

FRANCIS DESRAMAUT

LIFE OF FR MICHAEL RUA

DON BOSCO'S FIRST SUCCESSOR

(1837-1910)

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Overall revision by Aldo Giraudo based on archival sources

INTRODUCTION

The centenary of the death of Blessed Michael Rua offers us a chance to take stock of the life of Don Bosco's first successor. The Salesian Family owes much to him. What would it have become without Father Michael Rua?

Others in the past have written up his life. Soon after he died, his constant friend, Fr John Baptist Francesia (1838-1930) published a 220 page book, *D. Michele Rua, primo successore di Don Bosco* (Turin, 1911), its only limitation being, perhaps, its excessive enthusiasm for its chief character. Later, when the Beatification and Canonisation process began, a number of testimonies to his virtues ensued.

Thus, by the beginning of the 1930s, the editor of the *Bollettino Salesiano*, Angelo Amadei (1868-1945), who had easy access to the Central Archives of the Congregation, began gathering a large number of documents which resulted in a monumental three volume work with a total of 2,388 pages, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua* (Turin, 1931-1934). Amadei had kept himself well informed. For example, he even had recourse to the Salesian Sisters' local chronicles. But in a desire to overlook nothing, he accumulated testimonies and facts, using a purely chronological criterion to link them, year after year, without ever being concerned about constructing a true and proper account. The only exception to his way of proceeding was that he drew up an interesting and detailed moral portrait of Fr Rua based on the years 1898 to 1899. For the rest, it all seems mixed together in a huge hotchpotch: "a bazaar, a muddle", as Fr Ceria said to me one day, when he was talking about the tenth volume of the *Memorie biografiche*, a work by the same author and written according to the same criteria. Besides, Amadei did not specify the sources of his information, and completely ignored any system of reference. His biography, then, while an extremely worthy one, should be used prudently. Out of a desire for precision we might add that confreres had asked him for a digest of the work, under the title: *Un altro Don Bosco, Don Rua* (Turin, 1934, 703 pages).

One of his colleagues of the time, Augustine Auffray (1881-1955), who edited the French *Bulletin Salésien* in Turin, was very careful instead not to fall into the same literary limitations, and put together a true biography of Fr Rua: *Un saint formé par un autre saint. Le premier successeur de Don Bosco, Don Rua* (Paris-Lyon, 1932, 412 pages), a work immediately translated into Italian. Auffray built up his story intelligently, dividing it into 49 chapters, accurately organised and with a certain elegance of style. It is true that a critical reader today might turn up his nose at the images and Pindaric flights of fancy, but just the same the book is the first presentable biography of Fr Rua, pleasing to read and sufficiently well-founded (though he too forgets to reference his sources).

Another writer, this time an Italian, Eugene Ceria (1870-1957), was inspired by Auffray's method and style while putting together the final volumes of the *Memorie biografiche* of Don Bosco, and published a *Vita del Servo di Dio don Michele Rua, primo successore di san Giovanni Bosco* (Turin, 1949, 600 pages) after the Second World War. It is solidly documented, well put together and well written. He also benefited from a direct knowledge of Fr Rua whom he had met personally. Its 46

chapters are much better by a long shot when compared to Amadei's. Notes are kept to a minimum, which would be a somewhat serious limitation for scholars. But from the moment that he possessed first hand information he probably considered himself lawfully dispensed. His biography of Fr Rua still presents as one of excellent quality.

It might have been enough to re-publish and translate this work of Ceria's for the centenary year. Nevertheless, I believe that no biography is ever definitive. Existing documentation must always be reinterpreted in view of questions raised by researchers. New and neglected documents are always gone back over, as we see in the DVD *Documenti di don Rua*, prepared in 2007 and edited by the *Committee for Historical Studies of Fr Rua 2010*, which we need to exploit more systematically. But many letters and documents on Fr Rua still lie completely unknown in Salesian provincial archives in various parts of the world. An understanding of his theology of reference is still imperfect. We have no studies of his preaching. We know that he carefully followed up missionaries sent to the Americas: what shape did this ever-attentive direction take? To what extent did he encourage (or moderate) the marked 'Italianness' of the Salesian Society at the time? What stage did Salesian formation reach during his time as Rector Major? And besides, the serious questions relating to Rectors-confessors still need to be studied, as well as the juridical separation between the Salesian Congregation and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. These deserve a more accurate analysis than I have given them here ...

So in short, this book does not pretend to tackle the subject in any radically new way. Indeed, I frequently recognise my debt to earlier works, especially the one by Fr Ceria, not just for his life of Fr Rua, but also for his *Annali della Società Salesiana*. I also confess that I was regretfully unable to make use of documents at first hand which may have led me to modify the story at certain points. What I have done is provide a rather free re-reading of documentation found in the *Fondo Don Rua* at the Salesian Central Archive in Rome, made available to researchers in microfilm. And in particular I was unable to benefit from research still in progress at the vigil of the 2010 Centenary. I hope that someone able to fill in the gaps will soon come along.

Toulon, 31 January 2009.

ABBREVIATIONS

Amadei	A. Amadei, <i>Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua</i> , 3 Vols., Turin, SEI, 1931-1934.
<i>Annali</i>	E. Ceria, <i>Annali della Società Salesiana</i> , Turin, SEI, 1941-1951.
ASC	Archivio Salesiano Centrale - Rome (Salesian Central Archives, Rome)
Auffray	A. Auffray, <i>Le premier successeur de Don Bosco, Don Rua (1837-1910)</i> , Lyon-Paris, Vitte, 1932.
Ceria, <i>Vita Documents</i>	E. Ceria, <i>Vita del Servo di Dio Don Michele Rua</i> , Turin, SEI, 1949. G. B. Lemoyne, <i>Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. John Bosco, dell'Oratorio di s. Francesco di Sales e della Congregaz. Salesiana</i> , 45 volumes, in ASC A050-A094 (FdB 966A8-1201A9).
<i>Don Bosco en son temps</i>	F. Desramaut, <i>Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)</i> , Turin, SEI, 1996.
<i>Epistolario</i>	John Bosco, <i>Epistolario</i> , ed. Francis Motto, vols. 1-4, Rome, LAS, 1991-2003.
<i>Epistolario Ceria</i>	<i>Epistolario di S. John Bosco</i> , ed. Fr. Eugene Ceria, 4 vols., Turin, SEI, 1955-1959.
FdB	ASC, <i>Fondo Don Bosco</i> . Microfilm and description, Rome, 1980.
FdR	ASC, <i>Fondo Don Rua</i> . Microfilm and description, Rome, 1996.
Francesia	<i>D. Michele Rua, primo successore di Don Bosco</i> . Memorie del Sac. G. B. Francesia, Turin, Office of "Letture cattoliche", 1911.
L.C.	<i>Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani</i> , Turin, S.A.I.D. Buona Stampa, 1910.
MB	G. B. Lemoyne, A. Amadei, E. Ceria, <i>Memorie biografiche di Don John Bosco</i> , 19 Vols., San Benigno Canavese and Turin, 1898-1948.
<i>Positio 1935</i>	<i>Sacra Rituum Congregatione. Taurinen. Beatificationis ac Canonizationis Servi Dei Sac. Michaelis Rua. Positio super introductione Causae</i> , Rome, Guerra et Belli, 1935.
<i>Positio 1947</i>	<i>Sacra Rituum Congregatione. Taurinen. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Michaelis Rua. Positio super virtutibus</i> , Romae, Guerra e Belli, 1947.
RSS	<i>Ricerche Storiche Salesiane</i> , Rome, LAS.

1 - MICHAEL RUA'S CHILDHOOD

The City of Turin during the decade 1830-1840

By contrast with John Bosco the country lad who discovers the city only when he turns fifteen when he comes to Chieri as a student, Michael Rua was born in Turin, the capital of the Kingdom of Sardinia, where he would live for the rest of his life. He would always be a city-dweller, a child of the city in its pre-industrial period which was only slowly evolving from a past it still looked back to proudly to a more liberal period of constitutional monarchy.

In the 1830s Turin had 100,000 inhabitants and was enjoying a good reputation in Europe.¹ Outsiders praised "the orderly homes, the wide, neat streets, the convenience of water, which they call the Dora, the delightful walks, the excellent police, the kindness of its inhabitants, its famous museum, splendid cafes and many other beautiful things... Here they have...comfortable and beautiful arcades for every need".² This dignity came from its political circumstance. During the Restoration which followed the interruption of the Napoleonic period, after union with Liguria, the city became the most important capital in the Italian States of the time, if not for its size, at least for its organisation and economic might. The activity in the munitions works which provided for the army, and all the new industries, especially textile industries, attracted people from the Provinces. In Borgo Dora factories sprung up which provided jobs for several hundred workers, with chimneys that polluted the atmosphere.

Turin was still living under the reactionary regime of the Restoration. The king had absolute power. The ministers were answerable to him alone. In 1821, after several days of disturbances, this system seemed to waver for a moment when the proclamation of a constitution was imminent, but it was immediately restored by King Charles Felix. He was particularly concerned about the education of the young, as we see from the *Regulation for schools outside of University*, promulgated in 1822. It was necessary, one reads in the royal licences introducing it, to restore order in public education in the Kingdom, whose old orders had been overturned by the revolution and by the introduction of new orders, now rendered obsolete by the "happy era of May 1814". His intention was to provide for the moral and scientific education of the young in the Municipal, Public and Royal schools of the Kingdom. The reorganisation of the ancient disciplines, thanks to which "subjects of our royal predecessors were renowned for their culture, and no less their wisdom", appeared to be the most appropriate way to form young people along lines similar to their forbears who "considered learning, the Throne and God to be one indivisible truth".³ They were convinced that religion, the monarchy, and learning would contribute to shaping the minds and hearts of the young during the years of Restoration. But unfortunately education in Turin was only accessible to families who were fortunate enough.

¹ Here I am drawing from data from my *Don Bosco en son temps*, Turin, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1996, 132-140.

² Letter of Pier Francesco Cometti to the Vicar of the City, 10 May 1840, quoted by Umberto Levra, *L'altro volto di Torino risorgimentale, 1814-1848*, Torino, Comitato di Torino dell'Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano, 1989, 162.

³ *Royal licences with which His Majesty approved the Regulations for Schools be they municipal or public or royal*. Dated 23 July 1822, Turin, Royal Press, 1822, 3-4.

In fact this great city did not offer an ordered and civil aspect alone. The poor were there in abundance, and often homeless. "From statistics drawn up by charitable congregations, we see that Turin, with 125,000 inhabitants, had 30,000 poor", we find written in 1845. Beggars swarmed around and pestered passers-by. "We are surrounded, besieged every day by beggars; and their number is such that, even supposing that they were all truly poor and not just pretending, one could not possibly have either the means or the time to stop and deal with everyone, and help them all. So we are forced to go on our way paying attention neither to their tears nor their most moving oaths which at least theoretically should never fall on any deaf ear, especially the ear of a Christian".⁴ Beggars crowded the streets and footpaths around the city. You found them under the arcades, at the doors of churches and near the more expensive cafes, where, as one citizen complained, they never ceased pestering passers-by with the most daring persistence.⁵

Some of Turin's poor lived on the rapidly expanding outskirts of Borgo Dora, San Donato and Vanchiglia. But the most infamous group lived around the borders of Vanchiglia, in the area known as the Moschino. There you found fishermen, boatmen and the most miserable part of Turin's poor people. A contemporary writes thus: "It is impossible to express the disgust one feels when, either carrying out one's duty as a doctor, or to gather statistics, one goes round those filthy laneways, set apart from the business area, ignorant of all hygiene; human sewers standing as an accusation of human injustice which gives so much to some, while others have not even soil, air or sun".⁶ The Moschino was, for middle class Turinese, a collection of the worst sort of riff-raff, a lair for feared *coca* (organised gangs); dangerous by day and inaccessible by night even to the police.

These disastrous life circumstances generated moral disorder of equal proportions. In Turin the number of illegitimate births and infanticides was very high - one in four such births. During 1830-1840 it was just one in twelve in Genoa, the second largest city in the State, one in thirteen in other cities and one in forty taking the Kingdom as a whole. As in the French novels of the time, the poor found comfort by taking refuge in hostleries of ill-repute, their entrances almost below street level, as effectively described by a writer of the time: "The stranger opened the glass door and found himself in a big room rather longer than wide, the walls darkened by smoke, a floor made of planks thick with mud dragged in here and there by the customers' feet, and in a thick, stinking atmosphere where the smoke fully succeeded in carrying out much the same function as the dense fog outside that winter's evening".⁷

In this huge city undergoing the process of industrialisation poor children were particularly penalised. In 1840, a citizen complained to the city's Mayor "On every corner, at every crossroad in the arcades you are besieged by a crowd of *décrotteurs* [shoe-shine boys] competing to stop anyone from walking on, and they keep following them once they have passed by, forever yelling at them insolently, even from twenty

⁴ [L. Francesetti di Mezzenile], *Memorie sulla necessità di avvisare ai mezzi onde isbandire la mendicizia*, Turin, Tip. Chirio and Mina, 1829, 3 (text quoted in Levra, *L'altro volto*, 80).

⁵ Levra. *L'altro volto*, 81.

⁶ Report by Gioacchino Valerio, quoted in Levra, *L'altro volto*, 165.

⁷ Vittorio Bersezio, *La plebe. Romanzo sociale*, part I, Turin, C. Favale and Co, 1867, 3.

steps away”.⁸ The factories ruined the little ones. The same year a journalist denounced the plague “Whoever sets foot in a factory and especially in a silk factory will be sadly surprised to see a swarm of kids, cursing unconsciously all the while, emaciated, ragged and covered in mud, hitting each other, stealing from one another, little things that will lead them to crime; and he will be horrified to think of the sad future awaiting those little blond heads, when just a little care would be sufficient to give them all the manners, graces and virtues (since even this age has its virtues) of childhood”.⁹ These children lived on the street. Their misdeeds were deplored in Turin: “One of the many scourges gnawing at society and which, despite the most marked solicitude by authorities and police, has not been alleviated, is for sure the pickpockets who fill not only the streets and squares but even break into the royal palaces and the churches. Not a day goes by without complaints of theft of tobacco, watches, purses, handkerchiefs, needing real sleight of hand to accomplish”.¹⁰ Beautiful Turin, then, presented quite another side

Fortunately, Turin also had a tradition of very staunch charity. The city had a number of charitable works: hospitals, clinics, hostels, orphanages, shelters or asylums. As well as there being ancient charitable institutions, on 10 June 1837 a *Home for the Poor* was opened, aimed at people of both genders and any age from the city and the province. Anyone there would receive a daily ration of eighteen ounces of good bread and two brimming bowls of soup. When their health required it, beggars would also be given wine and a better menu. They wore a uniform and slept in large separate dormitories. If they accepted work, they had a right to half their earnings. Right from the beginning the number of residents quickly rose to 498. In 1838 the eighteenth century *Hotel of Virtue* was renamed as the *Hospital of Charity* and restructured as a technical school funded by private and public charity. Apprentices had the chance of later being employed in the workshops where they had learned their trade. Then there were the private institutions, amongst them the Barolo Charitable Work which involved a *Rifugio* (Shelter) for former women prisoners and penitent prostitutes and a monastery for penitents, who were known as *Magdalenes*. This charitable work quickly grew. But the Turinese charitable work of greatest importance was certainly the Little House of Divine Providence, founded by Canon Joseph Cottolengo. In 1832 he had transferred a small hospital for the very poor to Valdocco, one he had opened three years earlier, and which soon developed and by now had taken in a number of "families" of orphans, invalids, deaf-mutes, epileptics, mentally handicapped persons, prostitutes and was also a minor seminary. In 1840, at the heart of the accursed Moschino, bordering on the suburb of Vanchiglia, one of the more interesting institutions arose. The young priest Fr Cocchi founded a centre for neglected children, the Guardian Angels "Oratory", modelled on the Roman Oratory of St Philip Neri.

⁸ Letter by Pier Francesco Cometti to the Vicar, 7 December 1840, cited in Levra, *L'altro volto*, 86.

⁹ Lorenzo Valerio, *Igiene e moralità degli operai di seterie*, Turin, Baglione & Co., 1840, 20-21; cited by Claudio Felloni and Roberto Audisio, *I giovani discoli*, in Giuseppe Bracco (ed.), *Torino e don Bosco*, Turin, City Historical archives, 1989, vol. 1, 100.

¹⁰ ASCT, *Vicariato, Atti criminali*, vol. 114, minutes of 5 February 1846 (cf. Claudio Felloni and Roberto Audisio, *I giovani discoli*, in Giuseppe Bracco (ed.), *Torino e don Bosco*, Torino, City Historical Archives, 1989, 102).

The Rua family at the Forge factory

During the Restoration, at the invitation of certain intellectuals (Gioberti, Balbo, d'Azeglio), the army was reformed and given greater strength. The dream was to unite all of Italy, for which the Kingdom of Sardinia would be the driving force. This required a strong Piedmontese State. In Borgo Dora an important arms industry was constructed, called *The cannon Forge*. The factory had its own chaplain, and a small chapel. Some of the managing personnel lived within. John Baptist Ruà was the manager and his family, into which Michael was born, lived at the Forge itself.

By contrast with the Italian reader, the French reader does not note the accent on the *a* in the Ruà surname in administrative documents from the first part of the 19th Century.¹¹ There is a certain assonance between this word and the French term *roi*, meaning *king*. Amadei made note of it in his biography of Fr Rua. But he made a mistake. The name *Des Rois* does not lie at its origins.¹² In the France of the *Ancien Régime*, *roi* (i.e. king) is pronounced *roa* or even *roé*, never *roua*. So let's not complicate matters. Maybe the French form *roua*, not *roi*, is more plausible. If, as it seems, the Ruà forebears belonged to a French-speaking population, they would simply have been called *Roua*, then transposed into Italian as *Ruà*. The hypotheses could be more likely if we consider that the name Rouat is presently common in France and in French-speaking Canada. At any rate already by halfway through the 19th Century, the final accent had disappeared, in its Italian usage, and had shifted to the first vowel in the diphthong. The earlier pronunciation was now definitively forgotten.

A second marriage makes the presentation of Michael Rua's family a little more complicated¹³ His father, John Baptist, probably born in 1786, if we believe the first certificate of marriage which says he was "about 28 years old" (the baptism and family certificates have not been found). John Baptist was married the first time on 25 April 1814 to Catherine Grimaldi, by whom he had five children.¹⁴ Three of them died at a tender age. Around 1827, Catherine died at age 31.¹⁵ John Baptist then married Joan Mary Ferrero, 34 years of age and the mother of Michael, and then she looked after the two children of the first marriage, Peter Fedele and John Baptist Anthony.

Michael, born on 9 June 1837 and baptised on 11 June 1837 in the church of Our Lady of the Snows and Saints Simon and Jude in Turin,¹⁶ was the fourth and last child of Joan Mary. The earlier ones were named John Baptist (born 2 July 1829), Mary Felicity (born 7 March 1834) and Louis Thomas (born towards the end of 1834). Mary Felicity died when Michael was born, so he found himself at home with two step-brothers, Peter Fedele (22) and John Baptist Anthony (17), and two blood-brothers, John Baptist (8) and Louis Thomas (3). One can easily understand why Michael

¹¹ See, for example, the handwritten lists of the Ruà in the Salesian Central Archive, FdR 2750 B10-D4.

¹² Amadei I, 3.

¹³ In these two sections, I am inspired by the more or less advanced and at times quite critical Amadei I, 4-5.

¹⁴ The marriage certificate was published in Amadei I, 4, n. 2.

¹⁵ It was 26 April 1828 and he was just 32, according to Amadei (I, 5), but he refers to the death certificate of "Ruà Teresa, of Peter Baratelli still living, wife of Gioanni, about 32, who given the Sacraments, died there on 26 April 1828 and was buried there on the 27th" (FdR 2750 C4). Therefore he confuses 'Catterina Grimaldi' with 'Teresa Baratelli'. There were other Ruà families in Turin at the time.

¹⁶ Extract of Baptism in FdR 2750D12.

remained very affectionate towards this last one.

Michael and school at the Forge

This leaves us to understand that Joan Mary took particular care of the education of her last born, her favourite.

Michael learned to read and write, and studied the diocesan catechism. The first biographers tell us that he had an excellent memory. The catechism lessons remained firmly impressed on his heart and mind and stayed with him for the rest of his days. At a distance of a century and a half, the dogmatic and moralistic style of the catechism would be unfairly scorned by many priests and laity. In reality it was a tool able to offer young minds, like that of the young Rua, a religious framework that would stand the test of time. One learned what to think and believe about God and his Christ, of divine judgement of sinners, of life after death, of the chief Christian virtues, God's commandments and the commandments of the Church, of sins and sacraments.¹⁷ Christians formed this way had no need to be forever seeking elusive certainties.

We quote here just the main ideas of the Catechism which the Rua family took so seriously. The Christian's daily practices reminded him daily of the principal points of Christian doctrine. In the morning they consisted of a prayer of adoration, "I adore you, my God and I love you with all my heart...", followed by the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed, a prayer to the Guardian Angel, then the listing of the commandments of God, precepts of the Church, the Sacraments, after which an act of faith, hope, charity and an act of sorrow. In the evening they recited the "I adore you", the Our Father, Hail Mary, prayer to the Guardian Angel and the act of sorrow.¹⁸

In this old-style Piedmontese family, this was the way one became a Christian almost without realising it. Michael learned to serve Mass, which also gave him an opportunity for a little mischief. When he became Rector Major he would happily confess this. In 1894, in Cavaglià, a Piedmontese town near Biella, they were celebrating the opening of a Salesian school. The old priest, an executive witness for the founder who had recently died, welcomed Fr Rua and a group of people invited for the occasion to dinner. When it came time for the dessert, Fr Rua stood up to propose the toast: "I don't know, Father, if you recall a lively, mischievous young lad who used serve your Mass when you were the Rector of the Church of the Catechumens in Turin and who used to drink the wine cruet afterwards. Well then, Father, that young mischievous lad you were so kind to, and to whom you occasionally gave some money, was me and now here I am to sincerely ask you for forgiveness, even if a little late". The Arch-priest's brother, who told the story, added: "you can just imagine the hilarity amongst the diners, along with their admiration of his modesty in so publicly confessing something from his childhood. The old man wept like a child".¹⁹

Michael was soon ready to receive the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.

¹⁷ See the *Breve catechismo per li fanciulli che si dispongono alla confessione e prima comunione e per tutti quelli che hanno da imparare gli elementi della dottrina cristiana ad uso della Diocesi di Torino*, Turin, Eredi Botta, 1844.

¹⁸ Boarders in Salesian houses once upon a time were familiar with this, somewhat enriched in the *Companion of Youth*, the prayer book published by Don Bosco in 1847 then published repeatedly until 1960.

¹⁹ Anecdote recounted by Ceria, *Vita*, 10.

According to the parish registers at St Joachim's, he was confirmed by Archbishop Louis Fransoni on 25 April 1845. He was not yet eight years old. He made his first communion the same year.²⁰

During the second semester of 1845, a decisively fruitful year of events for him, Michael lost his father. John Baptist Ruà died "around sixty years of age". The older brothers left the family home. Despite her husband's death, Joan Mary and her children kept their place at the Forge, where the first born son was employed.

The second event that year which had the most long-lasting importance for him, was his encounter with Don Bosco: "I came to know the Servant of God in September of 1845, when I was eight years old", he would testify at the Canonisation process. Don Bosco was thirty. A priest for four years, he was one of the chaplains at the Barolo Shelter, where he had been called to take up the direction of the *Ospedaletto* still under construction. Since his childhood he had had the gift of attracting children and older youth around him to amuse them and instruct them. It was his passion and he was very successful at it. He came to Turin in 1841, and soon began gathering and organising a group of boys to whom he taught catechism in the small chapel at the Pastoral Institute, adjacent to the Church of St Francis of Assisi, where he attended courses in Pastoral Ministry (confession, spiritual direction and preaching). Three years later when he became chaplain at the Barolo Shelter, the boys went and found him in his room. The small number on the first day soon grew. The other two chaplains helped him. The Marchioness Barolo had given them a room in the already completed wing of the *Ospedaletto*, one which had been set up as a chapel dedicated to St Francis of Sales. They prayed, sang and played, and listened to wonderful instructions and splendid stories. At the Shelter, in the Autumn of 1844, the "Oratory of St Francis of Sales" took on a shape similar to Fr Cocchi's Oratory of the Guardian Angels in Vanchiglia.

But the Marchioness had already forewarned the chaplains of the temporary nature of their placement. When the *Ospedaletto* opened in the following August, the Oratory of St Francis of Sales had to vacate the premises. This made it necessary to find another chapel and a playground for the boys, other than the street that ran past the Shelter. Between May and June they tried to set up in a disused cemetery, St Peter In Chains, which also had a chapel. The authorities chased them out. They then presented a demand to the city administration, which on 18 July 1845, granted them Sunday afternoon use of the church at the *Mulini* (Mill) near the river Dora. They were tolerated there only until December. The youngsters in fact spilled over immediately into the nearby square, which alarmed the residents who were concerned about the cleanliness and peacefulness of their neighbourhood. All this moving around Borgo Dora aroused interest and attracted the attention of many to Don Bosco. Michael Rua became aware of it when the Oratory set up temporarily at the *Mulini*. Mrs Rua would not allow her younger son to mix with the boys on the street: so as far as we know, it was one of his classmates who spoke of Don Bosco to him and went with him to the Shelter. Michael was immediately fascinated by the kindly and smiling priest.

²⁰ According to Angelo Amadei's deposition at the Information Process for Fr Rua's Beatification, FdR 4350B4.

The Risorgimento in Turin

The years that followed Michael's encounter with Don Bosco were turbulent ones. The process of the Italian *Risorgimento* was under-way. In Rome in 1846 the "liberal" Pope Pius IX succeeded Pope Gregory XVI. People who were more open would have liked him to lead a crusade to free and unify the whole Peninsula. There was a need especially to get out from under the Austrian yoke which had humiliated Lombardy-Venice. On the 4 March 1848, the Piedmontese gave themselves a basic law, the Statute, which abrogated the absolute nature of the monarchy. A parliament was elected and liberal thinking began to make headway in the Kingdom of Sardinia. All citizens, including Jews and Waldensians, were declared equal. Love for one's country aroused enthusiasm everywhere, including amongst the lower echelons of the clergy, beginning with seminarians, much to the displeasure of the conservative Archbishop Luigi Fransoni. On the 23 March King Charles Albert declared war on Austria in order to liberate Lombardy. Unfortunately he was defeated and had to abdicate in favour of his son Victor Emmanuel II (23 March 1849). Meanwhile in Rome Pius IX, who was not well disposed to accepting a military crusade of this kind, was forced by an uprising to take refuge in the Kingdom of Naples. The Roman Republic was proclaimed, and the Pope, in the eyes of the more ardent patriots, became a symbol of obscurantist conservatism hostile to the Italian *Risorgimento*.

Meanwhile Michael Rua began to think about the priesthood. The social climate was certainly not conducive to vocations, as Don Bosco would explain in the preface of one of his writings: "That year (1848) a giddy spirit had arisen which was against religious orders and ecclesiastical congregations; and from there against the clergy and any Church authority. This furore and disregard for religion resulted in distancing young people from morality, piety; and therefore from vocations to the ecclesiastical state. Religious Institutes were dispersed; priests were vilified, some imprisoned, others kept under house arrest: humanly speaking how could one speak of religious vocations?"²¹

Michael attends the Brothers school

During these tormented years, Michael was not yet attending Don Bosco's Oratory, which since 1846 had transferred definitively to Valdocco in the Pinardi House where a shed had been transformed into a chapel. His mother did not allow him. The entire family attended Sunday mass at the chapel in the Forge. But the boy kept in touch with Don Bosco just the same. Sometimes, with his older brother Louis, he visited him at the Oratory. But he was able to see him especially, and probably speak with him also at school. Maybe it was Don Bosco himself who directed him to the school in the suburb of *Santa Barbara*, run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (whom we will call the de La Salle Brothers henceforth, since in English this is how they are usually referred to). In fact the Valdocco priest was a close friend of the Brothers' Provincial. In 1845 he had dedicated his first book, *Storia ecclesiastica (Church History)* "to my esteemed Brother Hervé-de-la-Croix, Provincial of the de La Salle Brothers", asking him to accept this humble gift, "this little work...; may it be no longer mine but his". The

²¹ *Cenno storico sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti*, Rome, Poliglotta, 1874, 3.

Institute's historian, Georges Rigault, after quoting this, writes: "John Bosco was very interested in Lasallian pedagogy. The provincial superior had taken a lead in this study. He took advantage of his innate understanding of the child's mind in frequent conversations with him and by reading the *School handbook* and the *Twelve Virtues of a good teacher*".²² This is very likely the case.

In October 1848, Michael then began to follow classes at the district school of *Santa Barbara*, located in Via Borgo Dora n. 29, where he attended for two years. If our information is correct, he was immediately enrolled in the second year of upper primary. The curriculum would see that he learned, "as well as religious studies, the precepts of literary composition, the system of weights and measures in use in Piedmont, the metric-decimal system recently adopted, the geography of Asia and Africa, the history of the Dukes of Savoy, from Amadeus VII to Charles Emmanuel II, elements of natural history, drawing and calligraphy".²³ These courses, then, completed the basic education already received in the lower primary classes.

The Brothers maintained that education took precedence over instruction. At school Michael refined the education he had received in the family. The pupils in the primary classes were invited to read the treatise written by the founder, St John Baptist de La Salle, on the *Rules of good manners and Christian education*. In Michael's time, in all the Brothers schools, pupils were harshly dealt with if they gave the impression of transgressing these rules. They had to show a good attitude towards the teaching about "modesty". The *Rules* warned them: "nothing contributes more to the gracefulness of the body, the honesty of precise habits, by which a young man observes the natural state of his body and the movement of the parts of the body". Then "young men are too prone to defects which offend in this area against modesty and honesty. Good manners means that one holds one's head straight and high, without bending it to one or the other side; not turning to the right or left distractedly".

As we can see from the headings of the various chapters, the booklet on "good manners" was filled with tiny details. These concerned, in the following order, the head and the eyes, hair, face, forehead, nose, mouth, lips, teeth and tongue, way of speaking and enunciating, yawning, coughing and spitting; how to hold one's back straight, shoulders, arms and elbows, hands, fingers, fingernails, knees, legs and feet. Repeating norms of comportment which were popular in the very orderly French society of the nineteenth century would seem bizarre and exaggerated today. But on the basis of this detail which seems excessive to someone living in our individualist way, there was the greatest of respect for oneself and others. One's attitude in public always had to be perfectly disciplined. "Children should never interrupt someone who is speaking with questions, even if they are serious and timely ones. When someone asks them something, they should answer modestly; and 'yes' and 'no' should have Mrs, Mrs, Miss added to them. They should be stopped from staring at those with whom they are speaking, or listening to someone speaking to others, while not paying attention to what is being said to them; or from laughing or sniggering while speaking; or speaking of things they know little about. In a word, they need to be convinced that it is their duty to listen, speak rarely and only what they know".

²² G. Rigault, *Histoire générale de l'Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrésiennes*, Vol. VI, Paris, Plon, 1947, 40-41.

²³ According to A. Auffray (p. 19), who takes up a "programme" probably given him by the Brothers in Turin.

Michael Rua, reserved and attentive by nature, absorbed these principles of good education without any difficulty. Thanks to them, as an adult he would find no difficulty in adapting to "good society".

Discipline was tough in the Brothers schools. The founder's treatise *La guida delle delle scuole cristiane* (or the *Handbook for Christian Schools*), translated into Italian in Turin by Pompa Publishers in 1834, illustrated these rules in detail. The Brothers were invited to read and re-read this long treatise. We do not know how detailed was the manner in which they were applied at *Santa Barbara's*, even if we must presume that the Brothers of the Nineteenth century did not overlook their traditions. At any rate the treatise as a whole helps us to understand the exact educational setting in which Michael grew up from eleven to thirteen years of age. Here are some of these rules, some of them surprising.

Silence at school: "The teacher will do well to get the pupils to understand that there are only three occasions when they may speak up, during recital of lessons, catechism and prayers. The teacher too will observe this rule, and will only speak up on three occasions: 1) during reading, when there is a need to make corrections, if there is no student who can do it; 2) during catechism; 3) during reflection and examen of conscience. Outside of these situations, he will speak up only when he considers it strictly necessary, and will see to it that such situations are rare. When the students come into class they should take their caps off, have their arms unfolded, by their side, and not drag their feet on the floor or make a noise with their clogs, in order not to disturb the silence that should obtain in the classroom. It will be easy for the teacher to see that silence is kept if he makes sure that the pupils are always seated in their own place, sitting straight up, facing the front and slightly inclined towards him; that they have their textbooks in hand and follow the reading; that their hands and arms are always kept in view; that they do not touch each other with their hands or feet; that they do not exchange things or knowing glances; that their legs are kept together and they are not touching their shoes or clogs; that they are not slouching at the desk while writing or in some other inconvenient position".²⁴

The School handbook has a long chapter on corrective methods. And rightly so, says the author. In effect "correcting students is one of the most important things in the art of teaching, and needs careful attention both in imposing it justly and fruitfully, both for those receiving it and those around".²⁵ punishments were administered with a strip of wood or leather on the outstretched hand, a rod (three blows, five if resistance was offered), or by means of "penances" generally consisting of a page of writing or a text to be learned by heart. John Baptist de La Salle knew that children need to have pity shown, but added: "If we have too much regard for human fragility and excessive understanding, letting them do what they want, we will end up with spoiled, unruly children full of disobedience".²⁶ This educator placed the need for the student's self-expression, held in high regard today, in second place. According to him the habitual behaviour of the teacher made everything easy: "teachers will learn to be very warm and available, and have a kindly, honest and open approach, without adopting either a mean or an over-friendly attitude; they should do everything for their students to win them over to Jesus Christ and be persuaded that authority is gained and maintained more, at

²⁴ Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, *Guida delle scuole cristiane*, in *Opere*, Vol. III, Roma, Città Nuova, 2000, 137-138.

²⁵ *Guida delle scuole*, 158.

²⁶ *Guida delle scuole*, 271.

school, through firmness, severity and silence than with blows and harsh words”.²⁷

Given premises of this kind, one can understand the enormous sensation created by the arrival of Don Bosco at *Santa Barbara's*, a priest who fostered friendly relationships with the young. Fr Rua was witness to this: “I recall that when Don Bosco came to say Mass and often to preach on Sundays, as soon as he entered the chapel it seemed like an electric shock had run through the many children. They jumped to their feet, left their places and crowded around and were not content until they had kissed his hand. It took him a long time to get as far as the sacristy. During that time the good de La Salle Brothers were unable to stop the apparent disorder and let things be”.²⁸

At the Brothers' school, Michael showed himself to be a devout, serious, committed and diligent student: he regularly gained “honourable” reports. His report cards, which we have, praise his “good conduct” and “application” in the second and third grade “upper primary”.²⁹ He would keep a fine memory of his school days. The Brothers' lessons about dignified behaviour in society and the *Guida* would influence him throughout his life.

²⁷ *Guida delle scuole*, 280.

