

Similar and much aggravated symptoms accompanied the final illness of 1887-88. By this time the oxygenation of the blood in the alveolar network of the lungs was so much reduced that the functions of other vital organs were also seriously affected. Especially concerned were the heart, the liver and the kidneys. This was Don Bosco's condition when he was put to bed on December 20, 1887.

On January 1, 1888, after 10 days in bed, Don Bosco experienced a remission over the whole range of symptoms—respiration, asthma, irregular pulse, cyanosis, etc. The word got around that Don Bosco had made a recovery. In reality, however, the remission was not due to a change in condition; it was just a reprieve obtained by desperately needed rest. This rest allowed the heart muscle to regain strength. Don Bosco was never a sufferer from primary heart disease. Heart trouble was not in the family's medical history. On the other hand, we know that both Don Bosco's father and mother, as well as his brother Joseph, died of pneumonia. When the heart muscle regained some strength, the circulation improved, the pulse steadied, the cyanosis decreased, and the breathlessness was relieved. But it was now just a matter of time.

Dr. Fissore gave much the same diagnosis, when on December 30, 1887, just as Don Bosco was "recovering," he was interviewed by M. Saint-Genest for the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro*: The reporter writes:

I followed [Father Celestino Durando] to a waiting room where two physicians, Dr. Fissore and Dr. Albertotti, were in consultation. I addressed my question to Dr. Fissore, and he replied: "Don Bosco is despaired of, and we cannot hold out any hope of recovery. He suffers from a cardio-pulmonary disease and from lesions of the liver, with complications affecting the spinal cord and with consequent paralysis of the lower limbs. He can no longer speak. His kidneys and lungs are also affected. So you see

¹⁵⁵ Michele Molineris, *Don Bosco inedito. Quello che le biografie di Don Bosco non dicono* (Colle DB: ISBS, 1974), pp. 312-318, 323-330, 332-337; *Vita episodica di Don Bosco* (Castelnuovo Don Bosco: ISBS, 1974), pp. 421-445.

why there is no hope." "And to what do you attribute this illness?" "No immediate cause is responsible for it. It is rather the result of a general physical deterioration, itself brought about by a life time of overwork and aggravated by continuous pressures."¹⁵⁶

In his biography, Dr. Albertotti's assessment of Don Bosco's condition is quite similar.

By November 1887, the disease which already affected his heart, lungs, and kidneys took a sudden turn for the worse. This final stage was marked by a critically high ratio of albumin in the urine, a daily occurrence. His spine was now so weak that it could no longer support him. Consequently he had literally to be put to bed. And, except for a short period of illusory remission, he kept to his sick bed to his dying day.¹⁵⁷

The physicians, therefore, including Albertotti, agree on the nature of Don Bosco's illness and on the cause of his death. As the above-mentioned Dr. Gucci explains, it was a type of pneumonia that is common in debilitated, bedridden, aged people suffering from chronic bronchio-pulmonary condition. In Don Bosco's case, it was the final stage of that disease. It is called *hypostatic pneumonia*; and it differs from common pneumonia in that it is caused by congestion due to poor pulmonary ventilation and a weakened heart muscle. It is irreversible even under treatment with antibiotics, precisely on account of the condition of the heart muscle, which may even suffer paralysis.

This being the case, Dr. Albertotti's statement at the time of the sealing of the coffin, that Don Bosco had died of "progressive myelitis" is puzzling indeed. He writes:

I, the undersigned, Dr. Giovanni Albertotti, do hereby certify that the most reverend Father Giovanni Bosco died [...] of progressive myelitis; and that with Dr. Tommaso Bestente, I witnessed the placing of his body in the

¹⁵⁶ French original in *Documenti* XLIV, pp. 687f., *FDBM* 1194 A3f.; translated and inserted in the *Bollettino Salesiano's* edition of Viglietti's chronicle on Don Bosco's last illness [Viglietti, *Scrapbook-Style Collection* 1886-1896, *FDBM* 1230 E9f.].

Saint-Genest adds that on learning of the reporter's presence Don Bosco asked that he be shown in, so he could thank him for his past kindness. "Don Bosco's room had the appearance of a monk's cell. He lay on a humble, small iron cot. The expression on his face was gentle, almost angelic. He looked at me with kindness and attempted a smile. With great effort he took my hand. I noticed his lips moving, and I realized that he was attempting to speak to me. I bent over him and up close, and almost inaudibly he whispered into my ear: 'Thank you for coming to see me, Pray for me.'"

¹⁵⁷ Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, p. 78, *FDBM* 533 B12.

coffin [...], which was sealed in accordance with the regulations of the Department of Public Health. Turin, February 2, 1888.¹⁵⁸

It should be clearly understood that the true nature of Don Bosco's crippling spinal ailment has not been ascertained. Albertotti himself, in the biography, connected it with the Varazze illness of 1871,¹⁵⁹ which, as mentioned above, had a bronchio-pulmonary origin. It is therefore believed that he described Don Bosco's spinal condition as myelitis, citing it as the cause of death, in order to counteract vicious rumors circulated in the anticlerical press, that Don Bosco was ill with a venereal disease.¹⁶⁰

It may have been on the basis of Albertotti's statement (perhaps made also earlier during the illness) that Lady Herbert of Lea, writing in *The Tablet* of London, introduced her biographical sketch of Don Bosco with the following notice: "We grieve to say that we have received the most alarming accounts of the health of Don Bosco, who is lying dangerously ill at the Mother House of the Salesians in Turin. He is suffering from spinal consumption."¹⁶¹

The foregoing comments will (I hope) facilitate our survey of Don Bosco's last illness as recorded by our chroniclers. This falls naturally into three periods: (1) the first crisis, December 20-31; (2) the reprieve, or illusory "recovery," January 1-20; (3) the second fatal crisis, January 21-31.

I. The First Crisis: December 20-31, 1887

Enria had been notified to be ready to take up his duties as sick-room attendant. He writes:

One day, before Don Bosco took to his bed definitively, he said to Father Viglietti: "Go and tell Enria not to work too hard and not to tire himself out, otherwise he will not be able to help me through the nights he will have to spend at my bedside. The dear Father! He was more concerned about the well-being of his boys than about himself. He knew only too well that I had no other desire than to stand by him till his dying day. God [knows]! That was my desire from the moment I had the good fortune of coming to the Oratory. True, in the Oratory there were lads who were far worthier than I as to virtue and spirit of sacrifice. But Don Bosco chose me and loved me

¹⁵⁸ "Morto [...] in seguito a mielite lenta." Photocopy of the original in ASC 117: Tomba di Don Bosco, *FDBM* 754 B4. "Myelitis" is an inflammation of the marrow in bone or spinal cord.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. note 83 and related text, above.

¹⁶⁰ An insinuation to this effect first appeared in the Turin newspaper *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, and was then taken up in some fifty other Italian sheets [cf. report and discussion in *IBM* XVI, 345-347].