²⁸ In *Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. John Bosco, dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales e della Congregaz. Salesiana*, Vol. III, 25 (ASC, A053), margin note copied in MB II, 316. In MB the following testimony which describes Don Bosco's besieged confessional, while those of other confessors were totally empty, could also be one of Lemoyne's exaggerations.

²⁹ These reports are reproduced in FdR 2665A1-7.

2 – DON BOSCO'S DISCIPLE

Studies Latin with Don Bosco

At thirteen years of age, and at the beginning of summer 1859, Michael began attending Latin classes for admission to Grammar school. He did this under Don Bosco's guidance. Don Bosco had his eyes on Rua since he wanted to make him a future collaborator in his apostolate.

Towards the end of the 1840s Don Bosco was developing into a charismatic individual, almost a miracle-worker in the eyes of his admirers in Turin. The Catholic Press began treating him as a celebratory in 1849. An article in the *Conciliatore Torinese* maintained that he possessed "prodigious power" over the hearts of the young. This "new disciple of Philip Neri" was able to work miracles.¹ Salesian hagiography over this period highlights the multiplication of hosts, chestnuts and also a temporary resuscitation of a fifteen year old boy so he could confess a serious sin before finally dying. People both within and beyond the Oratory tended to attribute miracles to him, even when he denied that he was the one who worked them.

Don Bosco needed collaborators, especially since now, next to the Oratory properly so-called, he had set up a small reception centre. The boys staying there went to work or school in the city. He had sought for three years in the very setting that his boys came from to find some ready to follow him. He lavished special attention on them, taught them and tried to guide them towards specific objectives of his own, like pastoral ministry towards poor and neglected boys. But disappointments were many. One after the other the recruits on whom he had pinned his hopes abandoned him.

It was then that Michael Rua arrived at the Oratory. During the summer vacations of 1850, he began Latin classes along with two other young men. Their teacher, Felix Reviglio, was one of their companions but further advanced in his studies. After a couple of weeks, Don Bosco evaluated their progress. The first biographer, Francesia, is categorical: Michael was "negligent". This judgement amazed those who knew him. It was understandable, after all. In the Brothers' school he had been accustomed to methodical teaching, perfectly organised, in structured classes, so he could only but feel disoriented by lessons being taught by a companion who was no expert, though full of good will. But as soon as he became aware that Don Bosco was unhappy about it, he rolled up his sleeves, as the biographer indicates, and soon surpassed his two friends in his efforts.²

Don Bosco gradually introduced him into the kind of life he wanted for him. Prayer and cheerfulness occupied a central role. Michael began this new period by taking part, towards the end of September 1850, in a Retreat organised for the Oratory boys at the minor seminary at Giaveno. The Saint brought some hundred boys there, joined by a further twenty from the village. The retreat followed a simplified version of the St Ignatius retreats, which Don Bosco well knew about. The morning meditation was offered by the curate from Giaveno, Innocent Arduino, and the morning and evening instructions by Fr Felix Giorda. Sermons, prayers, spiritual reading filled the

¹ Cf. *Il Conciliatore Torinese*, Saturday 7 April 1849, 2 (the article is signed by Lawrence Gastaldi). Here I refer to my book *Don Bosco en son temps*, 281-286.

² Francesia, 18-19.

participants' days. Robert Murialdo, Director of the Guardian Angels Oratory, came along as a reinforcement to hear confessions. At that time no retreat was thinkable without conversion and confession.³

The recollection of those taking part was sincere. The preachers carried out their task well. On 12 September Don Bosco saw with satisfaction that on that day, leaving the chapel, none of the boys went for the recreation that had been planned for between four and five in the afternoon. They all preferred to stay in the “reflection room”.⁴ Michael used like tell how he had learned from Don Bosco on that occasion of the “Exercise for a Happy Death” and the importance of making it regularly and carefully.

Some days later the saintly educator invited a small group of his best Oratory boys, amongst whom was the young Rua, to spend a week at the Becchi. He had great love for that small hillside covered with vines and fruit trees here and there in the fields and shaded along the slopes by majestic trees. It brought him back to memories of his childhood. A small chapel off to the side of his brother Joseph's house, and dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, allowed him to celebrate Mass on site. During excursions around the area, the farmers offered grapes and fruit to the boys. Rua, who was used to the monotonous and closed life of the city, enjoyed the open air of the countryside. He returned invigorated and with even more affection for his spiritual father.

High school classes

Michael then entered high school. At the time, high school classes, called 'grammar', covered three years. According to Francesia, at the end of the holidays in 1850, “Don Bosco, who wanted his students to attend a regular course, spoke about it to a good priest who was helping out at the Oratory and kept a private school for Latin . He was Fr Peter Merla, from Rivara, very zealous in helping students keen on study. Don Bosco entrusted his pupils to him, and they were able to complete the first two courses in Latin very well with him”.⁵

At the beginning of the 1851-1852 school year, Michael Rua began following lessons with Joseph Charles Bonzanino, in 19 *via Guardianfanti*. After a month, in October 1851, he gained an 'excellent' in Latin, and was allowed to go onto the third year of grammar classes. Bonzanino's school was nothing like the Brothers', but at least he was not wasting time. Augustine Auffray, well informed but with a fertile imagination, gives a picturesque description of the teacher:

“He was a character, this Bonzanino. He had teaching in his blood and gave himself to it body and soul. His successes, which were consistent, could be explained by the quality of his teaching: clear, methodical, practical. His long experience made him refer instinctively to the essential elements, he resolved problems only with principles, and he knew how to infuse both enthusiasm and intelligence into his somewhat austere classes. ... He lived near the church of St Francis of Assisi, in the same house where Silvio Pellico, after coming out of prison, had written *Le mie prigioni*. Every morning under the arcades of his building, groups of boys poured in, especially in the upper grades. They

³ Indications concerning the retreats organised by Don Bosco in P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol. II: *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Zürich, Pas-Verlag, 1969, 336-337.

⁴ Letter of G. Bosco to G Borel, Giaveno, 12 September 1850, in *Epistolario* I, 111-112.

⁵ Francesia, 20.

then split into three courses of Latin and Greek. He ran all three together. Some studied while others followed lessons and vice versa. On the same morning if you wanted to you could take part in an explanation of Cornelius Nepote, Caesar or Sallust, Phaidros, Ovid or Virgil. No wall, physical or moral, separated the classes. The teacher asked for just two things: attention, and homework well done with lessons learned as they should be. For the rest, full freedom. This method was to the advantage of good students. Those who had some gaps in their learning were able to fill them in, by adding on a more basic course. Those of courageous spirit and with solid intellectual faculties, could go on to the higher course. Bonzanino had pupils who started with the fifth class in October, went on to the fourth at Easter time and finished the year in third. Saturday mornings, totally given over to re-doing composition for assigning positions [graduated according to merit] for the week, presented a curious spectacle: students who were 'swotting' were hurrying to complete tasks in their course which would give them the luxury of adding on composition in the upper class. Young Michael profited marvellously from this stimulating atmosphere. One of his companions, Francesia – an imaginative Salesian who I maintain is the source of this information – says that Rua, when in third, took on following classes from the two earlier courses in order to strengthen his knowledge of the ancient languages”.⁶

Michael shone in his studies. According to Francesia, an astute witness, although he was surrounded by some very clever fellow students, it did not take him long to get to first place and remain there.⁷

The same Francesia tells of a prank which Michael was the innocent victim of. At the time in Piedmont it was a custom, on the third Thursday of Lent, to organise a prank which consisted in delivering to some poor unfortunate a real or paper saw. It was always the case that the victim, ignorant of the trap, would be made a fool of. In 1852, Bonzanino's students decided to deliver the saw to their teacher. Rua, who had suspected the plot, sought to dissuade his companions but without success. That Thursday morning, when Rua came into the classroom after the others from the Oratory one of them said to him: “You're still on your feet so could you give this letter from Don Bosco to the teacher”. Rua took it and handed it over. As soon as the teacher heard who the letter was from he opened it, and it contained a paper saw. He stood up, furious with Michael, saying that he would never have expected such insolence from one of Don Bosco's young men, and even less so from him. Later, when he understood that the real victim was Michael Rua, the teacher calmed down. It was the Vigil of St Joseph that day, and the name day of professor Bonzanino. In the evening, Don Bosco sent his boys along to wish him a happy feast day. But Rua stood apart and did not dare to let himself be noticed. Then the professor came up to him: “Don't be upset. It's my fault. I did not understand that the prank was meant for you, not for me”. Fr Rua would never forget the event. “It was a great trial” he confided still in 1909 to Francesia who reminded him of it, not so much for the humiliation he had experienced, but for the fact that it was thought that he had played such a trick on a beloved teacher.⁸

Michael distinguished himself at Don Bosco's Oratory, which was in full swing. We need to remind ourselves that this youth centre was becoming a pilot work in Turin. Towards the end of 1847, Archbishop Fransoni was informed in a petition that Fr John Bosco and Fr Borel, involved in spiritual direction at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales,

⁶ Auffray, 26-27.

⁷ Francesia, 21-22.

⁸ Francesia, 22-25, adapted in Ceria, *Vita*, 18-19.

had opened a new Oratory between the *viale dei Platani* and the *viale del Re* and were asking him to delegate the curate at Our Lady of the Angels to bless the chapel. The new Oratory, placed under the protection of St Aloysius Gonzaga, was located in the suburb on the outskirts of Porta Nuova. And following an unfortunate event that had occurred to Fr Cocchi, when 1849 finished with the closing of the Oratory of the Guardian Angels in Vanchiglia, the Archbishop had entrusted Don Bosco with the responsibility for this first Turinese Oratory as well. Some in the ecclesiastical scene were not too happy about these additional responsibilities. Don Bosco was reprimanded for being too pretentious. Envy was poisoning relationships. These murmurings only came to an end after a decree from the Archbishop. From Lyon, on 31 March 1852. Archbishop Fransoni, exiled in France, appointed Don Bosco as “director and spiritual head” of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, to which the Oratories of the Guardian Angels and St Aloysius Gonzaga were to be considered “joined and dependent”.⁹

The House attached to the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales, though poor, saw an increase in the number of residents, often neglected youngsters who had been forced to seek work in some construction site or other. The chapel in the Pinar di shed had become far too small for all these youngsters. Don Bosco decided to build a true and proper church dedicated, naturally, to St Francis of Sales, which was blessed on 21 June 1852. Meanwhile he also built a new building next to the old one.

Michael was still living at home, but he used spend most of his free time at the Oratory. Meanwhile he was growing up. A born observer, he quickly understood Don Bosco's intentions and helped out when he could to keep some order and discipline amongst both residents and externs. Well-dressed, well-mannered, and with a certain seriousness about him, given the *Rules for good education and politeness* by John Baptist de La Salle, he already commanded respect at his age. John Cagliero has left us a somewhat picturesque view of Michael in those times amongst his companions, a view probably enriched by Auffray, from whom I take this quote:

“We had him as a supervisor coming and going to school and I confess that we were a great contrast to him. The more we were thoughtless and noisy, almost unruly, the more he remained calm, reserved and diligent. We did not always listen to him, but he inspired awe in us whether in class or in study and also during recreation, with his delightful talks and his extraordinary devotion. I can still see him, Sunday mornings, standing on watch near the fountain. Don Bosco heard confessions before Mass and Rua saw that none of the absolved penitents would miss communion through carelessness, by coming to drink some water from the fountain [remember that this was the time of a very strict Eucharistic fast]. During Mass his recollection encouraged us to pray. He stopped us all from chattering, and after Communion, if we were distracted and looking around he called us back to our duty, whispering "thank Our Lord!" In our talks he would never cease praising Don Bosco and nor did he cease to urge us to show our love for him by exemplary obedience. He had wonderful tact, never tolerated any dubious talk amongst the working boys who came in from outside or from those who had only recently taken up residence with Don Bosco; and even more so amongst students of Prof. Bonzanino or Fr Picco, who seemed ready to go on to the ecclesiastical state”.¹⁰

His then companions, as adults, recognised that Rua had no equal in his careful

⁹ Document reproduced in in MB IV, 178-179.

¹⁰ According to A. Auffray, 31-32, confirmed by testimony of J. Cagliero at the canonisation process, *Summarium super dubio*, 1933, 51-52. (This *Summarium* is found as part of the *Positio*, 1935).

carrying out of his tasks. Naturally when Don Bosco, during a conference, asked for volunteers to recite the *Seven Joys of Mary* each day, Michael Rua was one of the twelve who presented himself (5 June 1852).

Michael Rua takes on the clerical habit

The holidays in 1852 were decisive for Michael. At fifteen years of age he already showed real maturity. As he had done in 1850, he took part in September, with around fifty of his friends, in a retreat organised by Don Bosco for the youngsters at the minor seminary in Giaveno. On his return he left the family residence at the Forge and entered as a boarder at the House attached to the Oratory. Finally, during the days at the Becchi, now traditional for a group of youngsters from the Oratory, Don Bosco had him don the soutane. There was no preliminary rite. And now this young adolescent doubled his commitment through observing his spiritual master. The days spent with Don Bosco had the same value as a meditation for him. At the canonisation process he made the following deposition: "Observing Don Bosco even in the most minute of his actions made more impression on me than reading or meditating on any devout book".¹¹

The clothing ceremony, which also involved his friend Joseph Rocchietti, took place on 3 October 1852, Feast of the Rosary, in the small chapel next to Joseph Bosco's house. The priest at Castelnuovo, Fr Cinzano, presided. He blessed the soutanes for the two boys. Then Fr Cinzano helped Rocchietti, the elder of the two, to put on his soutane while Fr John Baptist Bertagna did the same for Michael. At the end of his life Fr Rua still recalled what Don Bosco had said to him on that occasion. "My dear Rua, now you have begun a new life. You have begun your journey towards the promised land, but you still have to cross the Red Sea and the desert. If you help me, we will cross it together and we will arrive". Fr Ceria, interpreting this reflection, wrote that Don Bosco applied the saying of the Acts of the Apostles to his disciple: "We all have to experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God". (Acts 14, 22).¹²

His return to the Oratory in the soutane created a sensation: he seemed like "an angel" according to the early biographers. Maybe that was the case. At any rate the soutane, which suited him, looked good on him and added a nice touch to his calm approach and the natural dignity of his bearing. No need to say that he took it up with evident respect.

His status as a cleric brought him closer to Don Bosco. Finally after many hesitations, he decided to ask him the reason for a gesture he had made when he met him at the Brothers' school. He used give a medal to the other boys, while for Rua he held out his left hand and with his right made as if to cut half away saying: "Take this, young Michael, take it!" What did these words and actions mean? "You see, Rua: Don Bosco wanted to tell you that he would go halves with you one day. You will

¹¹ Ceria, *Vita*, 22.

¹² Ceria, *Vita*, 22. This is the Salesian version of the clothing which seems to be correct to me. But we need to know, as the Salesian historian Aldo Giraudo has told me, that the official Register of clerics at the Archbishop's house in Turin, for 1819-1876, indicates that "Rua Michael, son of John and Ferrero Joan Mary, born 9 June 1837, was clothed with the clerical habit in Turin by Father Bosco John on the 16th December 1853" (Archbishop's archive Turin 12.12.3: *Registrum clericorum 1808-1847* [but: 1819-1876], rubr. R, 1853). Personally, I presume that 16 December 1853, Don Bosco, who had not officially informed the Curia in October 1852, had simply advised the diocesan administration that he had given the clerical habit to young Rua. And then place and date of the administrative document.

understand better later”¹³.

In order to complete his secondary studies Michael entered Fr Matthew Picco's school, located in *via dei Fornelletti*, near the church of St Augustine. It was an aristocratic school, but Fr Picco was a friend of Don Bosco's and took his boys in for free. Rua, the perfect pupil, would take just one year to complete (1852-1853) courses in humanities (Latin and Greek) and rhetoric. He was at ease in that setting where he could establish new relationships that would be precious for him in the future. These upper secondary courses finished with an exam called the *licenza*. Michael was brilliant, as always, in his studies. One of the examiners, Dominic Cappellina, who enjoyed a certain reputation in the Piedmontese literary world, said to the teacher: “Allow me to point out one pupil of great worth. He will not fail to make a splendid career !”¹⁴

This school year was marked by three events. On the evening of 1 December 1852, the Oratory house was rendered unstable because of the collapse of walls of the building still under construction. In the middle of the night, Don Bosco's mother heard a cracking noise and sounded the alarm. Around fifty boys were asleep in the house. They all ran into the courtyard, under the trees, and then towards the chapel. Rua was one of them. No one was injured, fortunately. The damage, which was considerable, was only material.

The second event was of historical significance. In February 1853, the Bishop of Ivrea, Louis Moreno, and Don Bosco launched a popular collection of *Catholic Readings*, which gave even more prominence to the work at Valdocco.

The third event affected Fr Rua and his family: on 29 March 1853, his oldest step-brother, John, died. This death affected him greatly “I have never seen my friend more afflicted than at that time! I know that it was the beginning of Spring, it was raining, and it was a very sad day. We had done a bit of school, and aware of how upset he looked I could not refrain from saying to him: – what's happened that's made you look so sad?

Raising his eyes to heaven he said with a sigh: – My brother is dead!

What could I say to console him? We were in the sacristy in the festive Oratory. He left the school room, went into the church to pray and was there praying for a long time”¹⁵.

This death had an impact on the Rua family. Michael's mother, by now on her own, left the Forge for the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, in the Bellezza House. Now with time on her hands, she spent much of it in Don Bosco's ironing room with his mother, Margaret, who from 1846 looked after the house's finances. Thus the bonds between Don Bosco's work and Michael were strengthened.

¹³ Ceria, *Vita*, 23.

¹⁴ Francesia, 35.

¹⁵ Francesia, 28-29.

3 – PHILOSOPHY STUDIES

Michael and philosophy

In July 1853, Michael was admitted to the study of philosophy at the seminary in Turin. A poor seminary, to tell the truth, victim of the revolutionary movements of 1848. Despite repeated orders from Archbishop Fransoni, seminarians at the end of 1847 and beginning of 1848 continued their enthusiasm for patriotic demonstrations. The archbishop, being of a conservative nature, saw an attack on authority in these liberal tendencies, the authority of State and Church. The archbishop threatened not to admit the transgressors to ordination.

The seminarians simply hardened their stance. In the cathedral at Christmas time some seminarians turned up at the archbishop's pontifical mass with the nationalist rosette pinned to their chests. The Rector of the seminary, unable to contain this rebellious spirit, offered his resignation, which Archbishop Fransoni quickly rejected. The agitation did not die down. On 9 February 1848, when the *Statuto* (Constitution) was proclaimed in Turin, the clerics turned out again in the city with either their chests or their headgear decorated with the tricolour rosettes. They did the same a few days later, applauding a parade of secular groups. As a consequence, all clerics who had taken part in these demonstrations were refused ordination, and the archbishop took the drastic step of closing the Turin seminary. The seminarians returned home. Some found a place in nearby dioceses. Then, when war broke out, the civil administration turned the seminary into a military hospital. The archbishop, who was imprisoned for a period in Fenestrelle, was finally forced into exile in Lyon. So, when Michael entered as an external student, the seminary had for the most part still been taken over. He went looking for his professors in the attics where they lived.

During the 1853-1854 scholastic year his professors were Fr Cyprian Mottura and Fr Joseph Farina, assisted by a coach, Canon Berta. Rua left us two exercise books from that time, entitled: *Quesiti di Logica 1853-1854*.¹ It is a course which had been dictated, then carefully written down, on the process of understanding and demonstration of its results. Our seminarian learned to love the clarity of the sentences, the well constructed, judiciously distributed and perfectly consistent reports. In the future his confreres would take note of this. In first year of philosophy he also studied physics, the notes for which are still extant.

Studies however occupied just a small part of Michael's time. There were only two hours of classes daily at the seminary. Rua had to look after general assistance at the house of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales. He had supervision in the study, chapel, courtyard and refectory. Added to that at the last moment was a weekly catechism class and looking after the library which was being put together. In 1854, when Don Bosco created a St Vincent de Paul mini-conference, something which had started up in Turin only four years previously, he took up the role of secretary and organised work to help the poor in the district.²

One important event marked those months for him. On 26 January 1854, as the

¹f. these notebooks in in FdR 2720B5-2721C5.

² Count Carlo Cays, president of the only Conference in Turin, would recognise the Oratory of St Francis of Sales Conference on 11 May 1856, as Amadei noted I, 73

solemn Feast of St Francis of Sales was approaching, Don Bosco, who was insisting on the idea of setting up a Society to serve his work, brought four of the more prominent boys together in his room: clerics Michael Rua and Joseph Rocchietti, along with James Artiglia and John Cagliero who were boys at the time. He proposed, as we read in a note by Rua, that they "engage, with the help of God and St. Francis of Sales, in an experiment of the practical exercise of charity toward neighbour, in order to eventually make a promise and later, if possible and appropriate, a vow of it to the Lord".³ Thus the future Salesian Society began to take shape.

Three days later, on the evening of the Feast of St Francis of Sales, the four made their appearance at a prize-giving ceremony of a rather particular kind. During the week the pupils were invited to write down on a sheet of paper the four or five names of schoolmates of theirs whom they felt stood out for exemplary religious and moral conduct. The sheets of paper were signed. A signed entry of Don Bosco's informs us that "that year at the solemn prize-giving for St Francis of Sales, Michael Rua and Joseph Rocchietti were chosen by exception. Amongst the students, prizes went to: Bellisio, Artiglia, Cagliero. Scrutineers: the elder of the Turchi brothers, Angelo Savio, Pepe L., Comollo".⁴

This kind of very democratic election was one of Don Bosco's many well-considered ways of encouraging his boys to become good Christians. To achieve his aim, he thought nothing was worth more than a live example, but also an example which was talked about or written down. This is why in the *Catholic Readings* series, the same January 1854, in an appropriately adapted other edition, he published a story for them of a young man who was admired and loved, one whom he had known at school and then at the seminary in Chieri. *The Life of Louis Comollo* "who died at the seminary in Chieri, and was admired by all for his virtues" was something he often proposed for the edification of his young men. We can be sure that the cleric Rua took it to heart, since we find a long note on "examples" from Louis Comollo attached to one of his philosophy notebooks.

Nursing cholera cases

The summer holidays were somewhat lively for someone who all of a sudden had to begin nursing cholera cases. But let's have a look at the context.⁵

On 21 July 1854, a poster from the Mayor pasted up on the corners of Turin's streets proclaimed the rules of hygiene to be observed in homes, workshops, taverns given the imminent arrival of cholera in the city. For "those who had contracted the disease" the law said. Special hospitals called *lazaretti* (quarantine or isolation units) had to be set up to isolate the sick. Valdocco inhabitants learned that the municipality had put a large shed to this use in Borgo Dora. This hospital would have had a capacity of 150 beds and would have been furnished with an attached area serving as a pharmacy, kitchen, toilets, a place for disinfection and rooms for service personnel. The newspapers gave constant

³ Signed note of Rua's in FdB 1989C10.

⁴ As Lemoyne writes in MB V, 12. Regarding this information, supposing that it was truly from Don Bosco, we note that the indication, rather an incongruous one in a register, of the "exceptional" election of the two clerics, could only come from Lemoyne.

⁵ For the paragraph on cholera in Turin in 1854, I am drawing notes from my book *Don Bosco en son temps*, 399-408.

information on the state of the contagion. The Vicar General of the diocese, Monsignor Ravina, passed on the Government's instructions by circular to the parish priests, asking them for their cooperation. At the same time priests in Turin could read a small work containing instructions from the archbishop of Genoa to his own clergy: prophylactic and hygiene measures, ways to help with the exercise of ministry, and forbidding them to flee the city. In fact that temptation was strong. On 3 August, according to statistics from the Railway Company, a quarter of Turin's population had abandoned the city.

At the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, cleric Rua felt fully involved. Don Bosco, right from the first moment of alarm, had organised the house in order to deal with the contagion. The areas where a hundred or so boys lived were adapted and cleaned. He doubled the supply of linen in order to facilitate a frequent change of linen and laundry. At the end of July the epidemic began to devastate the city and touched the area close to the Oratory, Borgo Dora, where the population was literally decimated by the scourge. The regular and diocesan clergy gave themselves unstintingly to the service of cholera sufferers. The parish priest of Borgo Dora stood out in a particular way. Parishioners had abandoned their sick: there were eight hundred of them, of whom five hundred had died by halfway through October, according to one witness. Not content with administering the sacraments to the sick, the priests lent their services as nurses at the risk of their own lives. The parish priest, Fr Augustine Gattino, paid the price of his dedication with much suffering.

Don Bosco was convinced that he was not doing enough just limiting himself to defending his work against such a dangerous scourge. The municipality was looking for volunteer nurses: "Who would like to go and help those sick with cholera at the *lazzaretto* and in private homes?" he asked his boys one day. Thus he was able to give fourteen names to the authorities. We do not have the complete list but we know that amongst them there were certainly the seventeen year old Rua, sixteen year old Cagliero and fourteen year old Anfossi. Don Bosco gave the young nurses practical instructions. In all probability he explained that the disease had two stages. At the beginning there is a sudden attack which often proved fatal if there was not immediate help given; then there was a period of reaction during which the blood circulation tried to re-establish itself. The one looking after the cholera victim had to fight the attack by trying to produce a reaction as quickly as possible, then keep that reaction going in an appropriate manner. At the time these reactions were produced by applying boiling poultices and by energetic rubbing, wrapping the hands and feet of the sick person in warm wool since they were subject to cramps and loss of temperature.

He set up a timetable and the boys scattered, some to the *lazzaretto* at Borgo San Donato, others to homes in the area. There were comings and goings day and night at the Oratory. Don Bosco's young men courageously carried out their new task, certain that they would not contract the disease, scrupulously following their director's recommendations: pay attention to cleanliness, but especially flee sin and entrust yourself to Mary.

Thus began a totally new experience for the cleric Rua. But first he had to overcome his repulsion at the sight of the cholera sufferer. "Oh! What a frightening way to die, for those suffering from cholera", he would write to Don Bosco at the end of the year, describing what he had seen and heard. "Vomit, dysentery, cramps in the arms and legs, headache, breathless, suffocating... their eyes inflamed, faces livid, groaning and agitated; in short, in these unfortunates I have seen all of the pain that a human being

can put up with without dying". *L'Armonia* of 16 September dedicated a paragraph to the young men from the Oratory in its *Report on the charity of the clergy at a time of cholera*:

"Animated by the spirit of their father, rather than their superior, D. Bosco, they approach those suffering from cholera, full of courage, inspiring trust and courage in the sufferers themselves, not only by their words but also their deeds, picking them up in their arms, doing the rubbing down, without giving a thought to fear or repulsion at the sight. On the contrary, once they enter the home of someone who is ill they go straight to the people overcome with horror, suggesting they leave if they are frightened, while they get on with everything that is necessary, unless they are dealing with someone of the weaker sex, in which case they ask someone from the house to stay with them, if not by the bed, at least in some convenient spot. If the person has died, and it is not a woman, they complete the task of care for the body".⁶

Not one of the volunteer nurses from the Oratory was affected by cholera. Their dedication made a great impression on the city.

Second year of philosophy

While he was preparing for his second year of philosophy, the only seminarian in that course, our cleric, did not initially, it seems, take much notice of a new student in Valdocco, Dominic Savio. But he would soon change his mind. He had been recommended to Don Bosco by his teacher, Fr Cugliero. He was a lad he picked out for his intelligence and piety. "There were lots of boys who were his equal in the house but none who were better than him in talent or virtue. Test this and you will find another St Aloysius".⁷ Dominic was meant to follow the same course of studies that Michael had followed four years earlier. He would testify one day that, "from the first weeks he was at the Oratory", he had discovered "great esteem [for Dominic] which grew constantly", day after day. A "brotherly affection" bound them together.⁸ Between 1854 and 1857, Dominic was a pupil of Prof. Bonzanino then Fr Picco, with an intervening year where he attended school at the Oratory itself.

From Autumn 1854, Rua was involved every Sunday at the St Aloysius Oratory near the station at Porta Nuova. This meant that twice in the day he had a rather long walk ahead of him. Meanwhile his role at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales took on ever greater importance. One pupil of the time would testify: "What amazed me greatly when I entered the Oratory in 1854 with Dominic Savio, was seeing that Don Bosco gave Rua a lot of work by preference, while there were others, for example the cleric Rocchietti, older than him and more adapted to being in charge. I was really quite amazed to see this preference for the cleric Rua, but then I became aware how of all the boys he was the one who was really loved and whom they held in awe as a superior and representative of Don Bosco, who evidently had special esteem and affection for him".⁹

⁶ "Report on the charity of the clergy at the time of the cholera", *L'Armonia*, anno VII, n. 112, Saturday 16 September 1854, 521. This article was partially reported in MB V, 114-116.

⁷ G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tip. G. B. Paravia and Co., 1859, 34.

⁸ Deposition from Don Rua at the information process for the canonisation of Dominic Savio, *Summarius*, 152.

⁹ John Battista Piano, cited by Amadei, I, 57.

Michael Rua's private vows

Little by little, Don Bosco was forming young Rua, along with others. Without making much to-do about it Rua was preparing himself to enter the Society which Don Bosco was planning. In Autumn, with the permission of his spiritual director and confessor, he began to receive daily communion.¹⁰ Those months were a period of spiritual apprenticeship, his novitiate, if you like, something that would have meant conferences on specific doctrinal issues and appropriate exercises. The "conferences" Don Bosco held in his room on Sunday evenings, usually after prayers. The entire future of his work was bound up with that small group of disciples he intended to slowly form, following his own educational ideal. The exercises he asked them to do were those he himself did: exhausting days of work amongst the boys of the Oratory, prayers in common, liturgical celebrations, catechetics, evening classes, assistance, vigorous games...He asked nothing but total dedication to the service of neglected youth, other than regularly frequenting the sacraments and a serious programme of devout practices, like visits to the Blessed Sacrament These were the same practices suggested to the boys at the Oratory. His teaching was limited to this. He did not pretend more. The rest he put into God's hands. And grace was working in them through his example. Don Bosco came and went, praying, having fun, working under their very eyes. They just had to pick up on the teaching that emerged from his life. Rua nurtured his own heart and outlook by taking all these quiet lessons of virtue to heart. He often admired him at the kneeler or at Mass, deeply recollected, immersed in humble and trusting prayer. He found him always full of good humour in the courtyard and refectory, concerned only with maintaining a spirit of cheerfulness amongst the boys. If he found him along the street, he discovered a man who would never lose an opportunity to be in contact with the young. He was struck by his naturalness and goodness in daily life, his consistent good humour, his ever-smiling courtesy. If he spoke to him in the intimacy of his room, he left happy because of the fatherly encounter and authentic friendship. It was good living in Don Bosco's shadow.

The spiritual profit was rapid and serious, so much so that the master soon judged the disciple ready to take the big step. On the evening of the Annunciation, 25 March, 1855, in Don Bosco's humble room, Michael Rua, a seminarian in his second year of philosophy, made private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience into the hands of the one who was his father in faith. There was no pomp and ceremony. A priest standing on one side and a cleric kneeling before a crucifix on the other, murmuring a formula the exact nature of which we do not know. There were no witnesses. Fr Auffray prudently writes "Even between these four walls, something great came into being... Those obscure origins as always, of works where God shows that he is fully pleased."¹¹

¹⁰ This paragraph on the spiritual preparation of young Rua for first vows, closely follows Auffray's text even though it is a bit imaginative and 'loaded', true, but the images are nice. Auffray, 41-43.

¹¹ Auffray, 43.

4 - THE BIRTH OF THE SALESIAN SOCIETY

Studying theology

At the beginning of the 1855-1856 school year, cleric Rua began his study of theology by attending lessons at the seminary. His teachers were Fr Francis Marengo, author of *De institutionibus theologicis* (fundamental theology) and Fr Joseph Molinari, author of *De sacramentis in genere* (sacramental theology). There were two hours of classes in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon. To this Rua added a private lesson in Greek or Hebrew two or three times a week with the Professor of Eastern studies at the University, Fr Amadeus Peyron. In fact he very much liked to read and understand the Bible. At the same time he was preparing for the teaching exam, as we can see from the presence in his notebooks of exercises in French, arithmetic and natural sciences during that period.¹ Michael was really heavily involved in intellectual work.

He gave special care to theology. Four of his exercise books have been preserved, with the title *De Religione*. They begin by distinguishing religion as it is practised (worship) and religion as a social phenomenon (religions), then show the need for Revelation, the integrity and truth of the Old and New Testament which hand on this Revelation. The course, judging from the careful handwriting, seems to have been dictated. It endeavours to prove that there is only one authentically revealed religion which is the Christian religion of the Catholic Church. At the end, the treatise is summed up by our seminarian in thirty one pages of summary tables which reveal a man in love with clarity and coherence.

The treatise *De Deo uno et trino*, which followed the one on fundamental theology *De Religione*, was certainly left to later years. It seems that Fr Joseph Molinari offered his courses in a cycle, and had immediately begun to impart lessons on sacraments to his pupil, beginning with the treatise *De gratia*. In effect we find in the Salesian Archives one study, written by Rua, of 206 pages on Grace, a crucial problem in the Church at the time. This is followed by a long series of more or less ordered notes on the Eucharist (96 pages). The sacraments are dealt with more summarily in these manuscripts: we find a two page synoptic scheme on Baptism, 34 pages of notes on Confession and 17 on Extreme Unction. All written in scholastic Latin, as was customary at the time, analysis of these texts would allow a better understanding of Fr Rua's thinking during his priestly life.

The birth of a religious society in a turbulent context

Meanwhile Don Bosco was reflecting. His work was strengthened with the arrival of Fr Victor Alasonatti at Valdocco in October 1854. Alasonatti was a priest already of mature age. He made him his assistant and gave him the title of Prefect. Meanwhile he began to give a more precise structure to the rhythms and activities of the house and the entire institution. But would he succeed in creating a religious society which seemed essential for directing the work of the Oratories?

¹All Michael Rua's school exercise books (often dated), can be found in in FdR 2665B9-2750B9. We will not offer precise references here.

From a political point of view the moment seemed contrary to such an initiative.² Between November 1854 and May 1855, the Piedmontese Government led especially by the Minister of Justice and the Interior, Urban Rattazzi, fine-tuned a law on convents and had it discussed in Parliament. It aimed at proscribing religious orders and congregations of men and women in the territory, especially "mendicant orders" which were harmful, according to the liberals, to morality in the country and "contrary to a modern work ethic". The new law stripped the monks of their property. The clerical right reacted by denouncing the violation of the Statute and concordats with the Holy See, and presented the law as a deliberate attack on the right to form associations and to own property, a precursor to socialism and communism making inroads into the country. At the same time the extreme left cried foul against ecclesiastical obscurantism, and called to mind the end of Giordano Bruno, the 17th century philosopher who had been accused of heresy and was burned alive; they raised controversy against the process for Galileo, another too-modern mind, and against the Index of Forbidden Books. Then taking advantage of the debate which had flared up around the proposed law, they accused the Popes, amongst whom Pius IX, then under the protection of the French, for having always taken the part of the foreigner to the disadvantage of Italy. Aiming to broaden the law which they saw as being too weak, they asked for the suppression of all existing religious orders: along with contemplatives and mendicants, there was also a need to eliminate groups dedicated to preaching and teaching. They insisted that all ecclesiastical goods be made the property of the municipality or the province... In short, the atmosphere was electric.

At the end of a series of events, the Rattazzi law was approved by the two Houses and signed by the King on 29 May 1855. Works situated in the Kingdom of Sardinia and dependent on Religious who were not dedicated to preaching, education or assisting the poor were no longer recognised as *moral entities*; in fact they no longer existed. One needs to run through the list attached to the decree of application of the law to understand the psychological disorientation caused by all this in Piedmont: twenty one male congregations and fourteen women's congregations were affected by the law. "What bewilderment! What terrible unhappiness! How many unfortunates were effectively cut off!", exclaimed Don Bosco in a letter to a friend.³

This law would have been a constant point of reference for Don Bosco. He would have been afraid of giving his collaborators the inconvenient epithet of *friars*; it would have induced him to avoid every semblance of *moral entity* for his religious society and would he suggested to him that at all costs he must maintain the civil rights of his members. These rights would have distinguished his society from any other religious body.

The deaths of Margaret Bosco and Dominic Savio

Rua the seminarian, during his first year of theology, was affected by the death of three persons dear to him.

On 5 November 1856, at just 28 years of age, Fr Paul Rossi, Director of the St Aloysius Oratory at Porta Nuova where Michael went on Sunday mornings, died from a

² On Rattazzi and the law of suppression, I refer to notes in my book *Don Bosco en son temps*, 420-430.

³ Letter of G. Bosco to D. Rademacher, Turin, 7 June 1855, *Epistolario* I, 257.

lung infection. The burden fell to him and he carried it out as best he could.⁴

At home at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales, Fr Alasonatti's arrival had finally relegated Don Bosco's mother, Margaret, to her own work room. She had been the administrator of the house for a long time. The boys and visitors never forgot her, but she had retired. In November 1856 she was struck down by severe pneumonia. From that moment, Joan Mary Rua remained constantly by her bedside, along with Margaret's sister, Marianne Occhiena. The entire house prayed for her recovery. Everyone lived between fear and hope for some days. The boys went up to her room one after the other at almost any hour, seeking news. Every evening the community waited on Don Bosco and Fr Alasonatti for news. Her son Joseph came from Castelnuovo. Anxiety increased when she was given the Sacrament of the Sick. Margaret died, finally, on 25 November. The obsequies were modest, but moving. Solemn Mass was celebrated in the Oratory Church. Then the boys in mourning accompanied the coffin to the parish; verses of the *Miserere* alternated with some music from the Oratory band. The cortege moved ahead slowly, creating a great impression on bystanders. Mrs Gastaldi said she had never attended such a moving funeral.⁵ There was an important consequence for the Ruas: at the end of the '50s, Joan Mary would become a second "Mama Margaret" for Don Bosco's boys.

The third death to affect the Oratory was the death of Dominic Savio. On the previous 8 June, along with clerics Michael Rua and Joseph Bongiovanni, Dominic had founded the Immaculate Conception Sodality. A few rules were drawn up, mixed with practical resolutions, to improve the spiritual atmosphere of the entire work. The "great esteem" which Michael had for Dominic had grown "when this association was set up", said Fr Rua at the boy's process of Canonisation.⁶ Dominic had always been of questionable health. On 1 March 1857 a lung infection obliged him to leave the community and return to his family. That morning he had taken part in the Exercise for a Happy Death and was calmly farewelled by Don Bosco and his friends. He died eight days later. He was a saint, his companions immediately proclaimed, and began to pray to him. This kind of prayer proved to be effective, Fr Rua would tell the Canonisation process.⁷ For his part Don Bosco, who was of the same view, began gathering, with Michael's help in particular, testimonies of his outstanding virtues in order to write the *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* (Life of St Dominic Savio) which was published in 1859.⁸

Don Bosco's first constitutional plan

Let us go back to 1857. The good relationship he had with Minister Rattazzi reassured Don Bosco, anxious to get on with his plan for a religious foundation. This feared anticlerical very much appreciated his "philanthropic charity", recommended some needy youngsters to him and gave him, when Don Bosco requested it, some

⁴ On 26 July 1857, Fr Leonardo Murialdo would take up the direction of the Oratory of St Aloysius, as we learn from a letter of Michael Rua's to Don Bosco dated 27 July 1857 (cited by Amadei I, 90-91).

⁵ This note on Margaret's death is drawn from the account by John Bonetti, *Storia dell'Oratorio*, published almost like a serialised novel, in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, beginning from May 1883.

⁶ *Positio super Introductione Causae* (Romae, 1913), *Summarium*, 152.

⁷ *Summarium*, 153.

⁸ See the two texts by Michael Rua, *Memorie riguardo al giovane Savio Domenico*, reported in the same *Summarium*, 222-227.

substantial financial assistance. We have to go back probably to May 1857 and a decisive conversation that Don Bosco had with him at the ministry, during a visit of thanksgiving. Rattazzi asked him if he had thought about the future of his work: why didn't he set up a society of lay people and ecclesiastics? But, Don Bosco observed, isn't the Piedmontese Government hostile to this kind of association? Rattazzi replied that he should not found a traditional religious body, that is, a society of *manomorta* or privileged, untaxable rights, but a society where each member kept his own civil rights, submitted to the laws of the State, paid taxes etc; in other words, a society of free citizens.

This was enlightening for Don Bosco. Even if it would be a Congregation in the eyes of the Church, in the eyes of the State it would take the form of a *charitable society* which responded to these criteria. At the end of 1857 or at the latest at the beginning of 1858, he dictated to Rua, with the title of "Congregation of St. Francis of Sales", an exercise book of some fifteen pages explaining the origins, scope, form, vows, government of this society, and how one could be accepted into it.⁹ "The aim of this Congregation", Rua wrote, copying from Don Bosco" is to gather its ecclesiastical members together, clerical and lay, in order to seek perfection by imitating as much as possible the life of our Divine Saviour".¹⁰ Nothing complicated, and especially no solemn vows which were binding from a juridical point of view. "All the members will live a common life bound only by fraternal charity and simple vows which encourage them to live with one heart and mind to love and serve God". Don Bosco had taken account of Rattazzi's advice: "On entering the Congregation each one will not lose his civil rights after taking vows, and therefore will retain ownership of what is his, and the faculty or succeeding to and receiving inheritances, legacies and donations".¹¹ It would be a society of free citizens.

Don Bosco decided to present this project to the Pope. He was known in the Vatican since 1849, when his young people had taken part in a collection on behalf of Pius IX, who had thanked them. He went to Rome with Michael who acted as his secretary.

In Rome with Don Bosco in 1858

The trip from Turin to Rome by train, then boat, and finally by mail carriage, lasted four days, from dawn on 28 February 1858 until late evening 21 February. In Rome Don Bosco was a guest of the Maistre Family, in *via del Quirinale no. 49*. Rua too at first stayed there, but he soon left to find a place with the Rosminians, at the risk of needing to rise very early in the morning to meet up with Don Bosco.¹² The two pilgrims, who foresaw that they would be one or two months in the city, organised their time. Don Bosco wanted to fine-tune the statutes of the Society which was in process of being set up. Rua would have delivered letters, written up various texts in his beautiful handwriting, especially Don Bosco's book, *Il mese di maggio*, and accompanied Don Bosco as they went to town.

⁹ This exercise book is found in FdB 1893E5-1894A10.

¹⁰ G. Bosco, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales [1858]-1875*. Critical texts edited by F. Motto, Rome, LAS, 1982, 72.

¹¹ G. Bosco, *Costituzioni...*, 82.

¹² We have detailed information on the voyage from a handwritten exercise book of 75 pages *Viaggio a Roma*, 1858, in FdB 1352E3-1354A5; it is written by Rua, but considered to be a diary of Don Bosco's.

As the weeks passed, both visited Rome just like real pilgrims would who were passionate about architecture and history, and like apostles who were curious about the pastoral experiences of the city of the Popes. They went about on foot, sometimes in the rain and taking shelter under a single umbrella, unless some noble gentleman offered to take them in his carriage. They collected many daily news items, picturesque and edifying, read or just heard by chance, in order to write them down in the diary, which was full of detail. They visited the Church of the *Gesù*, the Pantheon, St Peter in Chains, Saint Louis of the French, St Mary Majors, St John Lateran, and obviously St Peter's at the Vatican, Castel Sant'Angelo and surroundings. For Don Bosco, who had just published a life of St Peter, the most moving visit was certainly to the Mamertino prison on 2 March, with Michael and the Maistre family. "Just seeing it was horrifying", Don Bosco wrote to Fr Alasonatti.¹³ In the presence of the Maistre Family, Don Bosco celebrated Mass at a small altar near the "Column of St Peter's".

Don Bosco and Rua fitted in with the devotional practices of the places they went to. On 23 February, at St Peter in Chains, the apostle's chains were venerated in a special way. "We have had the consolation of touching these chains with our hands, kissing them, placing them around our necks and foreheads", the diary of this journey says. On the 25th, they went up the twenty eight steps of the *Scala Santa* on their knees. On 13 March, they paused at St Mary of the Angels where they wanted to gain the plenary indulgence. At the high altar, they venerated an impressive range of relics. "Having thus satisfied our devotion", the diary says, "we got back home towards six, very tired and with a good appetite". The two Turinese were very interested in the Roman Charities to compare them with their own. They also visited the *Tata John House*, where the lifestyle seemed very similar to that at Valdocco; they saw a charity school run by the Roman Chapter of St. Vincent de Paul at *Santa Maria dei Monti*; they were at *San Michele*, a huge institute that took in "more than eight hundred people of whom three hundred are youths"; they also contacted some Oratories tied to the tradition of St Philip Neri.

The most important moment for both of them was obviously their meeting with the Pope, which Don Bosco had requested as soon as they came to Rome. On 8 March, returning from a tiring day, Don Bosco opened a letter that made him excited. "I opened it, read it and here was the gist of it: this is to inform Reverend Father Bosco that His Holiness has deemed worthy to grant him an audience tomorrow the ninth March at 11.45". The following day, accompanied by the cleric Rua, he presented himself at the Vatican, full of emotion, and with a ceremonial cape over his shoulders. "Filled with a thousand thoughts", they began to climb the stairs "more mechanically than thoughtfully", the diary says. The noble guards, "dressed to look like real princes" impressed them. When they reached the floor of the Papal hall, guards and attendants "richly dressed" greeted them and bowed deeply when taking the letter for the audience that Don Bosco held in his hands. The endless spectacle of comings and goings in the antechamber kept them busy for the hour and a half of waiting.

When a prelate gave the sign to enter, Don Bosco, the account says, had to "force himself not to become unbalanced by it all". Rua followed with bound copies of the *Catholic Readings*, their gift for the Holy Father. They made three genuflections according to protocol: one at the entrance to the hall, a second halfway and then a third

¹³ Letter of G. Bosco to V. Alasonatti, Rome, 7 March 1858, in *Epistolario* I, 340.

at the feet of the Pontiff. All of their apprehensions vanished when they discovered " a most kindly, venerable man, and the most handsome that an artist could possibly paint". Since the Pope was seated at his desk the two visitors could not kiss his feet as they had thought to do: they only kissed his hand. But Rua, recalling the promise made to the clerics at Valdocco, kissed his hands twice, once for himself and once for his friends. They remained kneeling, and Don Bosco, out of respect, would have kept talking that way. "No", Pius IX told him, "stand up!" When the Pope understood that he was dealing with the apostle of youth from Turin, he multiplied his questions about the Oratory, the boys, the clerics, and recalled the offering he had received at Gaeta. Don Bosco gave him the volumes of the *Catholic Readings*. "There are fifteen bookbinders at our place", he explained. The Pope disappeared for a moment then returned with fifteen medals of the Immaculate for the book binders, a larger one for Rua and a box containing a beautiful medal for Don Bosco. He was ready to say goodbye to both of them when Don Bosco asked if he could speak with him alone. Rua made a genuflection halfway down the room then withdrew. Don Bosco, alone with Pius IX, spoke of his plans for a religious society and the Pope encouraged him to ask his collaborators to take vows. Rua was called back in and the audience concluded with a solemn blessing on Don Bosco, his companion, on those who shared the mission, collaborators and benefactors, and finally on the youngsters and on all his works. Don Bosco and Rua went back to the *Quattro Fontane*, filled with veneration and gratitude for the Pontiff who had treated them in such a fatherly fashion.

The following pontifical audience on 6 April, which along with Don Bosco and Michael Rua also involved Fr Leonard Murialdo, another holy apostle of Piedmontese youth and at the time the Director of the Oratory of St. Aloysius, was in reality a farewell. Don Bosco gave the Pope a letter from Gustavo di Cavour, proposing a reconciliation regarding the lot of Archbishop Fransoni, exiled in Lyon, and concerning the future of the diocese of Turin, now without a pastor for nine years. The document was handed over to Cardinal Antonelli. The Pope showed "amazing kindness" towards Don Bosco. During the three-quarter hour conversation, Pius IX granted him all the spiritual favours and blessings he was asking for. And he added forty gold coins to buy breakfast for the boys at the Oratory. Leonard Murialdo and Michael Rua "were overjoyed", he wrote the following day to Fr Alasonatti.¹⁴ and on 14 April the two pilgrims, filled with information and emotion about Rome and its history, churches, charitable works and especially its venerable pontiff, set out on the way back to Turin, where they arrived by train from Genoa on 16 April.

The adventures of the journey further strengthened the bonds between master and disciple. In July, Don Bosco had occasion to answer a letter in Latin to Rua who had asked him for some advice. The letter reveals not only the kind of active spirituality taught by Don Bosco, but also the style of their relationship, which was now a completely fraternal one. Here is a full translation of it:

My Son,

May the joy and grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ always be in our hearts. You have asked me for some salutary advice, which I offer willingly and in just a few words.

¹⁴ Letter of G. Bosco to V. Alasonatti, Rome, 7 April 1858, in *Epistolario* I, 346.

Know and recall then that the sufferings of the present time cannot compare with the glorious future to be revealed in us. So let us seek this glory constantly and courageously.

Man's life on earth is like smoke which blows away, like a vanishing trace, a shadow which appears, a wave that flows on. Consequently we should have little esteem for the goods of this life and ardently seek those of heaven.

Rejoice in the Lord; whether eating or drinking or whatever you do do it all for the greater glory of God.

Greetings my son. Pray for me to the Lord our God.

Your confrere

Fr. Bosco

Saint Ignatius near Lanzo, 26 July 1858.¹⁵

For Don Bosco cleric Rua was by now a *consocius*, a confrere.

The treatise “De Deo uno et trino”

The Rome journey took place amidst a series of theological treatises which the cleric Rua was continuing to follow at the Turin seminary. In July 1859, at the end of year exams, he was graded first out of seven candidates with a 'plusquam optime'.

The Salesian Archives preserve five of his exercise books with notes from the end of the 1850s, bearing the title *De Deo uno et trino* (God Three and One), of which the second is dated 1859. In all there are 132 pages. Their content is interesting. In this order, they deal with the existence of God, his essence, attributes, both "negative", meaning eternity, immensity, immutability, liberty and unity and "positive", meaning his holiness, truth, knowledge, goodness, justice and providence. The third book deals more specifically with the Trinity and begins with the definition of "procession" and "relations", showing that in God there are three persons who are really distinct, and seeking to determine the originality of the position of the second and third persons, insisting on consubstantiality of the three persons and finally seeking to resolve objections against the definition of the Trinity. So we are dealing with a completely classical study, as one might expect from Scholastic theologians of the 19th century. It spoke to the intelligence and less to the heart.

There are other exercise books of Rua from the same period entitled *De iustitia et iure* 1859-60 (Justice and right).

Dogmatic and moral theology did not seem to have enthused Rua as a seminarian. He followed the courses conscientiously and did brilliantly in the exams. In February 1860 the examiners congratulated him, awarding him an *outstanding*. But Rua preferred the Bible or rather Sacred Scripture, and had begun to put together a series of exercise books (eighteen of these have been preserved in all), with a view to publishing a work (which in reality he would never do), beginning with the six days of Creation, minutely and succinctly recounted in eighty pages. We can follow it even if we do not fully agree with it. Biblical hermeneutics in the young Rua's time was still at the stuttering stage.

Michael worked very hard. We can imagine this just by looking at his timetable. During the day his tasks at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales or St Aloysius took up the main hours. He had to catch up in the evenings, not at night because Don Bosco would

¹⁵ *Epistolario* I, 355.

not allow him, or very early in the morning. During the cold winters, frequent in Turin, he was up by two or two thirty, as Professor Alexander Fabre, who came to the Oratory in October 1858, would later testify. He prayed alone, kneeling on the floor, next to a table in the study. When the clock struck three, he went to the rooms where six, seven, ten or even fifteen collaborators were sleeping, to wake them. It might be pleasant enough in summer, but it was rather tough in winter. "How often it happened", one of the boys write later, "that you'd find the water in the basin at the foot of the bed frozen"! Then we would throw open the attic windows, face the eaves and with our hands in the snow, wash our face". There was little light for working in the study: some oil lamps, called *cappuccino* because of the extinguisher which looked like a hood.¹⁴ At half past five these courageous boys were already with the other students. Thus, every morning Rua could put in three hours of study of theology before Mass.

The organisation of the Society of St Francis of Sales

1859 featured in political terms with the unification of Italy under the guidance of Piedmont, and in Valdocco, by the founding of the Society which Don Bosco had dreamed of creating.

The victorious war against Austria in Lombardy, which finished on 11 July with the armistice at Villafranca, and some popular uprisings in the Papal territories of Romagna stirred up by Piedmontese agents and ratified in August-September by their representatives in Turin, meant that all the north of the Peninsula soon came under the control of the Kingdom of Sardinia. For Pope Pius IX this was a grave attack on his papal authority. Valdocco took sides with him, without hesitation. Don Bosco, author of *Storia d'Italia* considered pro-Austrian and less than enthusiastic about the unity of Italy, was considered as dangerous and reactionary by the *Gazzetta del popolo*, which attacked it violently on 18 October. On 9 November Don Bosco sent the Pontiff a long letter expressing the total disapproval of the clergy and all good Catholics with regard to the behaviour of the Piedmontese Government. The Pope answered with a Brief which Don Bosco had published in the conservative paper *L'Armonia*, arousing the ire of his adversaries.

In such a tense atmosphere, Rua quickly wrapped up the remaining stages which separated him from priesthood. On 11 December Bishop John Anthony Balma gave him the tonsure and four minor orders; on 17 December he received the subdiaconate which vowed him to celibacy. It was as a subdeacon that some days later he took part in the meeting which founded the Salesian Society.

In December Don Bosco gave his Society a simple but adequate structure. On the Friday evening the 9th, he had announced in a talk with his collaborators that on the 18th a meeting was reserved for those who wanted to be committed along with him. Whoever did not accept this was asked not to be there.

The Rule copied by Rua had a chapter called "Government of the Congregation". The first article specified: "The Congregation will be governed by a Chapter made up of a Rector, Prefect, Administrator [*econom*], Spiritual Director or Catechist and two Councillors (which immediately went to three from the original)". To define this governing group, Don Bosco had deliberately chosen the term "Chapter", that is, "college", rather than "council", used in the constitutional models he had been inspired by. Decisions were to be taken by common agreement. The Rector's authority would not

be absolute, government would be collegial.

The following articles explained the ways for electing the Rector and the tasks of the Prefect and Spiritual Director. Here the three articles regarding the Spiritual Director are of great importance. We read there :

Art. 2 - The Spiritual Director will take special care of the novices, and will take the greatest care to have them learn and practise the spirit of charity and zeal which must animate the one who wants to dedicate his entire life to the good of neglected youth.

Art. 3 - It is also a special duty of the Spiritual director to keep an eye on the conduct of the Rector with the strict obligation of advising him should he overlook anything in observing the rules of the Congregation.

Art. 4 - But it is also the special task of the Director to keep an eye on the moral conduct of all the gathered members".

The assembly on the 18th saw to the election of this body. That evening, at 9 pm, eighteen people crowded into the small room of Don Bosco's. Two priests: Don Bosco himself and Fr Alasonatti, then deacon Angelo Savio, subdeacon Rua, thirteen clerics and finally a young layman. The assembly was minuted by its secretary, Alasonatti. According to this document, those present, simply by being there confirmed their intention "to foster and preserve the spirit of true charity needed for the work of the Oratories for neglected and endangered youth, who in those calamitous times were seduced in a thousand ways to the detriment of society and led to godlessness and irreligion". By common accord they agreed to "to erect themselves into a Society or Congregation where they would aim at mutual help in sanctifying themselves for the glory of God and the salvation of souls especially those most in need of instruction and education".

After this they proceeded to the election of the members of the administration of the new Society. They recited a short prayer to the Holy Spirit and asked Don Bosco, "the initiator and promoter" of the Society, to accept the role of Rector. Given that perhaps he feared the whimsical nature of his youngsters, who were not always so kind to the austere Fr Alasonatti, Don Bosco consented on condition that he himself could choose the Prefect of the Chapter who would be, precisely, the same Alasonatti, Prefect of the Oratory. The assembly could only but give its approval. The group then decided, certainly at Don Bosco's initiative, that for the other roles, that is Apiritual Director, Administrator and three Councillors, the election would be by secret vote. So it was that that evening the assembly voted "unanimously", according to the minutes, for subdeacon Rua to take on the role of "Spiritual Director" of the new Society. At Don Bosco's side he would be the guardian of souls, the one who with everyone's trust would be concerned with the formation of new adherents and would see that they had an authentic religious and Christian spirit. Don Bosco knew he could count on this young man who had still not turned twenty two years of age. Angelo Savio was elected as Administrator; John Cagliero, John Bonetti and Charles Ghivarello were appointed Councillors.¹⁶ The structure was complete.

¹⁶ Alessandro Fabre, "Per la memoria di D. Rua", Pinerolo 18 June 1910, in FdR 2839B2-8 (text taken up by Amadei I, 124).

5 – MICHAEL RUA AS A YOUNG PRIEST

Preparation

When he was appointed Spiritual Director of the budding Salesian Society, Michael Rua was still pursuing his theology studies at the seminary in Turin, and was preparing himself for ordination to the priesthood by the end of the academic year. Some of his exercise books, for example those containing the treatise *De legibus* (on laws), are dated 1859-1860. He was always very active. Ever since 1855, the five secondary level classes had gradually been established at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales. It was his responsibility to supervise them.

Always discrete, Rua was undemonstrative and did not make any show of his fervour in faith. His reflective nature tempered his words and actions. Reason ruled his passions. He always kept his calm. When it was time for prayer he gave himself to it with simplicity. For the rest of his time, like Don Bosco he made work his prayer. A number of people testify to this. Giacinto Ballesio, who came to the Oratory in 1858, would testify that "cleric Rua stood out for his simple, sincere and dignified piety. To see him praying, whether during study times or under the arcade during night prayers, or in church, with his face radiant, his self-possession, made it obvious that he was fully absorbed mind and heart in God. One sensed he could see the Lord, felt Jesus present, delighted in it and this helped us to pray all the more".¹

So it is no use looking for mystical outpourings in his personal notebooks. It wasn't his style. It all took place in the secrecy of his soul, in constant touch with God.

However let us not portray him as merely reserved and taciturn. "The cleric Rua", the same witness says, "although he maintained a dignified disposition and comportment, was the soul of the playground, leading the singing and games into which he knew how to weave an apt bit of advice, a pertinent remark, a reflection".²

On 17 March 1860, Rua began his final preparatory retreat for the diaconate at the Priests of the Mission House (Vincentians). He would be ordained deacon on the 24th of that month. His priestly ordination was approaching.

In the meantime Pius IX's difficulties continued and Don Bosco was trying to support him. Polls were conducted in various territories to Rome's north, in view of their annexation to Piedmont. Very much upset, the Pope excommunicated the "invaders and usurpers". Don Bosco wrote to him, sending him a letter of support from his young people, and expressing his full support of papal policy. He also passed on information on plans to take over territories belonging to the Papal States.³ In Turin, supporting Pius IX brought not a few problems in its train. Count Cays residence, along with Canon Ortalda's, Fr Cafasso's and Don Bosco's were searched. On 26 May the Oratory's administrative offices were given a thorough going over. And some days later the schools belonging to the house were likewise searched.

The first sentence of one of Don Bosco's letters to Rua, who was about to be ordained priest, can be better understood in this context. In July while he was with the

¹ Testimony cited by Amadei I, 121.

² Amadei I, 121-122.

³ Letter of Don Bosco to Pope Pius IX, Turin, 13 April 1860, in *Epistolario* I, 400-401.

Vincentian Fathers, during his immediate retreat preparation for priesthood Rua, writing in French, had asked Don Bosco for some useful advice, and he answered in Latin as follows (translated):

To my dear son Michael Rua, whom I greet in the Lord.

You have sent me a letter written in French, and you have done well. Be French in language and speech only, but in mind, heart and works, be fearlessly and generously Roman.

Listen carefully to what I am telling you. Many tribulations await you, but along with these the Lord will also grant you many consolations.

Be exemplary in good works; seek advice, try constantly to do what is good in God's eyes.

Fight the devil, hope in God, and, as much as I can be, I will always be with you.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be always with us. Greetings.

Fr John Bosco.⁴

Michael Rua would be faithful to Rome in word and in deed. He would certainly not have needed to be lectured. At any rate he would never forget it. As for the warning of tribulations awaiting him, he had already heard this from Don Bosco's lips and was calmly ready to suffer.

Michael Rua is ordained priest

Michael Rua was ordained priest on 29 July 1860 by Bishop Balma, auxiliary to Archbishop Fransoni in exile. He was ordained in the Villa belonging to Baron Bianco di Barbania, where the bishop was spending his holidays. The villa was located at Caselle, along the Lanzo valley. Since the railway line from Turin-Lanzo had not yet been built, deacon Rua left Valdocco on 28 July in the company of two young clerics, Celestine Durando and John Anfossi, and made the journey on foot, like poor people would, as Fr Francesia wrote.⁵ But when he got to his destination he did not go to bed (the following morning his bed was untouched), preferring to spend the night in prayer. The following day during the ordination ceremonies in St Anne's chapel in the villa, his bearing "brought tears" to the eyes of some of those present according to the somewhat sentimental expression of his biographer Francesia.⁶

He came back to Turin that day and the following morning celebrated his first Mass in all simplicity, assisted by Don Bosco, before the numerous community at the Oratory. Fifty years later one witness, then just a young cleric, still recalled his "serene and recollected gaze" as he approached the altar, his "radiant face" at the moment of consecration and his "angelic fervour" while distributing holy communion.⁷ That evening he gave the good night to the community. His simple, direct and familiar manner of speech brought applause.

But the real Oratory feast did not finish there. It was organised for the following Sunday, 5 August. Fr Rua sang the Mass. The Guardian Angels Oratory which he was involved with as we know, joined the group along with hundreds of boarders at the

⁴ *Epistolario* I, 419.

⁵ Francesia, 50.

⁶ Francesia, 51.

⁷ Cf. Ceria, *Vita*, 46.

Oratory of St Francis of Sales. It was a day of joy, affection and reverence. The inflated comments, kept in the Salesian archives, abounded in both verse and prose. In one he was defined as "model for the young, example for the clerics, and worthy disciple of Dominic Savio". In another he was admired as "a new St. Peter for his love for Jesus Christ, a new St. John for his love for heavenly things, a new Aloysius Gonzaga for the purity of his life, a new St. Bernard for his love for the Virgin, and a new Don Bosco for his dedication to the young". He was already considered to be a worthy successor to Don Bosco.⁸ Michael thought that was just going too far. He protested. The constant cry of "Viva don Rua!" was too much for him: he asked that they at least add "Viva don Bosco!".

Auffray pictures the sight in the hall that day as follows: "Not far from her son, Mrs Rua took part in this feast as if it were a dream, hardly controlling the emotions that filled her heart as she saw her only surviving son out of four of them elevated to such honour. In one corner of the hall the elderly Fr Picco, the Greek and Latin teacher of ten years earlier, savoured this modest triumph of his best student, while on the right of the new priest, Don Bosco was smiling with intense though restrained delight. Everybody's heart was bathed in an atmosphere of unique warmth. It was a family honouring its eldest son, under the father's tender gaze".⁹

The young priest's work

It is difficult to adequately describe the amount of work that fell to the young Don Rua as the 1860-1861 school year began. He had responsibility for all the secondary classes at the Oratory, which in July 1861 numbered 317 pupils, divided into five classes, a number that grew year by year. He managed it all without any fuss. His quiet way of working, but with impressive energy made him seem more austere than he was in reality. He was impeccable and those who approached him admired his kindness and discretion.

He spent his Sundays with the director Robert Murialdo, at the Guardian Angels Oratory in Vanchiglia, a seedy neighbourhood as we know. Cleric Ballesio who went with him would tell of the extremely tiring Sundays of that summer 1861. They left Valdocco at dawn and spent the entire morning with the youngsters at the Guardian Angel's, in church or in the courtyard, with his games equipment, or on the swings, or running and other games. At midday they returned to Valdocco with lots of children hanging all around him, and once they got there they ate the left-overs. Without having a rest they went straight back to Vanchiglia to once again be involved in the church and the courtyard. The afternoon's religious ceremonies were short, and interspersed with catechism. Fr Rua was no grand orator, but he would teach a little Church history and preached simply. And then, as evening fell, he would go back to Valdocco, always late for supper. Then, as Ballesio tells us, he would still go and pray or study.¹⁰

In an exercise book bearing the title *Libro dell'esperienza*,¹¹ (Book of experience) Fr Rua as Vice Rector recounts the various activities at this Oratory: Month of Mary, Confirmation in 1861, well-prepared on a daily basis the week beforehand, Feast of the

⁸ These items in verse or prose have been brought together in FdR 2756B1-2757A4.

⁹ Auffray, 81.

¹⁰ According to Giacinto Ballesio, in Amadei I, 165-166.

¹¹ Found in in FdR 2929B8-2930D7.

Assumption, the Rector's feast day and Confirmation at the Oratory of St Francis of Sales in 1862... Thus the *Book of experience* provides us with an anticipated programme for the Feast of the Patron of the Guardian Angels Oratory, 29 September 1861: Communion Mass celebrated by Fr Rua, lunch for everyone, sung mass and solemn vespers with Fr Leonard Murialdo presiding, and the Valdocco band providing the accompaniment. Fr Borel preached. As evening approached there were fireworks. The day finished up in the Church with a hymn to the Guardian Angels and the *Angelus*. In October 1861, Archbishop Fransoni congratulated Don Bosco, in a letter written while in exile, for the good work achieved at the Guardian Angels Oratory. Fr Rua would be a supporter of the oratory in working class milieux for the rest of his life, even and especially when his confreres would show a preference for schools and hostels.

To prepare for the exam that would give him permission to hear confessions, Fr Rua followed the moral theology teachings of Canon Zappata. We have a series of exercise books, 372 pages in all. Were they dictated or copied? We do not exactly know. The cover of the first one gives us an outline dealing with human actions, conscience, sins, commandments of God and the Church, faith. These are all ideas that one would expect to find at the beginning of a theology course.¹² Then follow laws, sanctions, justice and right, contracts, administration of the sacraments, with details on baptism, penance - with a note on indulgences - extreme unction and matrimony. Fr Rua, who was particularly conscientious and gifted with an excellent memory, recorded it all. Having completed all these classes and passed the exam, on 27 June 1862 Canon Zappata would give him his licence for hearing confessions.¹³

At the same time Fr Rua was preparing for his teacher's certificate for lower secondary, a diploma that the Rector of the Turin University would sign on 21 September 1863.¹⁴

And finally we go back to this period for a fine initiative for future historians of Don Bosco. One day in the spring of 1861 a 'sources commission' was set up at the Oratory, made up of fourteen members. They were to gather testimonies and documentation relating to the "marvellous gifts" and the "extraordinary deeds" attributed to Don Bosco, his "unique way of educating youth", his great "future projects", since they believed that it all revealed "something of the supernatural". Fr Rua was secretary of this Commission. Three of the assistants, clerics Ghivarello, Bonetti and Ruffino, were appointed as editors.¹⁵ Up until Don Bosco's death, Fr Rua made it his task to gather all the useful information from his helpers at the Oratory which would lead to an exact knowledge of their beloved and revered master.¹⁶

¹² Cover title: "*Theologiae moralis*. Volumen I.um: *De actibus humanis. De conscientia. De peccatis. De praeceptis Decalogi et De Ecclesiae et de fide*. Professor Rev.mo Can. Zappata. Fr. Rua Michael 1860-61". This first exercise book has 94 pages.

¹³ Cf. The licence in FdR 2751B9-C4.

¹⁴ Cf. The diploma in FdR 2665B2.

¹⁵ The initial declaration written in an exercise book belonging to Domenico Ruffino and signed by Don Rua is published in MB VI, 862.

¹⁶ We can see for example that on 21 January 1872, the Oratory Chapter at which he presided gave Berto and Dalmazzo the task of taking notes on Don Bosco, and on the following 28th decided to draw up a biographical outline of Don Bosco. Some chapters of this draft – the "solita vita", as indicated in the minutes – were read during the year at different Chapter meetings. It was during this time in 1873 that Don Bosco, who certainly knew of the initiative, decided to write up a kind of biography with the title,

Rector at Mirabello

Michael Rua was about to receive a new responsibility. On 14 May 1862, Don Bosco took a decisive step in ensuring the future of his Society. That evening he called his helpers together in his room for the first profession of religious vows envisaged by the *Rule*, written up four years previously. How many were gathered around him in that tiny room? Fifteen, twenty, twenty six? The number varies according to the lists and chronicles, which include or exclude simple spectators and postulants who were there to perform. At any rate, there was standing room only. Don Bosco, dressed in surplice and stole, followed the classic ceremony as laid down in the Constitutions of the *Society of St. Francis of Sales*, in the chapter *Formula for the vows*: the singing of the *Veni Creator*, response, prayer, Litany of Our Lady, Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be in honour of St Francis of Sales. But at this point instead of following the rite and calling each of his helpers before him one by one to pronounce their vows, he asked Fr Rua as Spiritual Director to recite the formula phrase by phrase so the others could repeat it. It was a practical way to save time in crowded circumstances but not without serious consequences, and in fact we will never know exactly who, that evening, made a formal commitment in Don Bosco's Society.¹⁷ However, Salesian history can claim without fear of misleading that the following year (1863) the Society had 22 professed and 17 novices in two Houses. That year in fact a new house had been opened, entrusted to Fr Rua as its Rector.

In the autumn of 1861, Don Bosco made contact with a family in Mirabello in view of founding a college in the town, belonging to the Casale jurisdiction. This business which was supported by the Bishop of Casale, Bishop Louis Nazari of Calabiana, a friend of Don Bosco's, was soon concluded because at the time the diocese had no minor seminary. Building began in autumn 1862. They told the civil administration at Mirabello, interested in founding a college in its own area, that it was a minor seminary. Michael Rua, who had been appointed to run it, gathered the required documents: a certificate of good conduct which declared he was "excellent, honest, studious, and of irreproachable conduct", as was required for the Rector of a seminary; a certificate of good reputation from the Capitular Vicar in Turin, Joseph Zappata; a civil certificate signed by the mayor and provided by the municipal police in Turin...¹⁸ and finally on 30 August 1863, Bishop Calabiana appointed Fr Rua as the Rector of the minor seminary of St Charles in Mirabello.¹⁹

He arrived in Mirabello on 12 October, with his mother Joan Mary who was to look after the kitchen and wardrobe in the new college. He was the only priest. The rest of the personnel comprised five clerics and four young men who were not as yet Salesians. When the college was opened, a good number of students turned up.