¹⁶¹ *The Tablet*, Saturday, December 31, 1887, p. 1058.

always, in spite of my being the most unworthy of his sons. He read my heart, and he knew that I would most gladly have given my life for his.¹⁶²

The first day he was forced to take to his bed was for all a day of mourning. By evening his condition was much worse. So I spent the whole night by his bedside. It was a night of grief. The dear Father was in so much pain. He could get no rest, no matter what position he took. His suffering must have been unbearable. [...] And yet not once did he complain. He would say to me: "My dear Enria, bear with me; for you shall have to spend many rough nights [by my side]; but the Lord will reward you abundantly for the charitable service you render to me." At hearing these words, I thought my heart would break. I would answer him: "What are you saying, Reverend Father? My service is as nothing; my whole life would not suffice to make even a small return for all the good you did to me. If my life were enough to restore you to good health, I am ready to offer it to God, as so many of my companions did [when you were ill] in 1871. [...] In spite of being so ill, Don Bosco received holy Communion every morning. The Reverend Father Viglietti would celebrate Mass at the private altar set up in the adjoining room. The door would be opened, and Don Bosco could then see and hear the priest. With what recollection he assisted at the holy Mass; and with what faith he prayed at the elevation of the host. Don Bosco appeared on fire with holy love as he adored Jesus in the holy Sacrament. On receiving holy Communion he seemed no longer to be of this world. I would be kneeling by his bed and observe his every movement. I can testify that in those moments Don Bosco appeared rapt into heaven.¹⁶³

Enria and Viglietti stood guard day and night to the end. The latter's first entry for this period also strikes an ominous note.

Don Bosco is seriously ill. He has frequent vomiting spells. We are at a loss as to what to feed him. He cannot even sit up in bed. He gasps frightfully for breath, and is running a temperature. This evening the doctor frightened us all; in this situation he gave Don Bosco not more than four or five days to live. I stand by his bedside and watch him day and night. However, he is not at all perturbed; he even humors me. As I insisted in holding his bowl of broth for him, he quipped: "I suppose you want it for yourself." He can swallow only gelatin and liquid sherbets. But he insisted on having the newspaper read to him, and on seeing the special delivery and registered letters.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 258f., *FDBM* 937 A5f.

¹⁶³ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 260-262, *FDBM* 937 A7-9.

¹⁶⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 75f., "December 21, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 B7f.

Through the evening of December 21, Viglietti spoon-fed him cold liquid food, and Don Bosco experienced some relief.

At a quarter to eight, he quieted down and was able to speak with greater ease; he took some crushed ice, some iced coffee, some liquid sherbet. At half past eight, he took half a bowl of thin noodle soup. He appeared considerably relieved. He said to me: "This afternoon, from about 4 o'clock on, I thought that there was nothing for it but to die; I lost touch with reality. Now I feel much better. After taking the soup, he joked: "Viglietti, give me some of that iced coffee, and make sure it is good and hot." And he laughed. This morning, December 22, at half past eleven, Dr. Vignolo called and made a thorough, hour-long examination of every part of the patient's body. He prescribed a certain beef broth with meat extract added, and he prepared it himself. Don Bosco was to take it even if he felt repugnance. The doctor assured us that there was no reason to be so frightened now. He left us all much relieved, and especially relieved was his poor grieving nephew.¹⁶⁵

Don Bosco, however, was not deceived. His condition was just as serious the next day. He knew how ill he really was, and wanted someone to be ready to administer the last sacraments.

He said to me: "Viglietti, make sure you are not the only priest here to attend me. I need someone here always ready for the Anointing." I assured him: "Don Bosco, Father Rua is always on hand. In any case, your illness is not so serious as to justify this kind of talk." Don Bosco persisted: "Does everyone in the house know that I am so seriously ill?" "Yes, Don Bosco," I replied. "Every Salesian knows about your condition, not only in this house but in every house anywhere in the world, and they all are praying for you." "For my recovery?" mused Don Bosco, "I am on my way to eternity." So saying, Don Bosco is moved and begins to cry. He has a wasted air about him. Again he turned to me: "Make sure that the Holy Viaticum is kept ready. As Christians, we gladly make to God the offering of our life." [...]

At half past twelve Don Bosco experienced renewed retching fits. He asked me: "Is it not a pain for you to have to clean up this vomit?" "Don Bosco," I answered, "Nothing is painful for me except to have to watch you suffer."

He added: "Convey my regards to your mother, and tell her to take pains to raise her family in a Christian manner. Ask her also to pray for you, that you may ever be a good priest and an instrument for the salvation of many souls."

¹⁶⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 77f., "December 21-22, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 B8f. It will be recalled that Viglietti was Dr. Vignolo's nephew.

Father [Giovanni] Bonetti came in. Don Bosco raised his hand in greeting and spoke to him affectionately with tears in his eyes. Don Bosco often repeats the request that everything be kept in readiness for the administration of the Anointing. He mentioned it to Father Rua, and remarked: "True, I have that fixture (*quell'arnese*) there," and he pointed to me, "but I'd like it better if there were more of you here with me."

At 2 o'clock, he took a turn for the worse. He turned to me: "Viglietti, make sure to tell your friend, Mr. Luís [Martí-Codolar], not to forget our missionaries, and tell him that I shall ever remember him and his wonderful family. All of you, do pray for me. Tell all your companions and confreres to pray for me, that I may die in God's grace. I do not ask for anything else." To Bishop Cagliero, he said: "Have you understood what you are to tell the Holy Father, the reason why he must protect the missions? With the pope's protection, you will go into Africa, you will cross Africa, then you will enter into Asia, into Tartary, etc." [...]

At half past four, a protracted medical examination [of the patient] by Drs. Vignolo and Fissore began, for which they swung the bed to the middle of the room. The doctors did not find any one thing fatally damaged. There is hope if only the patient could take nourishment. At the moment Don Bosco's condition appears somewhat improved. Dr. Vignolo wanted to test Don Bosco's strength, and asked him to squeeze his hand as hard as he could. Don Bosco warned him with a smile: "I shall hurt you, believe me." "Just squeeze," the doctor told him. Don Bosco then did, and the doctor quickly withdrew his hand, impressed with Don Bosco's strength.

At 5 o'clock, Don Bosco's confessor, Father [Giovanni Francesco] Giacomelli came, and they were alone for three minutes—quick work.¹⁶⁶

Enria tells us that Don Bosco needed to be coaxed into taking the prescribed medicines. He would take them and say: "Taken with the right intention they may do me some good." Enria remarks: "It was evident that the medicines no longer had any effect on him." Then he relates an interesting episode.

One night Don Bosco said to me: "I feel like having a drink of milk." "I do not keep any here in the room," I replied, "because the doctor forbade it and had it removed." But he insisted: "I really feel that a little drink of milk would do me good." "If you really want it," I answered, "I'll go and get some at once." "But how are you going to get it at this hour when all doors are locked?" "Let me worry about that; I will manage." I placed on the night table everything that he needed for his medicine and a drink of water, and went out. I ran in a hurry to the stable, I roused the stableman and asked him to milk a little milk for our beloved Father. When Don Bosco saw me

¹⁶⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VII, pp. 78-80 and Vol. VIII, pp. 3-6, "December 23, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 B9f and C1-3. Properly speaking, Tartary designates the high plateau of west-central Asia.

back so soon with a bowl of milk, he had a good laugh. Then he said to me: "Poor dear Enria, all the trouble you have on my account! You may rest assured that the Lord will reward you generously. For my part, I commend you to the Lord and to Mary Help of Christians in my prayers." Who would not have been moved by such tender words? How grateful our good Father was for any little service rendered to him! One felt so elated as to want to give one's life for him.¹⁶⁷

On the day before Christmas, early in the morning, Don Bosco received Holy Viaticum solemnly administered by Bishop Cagliero. Enria writes:

With what faith he waited for Jesus that morning. He lay tranquil and serene, praying all the while with great trust. In the meantime in the church of Mary Help of Christians altar boys and clergy were getting ready for the pontifical administration of the holy Viaticum.¹⁶⁸

In his entry, Viglietti adds details and gives us important information besides.

At half past seven preparations were being made for the administration of the Holy Viaticum. Don Bosco, in tears, begged Father Bonetti and myself: "Please, do help me to receive Jesus worthily. I am confused." And he prayed: "Into your hands, O Lord, I entrust my spirit." The procession with Bishop Cagliero, solemnly accompanied by clergy, altar boys, and all the youngsters, arrives. Don Bosco is in tears; but, robed in his stole, he stands out like an angel. What a touching scene, and what a solemn moment! Everyone was crying loudly, the bishop, too. [...]

At half past ten, the doctors came and carried out their examination. Don Bosco's condition appears to have improved. [...] Since yesterday afternoon, the vomiting spells have been subsiding. Since this morning there has been a notable improvement. Don Bosco's breathing comes more easily, there is none of the former restlessness. He slumbers and seems to be resting quietly. He is still completely drained of strength and does not speak. But at 6 o'clock, [he spoke to me and said:] "Poor dear Viglietti, you had no idea what caring for a sick person entailed, had you? You don't seem to know what to say or what to do any more."

At 10 o'clock in the evening, he called for Father Rua [and said to him]: "I would like an additional priest to watch with Father Viglietti at my bedside tonight. I may not last till morning."

At half past ten, Don Bosco said to me: "Father Viglietti, go and look in my desk, and you will find a little book of my memoirs. You know which book I mean. Take it and make sure to give it to Father Bonetti, for I would not like it to fall into the hands of any Tom, Dick or Harry. At 11

¹⁶⁷ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 264f., *FDBM* 937 A11f.

¹⁶⁸ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 268f., *FDBM* 937 B3f.

o'clock Bishop Cagliero administered the Extreme Unction. Don Bosco spoke of nothing but of eternity.¹⁶⁹

In a bulletin dated December 26, Father Rua reported to the confreres:

The daily papers have already publicized the fact that Don Bosco is gravely ill. Unfortunately I can only confirm the sad news.

The crisis began on the sixth of this month when much to his sorrow he was forced to leave off celebrating Mass. He made an exception the following Sunday, when he insisted on celebrating. He got through only by dint of extreme effort. His chronic ailments grew worse with every passing day. On Tuesday last, December 20, he still appeared at the noon-day meal as usual, after which he was taken for a ride in the carriage. But he was unable to walk to it; he had to be carried in an armchair from his room to the carriage, and back after the ride. Wednesday, by doctor's order, he kept to his bed; the doctor feared the onset of bronchitis. Between Thursday and Friday, his condition worsened to the point that we feared for his life. This critical condition persisted through the following days. He himself asked for the Holy Viaticum, which was administered in solemn form by Bishop Cagliero. [...] Saturday night, sensing a worsening in his condition, he asked to be given the Extreme Unction. [...]

As of this writing, his condition appears less grave, but it continues to be critical. The doctors have ordered that he be kept perfectly quiet, and have forbidden visits of any sort even by confreres of this house, except by those few who are in charge of caring for him.¹⁷⁰

The bulletin sent out on the following day is still very cautious:

Regretfully I cannot report any improvement in [Don Bosco's] condition. On the contrary, this morning the doctors found his condition to have deteriorated somewhat, even though he was able to get some sleep through part of the night. [...]

P.S.: Our beloved Father's illness has been diagnosed by the physicians as "cardio-pulmonary disease." This is in addition to the cerebro-spinal condition which has slowly been developing over the years.

¹⁶⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 6-9, "December 24, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 C3f. "Into your hands [...]", spoken in Latin: "In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum" [Luke 23:26 from Psalm 30(31): 6, Vulgata]. "You don't seem to know [...]", spoken in Piedmontese: "Sai pi ni cos di ni cos fe."

The booklet mentioned in the last paragraph is the so-called *Spiritual Testament*, for which cf. note 73, above.

¹⁷⁰ Rua, *Dear Confreres*, December 26, 1887, *FDBM* 437 D8.

The latest medical examination just now completed (6 P.M.) reveals that the ultimate outcome of the illness is still in doubt; but there has been no retrogression.¹⁷¹

Although Father Rua spoke cautiously, as was to be expected, according to Viglietti the Viaticum and the Last Anointing seemed to inaugurate a period of "recovery." The day after Christmas Don Bosco actually felt better.

At half past ten, the doctors examined Don Bosco and found his condition improved. He said to me: "Let's wait and see what the knowledge and the expertise of three physicians is able to achieve."

At a quarter to five, the cardinal came to say good-bye before leaving for Rome. He was crying like a child; he embraced and kissed Don Bosco several time, then gave him his blessing.¹⁷²

Cardinal Alimonda had been a frequent visitor before, and visited Don Bosco again before leaving for Rome, from where he regularly inquired about Don Bosco's condition. Enria mentions one such visit.¹⁷³ Father Cerruti, in his short memoir, has a longer account of a visit by the cardinal on December 30. Don Bosco, like many saints at the point of death, seems to have experienced some anxiety about his own salvation.

At 4:15 P.M., His Eminence Cardinal Alimonda was ushered into the patient's room. He put his arms around Don Bosco and kissed him tenderly. It was a most moving scene. Don Bosco took off his little night cap, and the first words he spoke to the cardinal were: "I commend my soul to your prayers." Then he added: "I commend my Congregation, too;" and he began to cry. With encouraging words His Eminence spoke to him of conformity with the will of God and of trust in God, reminding Don Bosco that he had labored hard and long in God's service. Meanwhile the cardinal noticed that Don Bosco was still holding the cap in his hands; he took it from him and placed it on Don Bosco's head. Don Bosco was deeply moved by the gesture. He said: "I have done all I could; now may God's will be done.... Hard times, Your Eminence!; I have been through hard times.... But the pope's authority, the pope's authority!... I have told Bishop Cagliero here to tell the Holy Father that the Salesians are committed to the defense of the pope's authority." There was a fiery vehemence in his words. Bishop Cagliero, who was standing by the foot of the bed, replied: "Yes, my dear Don Bosco, rest assured that I will deliver your message to the Holy

¹⁷¹ Rua, *Dear Confreres*, December 27, 1887, *FDBM* 437 D9.