This was when Don Bosco sent him a long and affectionate letter of obedience. It contained a range of useful items of advice for the good running of a college. The importance of the letter prompts us to present it briefly.²⁰ It said first of all that the

Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales, a basic document dealing with his first forty years.

¹⁷ Contrary to what has sometimes been written, no register was signed at the end of the ceremony. We have to trust the chronicles.

¹⁸ Cf. The document in FdR 2665A11-12.

¹⁹ Cf. The document in FdR 2751B3-4.

²⁰ *Epistolario* I, 613-617.

Rector at Mirabello had to always keep his calm, avoid mortification in food and and get at least six hours sleep a night, not just to maintain his health, but also for the good of the boys entrusted to him. Don Bosco knew his disciple well. He also invited him to see to the traditional practices of piety, both for himself and for the personnel: Mass, breviary, a short period of meditation each morning, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the day He recommended that he make himself loved before he made himself feared (his disciple's apparent severity always concerned Don Bosco)! Where he had to give orders or correct someone, it was to be clear that this was for the good of souls. He then encouraged him to direct all his actions to the spiritual, physical and intellectual well-being of the young people whom Providence had entrusted him with, and before taking any important decision he was urged to lift his thoughts to God.

The Rector, Don Bosco wrote, should give careful attention to the physical well-being of the teachers and assistants. He also had the special task of watching over the health of the students, speaking with them often, keeping himself informed of their concerns and seeking the best solutions for resolving difficult situations. During classes teachers should direct questions to all students equally. There were to be no particular friendships, no partiality. Assistants were to be punctual in carrying out their duties! The Rector was also to see to bringing teachers and assistants together from time to time to encourage them to promote a sound atmosphere in the college: no bad conversations, dangerous books, vulgar pictures or anything that might endanger the queen of virtues, purity.

An entire paragraph in the letter was reserved to service personnel. The leader was to be of recognised integrity, accountable not only for the excellence of the work of subordinates, but also for their moral conduct. Furthermore, the workers should have the opportunity to attend mass daily and to receive the sacraments monthly. We really were in another time, a culture which would unfortunately disappear. In taking on new students he had to see they were well-behaved, and reject any candidates who might be a bad influence. In cases of immoral behaviour a warning would be issued only once, and in case of relapse, expulsion was immediate.

One part of the letter sums up nicely the way the Rector at Mirabello should conduct himself before the students. "Do all you can to spend all recreation time with the students, and try to offer them an affectionate word, as you know only too well how to do, as you see the need. This is the great secret that will enable you to master the hearts of these youngsters". Don Bosco taught his disciple a pedagogy of presence which he knew very well. In general, "charity and courtesy are the characteristic features of a Rector both for those who live in and for day students" of the institute; he will try to resolve all problems "for the greater glory of God". Broken promises, quarrels, vindictiveness, pride must all be sacrificed *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

That very practical letter, slightly touched up over the years under the title of *Confidential reminders for Rectors* would be destined to gradually become the *magna carta* for every Rector of a Salesian boarding school, one of the fundamental documents for understanding Don Bosco's educational system.²¹

In conformity with Don Bosco's directives, Fr Rua sought to make the house at Mirabello a protective and transforming environment. His governing style was

²¹ Cf. F. Motto, *I Ricordi confidenziali ai Direttori di don Bosco*, Rome, LAS, 1984.

scrupulously based on the one which reigned at the Oratory in Turin.²² To achieve the desired educational results, Fr Rua wanted each of the pupils to find, within the walls there, a calm joy based above all on a conscience which was at peace with God. He used his creative zeal to maintain a peaceful spirit amongst his pupils. He sought a serious spirit of discipline, for sure, but one which was neither fastidious nor exaggerated, leaving as much room for freedom as possible. Teachers were to be fatherly or rather, older brothers, who shared in all their games, concerns, things that had to be done, showing great trust in them, and binding them with all kinds of dedication to their good. They had to bear just one thing in mind: build up a family atmosphere around the boys, something so necessary for their growth and especially a life of deep, authentic and reasonable piety, something which could give these adolescents the strength to resist evil, enlighten their moments of doubt, and make them always faithful in their duties. To maintain this spirit of piety Fr Rua, following what he had already experienced at the Oratory in Turin, set up an entire network of practices. He celebrated daily Mass for them. Morning and evenings he was available in the confessional. Every evening after prayers before sending them off to sleep, he gave his sons a short well-prepared talk. He gave his little flock two instructions every Sunday, one in the morning where he explained a little Church History, another in the afternoon which explained Christian virtues.

During the school year at the college in Mirabello, much fervent attention was given to celebrating the patronal feast of St Charles (4 November), then the Immaculate Conception (8 December), and the major solemnities of the liturgical year. All these feasts had a novena or triduum to prepare for them. There was a short recollection monthly which consisted in the exercise for a happy death, so dear to Don Bosco since he was in the Ecclesiastical College in Turin. And finally, every year in spring there was a three day Retreat during which time all classes were suspended, and pupils were invited to meditate on the eternal truths and life's larger problems.²³

There were many tight links between Mirabello and Turin. Visits and frequent letters from Don Bosco encouraged the Rector. Don Bosco was concerned about the spiritual life of the youngsters. He advised Fr Rua on how to deal with the civil administration in Alessandria who were asking why, in a presumed 'minor seminary' pupils were taken in who seemed not the least inclined to the ecclesiastical state. On 26 February 1864, the school superintendent arrived and even threatened to have the institute closed down.²⁴ The Bishop of Casale intervened. Don Bosco advised Fr Rua to appeal to the Governor if necessary. But in the end the matter was forgotten. The two also dealt with each other on financial concerns (on one occasion Don Bosco borrowed two thousand francs from Fr Rua) and for celebrations, as on 25 April 1865, when Fr Rua went to Turin with about a hundred boys from Mirabello for the laying of the foundation stone for the Church of Mary Help of Christians.

The house was a lively one even if not quite perfect. At the end of the second school year, Fr Rua purged the school of three undesirables. These "wolves" were regarded as

²² On the question of the *Regolamento pel collegio S. Carlo di Mirabello*, cf. MB VII, 519-522, 863-869.

²³ This paragraph on Fr Rua's regime of piety at Mirabello is taken, in many cases word for word, from Auffray, 106-107, based on his own experience of life in Salesian boarding schools.

²⁴ Original document in FdB 269C3.

too dangerous for the flock.²⁵

On 1 June 1865, to bring the month of Our Lady to a worthy conclusion, they put on the Latin comedy called *Phasmatonices*, (maybe today 'Ghostbusters?') an opera by Bishop Rosini of Pozzuoli. Bishop Calabiana was there with a string of clerical and lay dignitaries who had come specially from Casale for the occasion. These most cultured personalities were filled with admiration at the natural acting talents of the students and the obvious proficiency of the teachers, which manifested the quality of education the college was providing.

The young Rector Fr Rua had succeeded to perfection in his new experience at Mirabello. But, after two years, when he found himself back in Turin for the laying of the foundation stone for the Church of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco let him know that he was thinking of entrusting him with a new and even more weighty role.

²⁵ Letter of M. Rua to F. Provera, 11 July 1865, in Amadei I, 181.

6 - FR RUA AS PREFECT GENERAL

Fr Rua replaces Fr Alasonatti

In July 1865, Don Bosco found himself truly overburdened with problems. The work on the Church of Mary Help of Christians had begun and the cost – he needed to pay the master builders every fortnight – required extraordinary commitment of him. Five of his priests were sick, as he wrote to Fr Rua.¹ Fr Victor Alasonatti, Prefect General, who looked after the overall administration of the work, had throat cancer. He had to leave Turin and move to the house at Lanzo Torinese founded the previous year. On 16 July, the Rector of the College there, Dominic Ruffino, died at 25 years of age. So in August Don Bosco decided to call Rua back to his side. He was to replace Fr John Bonetti. This happened on 18 September. The same day he asked him to pay an invoice that was due.² On 4 October, he asked him to advertise the College at Lanzo.³ Then, on the night of the 7th, Fr Alasonatti died.

He urgently needed to reorganise the overall administration of the Salesian Society. Don Bosco went ahead this way: first of all he gathered together the five office-bearing members of the Chapter in order to replace the deceased Prefect and the Spiritual Director, Fr Fusero, who was ill. Fr Michael Rua was elected Prefect and Fr John Baptist Francesia Spiritual Director. After this all the confreres at the Oratory were called together for the election of the third councillor. In place of Fr John Bonetti, who had been transferred to Mirabello, Fr Celestine Durando was appointed. He then became aware that in formal terms none of the members of this administrative team had made perpetual vows as required by canon law. He set about remedying this immediately. On 15 November, Fathers Rua, Cagliero, Francesia, Ghivarello, Bonetti, along with two clerics and two brothers, made their perpetual vows into the hands of the Rector Major. From the end of the 1860s, given that Don Bosco was often absent, when there was reference to the *Oratory Chapter*, it was a case especially of Fr Rua, prefect, Fr Francesia, Spiritual Director, Fr Angelo Savio, Administrator, John Cagliero, Charles Ghivarello and Celestine Durando, Councillors.

Fr Rua represented Don Bosco

Don Bosco considered Rua, as Prefect General, to be his *alter ego*. On 11 January 1866, he sent him to Mirabello in his name to receive the perpetual vows of two of the first to be professed, Francis Provera and Francis Cerruti. On the following 4 February, Don Bosco found himself by the bedside of Rudolph de Maistre in his final agony, and in his stead Fr Rua presided at the Rectors' meeting called for the Solemnity of St Francis of Sales. On 11 February Fr Rua wrote a long letter to Countess Charlotte Callori, in Don Bosco's name, since he was "caught up in many tasks".⁴

Between 1865 and 1870, even though his responsibilities included the attached houses of Mirabello and Lanzo, Fr Rua's work focused mainly on the house at the Oratory. He had tended to forget about it, but since his return to Valdocco, concerned

¹ *Epistolario II*, 148-149.

² *Epistolario II*, 165.

³ *Epistolario II*, 170-171.

⁴ Published in *Documenti XLIII*, 134-135 (ASC A092).

about giving the secondary classes a qualified teaching staff, he too began to prepare himself for a degree at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Turin. A certificate of enrolment testifies to the courses in Latin, Italian, Greek literature and Ancient and Modern History, dated 30 November 1865.⁵

Since Don Bosco was often absent, Fr Rua was in fact the main one responsible for the work at Valdocco. He had to continue resolving problems to do with accounting, discipline, hygiene, cleaning, restructuring the area, preparing for feast days. Minutes of the weekly meetings of the Chapter speak about these problems. They were faithfully kept by Fr Rua himself, along with some notes in his *Book of experience*. A reading of these documents, whilst a little tiresome, can be very instructive. We learn, for example, that Salesian life at the time was by no means idyllic.⁶ Here and there we glean details from the Chapter meetings in 1866. On 11 March they decided to give greater attention to the hour of rising for the personnel, and how lessons were being prepared; on 18 March it was recommended that the accounts register be kept in order; on 8 July that Confirmation should be better prepared for (to be administered on the 22nd), that punishments should not be administered in the classroom and refectory and to check that beds were in order in the dormitories; on 12 August, coming back to the question of punishments, the Chapter established a graduated system, which consisted in depriving the culprit of a main course, wine, eating while seated in the middle of the refectory or near the doorway, kneeling in the refectory, under the arcades, etc.⁷

Reorganisation of the Oratory

It was a case of taking in hand a house of some 350 students and 350 working boys who often left something to be desired in order or discipline. Under Fr Alasonatti's direction, a man who was not well and who reacted a little too enthusiastically, the large house at Valdocco had lost some of its spirit. So it required some reorganisation, smartening up the discipline and giving some inner strength to the life of piety. The task was not easy for the new Prefect General. His approach drew some criticism. Rua was in an uncomfortable position. By now, it was said, he enjoyed Don Bosco's protection and nobody could move a leaf without his permission. Some were very happy with order being re-established so energetically after the relaxed management of Victor Alasonatti. Others, on the other hand, who had come to the Oratory as children, and were now grown up, could not resign themselves to submitting to a former companion. This gave rise to some ill will which Fr Rua sought to contain.

He put up with it. It was a heavy task. It was up to him to pay considerable debts. He needed especially to be concerned with the smooth running of the workshops with all the accounting that involved, buying the raw materials and machines, paying the workers, and seeing to accounts for the clients. Don Bosco also entrusted him with supervising the work on the church under construction. Besides, as Auffray suggests (not confirmed by other historians), he would have even been responsible for the *Catholic Readings*. This publication went to twelve thousands subscribers and required

⁵ Enrolment certificate in FdR 2665B1.

⁶ Microfilm of the notebooks of Chapter meetings handwritten by Fr Rua between 1866 and 1877, accurately dated, can be read in FdR 2916D1-2919E9.

⁷ Cf. FdR 2916D3 and following; see also the article by P. Braidò, «Don Michele Rua primo autodidatta Visitatore Salesiano», in RSS 9 (1990) 108-110.

that its contents be written up monthly in a simple and personal style. "It was no small matter to write appropriately, correctly and in a not too difficult style, and also keep an eye on the whole monthly preparation".⁸

The festivities of the consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

In May 1868 the house at the Oratory was bubbling over. Five years after having launched the idea, Don Bosco saw the realisation of his dream of a great church in honour of Mary Help of Christians. The final touches were being added. The consecration was being prepared for June, just four years after laying the foundation stone. In May the Chapter had discussed, under Fr Rua's direction, how roles would be distributed. According to the summary notes in the minutes, they had to see to door-keepers, people to take up collections, ushers, waiters at the table, stewards for the wine, people to look after guest rooms, confessors, and lighting. The festivities would last eight days. The consecration ceremony was the most important moment. They needed to invite personalities and see to the preparation of solemn religious ceremonies. There were crowds of devotees to be welcomed, students from the houses at Lanzo and Mirabello to receive, concerts to organise and a theatrical performance to prepare.

The grandiose festivities of the consecration, which took place on 19 June, lasted for eight successive days and were at the height of the religious fervour which meant that the church had been completed in record time. Don Bosco described them in a special edition of the *Catholic Readings*, published immediately after the event.⁹ Throughout all his life no other event would assume greater importance than those marvellous days between 9 and 16 June, with Masses and Pontifical Vespers, talks from bishops, banquets (for which gifts had arrived from all over North Italy), a gymnastics display and some theatrical shows, amongst which the *Phasmatonices* by Monsignor Rosini which had already been performed at Mirabello. The faithful turned up in droves. Don Bosco was radiant. At the end of it all Fr Rua was able to write in a note that nothing had disturbed "the happiness of these holy days".¹⁰

It is difficult to imagine the amount of work that such an enterprise demanded of its various organisers. Joseph Bongiovanni, besides his usual work, took it upon himself to see to the altar serving with the Altar Servers group, then fell ill on the day of the consecration and died on 17 June, twenty four hours after the completion of the octave.¹¹ We have to say that Fr Rua, to whom was entrusted the whole machinery of organisation, carried it off splendidly. But his physical condition showed a reaction the following month. The bow that had been overstretched, broke. Exhausted, he tried to hide his tiredness as much as possible, but he had to declare he was beaten. On 29 July he stayed in bed. Fr Ceria says he was suffering from serious peritonitis. That was probably the doctor's diagnosis, according to which he did not stand a single chance of

⁸ Auffray, 117.

⁹ *Rimembranza di una solennità in onore di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Turin, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868.

¹⁰ P. Braido, «Don Michele Rua precario 'cronicista' di don Bosco», in RSS 8 (1989) 347-348.

¹¹ It was said expressly, beginning with the fifth edition, in a note added to chapter 17 of the *Life of Dominic Savio* written by Don Bosco, cf. *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales*. With an appendix of graces obtained through his intercession [Sixth edition], Turin, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1880, 78-79.

recovering. Fr Rua calmly accepted his death and asked for the last sacraments.¹²

That day Don Bosco was away. When he came back at the end of the afternoon, he found the house in turmoil. Even one ran to him to give him news of the patient. According to witnesses he replied: "I know that Fr Rua will not leave without my permission". And he went to the confessional. Only after supper did he go up to Fr Rua's room. He spoke with him for a few minutes and when he saw that he was convinced he was about to die, it seems that he said: "Oh my dear Rua, I don't want you to die. You still have so much to do for me!" he blessed him and then left. During the night the illness did not get any worse. The following day, after he had celebrated Mass, Don Bosco was again by his bedside. Doctor Gribaudo, who was there, made a sign that there was no hope. Don Bosco was not to be beaten. It seems that when he saw the holy oils on the table, he scolded the infirmarian for not having enough faith, and turning to the patient said: "You see, Rua, even if you were to throw yourself out the window right now, you wouldn't die". Where did this belief come from? We do not know. At any rate, the patient began to suffer less. Little by little his health improved and the danger went away. At the beginning of his convalescence when he was able to take the first steps outside his room, the whole house was rejoicing. They called him down under the arcades, had a sing-song for him and read out a speech for him. When he regained his strength, Don Bosco sent him to take some rest at Trofarello at the end of the summer. He took no part in Chapter meetings between July and November. Only on 13 November did he finally take up his role again at the Oratory in Valdocco.

The daily life of Prefect Fr Rua

For a long time Fr Rua's life at the Oratory was spent in the office, and was rather monotonous and without events of any significance. Only those who witnessed it were able to speak of it with full knowledge.¹³ The room where he worked had only the furniture strictly necessary. No ornaments. There were one or two secretaries in a nearby room, to whom he not only gave work but kept an eye on them to discover their attitudes and eventually make them prefects and bursars in other houses. For this purpose he drew up some small handwritten manuals, where he explained the book-keeping for Salesian houses. He showed how to keep the Mass register, accounting and management ledgers for the College, the notebook of offerings, registers for the different administration sectors of a complex work: sacristy, kitchen, dispensary, workshops, laundry. Fr Rua patiently introduced his secretaries to more complex administrative tasks. Sometimes he took on people as temporary help, who could not fit in elsewhere and tried to get them back on their feet.

Prayer was the framework for the work that he did in the office. He began work with the *Actiones nostras*, a Hail Mary, a reading of some thought from St Francis of Sales or the *Imitation of Christ*, and finished with the *Agimus tibi gratias*.

Most of the Oratory correspondence ended up in his office. He opened and made notes on letters, then handed them over to the secretaries to write the responses. He simply signed them. A number of the letters addressed to Don Bosco he took care of himself: commissions, requests for acceptances, small offerings... Sometimes Don Bosco passed on to him letters that were too long or hard to decipher. And Father Rua,

¹² Regarding Rua's illness, cf. Amadei I, 206-208 e MB IX, 320-322.

¹³ This paragraph depends entirely on Ceria, *Vita*, 66-68.

once he had read them carefully, summed up their contents to guide the saint in his response.

In his office Fr Rua received suppliers, relatives of the boys and occasional visitors. A procession that sometimes lasted for hours. If the quality of the people and the nature of the affairs permitted it, after seeing and greeting the person who entered, he continued to read, write and consult his papers while holding audience up until they said goodbye. Think what you want about this. Evidently he wanted to save time.

From his position, he kept a constant eye on the discipline of the house. Contacts and frequent dialogues with the members of staff allowed him to identify abuses and disorders in order to correct them immediately. He never trusted his memory alone and took notes in his *Book of experience*. He took it on himself to keep an eye on all the places personally. He also adopted a habit which he was faithful to for a long time. After evening prayers, he would walk slowly alone under the arcades, saying the rosary, and warn those who were not observing the "sacred" silence or who had not retired to their room as prescribed in the regulations. Then he went around the entire house. Sometimes he would do this at the dead of night and always end up in the Church in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

Fr Rua's responsibilities were not limited to the students. The number of clerics was on the increase. He also needed to look after them. Fr Rua entrusted them to the care of an assistant, Paul Albera, future Rector Major. Soon a number of the Chapter meetings were reserved to "evaluation" of the clerics. Every Saturday Fr Rua gave them a lesson in what was called *testamentino*, or a study of a passage from the new Testament. He assisted the young clerics in their first steps as Salesian educators, giving them an example of an exemplary religious life.

And above all he lived under the direction of Don Bosco, the great support of the Oratory, whose moral influence filled the house, even when he was physically absent. In 1867 Don Bosco spent two consecutive months in Rome and Rua took command with extreme naturalness. However he always gave the impression that he would not move a finger without Don Bosco's consent. What Fr Barberis wrote in 1875 could have also been said in 1860: "The Oratory is organised in such a way that, one can say, you did not notice that Don Bosco was away from Turin".

7 – THE ONE WHO FORMED YOUNG SALESIANS

The problem of forming clerics at the Turin Oratory

Fr Rua, Prefect General of the Salesian Society, found himself directly involved in the problem of formation of young clerics at the Oratory. We need to situate his activities in the laborious evolution of the young Salesian Society through the 1870s. Especially because, even though Don Bosco was on the scene in those years, the prefect general was his first confidant, therefore his natural counsellor. He grew through his regular contact with Don Bosco, who didn't play around when the formation of his sons and the spirit of his educational approach was at stake.

From 1864 Don Bosco, convinced of Pius IX's support for his project, made efforts to see that the Salesian Society could pass from being a Congregation of diocesan right to an institute of pontifical right. That would allow him, or so he thought, no longer to depend on the bishops for admitting his clerics to orders. He would be completely free to judge their suitability. So he submitted the text of the *Regole* (Constitutions) to the Holy see, in the hope of obtaining the requested approval. But he was mistaken. That year he achieved merely the first step in the process of recognition of his institute, the *decretum laudis* (decree of praise), dated 23 July. A series of thirteen observations on the Constitutional text, formulated by the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, somewhat dampened his enthusiasm.¹ Not only this. As he had signalled to the Roman Congregation, he could have risked, in concrete, giving the Society the appearance of a traditional religious body, with all the problems that would bring with it. Besides, one of the observations was clearly contrary to granting full faculties to the Superior General alone for admission to orders: "The Superior General cannot be allowed to issue the dimissorial letters for admission to orders of the members of the Pious Institute; this should be eliminated from the Rules then". This went radically against his plans so he tenaciously opposed it.²

In May 1867, finally, after eighteen years of the diocese being "widowed" due to the exile (1850) and then death (1862) of Archbishop Fransoni, a new archbishop made his solemn entrance into Turin. He was Archbishop Alexander Riccardi di Netro, transferred from the See of Savona to Turin. He was very jealous of the rights and duties pertaining to his ministry. During his three years as archbishop he made life hard for Don Bosco, especially in reference to the formation of the clerics.³

Over the years in Turin the formation of clerics had more or less slipped through the normal regulations. Many seminarians had taken refuge with Don Bosco, who had a less Sulpician view of their conduct of life and their ecclesiastical studies. He made use of some priests around the city for their instruction, and sometimes (for moral theology) he provided it himself. During their studies these clerics offered various services in the education and instruction of the youngsters. "I have around fifty of them", Don Bosco

¹ You can read the *Animadversiones* by Stanislaus Svegliati in G. Bosco, *Costituzioni della Società...*, 231 [document 6].

² According to *Supra animadversiones in Constitutiones sociorum sub titulo S. Francisci Salesii in dioecesi Taurinensi*, in G. Bosco, *Costituzioni della Società...*, 237 [document 7].

³ On Don Bosco at the time of Archbishop Riccardi di Netro, cf. *Don Bosco en son temps*, 734-735, from whence the citations come.

told the Rector of the Seminary, Alexander Vogliotti in June 1866. And then, not ingenuously, added: "Their life is filled with assisting, catechising, instructing poor boys especially those attending the boys' Oratories in this city".⁴ During the summer holidays of 1866 this worked in his favour so much that the diocesan authorities, meaning the capitular vicar and the rector of the seminary, were restricted simply to asking that the clerics who were staying with him attend the courses at the seminary. Some were now living at Lanzo. But Don Bosco saw that there was a single teaching staff for everyone at Valdocco itself. The diocesan curia maintained, not without reason, that this was going too far.

Don Bosco pursued his objectives nevertheless. In Rome in January 1867, there was some movement concerning approval of the Society, the second essential stage for his Rule to come under pontifical right. He needed the support and recommendation of the Piedmontese bishops for this, beginning with Turin. For reasons that are easy to imagine, the Turin curia immediately put up objections. When, on 8 April, Archbishop Riccardi began his contacts with his new diocese, he began making life difficult for him. He was not about to approve ecclesiastical studies done in a hurry, in a school which included workshops and an Oratory. The archbishop considered that formation of this kind was inadequate, and this became a problem from the moment he was responsible for ordaining clerics of Don Bosco's. A month prior to the beginning of the school year, 1867-1868, he wrote him a letter which stated things unequivocally: in future he would be ordaining only students of the diocesan seminary so the superior of the Valdocco Oratory would have to act accordingly. Don Bosco immediately set about tackling the issue, and tried to dialogue, but he had to recognise that the archbishop would not bend. He turned once again to Rome, but this tactic annoyed Archbishop Riccardi.

For his reasons to be heard in high places, the archbishop employed the same tactics as Don Bosco had with the episcopacy to obtain letters of recommendation on behalf of the Salesian Society. Having given Don Bosco his recommendation, on 14 March 1868 he also sent a particularly pointed letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. He knew of the support that Don Bosco had from Pius IX and Secretary of State Antonelli. This notwithstanding he felt it was his duty to express his own point of view: "Really, if I were not persuaded that the Sacred Congregation will essentially modify the Constitutions that have been presented, I would never be convinced to take this step, even though my opposition will bring me considerable difficulties, since I believe I would have betrayed my duty as a bishop if I were to patronise a Congregation that might be approved as proposed, and it can do no other than serious harm to the Church, the diocese and the clergy...The Turin college is already a scene of chaos, with workers, students, lay people, clerics and priests all mixed in together. And it will become ever more so, by extending its sphere of activity". Three months later, Bishop Lorenzo Renaldi, of Pinerolo, took a similar view in a letter to the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars.

Much perplexed the Roman commission, invited to offer its view on the Rules for the Society of St Francis of Sales, set up an inquiry into Don Bosco's seminarians. The conclusions of Monsignor Gaetano Tortone, *charge d'affairs* for the Holy see in Turin, were not favourable. He severely criticised the poor quality of the clerics' studies, their lack of ecclesiastical spirit and their inadequate formation amongst the Oratory boys. Some months later, the journalist priest, Fr James Margotti, an influential character in

⁴ Letter of G. Bosco to A. Vogliotti, Torino, 26 June 1866, in *Epistolario* II, 264.

the Piedmontese clerical world questioned, when asked, Don Bosco's spirit of independence concerning the formation of his clerics.⁵

Faced with a coalition of this kind Don Bosco, little inclined to give in to measures that he considered oppressive, set about finding more allies in Rome. On 9 September 1868, still euphoric over the festivities for Mary Help of Christians, he spoke with Cardinal Philip de Angelis about his problems with Archbishop Riccardi di Netro, who was claiming that he would ordain only clerics who had passed through the seminary. To which his objection was: "... if I send my clerics to the seminary, where will the spirit of discipline of the Society end up? Where will I find more than a hundred catechists for as many classes of boys? And who, having spent five years in the seminary, will want to come back and shut himself up in the Oratory?".⁶The recruitment of personnel, their formation, their perseverance and the functioning of any other educational initiative seemed to be threatened by the arrangements of the Ordinary of Turin.

The latter seemed to have won. The *votum* on the Constitutions by Carmelite Angelo Savini, Councillor for the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, went against Don Bosco.⁷The Roman authorities supported the archbishop. On 2 October, the Secretary of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars informed Don Bosco of the negative vote on his request for approval of the Society of St. Francis of Sales, offering these reasons: "I am sorry to have to inform you that for now the Constitutions of your Institute cannot be approved, because they would need to be substantially modified in two of their main articles. The first concerns the Dimissorial Letters for the clerics who are to be promoted to minor or sacred orders. The second regards the studies of these same clerics since the archbishop demands that they be done in the schools belonging to the diocesan seminary".⁸

Things were clear. Don Bosco wanted two things that were incompatible: Roman approval of the Congregation and keeping his own system of ecclesiastical formation. The obstacle seemed to be insurmountable.

But his manoeuvring was successful in the end. He gained some new episcopal recommendations and went around the obstacles by addressing himself systematically to higher authority. On 15 January 1869, Don Bosco went to Rome determined to push things along. He stayed there a month and a half, besieging those who were responsible. Already by the 19th the Pope had received him in audience. This was the preliminary stage of the assault. He then began to explain his method of formation of young religious to the authorities: acceptance, years of testing, style of formation of aspirants (Don Bosco ignored the word *novitiate*), studies, practical apostolic formation. "The Holy Father", he would say in his address to the Salesians on 17 March following "favoured approval, but he could not conclude matters alone". In a new audience on 23 January, he had only observed that the dimissorial letters of the bishops were not essential for young men who had entered the Oratory before they had turned fourteen. However, over the weeks things went ahead quietly. In February, Don Bosco had two

⁵ Concerning Roman approval, cf. *Don Bosco en son temps*, 736-740, text and notes.

⁶ Letter of G. Bosco to F. De Angelis, Turin, 9 January 1868, in *Epistolario* Ceria I, 572-573 (this letter does not appear with that date in the *Epistolario* Motto).

⁷ Savini's *votum* has been reproduced in MB IX, 376-378.

⁸ Letter of S. Svegliati to G. Bosco, Rome, 2 October 1868, MB IX, 378-379.

long meetings with the Pope. During the second meeting, he learned that the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars would finally approve the Society of St. Francis of Sales. The decree of approval bore the date of 1 March 1869. It granted the superior the faculty, for ten years, of issuing dimissorial letters for young men who had entered his Oratory before the completion of their fourteenth year.⁹ Don Bosco was aware that he had finally achieved the second stage. Four days after the decree, he came back to Turin with the certainty of complete victory.

Nevertheless he soon understood that his Rule had not been fully approved and that it would not have been sufficient to present the dimissorial letters to a bishop to obtain ordination of a cleric.

Fr Rua as novice master without the title

Strengthened by the recognition from Rome, Don Bosco wanted to carefully follow the progress of his Society. On 15 August 1869, he wrote an important circular letter to the Rectors of the houses about their duties towards the confreres: two conferences a month, and a monthly *rendiconto* (friendly talk) which was obligatory for everyone.¹⁰ The Statistics would say in 1869, that there were 62 professed and 31 *ascritti* (novices) divided across four Salesian works. That year Fr Rua was given direct responsibility for the formation of these *ascritti* and thus became the novice master without having the title, in order to avoid the Society appearing to be a traditional Religious Congregation. To tell the truth his responsibility extended across all the stages of the period of *trial* (the word Don Bosco used) for candidates to Salesian life, from postulancy to ordination. Just the same the distinction between these stages was rather loose at Valdocco.

Five years later, when Rua's role passed to Fr Giulio Barberis, in a document prepared for the Roman authorities Don Bosco clarified the method of formation, using his preferred question and answer style.¹¹ His text reflected broadly to the role that had been assigned to Fr Rua in preceding years: selection of candidates, regulating religious life through specific activities, spiritual teaching given them, practical formation for their future life.

According to Don Bosco, the "novitiate", if we wanted to call it such, was not an absolute: "We have the novitiate, but public legislation, the places where we live, do not allow us to have a separate house which would serve this purpose exclusively. The novitiate, which we call a *trial period*, is done in intervals in the main house in Turin". This novitiate could not be of a monastic kind. "In accepting members we look especially to their virtues, since our Congregation is not destined to accept converts who are looking for prayer, penance, and to draw aside; but we accept individuals with good habits based on virtue and religion and who want to dedicate themselves to the good of the young, especially children who are poor and at risk. This is why up till now we have accepted only young men whom we have known for a long time, and who have lived in our houses in an exemplary way according to all reports", Don Bosco wrote.¹²

⁹ Text published in MB IX, 558-561.

¹⁰ *Epistolario* III, 124-127.

¹¹ Cf. 20 page booklet *Cenno storico sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti*, Rome, Tipografia Poliglotta di Propaganda, 1874 (partially reproduced in MB IX, 507-510).

¹² *Cenno storico*, 10-11.

These young men were formed in action, including during their "novitiate". Don Bosco wanted things this way, so in 1874 he explained to his Roman correspondents: "During this time the novices are also occupied teaching catechism whenever the need arises, assisting the children in the establishment, and sometimes even teaching some day or night classes, preparing the most ignorant for Confirmation, Communion, or to serve Mass or the like. This is the most important part of the trial period. Whoever does not have the right attitude for this kind of occupation will not be accepted into the Congregation".

This was the programme in ideal terms certainly. But how did it happen in reality and what were its results? What was the daily routine of Fr Rua and his *ascritti* like between 1869 and 1874? We have said that the novitiate as such did not exist. On the other hand nor was there any official religious Congregation at Valdocco. It was simply the case that from time to time someone decided to stay with Don Bosco. And when a boy confided his intentions to him, Don Bosco sent him along to Rua.

Don Bosco was certainly pushing the boundaries of fact when he made reference in his notes to special practices of piety for his "novices". He wrote: "Every morning vocal prayer, meditation, a third part of the Rosary, and several times a week Holy Communion. During the day they have spiritual reading, visit to the Blessed Sacrament and reading of ascetic material, examen of conscience and spiritual communion. Every evening of the year, at the established time, they come together in church, sing a hymn, then read the life of the Saint of the day; after the singing of the Litany they attend Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament"¹³. In fact in Turin these were practices for all the students.

Fr Rua, regularly, every Thursday, had a spiritual conference with the *ascritti*, as Don Bosco's letter assured he did: "Every week the master of those in the trial period gives them a moral conference on the virtues to be practised and the defects to flee, more often than not basing it on some article of the Constitutions"¹⁴.

In one of the minutes of the Chapter which Rua presided over on 8 November 1867, we find written: "There will be marks given for application and conduct of the clerics as for the other students". In fact, beginning from then, there were regular monthly meetings for marks for the clerics as we see from the minutes written up by Fr Rua. We do not have the registers containing these marks or observations. Nevertheless, part of a paragraph in the "Register of the conduct of clerics and brothers", in "Norms [by Rua] for keeping the Registers" in Salesian houses tells of the purpose of these judgements. The diligence and piety of the candidate are to be evaluated. "By *diligence* we mean the observance of the general rules of the house and the fulfilment of one's proper duties; by *piety* we mean religious conduct, reception of the Sacraments, attending sacred functions, behaviour in church, etc". At sessions of the kind, the Chapter felt it necessary to increase the assistance of clerics in church, dormitory, study and other places!¹⁵The "master" of the *probandi* personally dealt with each of them, normally once or twice a month. The *probandi* of the Oratory were well followed up then.

¹³ *Cenno storico*, 11-12.

¹⁴ *Cenno storico*, 12.