¹⁷² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, p. 10, "December 26, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 C5. The words, "Let's wait and see [...]," spoken in Latin: "*Videamus quod [=quid] valeat scientia et peritia trium doctorum.*"

¹⁷³ Enria, *Memoir*, p. 269, *FDBM* 936 B4.

Father.” The cardinal changed the subject. He said: “As for yourself, Father John, have no fear. You have so often urged others to be prepared for death.” Bishop Cagliero continued: “You so often spoke to us about being ready for death; it was one of your favorite subjects.” “I preached to others,” countered Don Bosco in all humility, “now I need others to remind me.” Don Bosco then insisted on having the cardinal’s blessing; and on leaving, the cardinal, deeply moved, embraced and kissed him once again.¹⁷⁴

In his entry for December 27, Don Bosco’s real name day, Viglietti describes some unusual activity around the patient.

At 12 noon, he was due to undergo some procedure. Dr. Albertotti was assisted by Father Bonetti and myself. We turned Don Bosco over so [clumsily] that he almost fell out of bed. I was holding him with his head against my chest.

After this operation it became necessary to move him to another bed. I sent for Father Rua, Father Leveratto and Father [Domenico] Belmonte. The four of us and the doctor were arguing over the best manner of effecting the transfer. Don Bosco had a suggestion: “Here is what you must do,” he said. “Tie a strong rope around my neck and swing me off one bed and onto the other.” The transfer was a near disaster. Father Rua fell backward on to the new bed, with Don Bosco on top of him. I held on and lifted Don Bosco, and Father Rua got out from under. It was a timely move [on my part], for if Don Bosco had gone down, that is, had been let go, he would have crashed bodily on Father Rua. Don Bosco thought it was funny. [...].

Later, knowing that the new bed in which he had been put was my own bed, he began to worry that I would remain without one. At half past four, with [Giuseppe] Buzzetti’s and Giuseppe Rossi’s help, Don Bosco was transferred back to his own bed, this time with no great difficulty.¹⁷⁵

The need to move the patient from one bed to another arose out of concern for cleanliness, for by this time Don Bosco had lost control of his bodily functions. He would express his regret to Viglietti: “Poor Viglietti! There is a messy job I got you into.”

In the same entry, Viglietti notes the great interest in Don Bosco’s condition in the press and among the people, and describes above all the prayers and

¹⁷⁴ Cerruti, *Memoir*, p. 4, “December 30, 1887,” *FDBM* 963 A11.

¹⁷⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 11f., “December 27, 1887,” *FDBM* 1227 C5f. December 27, the feast of St. John the Evangelist, was Don Bosco’s real name day. But the custom had prevailed to celebrate his name day on June 24, the feast of St. John the Baptist.

It is not clear what the procedure might have been. The Italian, “*Si dovea operare attorno a lui*,” does not specify. It was probably to check on a painful growth or sore at the base of the spine, perhaps the same which later required a surgical procedure.

religious exercises offered everywhere for his recovery. He adds: "Even though Don Bosco was asked numerous times to pray to God for a cure, he has always refused. He would say instead: 'May God's holy will be done in my regard.'" He writes further: "Don Bosco insists that the physicians tell him the truth about his condition. 'You know that I am not afraid,' he declares. 'I am at peace and ready to go.'"¹⁷⁶

In his bulletin of December 28 to the confreres, Father Rua speaks hopefully of signs of a "recovery." But he hastens to add that, according to the doctors, "the improvement may only be temporary."¹⁷⁷ Viglietti in fact speaks of a relapse that very evening.

This evening Don Bosco was very ill, so much so that he feared his hour had come. He had me fetch Father Rua and Bishop Cagliero. He said to them: "Promise me that you will love one another and bear with one another as brothers should." Quoting, he added: "Bear one another's burdens. Show yourselves in all respects models of good deeds... The help of God and of Mary Most Holy shall not fail you. Recommend the frequent reception of Communion and devotion to Mary Most Holy. Ask everyone to pray for my eternal salvation." At 10 o'clock, he received the papal blessing from Bishop Cagliero, and had the bishop recite the act of contrition for him. He said to the bishop: "Spread the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Tierra del Fuego. The number of souls that Mary Help of Christians wishes to gain for heaven through the Salesians is beyond imagining." Father Bonetti asked Don Bosco for a keepsake for the [Salesian] Sisters. Don Bosco answered: "Obedience. [Tell them] to practice obedience and to see that it is practiced." [...] At 1 o'clock he asked for something to drink. This was denied because of his continuous vomiting spells. So he remarked: "We must pay for a drink of our own water." And he added: "One must learn how to live, and one must learn how to die. Both are important."¹⁷⁸

II. Period of Illusory Recovery: January 1-20, 1888

Viglietti's next few entries record a steady improvement in Don Bosco's condition. This is reflected in Father Rua's reports to the confreres. The French-language bulletin of December 31 reads:

¹⁷⁶ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 13 and 15, "December 28, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 C6 and 8.

¹⁷⁷ Rua, *Dear Confreres*, December 28, 1887, *FDBM* 437 D10.

¹⁷⁸ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 17-19, "December 29, 1887," *FDBM* 1227 C8f.

"Bear one another's [...]," quoted in Latin: "Alter alterius onera portate [...]" [Galatians 6:2, Vulgata]; "In omnibus teipsum praebere exemplum bonorum operum" [Titus 2:7, Vulgata]; "We must pay [...]," quoted in Latin: "Aquam nostram praetico bibimus" [Lam 5:4, Vulgata].

Following a consultation, Drs. Fissore, Vignolo, Bestenti, and Albertotti, issued the following statement: the immediate danger is passed; there has been very considerable improvement; the fever has subsided, as have the recurring vomiting fits; the fluid which was present behind the right lung has been almost completely absorbed; there is hope, in the best prognosis, of further continued progress. [To the above may I add that] Don Bosco's mind is completely lucid and that he is eager to return to work for his children.¹⁷⁹

Father Rua's bulletin of January 5, 1888, is even more optimistic:

I am truly relieved and happy to report that our beloved Father is getting better every day. He can breathe more freely; he can speak more easily and more clearly; and he can more effectively take nourishment. The physicians begin to hold out the hope that he may shortly be convalescent, and that not long thereafter he may be able to leave his bed.¹⁸⁰

Apparently, however, even though physically improved, Don Bosco did not feel quite right. He said to his secretary:

Viglietti, I think it would be a good idea to tell Don Rua to keep an eye on me, because my head is no longer working. I don't know whether it is morning or evening, or what day or what year it is. I am disoriented and don't know where I am. I do recognize people, but only faintly, and I can't recall the circumstances [of my relationship with them]. I don't know whether I am praying or not, whether it is a Sunday or a weekday. You people have got to help me.¹⁸¹

It was evident, however, that Don Bosco was much improved in every way. So Viglietti records:

This evening, following a consultation by the physicians, we started Don Bosco on a diet of grated bread porridge, an egg, followed by some coffee. Before tasting the food, Don Bosco took off his cap, made the sign of the cross, and prayed with tears in his eyes. I was very much afraid that the food would be bad for him. But he retained everything nicely. After eating, he felt really good. He inquired about a thousand things, about political developments, about the pope, Bismarck, and Crispi. He wanted to know

¹⁷⁹ Rua, *Bulletin de la santé de Dom Bosco*, December 31, 1887, 11:15 A.M., *FDBM* 437 E2.

¹⁸⁰ Rua, *Dear Confreres*, January 5, 1888, *FDBM* 437 E5.

¹⁸¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, p. 22, "January 6, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 C11.

how things were going in the house [...]. He said to me: "Viglietti, [...] how does a person after twenty-one days in bed, not taking any nourishment and not even being in possession of his mental faculties, all of a sudden regain consciousness and understanding, feel strong enough to get out of bed, and experience the old urge to get back to work? [...]" He added: "What God can do by his divine power you, O Virgin, can obtain through your intercessory prayer.' There are secrets which one must carry with him to the grave." I insisted: "But you will tell us, surely?" "No," he replied. "One must stand in awe before the supernatural and inquire no further. One recognizes God's intervention, but whys and hows are best left to him. Evidently, my hour has not yet come. It may be soon, but not now."¹⁸²

For the next dozen days Don Bosco's condition remained stable and perhaps improved even further. He received visits from important persons on January 8 and 20. So Viglietti reports.

Today the Duke of Norfolk called on Don Bosco. The newspapers have been speaking of him as Queen Victoria's envoy to the pope. On seeing Don Bosco, he knelt at his bedside. The interview lasted about half an hour. They spoke of the situation in his country. The Duke pleaded for the establishment of a Salesian house like the Oratory in London and of missions in China. He accepted messages from Don Bosco for the Holy Father. Then he received Don Bosco's blessing and left.

This evening Don Bosco said to me: "Here is the situation. Don Bosco already spent his last penny before the onset of this illness. There has been no money since; there is none now. His little orphans, however, have not stopped asking for bread. Don Bosco will no longer be able to travel around and beg; so let those who have it in their hearts to give alms give them without being asked."¹⁸³

¹⁸² Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 23-25, "January 7, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 C11f. Anti-Catholic Adolf von Bismarck (1815-1898), of *Kulturkampf* fame, and left-wing politician Francesco Crispi (1819-1901) were prime ministers of Germany and Italy, respectively. "What God can do [...]," quoted in Latin: "Quod Deus potentia tu prece, Virgo, potes" [St. Bernard].

¹⁸³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 25-27, "January 8, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 C12-D1. It is not stated here whether this remark on charitable giving was occasioned by the visit from the rich duke. But earlier in the chronicle Viglietti reports Don Bosco's strict views on the use of money by the rich. He relates that Don Bosco had wanted someone to publish a pamphlet on that topic, but that he had met with such opposition because of his strict views that he dropped the subject. Recently, however, in a dream, the Virgin Mary had reprimanded him for his silence about the matter. She branded the ill use of money by the rich, adding in Latin: "If what is over and above were to be given to the poor, much greater would be the number of the elect." She accused of cowardice the priest who is afraid to preach about the duty of giving what is over and above to the poor [Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol.

[...] Don Bosco's condition is improving slowly but steadily. All he needs is to get some of his strength back, so that he can leave his bed. He no longer feels any real pain. Since January 15 he has been hearing holy Mass and receiving holy Communion from me every morning.¹⁸⁴

Viglietti dared to hope, but the relapse was in effect even as he was expressing the hope of complete recovery.

III. The Final Crisis and Don Bosco's Saintly Death: January 21-31, 1888

1. Sudden and Inexorable Relapse: January 21-28, 1888

The final crisis set in following, if not in consequence of, a small surgical procedure. In the next entry (January 22), Viglietti writes:

Don Bosco's condition has deteriorated slightly in the past couple of days. This morning he heard my Mass and received Communion. At 10 o'clock he had the visit of the archbishop of Cologne. Then the doctors decided to go ahead with a surgical procedure designed to remove a fleshy growth at the base of the spine. Dr. Vignolo performed the surgery with one stroke; all went well. Don Bosco gratefully took my uncle's hand. Now he feels completely relieved.¹⁸⁵

Father Sala asked him how he felt. Don Bosco replied: "They carved me up in a masterful way." "Did you feel much pain," Sala insisted. He answered: "The piece of flesh they cut off did not feel a thing!"¹⁸⁶ Two days later, Viglietti reports a visit from Archbishop François Richard of Paris, and then adds: "Don Bosco is again very ill. The doctors found him returned to the condition of a month ago." His next entry is even more gloomy:

Today Don Bosco's condition is very serious. He begs [the people around him] to prompt devout ejaculatory prayers to him. This evening it was painful to see him trying to speak. [...] Bishop Cagliari mentioned that he intended to go to Rome, and Don Bosco said to him: "Wait till after—" ¹⁸⁷

VII, pp. 18-20, "June 4, 1887," *FDBM* 1226 E3f.]

¹⁸⁴ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 28f., "January 20, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 D2.

¹⁸⁵ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 29f., *FDBM* 1227 D2f. For "at the base of the spine" Viglietti writes: "*nelle parti inferiori della schiena*," perhaps out of a sense of modesty.

¹⁸⁶ Sala, *Memoir*, p. 9, *FDBM* 1222 D1.

¹⁸⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 30 and 32, "January 25 and 26, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 D3f.

The disease was making inexorable progress. Don Bosco found it increasingly more difficult to breathe. He was in terrible pain; but he never complained. He kept praying: "May God's holy will be done in all things." [...] What a marvelous example of self-sacrifice and resignation our good Father Don Bosco left us!¹⁸⁸

Urged by Father Bonetti to call to mind that Jesus on the cross suffered torture without being able to move either to the right or to the left, Don Bosco answered: "Yes, I think of him all the time."¹⁸⁹

But even in the midst of excruciating pain his lucidity of mind and his sense of humor never failed. Sala relates:

One evening I was summoned to Don Bosco's bedside, and I went up in a hurry. Father Francesia went with me. We had to lift Don Bosco bodily, place a cushion under him, and then lower him on it so as to alleviate the pain which the bed sores and the wound [of the recent operation] caused him. Don Bosco said to me: "You could have done it by yourself. There was no need to call in such a celebrity [Francesia]." And he laughed heartily.

One other evening he was experiencing much pain, and from time to time he would move about in an effort to find a more comfortable position. At that point the physician in attendance [Albertotti] happened to come in. Don Bosco nodded in my direction to indicate he wanted to have a word with me. I put my ear close to his mouth, and he whispered to me with a twinkle in his eye: "Tell the doctor that he would win undying fame if he could find a way to replace buttocks when they hurt." Without further ado, I repeated the witty sally to the doctor, while Don Bosco laughed to the amusement of those who stood by his bed.¹⁹⁰

One day Don Bosco said to [Father Sala]: "See to it that you have a place ready for my burial, because if it is not ready well before I die, I will arrange for the corpse to be put in your room." Negotiations were in progress at the time to obtain a lot in the Turin cemetery exclusively for the burial of Salesians. That arrangement had been in the plans for several years. Father Sala promised Don Bosco that he would attend to the matter in earnest. As a matter of fact, it was Father Sala who, after intense negotiations, obtained permission for Don Bosco to be buried at Valsalice. It seems that Don

¹⁸⁸ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 265f., *FDBM* 937 A12f.