¹⁵ P. Braidò, «Don Michele Rua primo autodidatta 'Visitatore' Salesiano», RSS 9 (1990) 143. The clerics need to be assisted in church, the dormitory, the study and elsewhere, according to what Fr Rua said at the end of the evaluation sessions for the clerics on the 14th and 21 February 1869 (FdR 2916E5).

"They became novices without knowing it ... The Salesian novitiate presented a somewhat curious aspect in those years", concluded the somewhat perplexed, but as always gentle, Augustine Auffray. The essentials were there: length and trial; but nothing else".¹⁶ Maybe. But Archbishop Gastaldi would not be of the same view when elected Archbishop of Turin in 1871. In his official letters to the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, he would insist that Don Bosco's novitiate take the Jesuits as a model. It was not even the view of those revising the Salesian Constitutions who, in 1873-1874, obliged Don Bosco to draw up a definitive chapter: "The master of novices and their management", a text which the founder was particularly reluctant to write and he hurriedly modified the Italian version in 1875, the only one then given to each confrere, with ten articles fewer on the functioning of the novitiate compared to the Latin edition. For Don Bosco this trial period was analogous to the earlier period of "aspirantate", a time for action and apostolate. The Constitutions needed to declare this openly or, at the very least, not hide the fact.

Overall, the results of the kind of formation were good. Don Bosco believed he had a duty to say this in 1874. "The moral results up until now have been most satisfactory. Those who pass these tests become good members, like their work, have an aversion for laziness, and their tasks become necessary ones for them, and they lend themselves willingly to any occasion which can achieve the greater glory of God. Those then who lack an attitude for this kind of life, are left free to follow their vocation in other ways".¹⁷

Notwithstanding the lack of a traditional ascetic novitiate, the formation of young Salesians under Fr Rua's guidance as novice master without the title, was broadly guaranteed. The Salesian history that followed would demonstrate this. Later on however, serious moral disorders amongst the members of the early missionary expeditions to America – especially amongst the brothers – would lead to reflection on an approach more focused on activity than asceticism.¹⁸

¹⁶ Auffray, 131-132.

¹⁷ *Cenno storico*, 13.

¹⁸ Whoever wants to see a personalised example could read the report by Fr Joseph Vespignani, *Un anno alla scuola del B. Don Bosco*, San Benigno Canavese, Scuola Tipografica Don Bosco, 1930 (of which Auffray has translated an extract in his book, 134-137).

8 – FR RUA, PILLAR OF THE ORATORY AND THE LIVING RULE

A Society in constant growth

Fr Rua, who formed Salesians in the original period was, as we know, Prefect General of the Society. He represented Don Bosco, whom everybody simply worshipped, and he made every effort to maintain unity in a Congregation that was growing in numbers and extension. Houses were added in Alassio, Varazze and Sampierdarena, Liguria, between 1870 and 1873. In 1871 Don Bosco gave Fr Angelo Savio the task of building the Church of St John the Evangelist in Turin. In 1872 the founding of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Mornese, considered by Don Bosco as an integral part of the Salesian Congregation, and acceptance of the running of the aristocratic College at Valsalice, would give increased consistency to the work.¹

Between January and February 1869, Don Bosco was in Rome gradually overcoming the obstacles arising from his way of conceiving the formation processes of young candidates and finally gained approval for the Salesian Society. Meanwhile Fr Rua in Turin was getting the pupils there to pray intensely for him. The youngsters, moved by his urging, spontaneously formed into groups, pledging themselves to make sure that each one choose a day in the week to go to Communion, so that every morning a good number would front up at the communion rails for Don Bosco's intentions. This was a way of expressing their thanks to their father, Fr Rua's diary says.² These prayers were heard. On 26 February, Don Bosco informed his Prefect of the positive result, asking him not to spread the news for fear of the ruckus that might result from hearing of a new Religious Congregation being founded. Fr Rua told only a small group who helped him prepare for Don Bosco's return on the evening of 5 March.

The band greeted Don Bosco at the entrance. As a welcome they had set up two rows of poles running across the Oratory courtyard from the entrance to the arcade. Illuminated crystal globes and grease-lit torches were hung on alternate poles. The youngsters formed two wings, working boys in one and students in the other. Don Bosco, with the band leading, went down the middle with everyone on both sides applauding. He went up to the first floor of the house where he was all lit up by the lights from the courtyard. The concert carried on amidst extraordinary general enthusiasm. Fr Rua was satisfied. His diary describes the show in detail and he finishes off saying: "It was an endless outpouring of shouts of joy".³

The approval of the Society meant the Constitutions had to be respected. Don Bosco had put so much effort into getting them recognised by the ecclesiastical authorities. He explained in a conference: "The whole world is watching us and the Church has a right to our work. So from now on every part of our Rule has to be carried out to the letter". A few days later he insisted: "Let's see that we become true founders of the Society of St Francis of Sales, so that those who will read our history will find many models amongst us and they will have no reason to exclaim: what sort of founders were these !"

¹ I am drawing directly here from Ceria, *Vita*, 73-84, with the risk of simplifying if not contradicting the attachments, since I am also using minutes of the house Chapter.

² P. Braidò, "Don Michele Rua...", 355.

³ According to P. Braidò, "Don Michele Rua...", 355-356.

One of his letters to Fr Rua from Rome recalled the need for obedience.⁴ It had to be carried out in such a way as to give a basis to religious custom. The fact that they were few in number helped things.

A demanding Prefect

Fr Rua was Don Bosco's right arm in this delicate enterprise. Humble and generous, he never dragged his feet when it came to efforts and difficulties in responding to the master's intentions. He was a vigilant watchman, and drew attention to any irregularity. Calm and patient, he was not afraid to insist when he discovered any infraction of the established rules.

Sacred silence after prayer of an evening was often not respected. He took it upon himself – as we know – to make a late night tour of the house to remedy this by his simple presence. Another question close to his heart was the practice of Religious poverty. Fr Rua did his best to see that everyone scrupulously observed it. When he gave a sum of money to a confrere, he wanted him to give an account of it down to the last cent. There were few isolated cases which did not escape his control. The intervention could be difficult. One can imagine how he could and should react to a letter from Don Bosco on 21 April 1869 which ordered him to: "Tell D. Chiapale that last Sunday I was looking for him and could not find him : ask him if the Rule allows him to go where he wants without permission, and tell him that it is high time to stop this". Don Bosco had taught him that observance of the Rules was the *sine qua non* for the Society to have a future. What he would not have done to avoid the contrary!

In contrast to what we might imagine, his calls to order were not made harshly. He was demanding, yes, but neither pedantic nor importune. He showed a rare ability when it came to correction. He knew how to wait for the right moment, and when two words were sufficient, he never added a third. He adapted his interventions to the various temperaments. He never lost his calm, not in any calculated way. His simple goodness prevented him from humiliating the guilty person.

The strength of his corrections came from the fact that he was the first example of observance. Everyone was able to testify to this, and ended up 'baptising' him with the nickname "The Living Rule". Don Bosco himself called him this in private conversations, when he pointed him out as a model of observance on one or other point in particular while he was away.

Between 1867 and 1872, Fr Rua did not overlook the fact that as Prefect General he was also Prefect of the Oratory. He had to look after the organisation and follow-up to the large religious events (Christmas Novena, Holy Week, Month of Our Lady, Lent, Retreats, Don Bosco's feast day on 24 June, and the feasts for Saint Cecilia, the Immaculate Conception, St Francis of Sales, St Aloysius Gonzaga and Mary Help of Christians). His instructions regarding this can be found in the minutes of Chapter sessions held under his chairmanship.⁵ There were nearly nine hundred youngsters at the time. He established that young students would enter their classrooms in order, accompanied by their assistants, and that the students of philosophy should have a particular assistant during free study time (meeting of 8 November 1867). He

⁴ Letter of G. Bosco to M. Rua, Rome, 31 January 1869, in *Epistolario* III, 46.

⁵ We recall that the *Chapter deliberations*, personally written down by Fr Rua, are found in FdR 2916D1-2919E9.

encouraged them to keep the dormitories in order and prevent access to these during the day; dormitories had to be kept closed from 8.30 am (meeting of 16 November 1871).

The Prefect was able to say that he was mostly satisfied with the students, a little less so with the working boys. Their participation in church left something to be desired. "They are to be divided into different dormitories with their assistants; each one should have his own place and a devotional book", he prescribed in the Chapter meeting of the 27 December 1867. These students had not yet acquired precise discipline. For example the working boys frequently went into town to buy things they needed in the workshops: Fr Rua abolished the practice, but without great success. The timetable was too flexible. On 13 March 1870, the Chapter decided that one ring of the bell would call the leaders and working boys. The working boys had their recreations in the courtyard along with the students: Fr Rua established a rigid separation between working boys and students, not without its difficulties, judging from constant observations from the Chapter. It was even decided to have a fence built to help with this separation.⁶ Times set out for work and teaching were not formally laid down; Fr Rua set things up so that technical formation would take place by degrees and decided that the working boys would have theory classes every working day to help them improve in their trade and their overall culture. For example on 9 November 1871, Fr Rua assigned the classrooms for the working boys' classes.⁷ Occasionally he would look in on one or other workshop, observe the boys, talk to the workshop manager, often someone full of good will but with little technical know-how. Chapter meetings held under his chairmanship, regularly came back to the "problem of the working boys" (like on 20 March 1873) and on ways to "improve the moral circumstances of the working boys" (meeting of 27 July 1873). Little by little, thanks to him, technical courses at the Oratory improved notably and earned prestige.

Fr Rua and his Chapter were also involved with the gear worn in the workshops, cleanliness, washing and distribution of linen, hygiene in the dormitories. We can note how in 1870, when the College at Mirabello transferred to Borgo San Martino, Joan Mary Rua came to her son in Valdocco to deal with problems of this nature. Many boys dressed as they were able to, and a number of them, too poor to do otherwise, depended entirely on the institute. Fr Rua saw that everyone was able to dress well for Sundays and if they were going out. He saw to a weekly inspection of wardrobes in the dormitories, to check on repairs to shoes and clothes.

He wanted everyone to follow the rules of the house in detail. Don Bosco had written these rules in 1852, after an experimental period, and had then taken them up again in 1854 and brought them into force for the school year 1854-1855. They were not printed before 1877 but, as it seems, he had them solemnly read out in public at the beginning of each school year and saw that a chapter was commented on each Sunday. That was just the beginning. But how well were these regulations really known? The historian (I am thinking here of Fr Ceria) had no illusions. At any rate, the minutes for the Chapter meeting of 22 November 1867 laid down: "So that the rules be known by each [of the Chapter members!], it has been decided that a passage will be read out at each meeting". And the Chapter meeting of 8 December 1872 set up "a conference for department heads and assistants on the rules pertaining to them". Fr Rua, who was educated at the

⁶ Minutes in in FdR 2917C1-3.

⁷ Minutes in FdR 291B12.

Brothers school, saw precise observance of the rules as the best guarantee for the boys to profit both morally and scholastically. For the rest Don Bosco gave particular importance to them and every manifestation of Don Bosco's will was a categorical imperative for Fr Rua.

All of this meant he had to see that the weight of his authority was often felt, something that ended up making him more feared than loved, despite his gentle disposition. The best and most authoritative persons in the house, in particular the future Cardinal Cagliero, were seriously worried about it, to the point where they took their concerns to Don Bosco. John Cagliero would have put it more or less like this: "Dear Don Bosco, may God preserve you for a while yet, but it is certain that one day you will go to heaven and pass your mantle on to Fr Rua. Everyone says so and you have said as much yourself. But not everyone agrees that he will enjoy the same confidence of all as you do. The life of the censor that he lives here at the Oratory, to keep discipline, does not make so many fond of him". Don Bosco admitted that the observation was a just one. In 1872, he appointed another Prefect of the Oratory in the person of Fr Francis Provera and conferred on the title of Rector on Fr Rua, but out of respect for Don Bosco, the true Rector of the work, the latter modified the title to Vice Rector.

This Vice Rector had broad shoulders. There were two new tasks he did not refuse. He had to take on Sunday morning preaching to the faithful and pupils in the church of Mary Help of Christians This had been reserved to Don Bosco up until this point. He took to commenting on the Sacred Scriptures, and already had his notes ready from his note books. His listeners did not forget his instructions, which were always clear and orderly. He would add some moral, spiritual reflection or religious consideration to the accounts, as his sermon notes indicate. The second task consisted in teaching Sacred scripture to the clerics in the house, starting from when the course in theology at Valdocco became an internal one. According to the handbook, the subject seemed somewhat dry, but from what his past pupils said, his ease and natural gift of the gab made it all clear and attractive enough.

He was also responsible for the general organisation of theology courses. The minutes of the Chapter meeting for 10 November 1872 inform us about the weekly timetable. Courses in dogmatic theology Monday and Friday mornings (professor: Fr Molinari); moral theology Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays (professor: Fr Cagliero). In the afternoon there were lessons in Scripture on Mondays and Fridays (professor: Fr Rua); Church History Tuesdays and Saturdays (professor: Fr Barberis); while on Wednesdays they studied the New Testament (with Fr Rua). On Thursdays, a holiday, there was only one class in Liturgy, or sacred ceremonies, at 10 am for philosophers and theologians (professor: Fr Cibrario). He then had to look after the ordinations of the clerics, as we see from his correspondence of the time from Turin.

Besides all this, and would you believe, asks Fr Ceria, that Fr Rua was still undertaking preparation for public exams? Yes, that was the case. In 1872 he was amongst the candidates preparing for qualification for senior secondary teaching. With the number of colleges on the increase, they needed recognised qualifications. Fr Rua sought to be at least one of those. He had already tried in 1866, when he had passed the written exam, but he was failed in the oral by professors who were not well disposed towards students who had not followed their courses. This time, 1 October 1872, he gained the diploma

with honours.⁸ Furthermore (we do not know who introduced this), an original document tells us that, on 9 October 1873, Michael Rua was introduced into the literary academy of Arcadia bearing the pseudonym 'Tindaro Stinfatico'.⁹ According to Fr Lemoyne, the Abbot Peyron, a famous Turin Professor, had said that if he had six men of Rua's calibre he could have opened a university.¹⁰

A devout priest

Freed from the task as Prefect of the house at Valdocco, Fr Rua could now give more time to the task of Prefect General. He had already been involved in organising the colleges which were in the process of being opened, and at Don Bosco's request he had already printed and distributed their programmes. In October 1872, Don Bosco also entrusted him with the task of assigning personnel to the various colleges. This was a delicate task. "Do everything you can to see that things are done *sponte* and not *coacte* [spontaneously and not through coercion]", he told him in a letter.¹¹ He needed, then, to know his men well, treat them as gently as possible, have the right measure of their abilities ...

His spirit was fed by a lively devotion which made him strong and persevering in sacrifice. An anecdote from 1873 reveals this clearly. Fr Rua did not let himself be distracted from his prayer. A monk from Lerins, who was the sacristan that year at the church of Mary Help of Christians, has left us a detailed testimony of this. One day a Prince with his cohort arrived at the Oratory. In Don Bosco's absence, it was up to Fr Rua to receive him. Right at that moment he was celebrating Mass. The visitor was told about this and with one of his entourage, was waiting in the sacristy. After some twenty minutes Fr Rua came in from the altar. People told him to hurry up. But, as if he had not heard anything, he slowly took off his vestments. When he turned around, the Prince made a move to approach him. But Fr Rua made a sign to wait then went to his kneeler. He buried his face in his hands and remained there absorbed in prayer for twenty minutes. At the end he got up and, with an angelic smile, arms opened wide, he approached the royal visitors excusing himself for not being able to be immediately available. They understood, were very courteous about it and later said how edified they were by his lengthy thanksgiving.¹²

Nobody more than Don Bosco was able to tell how much Fr Rua had progressed on the road to perfection. The same monk from Lerins in September 1874 was at Lanzo, for the Salesian retreat, when he heard Don Bosco say: "If I were to indicate some point on Fr Rua where there was not a virtue already honed to perfection, I would be unable to do so because such a point does not exist".¹³

This was the year when Rome, after a long and hard struggle, had finally (13 April) given its decree of approval for the Constitutions. How many prayers Fr Rua had said in Turin to obtain this result! Don Bosco knew this. On 14 April he sent him a note to be

⁸ Certificate in FdR 2665B5.

⁹ Document in FdR 2774A7.

¹⁰ MB VIII, 252.

¹¹ Letter of G. Bosco to M. Rua, Peveragno, 16 October 1872, in *Epistolario* III, 475-477.

¹² Letter to Don Albera, Lérins, October 1914, in FdR 2835D3-6; cf. Ceria, *Vita*, 83.

¹³ Same letter; cf. Ceria. *Vita*, 84.

read out publicly at the Good Night. It began thus: "Your father, your brother, your soul friend, is leaving Rome today after being away for three and a half months, spending Wednesday night in Florence and hopes to be with you on Thursday 8th in the morning. Festivities, music, welcome are not necessary". In fact the Oratory was in mourning for the recent death of Fr Francis Provera, Fr Rua's successor as Prefect of the house¹⁴

¹⁴ Letter of G. Bosco to M. Rua, Rome, 14 April 1874, in *Epistolario* IV, 277-278.

9 – FR RUA AS VISITOR TO THE AFFILIATED HOUSES

Fr Rua "visitor" of Salesian houses

We are in the period 1870-1875. The Prefect General feels that he is responsible for religious observance, not only at the Oratory where he lives but also in other centres of the budding Congregation, the houses of Borgo San Martino, Lanzo, Sampierdarena, Varazze, Alassio and Turin-Valsalice. He wants to be kept constantly informed on the running of these institutes in order to correctly carry out a role which he judges to be essential for the proper functioning of the whole organisation. This is why systematic inspections are needed. He would see that they happen and accompany them with advice and disciplinary decisions.

Don Bosco used to often visit the houses, but always with a fatherly approach and a necessarily kindly one. Fr Rua, for his part, visited them as a wise administrator of educational works, concerned with both the material and moral circumstances of each of them. He visited institutions which by their calling needed to keep to the directives given by Don Bosco in the Constitutions, the Regulations of the Oratory and in the guidelines given him when he had been sent as the Rector to Mirabello. In short he needed to check on fidelity to the spirit which Don Bosco had instilled in his budding Congregation.

He arranged to carry out this role as inspector from 1874, when Don Bosco obtained definitive approval of the Constitutional text.¹ Between 1874 and 1876, he systematically recorded his observations in a notebook which has been preserved.² Fr Rua as inspector did not seem too concerned about the sensitivities of the Rectors, who were the first ones to be interested in his observations. He was by no means subtle if he needed to express blame or denounce negligence and abuses.

Fr Rua's programme as Visitor

As Prefect he had to check whether or not decisions taken at annual meetings of the Rectors had been applied. These meetings were held at Valdocco around the Feast of St Francis of Sales. His observations were addressed firstly to the Rectors and then later, through them, to the Salesian personnel.

A written programme of more than one visit was drawn up in one of his notebooks. The inspection first of all looked at all the areas, then the people, Salesians and pupils, and finally the general environment. He accurately checked the administrative registers.³ He inspected all the areas beginning with the church and the sacristy, looking at the altars, sacred vestments, weekly and Sunday celebrations, and religious feasts. Then he went on to the superiors' rooms and the boys' dormitories: was there something overly elegant in the confreres' rooms? Were the dormitories clean and sufficiently aired? Were crucifixes, pictures, statues of Mary in a dignified place? Were the

¹ This chapter owes a debt to the article by P. Braido, "Don Michele Rua...", 97-180.

² This notebook published in P. Braido, "Don Michele Rua...", 136-170. The curious reader could also consult it in FdR 2955D2-2957A9.

³ Here we take up the title of Fr Rua's notebook: *Cose da esaminare*, published in P. Braido, "Don Michele Rua...", p. 136.

assistants cells in the dormitory small enough to remove the temptation to transform them into an office? Then Fr Rua went down to the ground floor, along the corridors, the stairs and into the courtyards, and systematically checked for cleanliness. If there was a chance to go into classrooms, he questioned the students and checked their exercise books.

The confreres were the principal object of his attention. He checked that the spiritual conferences for Salesians and the aspirants in the house were ensured. In effect Don Bosco had sanctioned, in a circular on 15 August 1869 that: "There would be two Conferences each month one of which would be based on a reading and simple explanation of the Rules of the Congregation. The other conference would concern some moral argument, but in a practical way and adapted to the people being spoken to". In the same circular he said: "Every member once a month will present himself to the Rector of the house to which he belongs and will talk about what he judges to be of benefit to his soul, and if he has any doubts about observance of the rules he will talk about this asking advice that might be opportune for his spiritual and temporal profit". The inspector, then, had to check on the regularity of the monthly friendly talk. Then he would evaluate the religious life of the confreres in matters concerning modesty, poverty and obedience. Strictness concerning chastity was considered necessary. "The most important thing in our houses is to foster, obtain and ensure morality, both of the members and the boys. Once this is ensured, everything else is certain, but if this is lacking, then everything is lacking", we read in a deliberation of the Rectors' Chapter in 1875-1876.

He also needed to check whether the roles of Prefect and Catechist were being carried out correctly as described in the rule. We need to recall that, according to the Regulations of the Oratory at Valdocco, the Catechist saw to the spiritual good of the boys in the house, looked after the sick, set up and promoted the Sodalities (St Aloysius, the Immaculate Conception and the Blessed Sacrament).

Fr Rua knew that young confreres made up an important part of the personnel of the houses he visited. Was there a sufficient number of them? Did they have regular lessons in philosophy and theology? Were they receiving a good formation for liturgical service, with appropriate lessons? What could be said about their conduct when they were exercising their functions as assistants or teachers? Were they at meditation and community spiritual reading?

The investigation also regarded the pupils. What was their state of health like? How was the infirmary kept? Regarding their religious life, was there a concern to teach them prayers and how to serve at the altar? How were they being assisted in the church, the study, in classes, during recreation, in the dormitories and on outings? What could be said about their bodily cleanliness and their spiritual state of health? Was an outside confessor regularly invited into the house? Did the Sodalities exist? Was there an altar servers group set up? Were the older boys studying hard? How were the relationships with the teachers and assistants? Were there day boys? Did the house have a "festive oratory"? Fr Rua was also interested in the boys' future. Were there pupils who were thinking of entering the clergy? Were the clerics getting themselves ready to take exams for their teacher's certificate?

As Don Bosco had suggested to him when he was sent as Rector to Mirabello, Fr Rua was also interested in the relations between the college and its local area, the parish

priest, town council etc.

Then finally the financial area. How were superiors and pupils being treated at table? Was the administration taking on onerous construction and maintenance tasks? How much was being spent on books and journeys? Did the previous year finish in the black or in the red?

The inspection was made on the basis of the registers which the administration was invited to present. A list of these testifies to the methodical and meticulous spirit of Fr Rua as an inspector: the Mass register, the one for the conduct of clerics and brothers; the register of postulants to Salesian life, for pupils and boarders; the register of the boys' money deposits, the offerings, the administration; wardrobe lists which the brothers handed in when they came; lists of the various providers: shoemaker, tailor, milkman, baker, butcher, grocer, chemist etc.; and finally the register of current accounts. The notebook shows how Fr Rua was concerned with giving lots of advice on how to keep these registers.

Fr Rua's inspections in 1874 and 1875

The houses visited by Fr Rua in 1874 and 1875 were: Borgo San Martino, Lanzo, Sampierdarena, Varazze, Alassio and Turin-Valsalice. This is where we see him apply his detailed visiting programme

Fr Rua as visitor to Borgo San Martino and Lanzo Torinese

On 1 March 1874, Don Bosco was in Rome still at work getting the constitutional text fully approved, and meanwhile Fr Rua was making a quick inspection of the house at Borgo San Martino. The minor seminary or St Charles of Mirabello College, where he had been the first Rector, had shifted to this locality well-served by the railway line, in a splendid villa on a seven hectare property, which Don Bosco had acquired from the Marquis Scarampi di Pruney. At the beginning about a hundred boarders lived there, a number which grew between 1874 and 1877, first to 160, then to 200. Fr John Bonetti, one of the early Salesians, and very well esteemed by Don Bosco, was in charge of the work. After his visit Fr Rua declared that he was fairly satisfied with the way it was running. "Things are being managed well enough", he wrote in a notebook. Just the same he thought it appropriate to leave the Rector with a dozen recommendations, duly numbered, which are worth citing to the letter so we can familiarise ourselves with the inspector's style. Here they are: 1) avoid wax stains on the altar when the candles are being lit with fluid; 2) place a crucifix and picture of Our Lady in the classrooms and dormitories, where they are missing; 3) adjust the assistants' cells in the dormitories so they are the same as those at the Oratory; 4) get rid of the bad smells in the corridors coming from the toilets which are near the rhetoric classrooms; 5) see to regular monthly conferences for the confreres and aspirants so that they front up for the friendly talk each month; 6) give more encouragement to study of theology; 7) ensure regularity of the liturgy course for clerics and the boys; 8) set up the Immaculate Conception Sodality; 9) give monthly marks to the clerics and brothers; 10) keep the register of postulants up to date as well as the expense register; 11) entrust cleric Ghione with the job of Catechist, and free him from teaching if possible, so he can look after the St Aloysius and Blessed Sacrament Sodalities and the altar servers; 12) some confreres have been asked to get ready for the civil exams.

Fr Rua returned to inspect the college of Borgo S. Martino in April 1875 and spent two whole days there. He declared himself satisfied from a material and moral point of view, with some reservations. The day students should be able to take part in daily Mass. Properly visible crucifixes should be placed in all classrooms and dormitories. The cleanliness of some of the stairways and cupboards left something to be desired. The Catechist's role should be carried out a bit better, so the person concerned should ask for some help from Councillor Fr Chicco. The Immaculate Conception Sodality needed to be started up, at least amongst the clerics. The Prefect was invited to ask help from a cleric for correspondence and for managing the accounts register. The Rector should take more care to see to the regularity of the confreres' friendly talk and see that the conduct marks were given for the clerics and brothers. The inspector also asked that the theology students learn some texts of the Bible and the Fathers by heart and that they be involved in solving the objections to the theological theses formulated during the courses.

In March 1874, after inspecting Borgo San Martino, Fr Rua put in one day and a half visiting the house at Lanzo. This was a primary and secondary school situated on a hill, thirty five kilometres from Turin. Since it was also residential, it took in a certain number of young men as boarders. In 1873 a three storey building was built, so in the 1874-1875 school year the number of boarders was now more than one hundred and seventy. Fr John Baptist Lemoyne, a Salesian from Genoa who had come to Don Bosco when he was already a priest, was the Rector..

The inspector was not fully satisfied. The cleanliness of the church left something to be desired and the first dormitory was in disorder. Besides, there were crucifixes and pictures of Our Lady missing from the classrooms, dormitories and other areas. The assistants' cells were too large. As a general rule, all the dormitories should be kept closed when there were no boys there, similarly classrooms and other rooms. Courtyards, stairways and corridors were dirty and there was a need to avoid rubbish lying around the small courtyard. The Rector was invited to take greater care of the regularity of monthly conferences and the friendly talks by the confreres. Priests should not dispense themselves from school by taking up ministerial duties elsewhere. The Prefect needed to take more care of the service personnel to help them carry out their duties as good Christians. The clerics spent too much time amongst themselves and little amongst the boys, besides they weren't being serious about their theology studies. Every day there had to be a visit to the Blessed Sacrament either individually or as a community, with some spiritual reading. The conduct of the pupils in Form II left something to be desired. He hoped that the cleanliness of the boys' clothing would improve. The Prefect, Fr Costamagna, who had the task of looking after their behaviour, should not be absent too often. There was a need to invite the better boys to join the Immaculate Conception Sodality. Some registers were missing: conduct marks, clerics and brothers, expenses, suppliers. Finally the visitor ordered that the pergola in the middle of the garden be pulled down. As one can see the orders were detailed and the tone categorical.

Fr Rua as inspector appeared at Lanzo again a year later, on 3 March 1875. He spent two days there and noticed with satisfaction that as far as discipline and piety were concerned, the college was running better than the previous year. Despite this there was a long series of observations for the Rector's use. We can imagine how mortified he was reading this. The first were about the church and religious formation: the altar cloths

were not clean; there was a need to ensure daily mass for the day students; he had to organise a liturgy course for the clerics and think about the formation of the altar servers; greater importance was to be given to teaching catechism at secondary school; it was essential to set up a class for Gregorian Chant and get a larger number of students involved, putting aside an hour and a half, or three quarters of an hour after supper for this; the Sodalities of St Aloysius and the Immaculate Conception need to be looked after better, with short conferences. Then the Prefect was invited to take better care of the personnel, bringing them together regularly, explaining the rules of the house to them, etc. He needed to ensure the lessons in philosophy and theology for the clerics, three times or at least twice a week. Conduct marks were to be given to the clerics and brothers once a month. The teachers were invited to have spiritual reading under the guidance of Fr Scappini, while morning meditation for the assistants was the responsibility of Fr Scaravelli. Those who could not take part in the community practices of piety were to do them in private. The size of the cells had to be further reduced to bring them into line with the dimensions according to the rule. Reading at table was not optional, so it could not be too easily dispensed with

Fr Rua finished his report on Lanzo by proposing a certain number of disciplinary innovations which had to be observed, as a sign of better organisation and proper assistance of the students.

Fr Rua as visitor to Sampierdarena, Varazze, Alassio and Valsalice

From Piedmont the visitor then moved to the Liguria Riviera to inspect another three works. On 7 April 1875 he began a three day visit to the house at Sampierdarena. As for Borgo San Martino, the Hostel at Sampierdarena too was the result of a move. In 1872 Don Bosco had left a rented villa that was too small, at Marassi, where some forty working boys were ensconced, and had moved the work to Sampierdarena, on the outskirts of Genoa, in an old convent next to an abandoned church. In October 1875 he sent fifty young adults there, mature 'Child of Mary' late vocations which had just been founded. In 1877 the extended building allowed them to take in some two hundred pupils, amongst whom seventy were late vocations. This house, similar to the model in Turin, was entrusted to Fr Paul Albera, a beloved disciple of Don Bosco's.

Fr Rua appreciated the work very much. He found it well run and did not complain about the inadequate number of personnel, priests, clerics and brothers. Sacramental practice was excellent; the young men behaved well in church. He noted just a few things: the dormitories needed to be cleaner; some religious signs were missing in certain common areas, classrooms and dormitories; the monthly conferences and confreres' friendly talks should have been more frequent: there should be a weekly course in sacred ceremonies for the clerics; some students did not have special clothes for feast days and during the week the cleanliness of their clothing leaves something to be desired; the St Aloysius Sodality needed to be set up; and finally, there were some registers missing in the Prefect's office. That was all.

On 22 July 1875, Fr Rua was at Varazze. The College at Varazze, founded as a secondary school in 1871, only had room for a hundred and twenty, hundred and thirty boarders. There were also some day students. The confreres had also opened two Festive Oratories in the city, dependent on the College, something that Fr Rua was very happy about. The Rector of the College was Fr John Baptist Francesia, one of the

earliest of Don Bosco's disciples.

The inspection concluded with some positive and negative observations. The assistants' cells in the dormitories were too large: there should be neither tables nor shelves, just a place for the clothes, a chair and a trunk, if one could not do without; it would have been better to place the cells amidst the boys' beds. Then there was a need to see that the assistants study together, for example in the library, so the dormitories could remain closed during the day, according to the rule. Theology classes were too irregular, also liturgy. The Immaculate Conception Sodality should be started up. The brothers who were doing special studies with Don Bosco's consent had to have more time available, and a guarantee of more regular classes. Other notes regarded the food: in general the community menu should be along the lines of the Oratory in Turin; too much coffee was given out and the cafeteria was available to the personnel, something to be avoided. Fr Rua had an understanding with the Prefect of the house, Fr Fagnano, that all personnel would have laundry marked with their own names, exclusively for their use. The register of income and expenses was well kept, and helped one to know how much money there was.

On 26 July 1875, Fr Rua began his inspection of the College at Alassio. The work had been founded in 1870, in agreement with the municipality and was located in an old Franciscan convent. It was an important school, with excellent primary classes and a complete lower and upper secondary section. In 1875-1876 there were 160 boarders, and in 1877 more than 200. Between boarders and day students in 1876-1877, Alassio had 415 pupils. It was entrusted to the wise direction of Francis Cerruti, another first generation Salesian, and one of the most learned.

Fr Rua's visit to Alassio was brief and summary. His observations were simple: they needed to see that the day students could attend religious functions on Sundays; there were some religious pictures missing from some areas; some of the assistants' cells were too big and should be shifted to the middle of the boys' beds; some classrooms were rather filthy; if community meditation and spiritual reading were arranged for, it would be easier to see who was not doing them; finally there needed to be more insistence on the study of theology.

On 11 March 1875, Fr Rua began the visit to the house at Valsalice, on the hill overlooking Turin. In 1871 Don Bosco, at the request of Archbishop Gastaldi, but with serious opposition from the Superior Chapter, had accepted the running of this institution for aristocrats which had found itself in serious financial difficulties. The service personnel weighed heavily on the accounts. In 1872-1873 there were only twenty two boarders. At the time of Fr Rua's visit their number had increased to thirty five. Fr Francis Dalmazzo was in charge, helped by a group of collaborators: a Prefect, Catechist and three Councillors, plus four brother and clerical confreres.

Fr Rua's visit was very brief: half a day. Everything was in exemplary order: church, cleanliness of the areas, classrooms, corridors, stairs and courtyards. He complained only about the lack of a good provider and of certain registers (conduct of clerics and brothers, personnel, summary of expenses). He would have liked to see a Sodality set up, for example St Aloysius or the Blessed Sacrament. He hoped for a better commitment to study by the students. Teaching the sacred ceremonies to the clerics left something to be desired. Finally he urged that all the service personnel at Valsalice be Salesian.

Profile of the 'Provincial (Inspector)' in the Society of St Francis of Sales

The notes that were left show that Fr Rua was a meticulous inspector, less concerned with the sensitivities of the Rectors who were the first to be interested in his observations. Leaving the houses, he gave them a written letter in the same ink and with the same kinds of observations that were to be found in his personal notebook. Those whom they were written for, probably not so enamoured of their contents, did not keep them as relics. In fact they disappeared. Only one has come down to us. Its style is lapidary. Dated 10 March 1875, it was addressed to the Rector at Lanzo, Fr Lemoyne. The notes on his notebook are written up in fourteen points. The letter begins with "Dear Fr Rector", and ends with "Your most affectionate Fr Rua, Prefect of the Congregation of St . Francis of Sales".⁴ He was obviously acting in terms of Prefect of Discipline. If needs be he could be a frightening figure. Notwithstanding his great kindness, he was rigorous, austere, with an infallible memory, penetrating gaze and eye for detail.

So he did not win popularity contests, but this did not worry him. His job was to give some shape to the houses of the Society of St Francis of Sales, as he had done with the novices in the preceding years. In this way he contributed, perhaps without being aware of it, to stamping the institutions with a specific and essentially Salesian identity, one that according to him Don Bosco would have wanted for each of them. And he created a new institutional role in the budding Society, the inspector/provincial.