¹⁸⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, p. 33, "January 27, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 D4.

¹⁹⁰ Sala, *Memoir*, pp. 4f., *FDBM* 1222, C8f. Don Bosco's reported words in Italian are: "Si farebbe un onore immortale se trovasse il modo di cambiare le natiche ogni qual volta fan male."

Bosco had known beforehand that he would soon have to leave this world.¹⁹¹

Enria underscores Don Bosco's concern for the Congregation and its affairs.

Don Bosco sent for the Reverend Father Rua and had a long conversation with him. He also spoke with all the members of his council. I have no idea what he discussed with Father Rua. He must have given him directives for the good of the congregation and of his beloved sons, and must have recommended that they always keep alive the spirit of the Oratory. He also had a long conversation with Bishop Cagliero, in which he must have entrusted to him his dear sons and daughters scattered throughout the missions of [South] America.¹⁹²

Father Sala was a trusted member of the general council, as well as a very close confidant and "favorite son" of Don Bosco. The good father could speak freely to him. Sala writes:

Don Bosco suffers, the poor dear, not so much from the pain as from the inconvenience he thinks he is causing us. He said to me: "You know how punctilious I have always been about cleanliness. Now there is no way I can keep clean (I am lying in my own excrement)."¹⁹³

One night, on seeing the terrible pain he was in, I asked: "Don Bosco what can I do to alleviate your suffering a little?" [He answered:] "Pray." But then he added: "I seem to have sunk into a hole." Immediately I positioned one arm under his thighs and the other under his back, and carefully lifted him up bodily, while Father Viglietti placed a little cushion under him. This operation required my holding him several minutes. When I put him down I said: "Poor dear Don Bosco, I must have hurt you a lot." [He answered:] "On the contrary you should say, 'Poor dear Sala who had to work so hard.' But when the right time comes I'll take care of paying you back for this good deed."¹⁹⁴

Two days before the feast of St. Francis [Jan. 27] (I believe it was), I happened to find myself alone in his room. I took advantage of a moment when his breathing seemed a little calmer, and said to him: "Don Bosco, I can see you are in great pain." "Yes," he answered, "but all things pass away, and so will the pain." He joined his hands deeply moved and began to

¹⁹¹ Enria, *Memoir*, p. 273, FDBM 937 B8.

¹⁹² Enria, *Memoir*, p. 274, FDBM 9937 B9.

¹⁹³ Sala, *Memoir*, p. 5, FDBM 1222 C 9. Don Bosco's reported words for "I am lying in my own excrement" are in Italian, "*sono tutto immerdato*."

¹⁹⁴ Sala, *Memoir*, pp. 5f., FDBM 1222 C9f.

pray. I let him rest for a little while; then I spoke again: "Don Bosco," I said, "it must be a source of great satisfaction for you to know that, after a life of privation and toil, you have established the Salesian work in practically all parts of the world." "Yes," he replied. "Whatever I did, I did it for the Lord. I could have done more... My sons will carry on the work." After a pause he added: "Our congregation is under divine guidance and under the protection of Mary Help of Christians."¹⁹⁵

In his exhausted and feverish condition, Don Bosco often slipped into deep reveries or into outright delirium. Sala reports:

One evening he said to us: "See if you can fix me so I can get some rest." We arranged him as well as we could, and he seemed to be dozing off quietly. But of a sudden he clapped his hands and cried out: "Come quickly, save those young people. Mary, help them. *Mare!*" ["Mother!" in Piedmontese]. "Don Bosco, we are here with you," I said to reassure him. [Coming out of his reverie,] he asked: "Where are we?"¹⁹⁶

Enria reports similar episodes.

One night, he dozed off momentarily and immediately began to dream. He spoke aloud and said: "What do you want? Whom are you looking for? What does that boy want?" He was looking intently toward the end of the room. [...] I then said to him: "Reverend Father, there is no one there." He opened his eyes, looked at me with a smile, and said: "There seemed to be a boy there, and I thought he was in need of something." The youngsters were always uppermost in Don Bosco's thoughts.¹⁹⁷

Don Bosco's condition was getting progressively worse. He was so short of breath that he could hardly talk. He ran a temperature all the time. He suffered excruciating pains from the spinal cord. In spite of all this, Don Bosco was never heard to complain. [...] He would lift his arms and say: "All for the glory of God and of his most holy Mother." During the night before the feast of St. Francis de Sales he cried many times: "*Mare! Mare!*" ["Mother! Mother!" in Piedmontese] He was shouting so loud that he could be heard from far away. I watched all his movements, but did not dare interfere, as he might be having some supernatural vision. Don Bosco may have been seeing his own mother and calling to her, or he may have been calling on Mary. I had been standing straight by his bed, watching him, for well over four hours. All of a sudden he lifted his arms. I bent over him to find out what he might want, and tried to bolster his head. But Don Bosco

¹⁹⁵ Sala, *Memoir*, pp. 6f., *FDBM* 1222 C10f.

¹⁹⁶ Sala, *Memoir*, p. 3, *FDBM* 1222 C7.

¹⁹⁷ Enria, *Memoir*, p. 266, *FDBM* 937 B1.

put his arms around me and with all his might tried to pull himself up so as to change position. But the effort only intensified the unbearable pain in his spine and caused him to cry out: "My dear Enria, the pain is excruciating. If this situation continues for any length of time, I don't think I can endure it." Then regretting (so I believe) having spoken these words, he raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed firmly: "May God's will be done in all things!"¹⁹⁸

Viglietti concurs. On January 28, he writes:

Throughout yesterday, last night and this morning, he was very often delirious. I heard him cry repeatedly: "They are in trouble!" or "Forward, always forward!" He often calls our names. This morning he called out as many as 20 times, "*Mare! Mare!*" ["Mother! Mother!" in Piedmontese.] For the past few hours he has been praying with his hands joined and calling: "O Mary, Mary!" To all he says: "I'll see you in Paradise." To Father Bonetti he said: "Tell the boys that I shall be waiting for them all in Paradise." This morning he received the scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. He dispenses final keepsakes. [...] On being shown the picture of Mary Help of Christians, he said: "I have always placed all my trust in Mary Help of Christians." [...] Again turning to Father Bonetti, he said: "If the Sisters observe the rules they have received, their eternal salvation is assured."

The physicians found his condition critical. They hope that he will hold on for a while, but they no longer speak of a recovery. Don Bosco inquired about his own condition, and Dr. Fissore replied: "Things may be better tomorrow; today the bad weather is against us." Don Bosco smiled and, pointing up with his index finger, replied: "Tomorrow? Tomorrow I am off on a long journey."¹⁹⁹

2. Hope No More: January 29, 1888

January 29 was a critical day. In fact it seemed that the end had come. It is Sala's last entry.

¹⁹⁸ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 269-271, *FDBM* 937 B4-6.

¹⁹⁹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 33-36, "January 28, 1888." *FDBM* 1227 D4-6. "They are in trouble," may refer to the Salesians in France. It is known that Father Paul Albera, director at Marseilles and provincial in France, was not at Don Bosco's side, and that Don Bosco (according to Lemoyne) called out Paul's name in his delirium: "*Paolino, Paolino, dove sei? perchè non vieni*" (Paul, Paul, where are you; why don't you come to me?) Lemoyne adds: All present believed he was calling Father Paul Albera, director of the house in Marseilles"[*Documenti* XXXVII, 167, *FDBM* 1148 E12]. This episode is not recorded in our chronicles.

For the story of Father Albera's absence during the final crisis, cf. Joseph Boenzi's article, "Paolo Albera's Visits during Don Bosco's Last Illness" on page 99 of this issue of the *Journal of Salesian Studies*.

On the morning of the feast of St. Francis, I notified him that Mass had begun. I opened the door of the room onto the [adjoining] chapel for him. He joined his hands and began to pray. After the elevation he whispered to me: "What if I should throw up after receiving holy Communion?" I urged him not to worry and assured him that there would be no problem. At communion time I let him know that the Lord was about to come to him, to bring comfort to his soul. I put the stole on him and a new napkin before him. He received holy Communion, and I prompted a few words of thanksgiving, which he repeated with genuine emotion. This was the last time that our dear Don Bosco received our Lord.²⁰⁰

Viglietti adds considerable detail.

This morning everyone seemed to agree that Don Bosco should not be given communion, since he is most of the time unconscious. But I objected. I believed that at that critical moment the Lord would rouse and strengthen him. I celebrated Mass, and when I brought him Communion he lay in an unconscious stupor. I said the words, "May the Body of our Lord" loudly, and at that moment he gave a start, looked at the host, joined his hands [received Communion] and then remained recollected [for a while]. Later he relapsed into the delirious state in which he continues even at this moment, 5 o'clock P.M. [...] He no longer responds to anything, except when some one speaks to him of paradise or of the soul's salvation. Then he signifies his approval by nodding his head.

This evening, he kept on repeating Scriptural texts which have been familiar to him throughout his life of charitable activity: "Love your enemies;" "Do good to those who persecute you;" "Seek first the kingdom of God;" "Cleanse me from my sin." Father Bonetti prompted the ejaculatory prayer: "Mary, mother of grace, defend us from the enemy." Don Bosco continued: "And receive us at the hour of death." [...] [He] was heard to whisper repeatedly: "Jesus! Jesus! Mary! Mary!" "Jesus and Mary, I give you my heart and my soul," adding: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." Then more audibly: "*Mare, Mare*, ["Mother, Mother," in Piedmontese], open for me the gates of heaven!" Today he exclaimed hundreds of times: "*Mare! Mare!* Tomorrow! Tomorrow!"²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Sala, *Memoir*, pp. 7f., *FDBM* 1222 C11f.

²⁰¹ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 36-39, "January 29, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 D6f.

"May the body of Our Lord [...]" in the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, in placing the host on the tongue of the communicant the priest said: "Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen." The other Latin phrases (some quoted approximately) are: "Diligite inimicos vestros," "Benefacite his qui vos persequuntur" [Matthew 5: 44, Vulgata]; "Quaerite primum regnum Dei" [Matthew 6:33 Vulgata]; "A peccato meo munda me" [Psalm 50(51):4, Vulgata]; "Maria, mater

Enria, with his special effusion of love and filial piety, strikes the most ominous note.

It was January 29, 1888, feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron of the Salesian Oratory. Our good Father's condition was getting worse. By evening he was totally broken. I had to leave the room momentarily and I happened to meet [Giuseppe] Buzzetti. "What news?" he asked. I told him the bad news. He replied: "I am afraid that St. Francis will take him away from us and up to heaven." That was a truly painful night for our beloved Father. He could hardly breathe; he could not even swallow liquids any longer, and we had to limit ourselves to moisten his lips which were parched by burning fever. At about 2 o'clock in the morning he gave a start from a fit of breathlessness. I tried to lift him up, and he put his arms around me. At that moment, I thought that he would die in my arms. I prayed with all my heart: "Lord, take me, but let our good Father live." Gradually he calmed down and then said in a breathless whisper: "Mary Help of Christians, pray for us." He added repeatedly: "May God's will be done in all things." That painful moment will always remain etched on my mind.²⁰²

For some reason (about which we can only speculate) Viglietti's chronicle peters out at this point. For the crucial days, January 30-31, he gives us only a few badly styled jottings. From the little he tells us we can conclude that he was present in the room part of the time. This is corroborated by Enria. But apparently he did not witness what must be regarded as the most important events of that night. For the morning of January 30, after noting Don Bosco's unconscious, hopeless condition, Viglietti merely mentions that Bishop Cagliero and Father Lazzerio recited prayers and imparted the blessings of the dying. He adds that everyone present was then allowed to kiss Don Bosco's hand.

For the early hours of January 31, Viglietti's last jottings, completed with several inserted additions, read as follows:

At a quarter to one, Buzzetti being also present, Don Bosco looked at me twice intently for some time, then he placed his hand on my head [as I was kneeling at his bedside]. Buzzetti remarked with tears in his eyes: "This is his last good-bye, his last blessing for his faithful S[ecretary]. I have never seen him look at anyone in this way, and it had to be you." I prompted ejaculatory prayers. At a quarter to two Don Bosco entered into agony. Father Rua and Bishop Cagliero recited the ritual prayers. The death-rattle lasted until a quarter to five. Then, as the Angelus rang out from the bells of

gratiae, tu nos ab hoste protege, et mortis hora suscipe" [Roman Liturgy]; "In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum" [Luke 23:26 from Psalm 30(31): 6, Vulgata].

²⁰² Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 274-276, *FDBM* 937 B9-11.

our church, Don Bosco's rasping breath quieted down. Half a minute later he was dead. He was in paradise.²⁰³

It seems legitimate to conclude that, except for the personal episode just recorded, he was not present during those last few hours. He must have been exhausted and probably ill, from the physical and emotional strain, and was therefore forced at a certain point to leave the room.²⁰⁴

Therefore, for the details of that last day, and especially for the events which took place in the sick room in those few crucial hours before Don Bosco went to the Lord, we rely on Enria's recollections.

By Monday morning [January 30], Don Bosco's right arm was completely paralyzed. He still spoke occasional words to Father Rua, to Bishop Cagliero, to Father Viglietti, and to a few others who were present. Then he whispered: "May God's will be done in all things;" adding repeatedly: "Mary, Mary;" "Pray, pray!" Those were, I might say, his last words. By midday he had lost all speech. All the superiors stood around his bed. Not being able to move his right arm, he pointed to heaven with his left, as though wanting to say: "May God's will be done; all for his honor and glory;" or, "Pray, my dear children." At intervals he raised his left arm; but by evening he could no longer do even that. Throughout the day an uninterrupted procession of people, Salesians and boys, diocesan priests, benefactors, and lay people, passed through the room. They wanted to kiss his hand for the last time — that consecrated hand which through sacramental absolution had saved so many souls, wresting them from the demon and restoring them to God. Bishop [Basilio] Leto [of Biella] remained a long time by his bed, and from time to time he prompted beautiful ejaculatory prayers. His confessor [Father Giacomelli], Bishop Cagliero and Father Rua did the same. Poor Father Rua was sick with grief. At 9 P.M. all the members of the general council were gathered around the bed. They were all deeply moved, and no one wanted to leave for the night. They moved instead to the adjoining room where they watched and prayed the Lord and Mary Help of Christians for our beloved Father.