Fr Rua visited the affiliated houses of Piedmont and Liguria until the General Chapter in 1877. Up until then all the various centres depended on the Superior Chapter in Turin. But with the geographical spread of the works, their administration became more complicated. In 1875, the Society had begun to expand beyond the Italian borders to France and South America. The 1877 General Chapter judged it necessary to create some circumscriptions, and delegate the task of local control, essential for the overall unity and for observance of the Rule. According to a scheme prepared by Don Bosco in view of the Chapter, the Salesian "provincials", a completely new role, would be known as *ispettori* (literally, inspectors) and the provinces under their jurisdiction as *ispettorie*. In the spirit of the founder, these superiors were given the task of overseeing – in a fatherly way – confreres and houses. They had the task of maintaining unity in the Society. The Provincial had to be the Rector Major's eye on things, seeing to observance of the rules which were rules for the whole Congregation.

Here we find an idea that Fr Rua had created in his role as visitor of the affiliated houses between 1874 and 1876. But Don Bosco wanted to soften the severity, as he explained during the General Chapter: the provincial should be "a father, whose job is to help his children to do things well and so advises them, helps them, teaches them how to avoid embarrassment in critical situations". So the Salesian Provincial – for whom the General Chapter in 1877 drew up a rule in which we can see the meticulous touch of Fr Rua the Prefect General – had to try to reconcile within himself two complementary types, Don Bosco and Fr Rua. To be convinced it is enough to quote two articles from the regulations entitled *Provincial's visit*: "... – 2. He will visit the church or chapel in a canonical sense, that is, closed doors. He will observe how the Blessed Sacrament, tabernacle, holy oils, reliquaries, altars, confessionals, sacristy, sacred vessels, chalices, ciboria, monstrances, Mass register, vestments for divine worship are kept. – 3. He will

⁴ Letter published by E. Ceria in MB XI, 530-531.

visit the bedrooms, dormitories, infirmary, kitchen, cellar, dispensary and will carefully check that there is no waste with books, paper, linen, clothing, foodstuffs; if needs be he will make note of what seems contrary to religion, morality and poverty". These articles drew some points from Fr Rua's notebook relative to his visits made in preceding years to Lanzo, Borgo San Martino, Varazze, Sampierdarena and Valsalice.

10 – Don Bosco’s Right ARM

Don Rua and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

In the Sisters’ houses Fr Rua was Don Bosco's eye on things. Already in June 1875 Don Bosco had sent him to look into the budding Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Mornese. His own diary makes no mention of this visit, but the Mornese chronicle records that ‘he spent several days there’ and gave them ‘some short, heartfelt *fervorini*¹. Since John Cagliero, the first Salesian director of the institute, had left for America that same year as head of the first missionary expedition, Fr Rua was sent to take up that role for Don Bosco’s second family. In August 1876 he was in Mornese representing Don Bosco when the novices put on the religious habit. On that occasion he heard confessions, explained the founder’s thoughts on the life-style of the Sisters, dealt with the possibility of opening a new house, and looked into the feasibility of transferring nuns. He also investigated the moral and financial state of the convent, offering explanations, encouragement and advice. The community, who had never before received such an extensive scrutiny, deeply appreciated the gift Don Bosco had given them in the person of Fr Rua.

In his dealings with the Sisters, Fr Rua remained a man of the Rule, and would not countenance even the slightest deviation. In 1877, the Sister Superior of the house in Turin received a large quantity of fruit as a gift. Without further ado, rather than let the fruit go off, she began to share it out after the breakfast coffee. However, as the Rule prescribed either coffee or fruit for breakfast, she felt a twinge of conscience and consulted Fr Rua. True to himself, he replied that in principle it was better to let fruit rot rather than break the Rule. In this instance, he advised her either to give the fruit to the poor or distribute it among the girls.²

The monthly letters to Rectors

As Prefect General Fr Rua was responsible for the supervision of local Rectors who were becoming more numerous towards the end of the sixties. He presided over most of the general Rectors' conferences held in February 1876 at which he reviewed questions about the Rule that had come up at earlier local visits: receiving the manifestation of confreres regularly; giving the fortnightly conference without fail; taking good care of the liturgy; cutting back on holidays for the confreres. He also took the opportunity to remind Rectors that it was not within their authority to dismiss professed members or novices.

Rectors acted in direct dependency on the centre of the Congregation. Fr Rua made this clear in the monthly, handwritten circular letters sent to each one. The heading was personal, whereas the body of the letter, written by a secretary, took the form of a numbered series of points, (for example: the number of Masses celebrated over the previous month for the intentions of the Turin Oratory, or the end-of-year financial returns);

¹ According to the Mornese chronicle repeated in Amadei 1, p. 260

² From Ceria, *Vita*, p. 87

The latest news, (for example: when the next catalogue of the congregation would be sent out; the date of examinations for theology students residing in the house, or perhaps Don Bosco's state of health); recommendations, such as: "Just now we are experiencing exceptional financial problems, so our dear Don Bosco enjoins me to recommend economy in all areas and the avoidance of any non-essential expenditure"). There were occasional demands (for example: to send the list of personnel to Turin as soon as possible, or the exam results of the clerics, or again the membership certificates for new Salesian Co-operators), and pious appeals: for instance to guarantee good retreats for the pupils or to ensure that they spent the month of May well.³ Fr Rua would sometimes add an uplifting spiritual thought to the secretary's text and then put his signature to it. From time to time he would even add a footnote, long or short as required. Naturally, from 1876 onwards the American mission called for circular letters just for them: in the first instance addressed to Fr Bodrato, then to Fr Costamagna, who acted as Provincials. These circulars could consist eventually of lengthy, numbered items all from the hand of Fr Rua himself, as we can see from one of them, sent to Fr Costamagna, consisting of twelve separate points.⁴

From 1881 onwards, the circular letters to Rectors of the various houses were accompanied or replaced by a printed questionnaire signed by Fr Rua on the running of their schools. This bore the title: "Report on the house of for the month of188..." and consisted of the following nine questions: "1) How many boarders have you? 2) How many day pupils? 3) Their general behaviour? 4) Health of the boarders? 5) How many masses have been celebrated during the past month for the intentions of the undersigned? 6) How many masses were requested for the intentions of the undersigned? 7) Were all the manifestations made? 8) Was the monthly *Bona Mors* (Exercise for a Happy death) conducted according to the rules? 9) Were the two prescribed conferences given?" A blank space was left for each of the Rector's nine replies.⁵

In 1881 a printed table of seven columns for "information on the personnel" of their houses appears among Fr Rua's papers for the use of the Rectors. Opposite each name the Rector was invited to express his opinion on the duties and occupations of the person concerned, on his health, his "diligence" with regard to his personal responsibilities, his piety and his studies. To these he could add whatever "observations and explanations" he deemed appropriate.⁶ This somewhat bureaucratic system raises questions. Nevertheless, this was how Don Bosco, ultimately responsible for all the centres he had founded, made his presence felt from Turin through the diligence of his right-hand man and Prefect General, Fr Rua, operating somewhat like a Minister for the Interior. The requests for reports from the houses produced replies that at times gave rise to grave concerns for our Prefect General, especially when they came from the American mission, as when Fr Bodrato deplored repeated scandals in Argentina. On 4 September 1879 he declared: "Chiara has betrayed us", and he highlighted four scandalous cases of pederasty, two of them at St Nicolas de los Arroyos and two at Villa Colon. On 18 March 1880, he reported that a Brother had been obliged to marry "with

³See for example the monthly letters to Fr Lazzaro reproduced in FdR 3909 C12 at 3911 D5

⁴See the circular letters to the American province in FdR 3975 C12 at 3977 C1

⁵See an example of this format in FdR 3910 B1

⁶This list is in FdR 3910 B11

all haste”, having deceived everyone. “I beg you”, he pleaded, “send only those who are morally sound”. These were heavy blows for Fr Rua.

Two failed foundations

The sending of missionaries to America in 1875 caused quite a stir in Italy, so much so that requests for new foundations came flooding into Valdocco. These ended up on Fr Rua’s desk, and it fell to him to study them, and under Don Bosco’s guidance become involved in any dealings, which sometimes meant on-the-spot investigations. In 1877 there was a proposal for the Salesians to take charge of a school at Mendrisio in the Swiss Canton of Tessin. Following a lengthy exchange of letters, Fr Rua made his way to Mendrisio on 30 April to visit the building and gather precise information. On 3 May he reported back to the superior chapter with Don Bosco present.⁷ For Don Bosco, this seemed to offer the chance a gaining a foothold in Switzerland, and for that reason he was willing to make concessions. The members of the Council, on the other hand, showed great reserve. In the event, at the end of August the local government in the Canton appointed a layperson of their choice with full authority as head of the school in Mendrisio. For the time being hopes for a Salesian presence in Switzerland had been dashed.

Fr Rua became closely involved in another doomed takeover, this time in Paris. In 1866 Abbé Louis Roussel had set up a place for street children, described as ‘Orphan-Apprentices’, in somewhat ramshackle accommodation. The area was Auteuil, recently attached to the sixteenth district of Paris.⁸ The priest was concerned about the many problems faced by the working classes: accommodation, apprenticeships, and the whole mentality of the workers themselves. It was said his aim was to open the minds and hearts of children and at the same time prepare them for a future career. Since family accommodation was either non-existent or at best inadequate, he at least would provide a home for his apprentices, in much the same way as Don Bosco was doing in Turin and Genoa. One marked difference, however, was that whereas Don Bosco trained his helpers on the spot, the French priest brought in complete outsiders. In the course of a visit to Rome, Abbé Roussel was advised by Pius IX to speak with Don Bosco, and so in September 1887 he visited the Turin Oratory. What he saw impressed him so much that he immediately came up with the idea of a joint project between Turin and Auteuil. The Salesians showed great interest, foreseeing an eventual integration with the congregation, with the French priest retaining simply the management of the periodical ‘La France Illustrée’, already under his direction. Don Bosco seemed quite willing to go ahead with the project. With a good foothold already in France, at Nice and Marseilles on the Mediterranean coast, he had his sights on the French capital, and friends were urging him to become established there as well.

Whilst in Turin, Abbé Roussel had met Count Cays, a newly ordained priest who spoke good French, and he suggested that he should be the one to handle all necessary negotiations. Don Bosco agreed, and promptly told Count Cays to make his way to Paris. But he would not be alone: the faithful Fr Rua would go with him, charged with drawing up a contract with Abbé Roussel, and sounding out the thoughts of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Joseph-Hippolyte Guibert. The two set out on 6

⁷Minutes of the Chapter 3 May, 1877

⁸Report on the failed foundation in Paris in *Don Bosco en son temps*, p. 1120-1123

November 1878, and soon the negotiations seemed to be off to a good start. Don Bosco, acting through Fr Rua, was careful to avoid any impression of a takeover: Abbé Roussel's position as head of the Auteuil enterprise would be for life; the Salesians would help him, only to provide a successor when the time came. On 12 November, following an audience with the archbishop, who had shown himself very much in favour of a Salesian presence in the capital, Fr Rua wrote to Don Bosco outlining a proposed contract with four clauses: 1) Setting up a civil society, which would include Abbé Roussel, for the ownership of the Auteuil enterprise and its dependencies, 2) The co-owners would be under obligation to entrust this charitable work to the Salesians, who would administer it according to their constitutions' 3) As need would arise, the Salesian Superior Chapter would offer financial help to the Auteuil project, 4) Abbé Roussel would remain as head of this establishment. Don Bosco's only caveat was that there should be guarantees of stability of tenure for the Salesians.⁹ He wrote in this vein to Count Cays on 16 November: "All [the members of the superior chapter] agree that we should give all due respect and authority to Abbé Roussel, on condition that our presence in Paris is given guaranteed stability."¹⁰ The same day he expressed his two-fold wish to Fr Rua: to set up in Paris and not run the risk of being expelled.¹¹ The two messengers arrived back in Turin in the evening of 30 November.

The text of the agreement was drawn up in Turin without delay. In substance, it stated that

Abbé Roussel was appealing to Don Bosco and his Congregation to come to the aid of his work in Auteuil; Abbé Roussel would remain director of the work for life; the Salesians would assist him and would provide replacement helpers only as and when this became necessary; Don Bosco had the title of co-director with right of succession.¹² This contract was sent from Turin to Paris on 16 December 1878 and was signed by Abbé Roussel around 20 January 1879 in Marseilles where he had gone to meet Don Bosco. Subsequently, after Don Bosco's return to Turin, the course of events underwent a swift reversal: at the end of January the Salesians decided to withdraw. Don Bosco was afraid that the Paris initiative would collapse and he would lose face. The pretext for retracting was provided by Cardinal Guibert who reserved to himself the right to ask the Salesians to leave if they didn't adapt to the Paris scene. They weren't prepared to take that risk. On 6 February, at the opening of the annual Rectors Conference, Don Bosco explained everything to his sons.¹³ The retraction was sent to Abbé Roussel on 10 February, and three days later Count Cays sent him a further letter explaining the matter at some length, but it would seem that this reversal caused little heartache for the French priest.¹⁴ It was, in fact providential for the Auteuil project. It even forestalled its demise, since the application of French laws against Religious Congregations between 1901 and 1903 would have proved fatal for it.

⁹M. Rua – G. Bosco, Paris 12 November, 1878, FdR 3862 A7-9

¹⁰G. Bosco – C. Cays, Turin, 16 November, 1878 *Epistolario*, Ceria III, p. 414-415

¹¹G. Bosco – M. Rua, Turin, 16 November 1878, *Epistolario* Ceria III, p. 415-416

¹²Piece edited in *Documenti XX*, p. 79. E. Ceria preferred to reproduce in MB XIII, p. 999, doc.59, a preparatory version from Count Cays which differs slightly from the signed text.

¹³Report of the meeting in *Documenti XX* p. 77-78

¹⁴C. Cays – L. Roussel, Turin, 13 March 187, ed. MBXIII, p. 1001-1002 doc. 61

Fr Rua in the controversy with Archbishop Gastaldi

Don Bosco suffered a great deal between 1871 and 1883 on account of his Archbishop Lawrence Gastaldi.¹⁵ He pretended not to know the reasons for this unexpected hostility from a man who had been one of his best friends, one whose candidature for the episcopacy he had encouraged in the sixties, who had openly supported negotiations with Rome for the recognition of his Congregation, and whose laudable transfer from the see of Saluzzo to that of Turin Don Bosco had obtained from the Vatican in 1871.

The hostility that arose in 1873-1874 when Don Bosco was endeavouring to have the text of his Constitutions accepted by the Roman authorities, is not without foundation. Archbishop Gastaldi took his pastoral obligations seriously and was trying to carry through a reform of his diocese, beginning with the clergy who he wanted to see as worthy, pious and well-educated priests. Don Bosco had already experienced problems concerning the formation of his clerics with Archbishop Riccardi di Nietro. The situation worsened under his successor. Archbishop Gastaldi was very demanding with the Salesian candidates for ordination, and that troubled Don Bosco. "Are the ordinations running into problems with the archbishop?" he asked in a letter to Fr Rua on 18 November 1875. Archbishop Gastaldi's reforms upset a section of the diocesan clergy and they complained to Rome. The archbishop's suspicions fell on Don Bosco, who was held in high regard by the Pope and his Secretary Antonelli, as the one to blame for a letter of reprimand from Pius IX. The climate of relations between the diocesan curia and Valdocco became more and more acrimonious. On 27 August 1873 Don Bosco was very distressed by the archbishop's criticisms of him on the occasion of his visit to the college at Alassio.

In situations of dispute Fr Rua was frequently forced into the front line of action. In a confrontation between two confreres close to Don Bosco – Gioacchino Berto and John Bonetti - he did his best to smooth out the situation in every way possible. He would remain calm, offer explanations, rationalise, or simply keep quiet. Never was he known to have an angry outburst. For Valdocco the archbishop's secretary, Canon Thomas Chiuso, was an enemy to their cause, yet Fr Rua would treat him as "a very dear friend", beginning his letters with "Teologo mio Carissimo" ("My very dear Father"), and concluding by asking him "on behalf of all of us at Valdocco, to kiss the hand of His Excellency, Archbishop Gastaldi, most dear and worthy in the eyes of the Lord."¹⁶ One such explanatory letter, written on 13 January 1879 was, in the opinion of Fr Ceria, "a masterpiece of diplomatic finesse".¹⁷

The well-documented affair of the imaginary suspension of Don Bosco in December 1875 is indicative of his role in what can only be called the battle between Valdocco and the archbishopric. Fr Rua wasn't just a convenient go-between for Don Bosco. He intervened skilfully. Even in the most heated exchanges he could balance frankness with measure, precision with delicacy, unconditional love for Don Bosco with perfect

¹⁵The latest The latest comment on this well-known dispute between the archbishop and Don Bosco is found in Arthur J. Lenti, *Don Bosco, his Pope and his bishop*. The trials of a Founder, Rome, LAS, 2006, p. 65-245

¹⁶M. Rua – T. Chiuso, Turin, 13 March 1879, ed. MB XIII, p. 1001-100", doc. 61

¹⁷MB XIV p. 231

deference towards the archbishop. Don Bosco's faculties for confession had not been renewed within the prescribed time.¹⁸ On 24 December Fr Rua informed Don Bosco, who deduced that the archbishop had refused to renew them – a measure the archbishop often had recourse to in dealing with his clergy. Don Bosco withdrew to Borgo San Martino [outside the diocese] to avoid having to refuse to hear confessions in Turin. On the 27th Canon Chiuso notified Fr Rua that Archbishop Gastaldi was authorising Don Bosco to continue to hear confessions, since this faculty had never been taken away from him. On the 29th, a further note from the Canon summoned Fr Rua to meet the archbishop. He went that same evening and defended the pastoral stance Don Bosco had taken as best he could. The following day he put into writing the gist of his explanation, at the same time humbly apologising for having perhaps been too vehement in his defence of Don Bosco. He felt free to add: "For years I have lived close to Don Bosco, and it's plain to everyone that he does an enormous amount of good and that the Lord blesses his work. I've also been able to see that even his most ambitious projects have worked out well, and I can only conclude from this that the Lord has truly given him the grace of state, and that having destined him to accomplish certain providential projects, he showers him with all the help he needs to bring them to fulfilment, and this to such an extent that from time to time, as has occurred with so many other holy founders, he finds himself opposed by highly respectable people."¹⁹

Still the dispute went on unabated. On 31 December the diocesan curia levelled a series of well-documented rebukes at the Salesians. The Congregation could not accept candidates without testimonial letters from their Ordinary; it could not have young men in a college wearing the cassock without the permission of the bishop. More serious still, there was a clear breach between the ecclesiastical authority of Turin and the Congregation when the latter accepted persons under licence to the diocesan seminary. This rift, they claimed, became even more apparent when, in letters and conversations, there was a lack of due reverence for the authority of the archbishop. The Congregation was therefore obliged to observe the strict canonical rules. As the new year of 1876 dawned, Fr Rua again took up his pen and in a lengthy letter to Archbishop Gastaldi replied to this series of observations point by point. In a style that was direct, concise, quite dignified and devoid of any offensive or harsh language, he dealt with each allegation, and where necessary with references to Canon Law.

His opening phrases set the tone for the whole letter. "Most reverend Excellency, It is my duty to offer you my most cordial thanks for the observations made by letter on 31 December, which confirm the impression widely felt amongst us that the true cause of your dissatisfaction with the Salesian Congregation is simply the lack of due clarification. I have firm reason to believe that when things are presented in their true light and our good will becomes quite evident, problems will vanish, either because they are non-existent or because they are wrongly attributed to us. As Prefect of our Congregation, I have always been fully aware of all that goes on, and therefore, if you will allow me, I will explain my point of view, whilst submitting everything ultimately to your enlightened wisdom."

His letter ended: "I realise I have been too lengthy, but do please forgive me opening

¹⁸Read about the non-renewal of faculties for Confessions MB XI, p. 485-488

¹⁹M. Rua - L. Gastaldi, Turin, 30 December 1875 FdR 3903 D6-9

my heart in this way to assure you that the esteem and veneration with which your Excellency is held by the Salesians has never been lacking, neither when you were a simple Canon in this city, nor when you became Bishop of Saluzzo, nor when Divine Providence saw fit for you to become our archbishop. It will always be a great honour for me, and a cause of much gratitude, to declare myself to be Your Most Reverend Excellency's very humble servant, Fr Michael Rua."²⁰

It would be interesting to know in some detail what part Fr Rua played in the John Bonetti dispute. This Salesian, chosen by Don Bosco as chaplain and director of the Saint Teresa Oratory for girls in Chieri run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, found himself at loggerheads with the parish priest. It would seem that in February 1879, having overstepped his rights in the parish, he went on to insult the parish priest by letter, and as a result of this, had his faculties for confessions withdrawn by the archbishop and was forbidden even to set foot in the Oratory. Bonetti took it badly, but Don Bosco supported him, whilst Fr Rua acted as mediator, trying to clarify what in fact had gone wrong and to restore some calm. All in vain. For three years Chieri remained a trouble spot for the Salesians and it was the lot of the Prefect General to be caught up in it.²¹

Allow me to single out just one of these incidents for which we have ample information. In November 1880 a Salesian sister died in the house at Chieri. She was scarcely in her grave before the Salesians were denounced at the diocesan curia for a clear violation of parish rights and Canon Law. The fiscal lawyer (the archbishop's procurator) trusting the accuracy of the news, summoned Fr Rua to the curia and put the facts to him as follows:

Two Salesians had administered the last sacraments to the dying Sister, using the holy oils from the Jesuits' chapel, and after the death of the Sister had accompanied the funeral cortège through the town and to the cemetery.

In the course of the interview Fr Rua gave the lawyer what seemed to him the most plausible explanation, apologising for the confreres who were not well informed about parish regulations. Later, on 27 November, he presented his version of the events at some length to the archbishop: one of the priests was the Sister's regular confessor; for the last sacraments and the funeral cortège, the two priests had followed the custom of the Turin oratory. Finally, Fr Rua "humbly asked forgiveness from His Excellency for the two priests concerned" and said he was "prepared to do the same with the local parish priest should His Excellency judge this necessary." "Should it seem fitting to provide an indemnity for the parish priest to compensate for the violation of parish rights, at a simple, venerable sign from His Excellency, we are prepared to do whatever is necessary".²² Now it appears that, in the event, Fr Rua overstated the case, because the last sacraments had not, in fact, been administered by the Salesians, but by a collegial Canon (who, incidentally, was opposed to the parish priest and on the side of Bonetti), and the funeral cortège consisted only of girls from the oratory of Saint Teresa ...²³

The disagreement came to a head when the archbishop accused Don Bosco of being

²⁰M. Rua – L. Gastaldi, Turin, 8 January 1876, minute reproduced in FdB 673 B4-7

²¹On the Bonetti affair see *Don Bosco en son Temps*, p. 1087-1092, 1137-1141, 1158-1161

²²M. Rua – L. Gastaldi, Turin, 27 November 1880, minute in FdR 3903 E 1-2

²³Incident recounted by E. Ceria, MB XIV p. 249-250

the originator of defamatory statements about him published between 1877 and 1879. According to these libels, Don Bosco was the archbishop's enemy number one, and it was clear that those who wrote them were well informed on internal matters of the Salesian Congregation. One of them, which ridiculed both the archbishop and the parish priest of Chieri in the Bonetti affair, bore the title: "The Archbishop of Turin, Don Bosco and Fr Oddenino, or silly, serious and sorry tales told by a man from Chieri".

The Bonetti affair and the libel issue were an unfortunate combination. Don Bosco was powerless to defend himself or his confrere, and on 27 February he confided in Fr Rua: "I have received a letter from Cardinal Nina [protector of Salesian affairs in Rome] concerning the Fr Bonetti problem. My only wish all along has been to settle this difference with all concerned. The simplest solution I can see is the one from last year, namely, to cancel the suspension already cancelled by the archbishop and then re-imposed the following day. (It must be mentioned here that news of the goings-on in Chieri had eventually reached the archbishopric; hence such an about-turn was quite feasible.) However, there is still the serious problem outlined by Fr Colomiatti: if Don Bosco doesn't agree to some accommodation, the archbishop will bring a case against Don Bosco for defamatory statements against him in the press. I must stave off the threat of our Congregation being made responsible for these publications in which I have had no part either directly or indirectly. All the more so, since I am weighed down by the threat from the archbishop himself, written more than once, declaring that if Don Bosco, either personally or through others, in printed matter or in manuscripts, has published or distributed [material against him] or does so in the future, he will incur a suspension *ipso facto incurrendo* from the Holy Father and the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. Who is going to believe, given these serious threats, that Don Bosco has lost his senses to the point of dabbling in such publications? You can let Fr Colomiatti know my thinking. I authorise you to deal with all this and to settle it in the way you believe to be for the greater glory of God and the good of souls, but make sure to inform Fr Bonetti of any outcome that concerns him."²⁴ Sadly this effort of Don Bosco's came to nothing.

The archbishop held an enquiry into the libels, gathered some witness to the Don Bosco's probable guilt and cited him before the diocesan tribunal ...The whole affair reached Rome, where in fact in 1882, Leo XIII finally attributed a degree of guilt to the Salesians. As for Fr Rua, he remained true to his well-established principles: "Silence, prayer, no untimely reactions, informing Don Bosco when necessary, and scrupulous obedience to him." In complete contrast to Fr Bonetti, who went around noisily protesting and accusing others, Fr Rua the perfect communicator, wisely held his peace and prayed.

The austere Prefect General

Fr Rua lost his mother, Joan Mary, on 21 June 1876.²⁵ This saintly woman had given the last twenty years of her life to Don Bosco's boys, who found in her a true mother's heart. For her own son, her death was a great sadness, and the whole Oratory shared in his grief. Fr Rua sent a picture of her to his brother Anthony, manager of the royal armaments factory at Brescia, at the same time giving him an inventory of her

²⁴G. Bosco – M. Rua, Roquefort, 27 February 1881, *Epistolario Ceria*, t.IV, p. 28

²⁵ For this paragraph we follow E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 88-89

possessions. These amounted to some clothes, a small amount of gold worth 38.50 lire, her wedding ring, which was thought to be of gold, but which in fact was of gilded silver and valued at two lire, and some furniture worth 80 lire. He had shared out the clothes among family members, and as for the remainder, he wrote: "Reckoning half of her jewellery at 30 lire, and half the furniture at 40 lire, I am sending you herewith 70 lire which I would suggest you share among your children, so that they will all have some small keepsake of their dear grandmother."

Looking at these amounts, readers will draw their own conclusions. However, it is quite clear that a man so meticulous in handling a modest heritage was highly suited to administer the sums of money that came to Don Bosco through Divine Providence. There's no doubt that much money did pass through the hands of Fr Rua, but not a penny of it ever stuck to his fingers; never did he spend or give away more than was necessary. In these matters, as in all else, he followed Don Bosco's precept: "Providence has never failed us, and never will, as long as we don't become undeserving of it by wasting money or allowing the spirit of poverty to be weakened. Hence Fr Rua's strictness in the observance of the vow of poverty, strictness with everyone, beginning from himself. Poverty with clothes: in 1877 Fr Vespignani, one of his secretaries, given the task of brushing his cassock, had to handle it gently for fear of tearing it, since it was so threadbare. Poverty with footwear: he wasn't the least ashamed to wear mended shoes. Poverty in his office: a simple table where he worked and received visitors, two or three ordinary chairs, two modest pictures hanging on the wall opposite him, representing the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Help of Christians, and nothing else.

He kept an eye on the poverty of his confreres, too. There is so much that could be said about that, but suffice it to recall just a few examples from the years 1875 – 1880. Missionaries were under his care, and in 1876 a confrere who was about to leave for Argentina would have liked a new breviary. Fr Rua asked to see the one he was using, showed him his own, old and well fingered, and with a smile suggested an exchange. The confrere bowed in submission and declined. In 1877 his secretary Fr Vespignani, still a Salesian novice, had received a box of books from his family and asked permission to keep them in his room. Fr Rua replied gently: "I'll tell you what I've done with mine: I've put them all in the community library." Vespignani's family also sent him a tall writing desk at which he could work standing up. "Look", said Fr Rua, you are tall. The most convenient way to work standing is to put a chair on the table", implying that he could write on the chair. In each of these cases, comments Fr Ceria, Fr Rua was putting a novice to the test. He would deny him any superfluity, and would not allow him to keep gifts for himself in breach of the Rule.

He had the expenditure accounts examined by his secretaries to check how much each confrere spent on clothes, and demanded a list of those who had more than one new cassock or new pair of shoes in the course of a year, so that he could have a word with them. Given that the finances were constantly in the red, recommendations about economy were many and various: economy in the kitchen, the wine cellar, the linen room, the laundry, and in heating and lighting. These examples, provided by Fr Ceria, may be alien to our consumer society, but he claims that such attention to detail helped to form a spirit of thrift in the mentality of the Salesians, not simply to guarantee a healthy domestic economy, but to create an awareness of the value of money in the hands of one with a vow of poverty. For a religious, money is almost a sacred thing,

because it is a gift of Providence for one sole purpose: the glory of God and the good of souls. We can understand then, why Fr Rua gave so much consideration to the bursars responsible for the administration of the various communities. He would bring them together to explain practical guidelines for economy and to agree on accounting methods, given the need there was to set up a common practice in conformity with the true spirit of the budding Salesian Society.

For all his austerity, there was nothing niggardly about him either in his own regard or toward others. Though he observed poverty in his own clothing, this was not only tidy, but also very clean and presentable. Nor did the spirit of poverty make him unaware of the needs of others. He would be very mindful of the sick, and, as long he was responsible for them, also the missionaries. Nor did he skimp where the beauty of the liturgy was concerned. He had two guiding principles in matters of poverty, one ascetic, the other moral. Without a spirit of poverty there could be no fervent prayer, no readiness for sacrifice inherent in the Salesian vocation, no possibility of spiritual progress or of becoming a true son of Don Bosco.

The Valdocco Oratory lived on charity. Don Bosco's aptitude for searching out benefactors for his work is proverbial. Gradually his right hand man was taught the same skill, though it must have pained him somewhat, and as Don Bosco's periods of absence got longer, he had no choice but to put it into practice. He set to work then, writing to this one, then to that one announcing a forthcoming visit with the hope of receiving whatever charitable gift they could offer.

Sometimes, even when Don Bosco was at home, Fr Rua didn't know which way to turn to find help in some urgent need. Don Bosco would remain unperturbed, convinced that Providence would see to it. As for Fr Rua, it was in such a situation that he learned a little lesson, as Fr Lemoyne recounts in the form of a conversation.²⁶

Following the evening meal on 29 April 1879, and in the presence of several confreres, Don Bosco told Fr Rua that some of them were complaining, because when they went to ask him for money he sent them away empty-handed. "For one simple reason, replied Fr Rua, the cash box is empty.

- Sell whatever bonds we have.
- I've already sold some, but it wouldn't be right to sell them all. We have to keep some to meet more urgent needs that might crop up.
- When that happens, the Lord will provide. In the meantime try to settle the more outstanding debts we face now.
- But in two weeks' time I'll face a bill of 28,000 lire
- But it's madness not to pay today's debts and to hold on to money only needed in two weeks time
- Today's debts aren't pressing, so what shall we do then?
- The Lord will provide. Anyone who puts money aside for future needs is closing the door on Divine Providence.
- But we must be prudent ...
- Listen to me. If you want Providence to help us, take out what you have and pay

²⁶ Found in Amadei I, p. 294. The argument itself is probably historical. The conversation as given here is certainly an invention of the chronicler.

your debts. As for the future, let's leave it in the hands of God. I don't know of any of our bursars who have complete trust in Providence and who don't build up funds for the future. I fear that our present problems are due to excessive caution. When man resorts to that, God withdraws."

Two temperaments, two spiritualities in happy partnership.

The differences were noticeable in their views on rank and status. Fr Rua felt strongly about priestly dignity. However, since the beginnings of the Salesian Society a number of laymen, mainly tradesmen, gardeners or cooks, had become full members. Fr Rua, as we know, had devoted himself exclusively to the formation of clerics. It was left to Don Bosco, then to Fr Barberis, to see to the formation of lay members, done mainly through a series of general instructions, and there was a tendency to look on these Brothers as second class Salesians. At the Third General Chapter in 1883, one of the proposals read as follows: "The Brothers must be given a lower status: they must be assigned their own distinct category", and so on. Don Bosco, visibly upset by this, protested: "No! No! No! The Brothers are the same as the rest."²⁷ Later, in September 1884, Fr Rua would propose two distinct categories [of Brothers]. As he would say, it wasn't fitting "that a lawyer, a pharmacist or a teacher should rank alongside a common worker."²⁸ Don Bosco rejected that outright: "I can't accept two categories of Brothers"; but he made it clear that uncouth, simple-minded people could not become members of the Congregation.

Still fighting his corner, Fr Rua asked him if he couldn't set up a group similar to the Franciscan tertiaries, but even this couldn't change Don Bosco's mind. The peasant in Don Bosco could not go along with the city bureaucrat in Fr Rua with his concern for social niceties.

Whatever we make of these contrasting approaches, Fr Rua's intellectual, moral and religious qualities were so outstanding that anyone with eyes to see could recognise them. So much so, that the idea grew stronger by the day that he was the one to succeed Don Bosco. In 1879, speaking to Fr Cagliari who had come back from America in 1887, Don Bosco posed the question of his successor, saying that in his opinion there were three probable candidates. "Later on, maybe," replied Cagliari, "but as of now, there's only one – Fr Rua." Don Bosco didn't contradict him. On the contrary, he exclaimed: "We only have one Fr Rua! He has always been and still is Don Bosco's right arm." Fr Cagliari went further: "Not only your right arm, but your head, eye, mind and heart."²⁹ Fr Rua certainly had his own unique personality, but rather than let it have free rein, he subordinated it, sacrificed it even for Don Bosco and his work, convinced that in this way he was himself being conformed to a vocation that came from on high.

²⁷ Cited by P. Braido, *Religiosi nuovi per il mondo del lavoro*, Rome PAS 1961, p. 27

²⁸ *Annali* I, p. 709

²⁹ From E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 99

11 – Don Bosco’s Travelling companion

Rome: April – May 1881

Until 1881, whenever Don Bosco was away from Turin, Fr Rua had to take his place at the Oratory and so was not free to go with him, but on 5 April that year, Don Bosco, on his way back from a long journey in France, wrote from the Riviera with a strong request: “Please let me know if you could come to Sampierdarena on Wednesday of Holy Week and come with me to La Spezia, Florence, etc. I need you.”¹ His real intention was to travel as far as Rome itself.

Fr Rua did in fact join Don Bosco at Sampierdarena on 13 April. The two travellers passed through Florence, where they were detained much longer than they had anticipated, and finally, on the 20th, arrived in Rome where they found accommodation with Fr Dalmazzo near the building site of the church dedicated to the Sacred Heart.

The previous year, this building project requested by the Pope seemed dead in the water, and the Cardinal Vicar had expressed his disappointment to Don Bosco, who was in Rome at the time. Don Bosco had agreed to take on responsibility for carrying the work forward, on condition that a hospice for young people from the city be built on the same site. With the Bonetti affair still rumbling on, it’s understandable that if he was to cope with this enormous undertaking, he needed Fr Rua.