²⁰³ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, pp. 40f., "January 30, 1888," *FDBM* 1227 D8. Cf. note 1 and related text, above.

²⁰⁴ That he took ill and had to be sent away for a long convalescence is confirmed by his statement in the *Scrapbook-Style Collection 1886-1896* [*FDBM* 1230 D5f.]: "January 31, 1888. After Don Bosco's death I was taken to the house of Dr. Celestino Vignolo Lutati. — February 4. I returned to the Oratory. Mrs. Consuelo Pascual de Martí-Codolar, her son, and her nephew Joaquín arrived from Barcelona. They came to take me home to Barcelona with them. I left with them on February 9. I stayed in Barcelona [some time], for I was very ill. I was then taken to the villa of the Martí-Codolar family at Horta and stayed there until I got well. Joaquín Martí-Pascual accompanied me back to Turin."

At about 1:30 A.M., Don Bosco gave such a start that even the bed shook. Then his breathing became so labored that we feared the end had come, and his blessed soul would wing its way to heaven. Father Rua and Bishop Cagliero prayed over him, while the rest of us knelt around the bed and kept our gaze fixed on our good Father's countenance. I cannot describe that sorrowful scene and the grief of all present. We were all in tears, mixing prayers and loud sobs. But the Lord took pity on our dear Father and sent some relief, so that the labored breathing which frightened and grieved us so became calmer. Seizing the opportunity, the reverend Father Rua turned to Don Bosco and said: "Reverend Father, we are gathered here, a good number of your oldest sons, priests and brothers, and we ask for your blessing. Please bless us, and bless also all your children scattered throughout the world and in the missions. Since you cannot move your right arm, I shall raise it for you, and shall pronounce the words of blessing. Follow them in your mind and bless all our Salesians and our young people."

A new crisis followed, and no words can describe the grief of all bystanders. God permitted that saintly body to suffer to the last; but the crisis passed, and by and by his breathing became calm once again, almost normal. Again everyone retired to the adjoining room to pray and wait. I remained by Don Bosco's bed. At about 4 A.M. I became aware that his breathing was no longer smooth, and beads of perspiration were appearing. I stepped into the adjoining room and alerted all the superiors. When all were again kneeling around the bed, the prayers were said and the litanies added; after which the bishop read the *Proficiscere* [Depart, O Christian soul]. Then without our being aware of it, while all of us kept our eyes fixed on that dear countenance, Don Bosco fell asleep in the Lord. It was 4:45 in the morning of Tuesday, January 31, 1888. Don Bosco died effortlessly. We still kept kneeling and looking at him. He seemed asleep. But his soul had already flown to heaven to receive in God's beautiful paradise the reward prepared for him for his heroic virtues and labors. One cannot describe the grief we all experienced in those moments. Still kneeling around the bed, we kept praying and weeping. We could not take our eyes off that revered countenance. It seemed that he would wake up at any moment and address to us some further word of encouragement and advice. Everyone was crushed with grief. But Father Rua said: "We have lost our loving Father [on earth], but we have gained a powerful protector in heaven. He will intercede before the throne of God and of Mary Most Holy for all his beloved orphaned children here on earth. You may rest assured that Don Bosco will always be alive among us. Let us keep his spirit alive and let us impart it also to our young people. If this is done, God will cause our Father Don Bosco to live among us till the end of the world."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 276-282, *FDBM* 937 B11-C5.

This is Enria's emotional conclusion. The final 60 lines of his chronicle²⁰⁶ describe the mourning, the lying in state for three days, the endless stream of people paying their respects, and the splendid funeral attended by Church and civic authorities and a great crowd of people—"to honor the world's greatest benefactor of the young."

Viglietti's envoy, on the other hand, is a more personal, deeply grieving lament:

Poor child, your chronicle is ended. You loved your good father so much! Who will comfort you in your bereavement? I know I have done all I could for my adored father. If there were times when I displeased him, I hope he will have forgiven me. He loved me so much. I will not dare make comparison; but, yes, I was his favorite son.²⁰⁷

Conclusion

Having reached the end of my journey (for the length of which I beg the reader's kind indulgence) I will be permitted a concluding comment. Clearly Don Bosco died a saintly death. He died, as he had lived, in union with Christ crucified, calling on Mary's intercession, in prayer of total surrender to God. And this, remarkable though it is, comes as no surprise to us.

But the perusal of these chronicles and memoirs has been for me a deeply moving experience in another way: it has revealed new facets of Don Bosco's radiant spiritual life.

Don Bosco's patient endurance of excruciating pain is one of the most remarkable features of the story of his last years, and more especially of his last days. "May God's holy will be done in my regard," was one of Don Bosco's most oft-repeated prayers. And not only did this great and holy man endure his pain; he made light of it. He found strength within himself to disguise his pain with wit and light-hearted banter. He witnessed the dissolution of his body with humor and grace.

Don Bosco's "humanity" is revealed at every step in the record of the chronicles. Here is a man who has achieved much in his life time and has received recognition, even to the point of adulation, from all quarters. Here also is a man who, in utter truthfulness, comes to terms with his limitations, humbly acknowledges his helplessness and need, and trustingly gives himself over into the care of others.

On the other hand, the devoted and unstinted service rendered to Don Bosco by his spiritual sons appears altogether amazing. Not only did the few who were his attendants remain constantly at his side, but many others, certainly all of his

²⁰⁶ Enria, *Memoir*, pp. 182-185. *FDBM* 937 C5-8.

²⁰⁷ Viglietti, *Original Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, p. 41, *FDBM* 1227 D8.

close associates, spent endless hours at his bedside caring for him with incredible love. These chronicles are witnesses of a constant outpouring of love and affection by most devoted children towards a beloved father. And this was no mere dutiful service. It was the heart's grateful response to a father's true love, devotion, and concern for his children over a life time.

The chronicles are irrefutable proof that Don Bosco remained an active moral and spiritual force to the end. He maintained control of the affairs of the congregation throughout the period of his quasi-retirement. There was no disillusionment, no despondency, no isolation, no senility in that man, in spite of physical aging and of crippling ailments. Vigor of spirit, lucidity of mind, interest in all affairs, desire to work on, remained undiminished to the end. Evidence of this unflagging activity, interest, and concern are the strenuous journeys undertaken on behalf of the congregation throughout the period of his quasi-retirement, the *Spiritual Testament*, and from his bed of pain the ceaseless outpouring of spiritual advice, counsel, and moral encouragement for his sons and daughters. His spirit lives on.