“A wonderful, pleasant and wholesome site” is how the latter described it in a letter to Fr Lazzerio, Rector of the Oratory. His only complaint was about the “Protestant” environment. As for the cost of the church and the home for boys – “at least several hundred thousand lire, if not millions” - the thought of it scared him. All the same, he went on: “Don Bosco is praying and working with all his energy to make a success of it; he doesn’t leave a stone unturned to achieve his goal. And he keeps saying that he needs the support of the boys’ prayers.”²

We know very little about this stay in Rome, apart from the audience with Leo XIII on 23 April. Fr Rua was certainly present with Don Bosco, who wrote about it for his Cooperators in the *Salesian Bulletin* the following May. There we find this snatch of conversation with the Pope:

“... ‘Now, tell me about the church and boys’ home on the Esquiline, dedicated to the Sacred Heart. How is the work going? Has there been any progress, or has it come to a halt?’ I was able to tell him that it was going full speed ahead, and that there were around a hundred and fifty workmen putting all their skill to the task for this work, so much blessed by His Holiness. I pointed out that the charitable gifts of the faithful gave us great encouragement, but given the enormity of the project, we were beginning to feel that funds were still quite inadequate. It happened that a little earlier, someone had offered the Holy Father the sum of five thousand francs for Saint Peter’s pence. ‘There you are, he said with a smile, this money came just at the right moment: I took it with my right hand and I give it to you with my left. Take it for the work on the Esquiline’”.

Don Bosco was shrewd enough when it came to gathering funds, but for him this was just one problem among many. He needed updated information on contracts with

¹ Epistolario Ceria, IV, p. 40

² This letter in FdR 3907 E2.

suppliers made by the previous administration, negotiation with the architect and close examination of the plans for the hospice. All these areas had, in fact, been delegated to Francis Dalmazzo, but Don Bosco felt that the experienced eye of Fr Rua would be invaluable. Meanwhile, he himself would do business with the Roman Congregations regarding the Bonetti affair and the privileges he hoped to obtain for his own congregation.

The two travellers left Rome finally on 13 May, arriving back in Turin on the 16th, so as not to miss the opening of the novena in preparation for the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

May 1883: At Don Bosco's side in Paris and Lille

Two years after the Rome visit, Fr Rua was again called to be at Don Bosco's side on his travels, this time across France.

Don Bosco had left Turin on 31 January heading for Liguria and the Côte d'Azur. His aim was to seek alms for the Sacred Heart Church in Rome, and to hold out his hand in a country where money and good-hearted people were not lacking. The day before he left, he wrote as follows to the Cardinal Vicar who had entrusted him with the responsibility for the church: "Tomorrow morning I shall leave for Genoa I shall go from house to house as far as Marseilles, and from there, if my health and public engagements permit, I shall make my way to Lyons and to Paris, seeking alms for the Sacred Heart church and recommending St Peter's Pence."³ Following the setback at Auteuil, he was hoping, in fact, to set up Salesian foundations in Paris and Lille, and appearing there in person might help his cause.

The months of February and March, which saw him in Nice, Cannes, Toulon and Marseilles, were very fruitful. On 19 March he was able to inform Fr Dalmazzo, his *chargé d'affaires* in Rome, that he was sending him three thousand francs from Cannes and two thousand from Hyères. "I'm doing my best...", he wrote humbly.

On the 2nd April he was on his way again, leaving Marseilles and heading north, accompanied by Salesian, Camille de Barruel, who acted as his secretary. By now, he no longer needed to draw public attention by giving an address on saving young people in danger. People flocked to him as a miracle worker. He spent the 3rd and 4th at Avignon, and the day after he left, a newspaper carried the following: "This venerable priest, a complete stranger the day before, was immediately surrounded by a crowd of sick people ... It was a most moving sight as the blind, the deaf, paralytics, asthmatics and epileptics pressed around him, vying with each other to catch his eye or receive a word from him."⁴ It was as though they had to make some connection with him, catch sight of him, if possible speak to him and touch him, in order to benefit most from his gifts. To receive the sacred host (on the tongue) from his hand, was a grace much coveted by devout people. A lady from the Paris nobility declared regretfully: "I couldn't get to you". But she added: "Last Sunday I had the joy of receiving Our Lord from your hands – the greatest of all graces..."⁵ When it wasn't possible to be in his presence, people would write to him. His prayers, it seemed, could obtain anything from God.

The two travellers made their way to Paris in stages - Avignon, Valence, Tain,

³ Epistolario Ceria, IV, p. 210-211

⁴ Gazette du Midi, 5 April 1883

⁵ Mme de Staplande to Don Bosco (104, rue du Bac, Paris), s.d.,FdB 1613 D10-E1

Lyons and Moulins - and finally left the train at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, around 6.00 pm on 18 April. In each town they passed through, both the Catholics and the curious alike became excited. They crowded into churches to catch a glimpse of Don Bosco, listen to him and, if possible, speak to him; and the moment he arrived in Paris the press made his presence there a front page story.

Back in Turin, Fr Rua had been following this amazing series of events, and in a lengthy circular to Provincials, dated 28 April, he shared with them the wave of enthusiasm stirred up by Don Bosco's journey through France.⁶ His letter picks up for us what his feelings were during the first half of Don Bosco's journey to Paris (even if it does contain mistakes, mainly regarding dates which we can readily excuse, but which I will take the liberty of pointing out). After telling about three cures attributed to Don Bosco as miracles, the circular continues:

“...These miraculous events aroused such enthusiasm and such veneration for the person of our superior and father Don Bosco, that the immense crowd followed him everywhere, and even went so far as to snip off pieces of his cassock to keep as precious relics. On Sunday 8 April, Don Bosco was at Fourvière, a famous sanctuary built on a hill near Lyons, and popular as a shrine to the Blessed Virgin. So great was the crowd that came to see him and receive his blessing, that the church where the ceremonies were held, and the whole area around was one mass of people.

It meant that once the devotions were over, Don Bosco had to give his blessing from the window of the Rector's room for the sake of those who hadn't been able to get into the church. [Incorrect: Don Bosco gave his blessing on the esplanade]. On Monday 10 April, a large crowd had come to the parish church of St Francis of Sales in Lyons to be present at Don Bosco's Mass, catch sight of him and receive his blessing. They were so numerous in fact that for Don Bosco to be able to come out of the church, the sacristy doors had to be locked as a precaution. The following day, an even bigger crowd gathered in the principal parish of the city, named Ainay, and came forward to receive the Blessed Sacrament; as a result the distribution of Communion took a great deal of time. After the Mass, Don Bosco had quite a struggle as he slowly made his way to the sacristy to take off his priestly vestments. Everyone wanted to see him, touch him and receive his blessing...

“On 11 April, in response to a kindly and insistent invitation, Don Bosco had dinner at the country residence of the Lyons seminarians. There were in all about two hundred of them together with their superiors and a number of distinguished guests. One of these was Mgr Guiol (Rector of the Catholic Faculty in Lyons, who was entertaining Don Bosco in his private residence.) The welcome accorded to Don Bosco by superiors and seminarians alike was quite wonderful and cordial. They all dined together in a vast refectory. Towards the end of the meal, their expectation of him to speak became so strong and vocal that Don Bosco agreed to address the seminarians, offering them advice and encouragement. He was listened to with religious attention, and when he ended, to a man they burst into loud applause. Don Bosco also visited the convent of the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

⁶ Allography circular manuscript dated 28 April 1883 signed by Don Rua, FdR 3987 C6-7

Whilst in Lyons he also gave two conferences, firstly to members of a geographical society, then to an audience in a private hall. [Part of the Boisard enterprise at la Guillotière].

“On Monday the 23rd (Incorrect: it was Monday 16 April), he was on his way from Lyons to Moulins where he hoped to have at least one day’s rest after all his tiring activities. He finally reached Paris on Tuesday the 25th (Another mistake: it was Wednesday 18 April). There a great number of people, both clergy and lay, were expecting him, hoping to see him, speak with him and receive some words of advice or comfort from him. There was much competition about who would have the honour of offering him hospitality, or, if that seemed impossible, about having him at least promise to pay them a visit, since they considered his presence in their home to be a veritable blessing from the Lord.

“On Sunday 29 April, he will give a conference to Salesian Cooperators in one of the most central and most beautiful churches in Paris, known as the Madeleine. It is our hope that the Lord will graciously help him to reap fruits for eternal salvation.

“In the course of these journeys, and amid so many tiring commitments, may the Lord keep our dear superior in good health. The work he is compelled to undertake is so demanding that his secretary writes that he would need at least two extra people to help him.

Pray therefore, and have many prayers said for Don Bosco, keeping in mind also yours etc.”

By the time he signed this letter, Fr Rua had probably made up his mind to join Don Bosco in Paris so as to help his secretary, Camille de Barruel, who said he was snowed under with correspondence. In fact, he arrived at the house of the Countess de Combaud on the morning of 2 May, and when he saw the mountain of letters piled up on Don Bosco’s desk, he knew exactly what he would have to do. “You can’t begin to imagine the mountains of letters here, waiting to be answered” he wrote later that day to the rector of the Turin Oratory. “He doesn’t need just three, but six or seven secretaries. Fortunately there is a kind religious on his way here to make himself available.”

Fr Rua wasn’t exaggerating. You find the same observation two days later from the pen of a correspondent of the newspaper *La Liberté*. On the occasion of a visit to Don Bosco in the *Hôtel de Combaud*, he had been directed to the one he called his ‘general secretary, namely Fr Rua, “who is the most out and out Italian you could imagine”. “We’ve never seen so many letters delivered in one day” wrote the journalist. “There was a heap of them on the desk, and the floor beneath was littered with those already torn-up. Among the scattered fragments you could see fine, lengthy strands of hair, indicating letters from a woman’s hand. The general secretary made a note on each letter that seemed to merit a reply, then added it to a bundle in front of him. So many letters! So many letters!”⁷ Fr Rua must have spent night after night sorting, and wherever necessary, replying to letters.

Fr Rua would stay with Don Bosco until his return to Turin at the end of that month of May. In the meantime he visited Lille with him from the 5th to the 14th, came back to

⁷ “*A travers champs*” par X, in *La Liberté*, Paris, 5 May 1883

Paris with him, and stayed until their final departure on the 26th. Their next move was to Reims where, between trains, Don Bosco had a pre-arranged meeting in a church with Léon Harmel. They went on then to Dijon where they stayed from the 26th to 29th, broke their journey again for a brief visit to the Count de Maistre at Dôle, the 29th and 30th leaving France for good on the second evening and arriving back at the Oratory on the 31st around 9.00 am.

We have a certain amount of information about all the movements of Don Bosco in the course of those weeks: his Masses in churches, convents and private oratories, his conferences, the amounts he received in alms, his visits to the sick in clinics and hospitals, his audiences, his formal dinners with civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries, his festive meals (at Lille!), his intermediary excursions from Lille to Roubaix or from Paris to Versailles, etc. As for Fr Rua, he remained always in the wings.

The very day they arrived back in Turin, Fr Rua compiled a circular for the Rectors of the houses, writing as follows: “With the help of God, our dear Father has returned safe and sound following a good four months or more of travelling: the whole journey was a continuous witness to the affection and veneration the good French people have in his regard as well as for the Salesian Society.” He invited them therefore to give thanks to the Lord and to the most blessed Virgin. Together with the letter he also sent a copy of the dream Don Bosco had on the night of 18 January in which the late Fr Provera offered some advice to the Salesians and their pupils.⁸

As we see, Fr Rua would always remain thoroughly self-effacing behind the figure of Don Bosco. Nevertheless, this humble man could also make quite an impression. This is how he was seen by a discerning eye-witness in the course of that journey: “Fr Rua is the archetype of a distinguished, Italian diplomat: medium height, with pale complexion, pointed features and a sharp eye. He is quietly spoken, and in his shrewd smile there is also much kindness. We were able to spend several hours in his company, and we came away much taken by the charm of his conversation, which showed a happy blend of Italian good nature and a deep understanding of the human heart. He is an outstanding character.”⁹

On 27 May, the two travellers were at the Carmel in Dijon, where Don Bosco celebrated Mass, then went to the infirmary to give his blessing to the Prioress who was very sick. In 1933 a Carmelite gave the following testimony: “Even after a gap of fifty years, I can still see Don Bosco, calm and recollected, as if he lived more in the other world than in this one ... Fr Rua, though different, came across as a saint, another Aloysius Gonzaga.”¹⁰

With Don Bosco at Frohsdorf

In mid-July of that year, Don Bosco and Fr Rua made an unexpected and truly amazing journey into Austria to visit the Count de Chambord, legitimate pretender to the throne of France with the title of Henry V. To put this journey into context, we pick up the beginning of a report of it written by Fr Rua.¹¹

⁸ This dream in E. Ceria, MB XVI, p. 15-17

⁹ “*Dom Bosco à Paris, par un Ancien Magistrat*”, Paris, 1883, p. 61. I think this “former magistrate” was Albert du Boys, who would publish a biography of Don Bosco the following year

¹⁰ Cf E. Ceria, MB XVI, p. 275, text and note.

“Towards the end of the month of June 1883, the Count de Chambord fell dangerously ill. After God, all the hopes of the French Catholics rested on him for a restoration of order in the political and religious affairs of that generous nation. The news of his illness was scarcely out before letters and telegrams from every corner of France were sent to Don Bosco for prayers to be said to Mary Help of Christians for the sick nobleman. Each week letters of this kind came in their hundreds.

From Frohsdorf itself, the flower of the French nobility who made up the small royal court sent letters and telegrams to urge Don Bosco to pray, and have prayers said, leaving him in no doubt about the total trust the count had in the protection of Mary Help of Christians when Don Bosco and his boys prayed to her. Every effort was made to send replies promising prayers and communions to obtain the cure of the Prince, if that was in keeping with the good of his soul. Then one day in July a telegram came from Neustadt, signed by Abbé Cure, with a pre-paid reply of twenty words, ardently begging Don Bosco to go to Frohsdorf, since the sick Prince had such a deep longing to see him. Don Bosco was not in good health and had a very heavy workload, so the reply had to be that for the time being such a journey was out of the question. The telegram got lost, and the same message was repeated by letter. When the Prince learned that Don Bosco couldn't come, he still held on to his hope of having him with him for a few days.

Shortly afterwards, the eminent Count Joseph Du Bourg from Toulouse, a man devoted to the Church and to the royalty, received a call from the Prince inviting him to come and see him. Moreover, it instructed him to pass through Turin where he must collect Don Bosco and bring him with him...”

Joseph du Bourg, member of the Royalist party and friend of the de Maistre family, had entertained Don Bosco in Toulouse in 1882.¹² He turned up at Valdocco on 13 July, but was given a frosty reception. “This good priest,” he wrote later, received me with a genuine, kindly smile, and enquired about my family. After replying, I explained the reason for my journey and my visit. Without a moment's hesitation he gave a resounding ‘No’, from which I could see that in this whole matter his mind was already firmly made up. He went on to tell me that his travels through France had sapped all his energy; that since he got back he had been unwell and unable to face any work, and that his legs were still quite useless. They were just like two lifeless, rubber stumps.” “In any case,” he went on, “what would I be doing in that castle? It's no place for Don Bosco. If prayers are needed for the Prince, I will pray and get my whole Congregation to pray for him. If God wishes to intervene for the health of the Prince, he will do so. As for Don Bosco, all he can do is pray, and he can do that just as well here in Turin as he could there.” The Count was taken aback but wouldn't admit defeat. He said as much to Don Bosco, and to such effect that he agreed to make the journey. He would go to Frohsdorf with Fr Rua.

A further annoyance was that at all costs they had to leave that very night. Don Bosco resigned himself. The journey took them first of all across the north of Italy, then into Austria. To add to their troubles, a delay on the morning of 14 July resulted in a missed connection at Mestre, a station near Venice, so that they arrived three quarters of

¹¹ “*Viaggio di D. Bosco a Frohsdorf*”, 6 manuscript pages, FdB 1349 C4-9. Unfortunately this account is incomplete.

¹² From here we follow the account given by this count in his work *Les entretiens des princes à Frohsdorf, 1873 and 1883. La vérité et la légende*, Paris, Perrin & Co, 1910, p. 112-168.

an hour late for the express train from Venice. The travellers had no choice but to take a local train with interminable stops, which meant that they took twenty four hours to reach Wiener-Neustadt in the small hours of Sunday 15 July, making it two nights and a day all told on the train.

Nevertheless, “the time passed fairly quickly,” wrote Joseph du Bourg, “thanks to the interesting conversations I had with my two fellow-travellers. During the lengthy stops, I tried in vain to get them to have something to eat. At two o’clock in the afternoon Fr Rua did splash out with two fried eggs, with grace after meals as a dessert. Meanwhile, Don Bosco, poor man, exercised his rubbery legs, walking back and forth on the station platform, his hands clasped behind his back. His cassock drew the attention other travellers, since throughout Austria priests wear a long frock coat and a tall black hat when out of doors. It doesn’t surprise me that, with their Spartan life-style, these venerable religious are as thin as a rake. But they are saints, and that makes up for everything! As for me, Don Bosco’s prayers had done me some good: I ate like a lion.”¹³

A car picked up the three travellers at the Wiener-Stadt station and took them quickly to Frohsdorf castle, where the Prince received Don Bosco at his bedside as soon as he had celebrated Mass. Once he had left the room, the Prince called du Bourg: “My dear friend. I tell you, I’m cured. He didn’t let on, but I knew; I’ve pulled through this time.” Du Bourg was ecstatic. “He’s a saint,” he continued. “I’m so happy to have set eyes on him. I want you to see that places are set at my wife’s table for these two religious.”¹⁴ As 15 July was the feast of Saint Henry, the Count de Chambord’s patronal saint, his entourage were given permission to file past his bed and offer their good wishes. The castle chaplain, who chose on this occasion to halt the procession, has left an account of remarks made by the count which it would be regrettable to omit here: “I wanted to see you during these days, but I am so tired.” Referring to Don Bosco and his companion Fr Rua, he added: “Don Bosco makes out that he is not the one; it’s the other person.” Since I didn’t understand what he meant, he repeated: “It’s true: he’s not the one who works miracles; it’s his companion. He’s a saint as well.”¹⁵

In the course of the two days Don Bosco and Fr Rua spent with him, the Count de Chamborg seemed to take a turn for the better. As Don Bosco was leaving, he made him promise to visit the church of Mary Help of Christians if his health continued to improve. The two saintly travellers left Frohsdorf on 17 July, and this time they were fortunate to catch the express which soon had them back in Turin.

As a fitting finale to this historic journey, Fr Rua wrote without delay to the Countess Marie-Thérèse de Chamborg on behalf of Don Bosco, to thank her and her husband for their hospitality. At the same time he put together and despatched letters from students and apprentices offering their fervent prayers for her husband’s improvement in health. Very touched by this, the Countess sent the following reply:

“Very Reverend Fr Rua, Your letter went straight to my heart. I read it immediately to be dear, sickly husband, who was very moved by it, and we both wish to thank you and our dear Don Bosco for your kind words. It was a great source of consolation for us

¹³ Joseph du Bourg, *op. cit.*, p. 131-132.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 146-147

¹⁵ Letter from A. Curé to Mgr Vannutelli, nuncio in Vienna, 17 July 1883, edited by E. Ceria MB XVI, p. 573

to receive his blessing, and to know how many pure and innocent souls are praying for the recovery of my very dear and much loved invalid. Each day, thank God, we are seeing a gradual, albeit slow improvement, in spite of minor crises which still occur, though less frequently, all of which gives us reason to hope for a complete cure which, as Don Bosco said, requires patience on our part. We both thank you also for the letters, so heartfelt and generous, sent by the boys of Don Bosco's Oratory, the young students and the apprentices. As I write to you, my husband's urgent request is to beg our dear Don Bosco that his holy prayers, in which he has so much trust, be kept up for him.

"We shall always hold dear the memory of the two days that Don Bosco and yourself, esteemed Fr Rua, spent here with us. I am pleased that your return journey went so smoothly for you. It doesn't surprise me, because such good and worthy souls as yours deserved to enjoy the special protection of their Guardian Angels.

"I conclude, expressing again to dear Don Bosco and to yourself the assurance of our gratitude and our sincere affection, and with these, from the bottom of my heart I remain

Your most obliged Marie-Thérèse, Countess of Chombord

Frohsdorf, 29 July 1883

My husband bids me send a very special, heartfelt greeting to you on his behalf."¹⁶

¹⁶ Letter edited by E. Ceria, MB XVI, p. 348. The improvement in the count's state of health was only temporary. He worsened from 5 August and died 24 August 1883

12- Don Bosco's Vicar General

Leo XIII Intervenes

The year 1884 got off to a calamitous start for Don Bosco, weakened as he was from his travels of the previous year. At 68 years of age, he wasn't exactly an old man, but there was good reason to believe that his health was at rock bottom. The fatigue, the problems and the moral suffering had worn him down. In the opinion of his doctor, "from around 1880 onwards, Don Bosco's body had become almost a walking medicine chest."¹

After breakfast on 31 January, he went to the novitiate at San Benigno to celebrate the patronal feast of St Francis of Sales. It was there that his extreme tiredness caused grave concern to the novice master, Fr Giulio Barberis, who tells us that when he gave the 'good night' on 1 February, he drew it to the attention of the novices, adding that the moment seemed to have come to make some extraordinary commitment to God so as to keep this saintly man alive. In response to that it would seem, Louis Gamarro, a tall young man of twenty four, offered his life for Don Bosco. His sacrifice was accepted, says Fr Barberis, since he died within a few days.² Later that month, Don Bosco suffered a serious attack of bronchial-pneumonia and they feared for his life. He did pick up again shortly afterwards, but soon the Pope himself began to worry about his condition.

On 9 May 1884, having waited long for such an invitation, Don Bosco was finally given an audience by Leo XIII. Fr Lemoyne was with him, and he was hoping to be granted the privileges which would regularise the government of the Salesian Society. The Pope maintained his customary openness, even showing great warmth towards him, but he was taken aback by his extreme weariness and immediately began urging him strongly to take a rest and get others to do the work, so that he could take care of himself. "You are not in good health; you need to rest and be looked after. You need someone alongside you; someone who can capture your traditions, and keep alive those many things that are not written down."³ Cardinal Nina, the Cardinal Protector of the Salesians, was of the same opinion. "Don Bosco tries to do too much", the Pope told him. In 1884, therefore, in the mind of the ecclesiastical authorities, Don Bosco was no longer able to carry on alone as Superior General of the Salesians. He could die at any time. What would happen then to the society he had founded? Was he not running the risk of being too closely identified with it? It would be wise to think of his retirement, at least partial, and of a successor.

By September, the danger seemed imminent. On the 14th, the retreat was in progress at Valsalice, and Don Bosco had to return urgently to Valdocco, since the swelling in his legs obliged him to lie down continuously. His secretary, Fr Lemoyne, thought it was an outbreak of a bacterial skin infection, but other possible causes of the swelling were anaemia, a weak heart or a serious lung condition. At all events, those around him thought they were losing him. On the 19th the Superior Chapter, meeting under the

¹ G. Albertotti, *Chi era Don Bosco?*, Gênes, Pala, 1934, p. 83.

² *Documenti* XXVII, p. 33.

³ From *Verbale del Capitolo superiore*, 24 October 1884, FdB 1881 D1-3.

presidency of Fr Rua, wasted no time in broaching the subject not only of his approaching death, but also of his funeral and burial.⁴ According to the minutes of the meeting, “Fr Rua said that, in view of Don Bosco’s illness, we can’t fail to consider the likelihood of a sad outcome. It would be appropriate to think about a possible funeral and how to organise it, as well as the place of burial. We could ask the government for permission to bury him in the Oratory church.” As for Don Bosco himself, his mind was clearly open to the proximity of his own death. He had begun to write his spiritual testament at the beginning of that year, 1884, but it was in the September that he completed the second part, in which he spoke serenely about his death.⁵

It was in the course of these few weeks, darkened by the shadow of painful forebodings, that Mgr Dominic Jacobini, Secretary of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, wrote in the name of Leo XIII to the Cardinal-archbishop of Turin, Gaetano Alimonda, who, in contrast to his predecessor, was a good friend of Don Bosco. The first part of the letter concerned Fr Cagliero, the second the retirement of Don Bosco and the appointment of a successor. The Pope’s wish was that, through the good offices of Cardinal Alimonda, Don Bosco should be asked, for the good of his institute, to designate, either his successor – which would mean relinquishing his own position as Superior General of the Salesians – or a vicar with right of succession. Here is a translation of this important section:

“His Holiness has commissioned me to write to you, on this occasion, about a subject of great importance. He sees that Don Bosco’s health is deteriorating by the day and is fearful for the future of the institute. He would therefore like your Eminence, using your discretion as to the best approach, to speak with Don Bosco and persuade him to designate the person he thinks the most suitable to succeed him or have the title of vicar with [right of] succession. In either case, the Holy Father will reserve the appointment to himself, according as he judges to be most prudent. It is his wish, moreover, that Your Eminence should act immediately with this matter, which is of great consequence for the good of the Institute.”⁶

It seems very likely that the cardinal went to see Don Bosco on 10 October, the day he received the message. At all events, when the Salesian superior council met on 23 October, Don Bosco shared the wishes of Leo XIII with the confreres, and questioned them on how to proceed. The chapter invited him to designate his administrator/successor himself and to send the name to the Pope, who they felt sure would immediately approve his decision. Don Bosco opted for Michael Rua, who would not, however, become Superior General right away, but would simply be his vicar. Since Don Bosco didn’t envisage a total retirement just yet, he preferred Leo XIII’s second solution. It would seem that he had no other name in mind to succeed him as head of the Salesian Congregation. His reply was sent to Cardinal Alimonda, who in turn, through the good offices of the Cardinal Protector Nina, passed it on to the Pope on the following 27 November.⁷

⁴ The *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore* from 30th Aug 1884 to 23rd February can be found with their respective dates in FdB 1881.

⁵ See F. Motto, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel Sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani*, Roma, LAS, 1985.

⁶ *Documenti XXVIII*, p. 450, where the piece is dated 9 October 1884.

⁷ Explanations in MB XVII, p. 275-280.

In the meantime, Leo XIII had expressed his feelings to Fr Cagliero on the occasion of an audience granted him on 5 November. He had made him a bishop and appointed him as Vicar Apostolic of northern and central Patagonia, and after speaking to him about his mission, he said he felt concerned about what would happen to Don Bosco's work in the event of the founder's death. "He is getting old," he said, with a tell-tale shake of the head. It was essential to make every effort to capture his spirit so as to keep it alive and pass it on to others intact. Without that, the progress of the Society would quickly come to a halt. There was no time to lose. As long as the founder was alive, it was easier to know the true spirit of the Institute. "This calls for a capable vicar," concluded the sovereign pontiff.

The title of 'Vicar General' becomes official

Throughout 1885 Fr Rua continued to exercise his role of Prefect General, sending monthly letters to Rectors of the various houses. He showed quite exceptional care for the new Rectors in Paris, Charles Bellamy, who received no less than sixteen letters from him in the course of the year.⁸ In his letters Fr Rua would ask for the exam results of the clerics for each semester, recommend retreats for the pupils and pass on news about Don Bosco or missionary journeys, etc. In April, Don Bosco sent him as extraordinary visitor to the houses of the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in central Italy and Sicily. Everywhere he was warmly welcomed. In contrast to the visits he made between 1874 and 1876 to the houses in Piedmont and Liguria, he didn't concern himself with minutiae about the property – that was within the remit of the Provincial, by right. His main responsibility, as we see from the notes he left when he visited centres in Spezia and Lucca, was to ensure that each establishment was fulfilling its role as a place of education both for boarders and day pupils.⁹

The timing of his visit to Sicily was most unfortunate. The expected arrival of the Salesians in Catania was the trigger for a flare-up of local anticlericalism. The newspaper *La Gazzetta di Catania* seized on a recent story to put the public on their guard. A girl accepted by the Salesian Sisters in their house at Bronte, then sent on to their mother house at Nizza Monferrato, turned out to be somewhat mentally unstable, and following a short spell in a psychiatric hospital in Turin, she had been sent back to her family. Disturbed by her experiences, the girl foolishly began spreading mischievous tales, which a journalist from *La Gazzetta* took seriously, making them into a veritable nuns' tragedy with a plot of outrageous fantasy. It parodied "Don Bosco's daughters" and inveighed against those who had entrusted the girls' college of Bronte to these "hyenas in sheep's clothing". Agitation was at its peak when Fr Rua arrived. He acted calmly, gathered all the relevant information and drew up a well-documented clarification for the attention of the *Gazzetta*. In spite of this, the newspaper continued its campaign unabated. It took the publication of Fr Rua's report in the clerical journal *L'Amico della Verità* on 27 April for the people of Catania to learn the truth.¹⁰

Fr Rua came back to Turin with mixed feelings about the work at Magliano Sabina,

⁸ FdR 3853 C5 à 3854 B4, i.e. forty eight pages.

⁹ Edited notes by P. Braido, «Don Michele Rua primo autodidatta Visitatore Salesiano», RSS 1990, p. 167-168.

¹⁰ This article, signed «Priest Michel Rua, general procurator of the Salesian Society» was reproduced in E. Ceria, MB XVII, p. 823-824.

not far from Rome. The Superior Chapter faced this issue at their meeting of 12 June 1885. Don Bosco wanted the Salesians to pull out; Fr Rua and the other council members took a different view, foreseeing negative reactions on the part of the Roman authorities. A clash was evident. Don Bosco's final word was: "Do as you wish", but he predicted a possible "catastrophe". His words came true a few years later when the Salesians moved out, lock, stock and barrel.

As we can see, over these months Don Bosco was very much on the scene, though well aware that he could no longer carry out his responsibilities on his own. If Fr Rua were to take over, he could, as he was heard to say, devote himself simply to seeking funds from his benefactors, either by letter or by personal visits.¹¹ All the same, he took his time in giving his Prefect the official title of Vicar General. No doubt it pained him to imagine anyone other than himself as the pivotal figure of his Congregation. Would this other person, so unlike himself, not give it a rather different image? It wasn't until 24 September 1885 that he finally took this step. The occasion was a historic meeting of the Superior Chapter, when canonical procedure was followed and Fr Rua was declared his Vicar and successor.

That day, Don Bosco had two statements to make.¹² The first concerned himself, now only half the man he used to be, and needing a replacement. The second concerned the Vicar General, who would take on all the responsibilities he had exercised himself until then, and all that would contribute to well being of the Congregation. He was nevertheless convinced that in all matters he would willingly seek his views and would work only for the good of the Salesian Society, so that at his death nothing would be changed. The Vicar must see that the traditions, so precious to the Society, remain intact. The Holy Father himself had strongly recommended that. Traditions are not the same as Rules, Don Bosco pointed out: they teach us how to explain them and put them into practice. Everything must be done to safeguard those traditions after his death and to pass them on in their entirety to those who would come after him.

Don Bosco went on: "My Vicar General in the Congregation will be Fr Michael Rua. This is the thinking of the Holy Father, who wrote to me in the first place through Mgr Jacobini. Since he wanted to help Don Bosco in every way possible, he asked me who, in my opinion, should take my place. I replied that my choice would be Fr Rua since he was one of the first to become a member of the Congregation, had been exercising this responsibly already for several years, and his appointment would be well received by all the confreres. His Holiness replied to me a short while ago through Cardinal Alimonda giving his approval to my choice. From now on, then, Fr Rua will take my place fully. What I can't do myself, he will do. He has all the power of the Rector Major: accepting confreres, giving the religious habit, delegations, etc., etc. This appointment, however, requires that he stays close to me; he must therefore relinquish the role of Prefect of the Congregation. Consequently, using the faculty given me in the Rules, I nominate as Prefect of the Congregation Fr Celestine Durando, currently Counsellor for Schools..."

Don Bosco ended by asking the Chapter secretary to draw up a circular which would inform all the houses in the Congregation of Fr Rua's appointment as Vicar General.

¹¹ Meeting of the Superior Chapter, in *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore*, 22 June 1885. The minutes of the Superior Chapter for the period March 1885-February 1888 are in FdB 1882-1883

¹² The following lines refer to the minutes of this meeting in *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore*, 24 September 1885.

The circular was printed and given the date of the following 8 December,¹³ and Don Bosco himself took care to oversee its distribution.

At the Oratory, Don Bosco made the appointment a solemn event on 8 December. He made sure to be at table in the community dining room, something he hadn't done for a long time because he had difficulty negotiating the stairs. It was rare for him also to preside at benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, but that day he did preside. As he made his way slowly from the sacristy, those in the congregation stood on the benches in order to catch sight of him. In the evening he gave a conference to the Salesians in the choir of the church of Mary Help of Christians, as was his custom each year on that date. Before speaking himself, he got Fr Francesca, Provincial of the Piedmont houses, to read the circular announcing the appointment. He made no further comment on it, but rather praised the goodness of the Madonna, who blessed and protected the whole Salesian mission. He looked back over the vicissitudes of the Oratory from the time of its foundation. The contrast between past and present brought into relief the long road they had travelled and augured well for the future.

On 9 December the circular was sent to the other three European Provincials and to the two in America. In the eyes of the whole Salesian family Fr Michael Rua was now the rightful Vicar General of Don Bosco and, they believed, his named successor.

The appointment of Fr Rua was received not just favourably, but with real enthusiasm. Proof of this is found in a number of letters from France and America that are kept in the Salesian archives. We quote as an example the reaction in Paris of Charles Bellamy, dated 15 December 1885. He wrote to Fr Rua as follows: "The feast of the Immaculate Conception has always been a day of joy for our Pious Society. This year our good Mother has gifted us with a piece of news that all the Salesians have received as the most precious, most dear and most desired of gifts: I mean your official nomination to the demanding but sweet role as Father of our Pious Society. Oh! How we have thanked the Madonna for this, and how we have promised wholeheartedly to be for you, as for our very dear Don Bosco, your obedient and zealous sons!"

We could quote the Salesians in Italy, starting with his former companions, but suffice it to quote John Cagliero, the future cardinal, whose sentiments express those of the others. "I was his companion as a boy, as a cleric and as a priest, then as Rectors and member of the Superior Chapter, and I can confirm that, at every stage of his life, he was always the *primus inter pares* [first among equals], first in virtue, first in work, first in study and sacrifice, just as he was always first in his holy and strong love for Don Bosco and for young people, for whose sake he was nothing but enthusiasm, care and fatherly love."¹⁴

Fr Rua was 48 years old. The twenty years spent as Prefect had stamped him with an air of severity, not as a natural trait, but as something demanded by the type of responsibilities inherent in that role. Once he became Don Bosco's Vicar, he shed all that and made every effort to replicate in himself the fatherliness of the saint. The change was tangible. Confreres who esteemed him highly now showed him filial affection. Fr Ceria, an eye-witness from those distant times, has this opportune comment in his biography of Fr Rua: "Anyone who has not lived through those years

¹³ Circular reproduced in MB XVII, p. 181-182.

¹⁴ Remarks quoted by A. Amadei I, p. 348. They correspond more or less word for word with the deposition of Cardinal Cagliero on the virtues of don Rua at his beatification process.

cannot fully understand what we are saying here, because he has not experienced the reality for those Salesians of a living Don Bosco.”¹⁵ There we have it.

With Don Bosco in Spain

On 1 March 1886, Don Bosco’s secretary Charles Viglietti put a note in his chronicle: “‘Hunger drives the wolf from his lair’, said Don Bosco today, ‘and In the same way I feel constrained, decrepit and sickly as I am, to undertake another journey and to go perhaps as far as Spain. We are already considering when to set out.’” So the saintly man had set his sights on Spain, where he already had two foundations (Utrera in Andalusia and Sarrià in Catalonia) and where he could count on generous benefactors.¹⁶

The truth is that, for those around Don Bosco, given his state of exhaustion and multiple ailments, this projected journey was beyond belief. However, in the early afternoon of 12 March, accompanied by his secretary Viglietti, he left Turin and made for the Italian Riviera and the Salesian house of Sampierdarena, near Genoa. The journey would be made in stages, with stops of varying length in the course of which he would collect money for his work and for the church and hospice of the *Sacro Cuore* (Sacred Heart) in Rome. Following their route along the Riviera the travellers were at Varazze on the 16th, and Alassio on the 17th; from there they crossed into France and were at Nice on the 20th. Cannes on the 27th, then at Toulon on the 29th, and Marseilles on the 31st.

There was much scepticism back in Turin about the outcome of the journey to Spain. On 28 March, Joseph Lazzaro wrote to Bishop Cagliari: “Humanly speaking, given Don Bosco’s state of health, it doesn’t bear thinking about.” The news from France, however, told a different story: this sort of exertion, coping with huge, public manifestations of piety, far from weakening Don Bosco, seemed to energise him. He was noted for being tenacious. Fr Rua therefore decided to join him in Marseilles, and on 2 April he was at Don Bosco’s side in the oratory of Saint Léon. So as to pick up some knowledge of Spanish, he took with him a small, elementary grammar, the booklet *Don Bosco y su Obra* by Mgr Spinola, and the *Imitation of Christ* translated into Spanish. He made such rapid progress that, once over the frontier, he would already have a working knowledge of Spanish.

At Marseilles Don Bosco did allow certain precautions to be taken to safeguard his journey, but come what may, he was going to see his friends beyond the Pyrenees. On 4 April, Viglietti informed Lemoyne: “Our Father is full of courage, despite his weak condition...”

In order to provide maximum comfort, Fr Rua decided that when leaving Marseilles on 7 April, they would travel by saloon-carriage for the French section of the rail journey to Spain. In fact, this resulted in Don Bosco, Fr Rua and Viglietti the secretary arriving on the 8th at Port-Bou, on the Spanish/French border, at 4 o’clock in the morning. The Rector of the house at Sarrià, Fr John Baptist Branda, was there, waiting for them. They changed train and were able to continue their journey to Barcelona in a reserved carriage.

The travellers were offered a drink, which Don Bosco accepted. Fr Rua, on the other

¹⁵ E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 120.

¹⁶ For Don Bosco’s journey to Spain, see MB XVIII, p. 66-138.

hand, intent on keeping the fast so as to celebrate Mass in Barcelona, declined. It was during this part of the journey that Fr Rua was coincidentally drawn into a certain conversation. On the previous 6 February the Rector, Fr Branda, had experienced a lengthy vision during which Don Bosco, who was undoubtedly in Turin at the time, had appeared at his bedroom door in the middle of the night, named a Brother and two young people as guilty of obscene behaviour, and then walked with him through the dormitories of Sarrià. That night, it seemed, Don Bosco was simultaneously in Turin and Sarrià. Was he ever aware of that? As they travelled from Port Bou, Fr Branda went into Don Bosco's compartment and began to question him about the issue of immorality. He gave his own account of the incident, to which Don Bosco replied simply: "Carry on", but offered no further light. He then fell asleep. Fr Branda left him and went into the next compartment where he related his story in every detail to Fr Rua, who took careful note of it.¹⁷

Official Salesian history (Lemoyne in 1913, Ceria in 1937) has scarcely called into question this double presence; but for there to have been an authentic bilocation, as Fr Branda himself has solemnly affirmed on many occasions, it would have been necessary for Don Bosco to be fully conscious of it. Unfortunately for Fr Branda the visionary, we have no reliable proof that he was ever aware of any mental journey from Turin to Barcelona in February 1886.¹⁸

Fr Rua was full of wonder as he witnessed the welcome given to Don Bosco by the city of Barcelona. In the French stations, Don Bosco had already found friends and benefactors; in Barcelona he was greeted by civil and religious authorities alike. The queen-regent was represented by the city governor, and the bishop (away on a pastoral visit) by his Vicar General. The leaders of the Catholic Association and various dignitaries were also there. Both the devout and the curious were present in great numbers. "Thousands of people from all levels of society made their way to the station to see Don Bosco" wrote Fr Ceria, carried away with enthusiasm. Due protocol was observed by the various official delegations. High society people, commented the secretary Viglietti, followed correct procedure. Prominent Cooperators, both men and women, were much in evidence. Among them was Dorothy Chopitea, who had the honour others would have relished, of taking Don Bosco, Fr Rua and the cleric Viglietti in her own carriage. After Mass, celebrated by Fr Rua, and a meal at the lady's home, our travellers made their way to the Salesian house at Sarrià where they would stay throughout their time in Barcelona from 8 April to 6 May. It was there that Don Bosco would receive innumerable visitors, who often had no choice but to come in groups just to receive his blessing. All would leave – the devout and the curious - with medals of Mary Help of Christians. It was from there that he would attend receptions in his honour arranged by wealthy individuals, either in splendid churches or sumptuous halls.

Fr Rua meanwhile was launching into the Spanish language, much to the surprise of Don Bosco who asked him had he just learned a few everyday phrases. "A little more than that", he replied. "Bravo, bravo", said Don Bosco, "You'll often save me from embarrassment." In fact, he would frequently act as his interpreter where an important

¹⁷ He would testify to this at the canonisation process for Don Bosco, connecting this account

with something he heard Don Bosco say in Turin in that month of February about his intention to visit Don Branda. (*Positio super Introductione Causae. Summarium*, p. 830.)

¹⁸ Consult regarding "the bilocation at Barcelona", in my book *Don Bosco en son temps*, p. 1350-1356

conversation required language skill that no other Salesian could provide. A letter he wrote on 9 April to John Bonetti illustrates the extraordinary speed of his language learning. He began the letter in Spanish, then, having completed a paragraph, he reproached himself: “Oh! Look at that. I’m so used to speaking Spanish that I hadn’t noticed I was writing to you, especially you, in that language. I know you’ve been here, but you didn’t use the language much, because your visit was so short. I’ll continue in Italian so as not to waste your time.” The Prefect General, Fr Durando, would write to the houses from time to time about the visit to Spain, with news gathered from the secretary Viglietti, but the name of Fr Rua only figured in one circular, dated 5 May. There he wrote: “I mustn’t forget to give you news about our much loved Fr Rua. Throughout the whole time Don Bosco was in Spain, amid his many and diverse responsibilities, he has been his true vicar and support, no matter what it cost him in work or fatigue. It may surprise many of you to know that he preached in Spanish before a large congregation in our church at Sarrià.” That was on Easter Monday, 26 April.¹⁹

As one would expect, Fr Rua always accompanied Don Bosco at celebrations in his honour, whether in the house of Sarrià itself or at other gatherings in Barcelona.²⁰ He was at his side on the following occasions: 14 April, at the college of the Ladies of the Sacred Heart; 15 April, at an evening meeting of the Catholic Society of Barcelona when he was solemnly made an honorary member; 17 April, at a banquet in his honour given by Fr Narciso Pascual; 21 April, when he celebrated Mass in the private oratory of the Marchioness de Comillas; 24 April, at Vespers in the private oratory of Fr Narciso Pascual; 29 April, for a visit to Oscar Pascual, president of the bank of Barcelona; 30 April, at a conference for Salesian Cooperators in the church of Nuestra Señora de Belen; 1 May at Don Bosco’s Mass in the same church; 2 May, at a dinner given by the Archbishop of Barcelona; 3 May at the magnificent reception in the villa of Fr Luis Martí Codolar; 4 May, following a dinner with the Pons family, at the Jesuit college and in the hospital founded by Dorothy Chopitea; 5 May, at his visit to the Marchioness de Comillas and at a ceremony in the church of Nuestra Señora de la Merced. However, apart from a few exceptions of varying importance, the very detailed chronicle of the secretary Viglietti makes little mention of him. The following is one of those exceptions.

On 11 April, Don Bosco called Fr Rua, the Rectors Fr Branda and the secretary Viglietti, and with much weeping, began to tell them of a dream he had during the night of the 9th/10th. It was a missionary dream in which Don Bosco saw great numbers of young people calling out to him: “We are waiting for you”. A group led by a shepherdess pointed to Valparaiso in Chile, then beyond the mountains, hills and oceans, to another place called Peking. The shepherdess traced a line going from Santiago to Peking, passing across Africa, and said to him: “There now you have a clear idea of what your Salesians must do.” “But”, exclaimed Don Bosco, “how can they go about it? The distances are so immense, the places difficult to reach, and we are too few.” He was then shown places in India and in China where there could be novitiates for new recruits. The three listened in amazement, and first one, then another exclaimed: “Oh! Mary, Mary!” The Vicar General took note of all that had been said, convinced it

¹⁹ E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 122-123.

²⁰ Diary of Don Bosco’s stay in Barcelona in the chapter «Diario barcelonense», MB XVIII, p. 66-117. I draw also on the detailed chronical of the secretary Viglietti.

was a heavenly message. He would always have the missions much at heart. One day he would have no hesitation in sending his disciples off to Africa and Asia. “How Mary loves us!” he said finally to Don Bosco. Fr Rua always believed such predictions were from above.²¹

The return from Spain

The three travellers left Spain on 6 May. They made the journey in stages, stopping at Gerona, Montpellier, Valence and Grenoble, taking nine days in all to reach Italy.²² In the last two mentioned, Fr Rua was very much to the fore.

At Montpellier doctor Combal was consulted about the state of Don Bosco’s health: all he could do was confirm the diagnosis given two years earlier at Marseilles. “The only illness Don Bosco has is none other than extreme exhaustion. If Don Bosco had never worked a miracle, I would say that his greatest miracle is the fact that he is still alive. His whole system has broken down. He is all but dead from fatigue, yet every day he works, eats little and lives on. For me that is truly the greatest miracle of all.” His days in Barcelona had completely worn him out.

It isn’t surprising then, that he wasn’t well enough to deliver a conference planned for the cathedral at Valence. Fr Rua took his place and recounted the history of the Oratory at Valdocco. On their arrival at Grenoble on the 12th, Fr Rua again had occasion to intervene. They were scarcely outside the station when our three travellers found a huge crowd gathered on the Saint Louis square, by the church of the same name: they had been told that Don Bosco the miracle-worker was about to arrive. Not only the square, but also the adjacent streets were overflowing with people. On the steps of the church the parish priest, vested in surplice and surrounded by his clergy, was waiting for Don Bosco. The crowd went silent, and the priest, raising his voice, invited Don Bosco to call down God’s blessing on his parishioners, that their intentions might be heard. Don Bosco graciously consented: he blessed the crowd and prepared to make his way to the bishop’s residence. His general blessing, however, in no way satisfied the devout expectations of the people. In the words of his secretary, “a new type of persecution” awaited him on this Saint Louis Square. The people, gripped by something that Viglietti found it hard to describe – was it “enthusiasm” or some “madness”? – surged towards Don Bosco, whilst Fr Rua did his best to protect him. They had brought various pious objects – medals, crucifixes, rosaries, etc. – which they were determined to get him to touch. Rosaries, hurled from a distance by those who couldn’t get near him, landed on his shoulders, neck, head and arms. “A pious flagellation” Fr Rua would call it when giving testimony for the canonisation process. Pious people who were nearest would force crucifixes and medals against his lips. Eventually he was pulled away from them to go and stay at the major seminary.

The following day, 13 May, the superior of the seminary suggested to Fr Rua that he should lead the “spiritual reading” required by rule. In Sulpician terminology, this is more of a “spiritual lecture” or “lesson in spirituality”. A seminarian who was present would describe the event as follows: “Don Bosco’s pious confessor takes as his theme ‘God’s love for us’. His heartfelt words bespeak a soul on fire. It is not so much a

²¹ This dream, included in Viglietti’s chronicle (FdB 1224 D6-7), reappears, with some corrections by Lemoyne, in MB XVIII, p. 72-74.

²² Consult the chapter «Partenza dalla Spagna e ritorno a Torino», MB XVIII, p. 118-138.

meditation as a contemplation. With the Saint, this becomes an ecstasy, as large tears flow down his cheeks. M. Rabilloud [the superior] speaks out in a voice so gentle and so moving: “Don Bosco is weeping”. The Saint’s tears are more eloquent even than the uplifting words that come from the heart of Fr Rua. We are moved to the very depths of our being. We have seen his sanctity in this sign of love, and we need no miracle to prompt our veneration for the Saint as we make our way from the hall to the refectory.”²³

Don Bosco, with his Vicar Fr Rua and his Secretary Charles Viglietti arrived back at the Turin Oratory in the evening of 15 May, in time for the opening of the novena in preparation for the feast of Mary Help of Christians on the 24th.

Broken with fatigue, Don Bosco slowly, very slowly crossed the courtyard, led by the boys’ band and flanked on either side by phalanx of youngsters. Fr Rua would remember this journey to Spain as the final triumph of a revered master whose humble vicar he had become.

²³ Dom Pierre Mouton, «Séjour de saint Jean Bosco au séminaire de Grenoble, mai 1886», *Documenti* XXXII, p. 328, h. t.

13 – Don Bosco’s Life comes to an end

A saintly and humble vicar

Don Rua carried out his role as vicar humbly and diligently. In August 1886, Don Bosco authorised him to preside at the general chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Nizza Monferrato, granting him the faculties needed for any deliberations considered to be in the interests of the Institute. In the letter of appointment, he wrote: “Have courage! The Lord has equipped us for a variety of tasks; it’s up to us to do our best to see them through. As for me, my eyesight is poor and my health is deteriorating.”¹ By now, in fact, Don Bosco could do little more than pray, and he could rely on his vicar with peace of mind.

It’s true that he did preside at the Salesian General Chapter at Valsalice in September, where all the Rectors were gathered. Nevertheless, in an unprecedented move, he wrote a letter addressed explicitly to “Fr Michael Rua, Vicar General of the Salesian congregation”, officially inviting him to substitute him in receiving the spiritual manifestation of each member of the chapter.² Fr Rua took a leading role on two occasions in the course of the chapter. At the opening session, he read the rules of procedure, and at the end he shared with the chapter members twelve directives, coming most likely from Fr himself, but reflecting some of the rigour of the former Prefect General of the Congregation. They concerned the observance of poverty, community life and the formation of young clerics in the schools.³

Fr Rua lived meticulously the poverty he recommended to others. Fr Amadei, his contemporary, tells us that crossing the Oratory playground one day, Fr Rua happened to come across a new pen. Picking it up, he showed it to him, saying: “Look, I shall be able to write with this for months to come!”⁴ One of his young secretaries at that time, Anthony Dones, says that Fr Rua would sometimes ask him to go to the Oratory tailor’s or shoemaker’s to have his clothes or footwear repaired, but not before going first of all to the prefect for the customary approval. When he remarked that Don Bosco’s Vicar needn’t do that, he replied: “Not at all: the Prefect is the only one with authority in the workshops.”⁵

When it came to his times for prayer, only something of the greatest importance could drag him away. At the apostolic process for Fr Rua, Alexander Lucchelli (1864-1938) gave the following testimony. “His composure was something to be admired. For that half-hour he seemed to be absorbed in a deep colloquy with God, and no matter what happened around him, nothing would distract or disturb him. On the morning of 23 February – the first day of Lent – we were all making our meditation in the church of Mary Help of Christians when an earthquake shook the north-west of Italy, centred on Liguria. Suddenly, we felt the ground shaking beneath our feet, and a horrendous din of

¹ G. Bosco - M. Rua, Pinerolo, 8 August 1886. *Epsitolario* Ceria IV, 359.

² *Epsitolario* Ceria IV, p. 355-356.

³ Read them in MB XVIII, p. 188-189.

⁴ Amadei I, p. 364.

⁵ Amadei I, p. 364-365.

crashing objects deafened us. It was as though the church was about to be crushed by some colossus. Shouts went up: ‘An earthquake! An earthquake!’ and everyone fled from the church and into the playground, faces white with terror. They looked up at the cupola, expecting at any moment to see it come crashing down. But their panic was short-lived, as they soon realised that the earthquake hadn’t damaged the church after all. They went back into the church, and there was Fr Rua – the only one who hadn’t budged – still in his place, still at prayer. Had he not noticed anything? I don’t think so. Had he understood that we weren’t in danger? I don’t know. But one thing is certain, as everyone could see: in spite of that terrible earth tremor, Fr Rua hadn’t interrupted his prayer.”⁶

At Rome for the consecration of the Sacred Heart church

Don Bosco was eager to be present in Rome for the consecration of the Sacred Heart church which had cost him so much in personal sacrifice. He set out for Rome on 20 April along with Fr Rua and Fr Viglietti. They made the journey in short stages, arriving there on the 30th. Don Bosco was worn out, and so was Fr Rua. One morning there, as he was preparing to celebrate Mass, he fainted and had to lie down for a while. Before long, however, he was on his feet again and celebrated as if nothing untoward had happened.

Leo XIII gave an audience to Don Bosco on 13 May, the day before the consecration. Before leaving, Don Bosco asked the Pope if he could introduce Fr Rua and Fr Viglietti, who were waiting in the antechamber. The chronicler kept a record of the Pope’s words: “Ah, you are Fr Rua, the Vicar of the Congregation. Very good! Very good! I’m told that you’ve been with Don Bosco since you were a boy. Carry on; go ahead with this venture, and be sure to preserve in yourself the spirit of your founder.” “Of course, Holy Father”, replied Fr Rua. “With your blessing, we hope to be able to give of ourselves to our last breath for this work to which we’ve devoted ourselves since we were young.” He then asked permission to make a request: an indult to allow acceptance of candidates for the congregation. The Pope listened then asked him to follow him. The indult was granted there and then for five years.⁷

The three arrived back in Turin in the evening of 20 May. As soon as they were in the Oratory, Don Bosco insisted on going to the church to thank Our Lady. It was the sixth day of the novena in preparation for the feast of Mary Help of Christians, and the whole community was gathered there for the usual ceremonies. Fr Rua presided at Benediction and gave the blessing, which Don Bosco received devoutly.

It was a tradition on the feast of Mary Help of Christians for a conference to be given in the church for the Turin Cooperators. It was Fr Rua who gave it on this occasion. A report of it was given in the *Salesian Bulletin* the following July. “It took place the following evening, 25 May in the sanctuary. Fr Rua, Vicar General of Don Bosco, spoke of the celebrations in Rome at the consecration of the Sacred Heart church, then of the fatherly audience granted to Don Bosco by Leo XIII, the blessing that the Sovereign Pontiff had kindly given for all the benefactors of the new church, the constant progress of the missions in Patagonia, and finally the special protection of

⁶ Alexander Lucchelli (1864-1938), Apostolic process of Fr Rua, in *Positio* 1947, p. 586-587.

⁷ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 12 September 1887, FdB 1883 C12.

Mary Help of Christians, who quite recently, so it seems, miraculously saved Bishop Cagliero from certain death – whilst travelling through the Andes he had to leap from his horse which had suddenly reared up. Those are the main topics of most interesting and edifying talk.”

Speaking for Don Bosco

Before Don Bosco’s final illness, Fr Rua had to take his place at three public events. Every year, on 23 and 24 June, for the feast of St John the Baptist, the Oratory had a solemn celebration in honour of Don Bosco. The festivities took place in the large playground, the only place big enough to hold both the young people and the numerous invited guests.

As the concert of music and recitations came to an end in the evening of the 24th, Don Bosco hadn’t the energy to give his usual closing talk. He appointed Fr Rua to speak in his place, and in his name to thank those who had organised the ‘Academy’ and all who had made gifts. Fr Rua gave a ‘moving allocution’ says the chronicler of the *Salesian Bulletin*. Emotion there was indeed among the audience, who knew all too well that such an occasion would never occur again. The past pupils organised a banquet to follow the celebration. Don Bosco couldn’t be present this time; Fr Rua took his place and spoke in his name. He encouraged them always to keep in mind and take with them in their own lives the image, the advice and the wishes of their great benefactor. His listeners were pleasantly surprised to find in Fr Rua the fatherliness they had known so well in Don Bosco.⁸

That year Don Bosco hadn’t been able to go to France as he had usually done since 1876. Instead, the French came to him. More than nine hundred workers, on their way to Rome under the leadership of Léon Harmel, made a stop at Turin. They were on pilgrimage to honour the priestly jubilee of Leo XIII, and they broke their journey in Turin on 13 December. The workers were eager to see Don Bosco, but the short time at their disposal wasn’t enough for them to go as far as Valdocco. Don Bosco, therefore, went with Fr Rua to meet them in the Valentino *parc* where the pilgrims were to have a meal in a restaurant. Don Bosco blessed them as far as he was able, and would have loved to address them, but his voice could barely be heard by those nearest to him, so he asked Fr Rua to speak for him. This was no problem for him as he addressed them in French. Don Bosco, he said, congratulates and thanks the pilgrims; he asks them to beg the Pope to pray that the Salesian family will receive all the grace they need to fulfil their mission; he invites them, when in Rome, to visit the Sacred Heart church, and promises to celebrate Mass the next day, asking for God’s blessing on the whole pilgrimage. After this address, the pilgrims filed past Don Bosco, who gave each one a medal of Mary Help of Christians. Many of them slipped a silver coin into his hand which he passed on the Fr Rua.⁹

On 24 November the faithful packed the church of Mary Help of Christians for an extraordinary ceremony. The Polish prince August Czartoryski, who came to know Don Bosco in Paris in 1883, was nearing the end of his life and was preparing to join the Salesian Congregation. That day he received the religious habit from Don Bosco, along with three other adults – French, English and Polish respectively. Don Bosco came

⁸ E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 130.

⁹ «Le pèlerinage des ouvriers français à Rome», *Bulletin salésien*, November 1887, p. 132-133.

forward slowly, very slowly, with the four candidates. When the *Veni Creator* had been sung, he invited them, according to the wording of the ritual, to put off the old man, at which they removed their jackets and ties and handed them to the assistants. Then he invited them to put on the new man as he gave each one a cassock. It was the moment then for Fr Rua to go into the pulpit and deliver an appropriate sermon, taking for his text the words of Isaiah: 'Fili tui de longe venient' [Your sons will come from afar]. The ceremony concluded with the singing of the *Te Deum*. As they came out from the church, the older ones commented on Fr Rua's sermon: they said "Fr Rua spoke with the mind and heart of Don Bosco."¹⁰

The death of Don Bosco

From mid-December of this same year 1887 Don Bosco's health deteriorated rapidly, and Fr Rua stayed close at hand, ready for any eventuality. On the 21st the end seemed imminent: he was convulsed with bouts of sickness; his temperature was high; his infirmarians, in an attempt to forestall any vomiting, tried in vain to give him nourishment that his system could accept. His breathing was shallow. Later that evening he told one of those with him that around four o'clock he thought he was about to die. "I lost all consciousness." He asked for the last sacraments, saying to his secretary, Viglietti: "Make sure you are not the only priest with me. I need someone here ready to give me Extreme Unction." "Viglietti replied: "Don Bosco, Fr Rua is here all the time."¹¹ On Christmas Eve, his wishes were granted: Bishop Cagliari solemnly brought Viaticum first thing in the morning, as the community Mass was being celebrated. Later that night, around eleven o'clock, he gave him Extreme Unction.

Alarmed by the turn of events, every day from the 26 to 31 December Fr Rua sent a detailed bulletin on the progress of Don Bosco's illness to all the Rectors.¹² The one for the 27th spelled out: 'a cardio-pulmonary condition'; in other words, both his heart and his lungs were affected. As for the sick man himself, his customary good humour seemed to override any illness and pain. On the 26th, as three doctors consulted each other by his bed, he said quietly to Viglietti, like a doubting patient from a Molière comedy: "Videamus quid valeat scientia et peritia trium doctorum." [Let's see what the knowledge and skill of three doctors can come up with.] And on the 27th, whilst four Salesians – including Fr Rua – and a doctor were putting their heads together to work out how to move Don Bosco from one bed to another, he said playfully: "Tie a strong rope round my neck and pull me across". In the end the transfer became a tragicomedy as Fr Rua found himself on the second bed with Don Bosco lying on top of him!

Meanwhile those around him were putting together the spiritual thoughts he expressed. In a circular on 30 December Fr Rua wrote: "Yesterday evening Bishop Cagliari, Fr Bonetti and I were by his bed; in a brief moment when he could speak more easily, we heard him say: "I recommend to our Salesians devotion to Mary Help of Christians and frequent communion." When I remarked that this could serve as a

¹⁰ From E Ceria, MB XVIII, p. 466-468. The original chronicle of Carlo Viglietti, dated 24 November, only records one ceremony in Don Bosco's own room. I imagine that after the ceremony in the church of Mary Help of Christians, which seems well documented, the Czartoryski family visited Don Bosco's rooms. The Viglietti chronicles are in FdB 1222 D2 - 1227 D8.

¹¹ C. Viglietti, Original chronicle, 23rd December 1887.

¹² These circulars are in FdR 3980 A10-B8.

Strenna for the new year and be sent to all the houses, he replied: “It’s for the whole of life...” But then he agreed to make it the Strenna. Let us not forget this precious advice of our much-loved father. Let us observe it ourselves, recommend it to our young people, and from now on let us use it as a means to obtain the grace of his recovery.”

Don Bosco’s condition seemed to improve slightly, and on 31 December Fr Rua was happy to announce that he was feeling a little better, and the doctors were now entertaining a possible recovery. There was reason, all the same, to be more cautious. On 2 January, Fr Rua had to tone down his earlier report as he declared: “The illness of our much loved father has not worsened, but there is little sign of improvement. His death in the very near future seems inevitable. His wish for all of you for the new year is good health in body and spirit, so as to make progress in virtue, in study and in your various duties of state..”

This remission lasted for three weeks, as Don Bosco began talking again, eating a little and receiving visitors. Nevertheless, he was very wary. On 6 January he cautioned his secretary: “Viglietti, you would do well to tell Fr Rua to keep an eye on me, because my mind is going. I can’t remember if it’s morning or evening; what day it is or what year. I’m losing my bearings; I don’t know where I am now. I can scarcely recognise people or remember what has happened...whether I’m praying, whether it’s a feast or a feria. Please help me, all of you.”¹³ He began to decline again from the 24th.¹⁴ By the 27th he was drifting in and out of consciousness and was sometimes delirious. Whenever he became lucid, he would always greet his sons – Berto, Durando, Bonetti, and of course Fr Rua – and would say over and over again: “Tell the young people I’m waiting for them in paradise”. The night of the 29th/30th was a very painful one for poor Don Bosco: he couldn’t breathe or take anything he was offered. About two o’clock in the morning, he began to tremble, his teeth chattered and he seemed to be suffocating. Even his bed was shaking. Alarmed by this, the infirmarian, Enria, tried to raise him up a little; Don Bosco gripped hold of him, and for a moment Enria thought he was going to die in his arms; then, Don Bosco became calm, and in a thin voice he invoked Mary Help of Christians, adding: “God’s will be done in everything!” When day broke, they could see that he was paralysed in one arm. He managed to say a few words to those closest – Rua, Cagliero., Viglietti... Perhaps that morning he whispered in the ear of his great disciple: “Make yourself loved.” Fr Rua decided that both Salesians and boys should be allowed to come and kiss the hand of the dying Don Bosco. Soon a long line of them made their way in silence up the stairs leading to Don Bosco’s room, where he lay motionless, with one arm hanging and a crucifix on his breast. Many touched him with their medals, crucifixes, rosaries or holy pictures, which would then be considered as relics.

After their sombre meal with the Salesian community, the main superiors – Cagliero, Rua, Bonetti, Belmonte, Sala – returned to the bedside of Don Bosco, whose room was close to the dining room. They knelt on the tiled floor around their beloved father’s bed of suffering and prayed, unsure whether or not they should try to snatch a little sleep. Finally, they decided to spend the night sitting in a nearby room from where they could come quickly as soon as any alert was raised. Around half past one, his breathing became laboured. Enria alerted the superiors. Fr Rua and Bishop Cagliero gave the final

¹³C. Viglietti, Original chronicle of that date. See E. Ceria, MB XVIII, p. 511.

¹⁴On the death of Don Bosco, see MB XVIII, p. 529-543.

commendation, while the others prayed with much weeping and sobbing. Finally, the laboured breathing abated, and with it the dread and the agony of those gathered around. It was then that Fr Rua, with a thought fully in accord with the spirit of Don Bosco, leant his own hand and voice to bestow a blessing from Don Bosco on his sons throughout the world. He came alongside the bed, then spoke as follows: “Don Bosco, we are gathered here, so many of us your sons from the earliest days, priests and brothers, and we ask your blessing. Bless us, and all those scattered throughout the world and in the missions. And as you can no longer raise your right arm, I will hold it and pronounce the words, and you will surely bless all the Salesians and all the young.” With great gentleness, he raised the arm of their father and pronounced the words of blessing over his confreres, who bowed deeply and wept with emotion. A further two hours passed. At a sign from Enria, the superiors again gathered round the bed to recite the litany for the dying and the ‘Proficiscere’. Don Bosco breathed his last at quarter to five in the morning of 31 January 1888.

Don Bosco’s Funeral and Burial

Fr Rua immediately compiled a long, emotional circular, dated 31 January, to give the news of Don Bosco’s death “to the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Salesian Cooperators.” He assured them: “With the responsibility now of representing him, I shall do my best to meet your common expectations. I am sure that with the work and advice of my confreres, the Pious Society of St Francis of Sales, held by the hand of God, aided by the protection of Mary Help of Christians, and supported by the charity of our well-deserving Cooperators, will continue the work undertaken by its wonderful and much lamented founder, especially for the well-being of poor and abandoned youth and for the missions.”¹⁵ In these few lines we see transparently the future programme of a Rector Major totally faithful to Don Bosco.

On 1 February Don Bosco’s body, clothed in priestly vestments, was placed on an armchair in the church of St Francis of Sales, where the boys of the Oratory and many of the faithful would pay homage to him. The Salesians kept vigil throughout the night. Fr Rua knelt in prayer by his mortal remains for a very long time. With the coming of morning his body was placed in a triple casket. The funeral Mass was celebrated in the church of Mary Help of Christians during the morning of 2 February, and the funeral cortege comprising the Salesians and boys of the Oratory filed through the local streets in the presence of an immense crowd of people. Eight Salesian priests carried the casket. Behind it, between Fr Durando and Fr Sala, Fr Rua walked with bowed head, immersed in his great sorrow. The cortege didn’t end at the cemetery, but returned to the church of Mary Help of Christians.

For some days the Salesian superiors anguished over the question of where Don Bosco should be buried. They would have preferred to place the body of their founder in the crypt of the church of Mary Help of Christians, but the civil authorities would not allow it. Finally, after much negotiation, in both Turin and Rome, permission was granted to bury him outside the city of Turin in the Salesian house at Valsalice. This former college for children of the rich had recently undergone a transformation: from the beginning of the scholastic year in October it had become a house of studies for young Salesian clerics in training. These clerics formed a guard of honour. So, as not to

¹⁵ Original printed Supplement to the *Bollettino salesiano*, February 1888, 3 p.

provoke any reaction from anticlericals, the transfer of the body was carried out in secret. Fr Rua urged the clerics to go to the tomb often and spend time in prayer. Once a month, as far as possible, he would go from the Oratory to Valsalice himself to offer his own fervent prayer.¹⁶

¹⁶ On the problem of the burial of Don Bosco and the option for Valsalice, see MB XVIII, p. 533-567.

14 - Fr Rua as Rector Major

*Succeeding Don Bosco*¹

In his circular of 31 January, Fr Rua had written in reference to Don Bosco: “With the responsibility now of representing him, I shall do my best to meet your common expectations.” Why did he not speak of ‘replacing’ him? Among the Salesians themselves the nuance went unnoticed, to the extent that it was completely taken for granted that Fr Rua would succeed Don Bosco. Yet here was Fr Rua continuing to consider himself simply as nothing more than his Vicar. He wasn’t aware of any formal decree appointing him as vicar with right of succession. Don Bosco had never made any reference, spoken or written, to such a decree. There were only letters from Archbishop Alimonda to that effect. In any case, in his thinking, such an arrangement in no way excluded the possibility of a normal election by a general chapter, so he questioned Archbishop Alimonda about it. Though the archbishop was quite certain of the outcome, he advised Fr Rua to get in touch with Rome. On 8 February, then, he wrote to Leo XIII describing the situation as he saw it: “Very Holy Father, knowing my own weakness and inability, I find myself compelled to ask you humbly to kindly give your wise thought to this matter, and to grant the undersigned a dispensation from the difficult responsibility of Rector Major. I assure you, however, that with the Lord’s help, I shall continue with all my heart to make my own humble contribution for the good of our Pious Society, come what may.”² The members of the Superior Chapter, meanwhile, took a different view. The following day, they sent a joint letter to the Cardinal Protector of the Congregation, Parocchi, putting forward strong reasons for confirming Fr Rua in the role of Rector Major. They assured him that the whole Congregation would not just humbly submit: they would find it a cause of great, heartfelt joy. Consequently, they begged him to refer the matter to the Holy Father.³

This letter helped to quieten rumours from those in Rome who were predicting the inevitable collapse of Don Bosco’s whole enterprise. Certain members of the curia thought that the Salesians had no men capable of saving the congregation: the only solution would be to dissolve it and to incorporate the members into a society with similar aims. These concerns had reached the ear of Leo XIII, enough to make even him consider such a radical step. This Pope didn’t know Fr Rua well enough, having met him only once in May 1887. His modest and almost ingenuous manner had masked the intellectual qualities needed in a successor to Don Bosco. It was providential that Bishop Emilian Manacorda, Bishop of Fossano, who was very taken by Don Bosco and his work, was in Rome just then. He was fully acquainted with the Roman curia, since it was there that his own career began. As soon as he got wind of the danger, he leapt in to dissipate the doubts and banish the fears, assuring them that men of quality were not lacking among the Salesians. They could have complete confidence in the future of their

¹ I have adapted here the pages Don Ceria devoted to this problem in 1949 in his *Vita del Servo di Dio*, p. 136-139, starting from the notes gathered about the circular signed by Mgr Cagliero and the superior chapter dated 7 March 1888. These are found in *Lettere circolari di Fr Rua*, p. 6-16.

² Letter of Fr Rua in FdR 3912 B1-4.

³ L.C., p. 11-13.

Congregation. The letter from the superior chapter arrived in the midst of all this, and was read with interest, all the more so since the first signatory was Bishop John Cagliero. Cardinal Parocchi lost no time in speaking to the Pope. Returning from the audience, he wrote straight away to Cagliero to tell him the good news: “Delighted to have obtained from His Holiness the granting of the just request presented by your Excellency and your worthy confreres, I cannot delay in passing on to you, Monsignor, this happy news. Praised be Jesus Christ!” There and then he sent him the decree in Latin naming Fr Rua as the Rector Major for twelve years, beginning from 11 February 1888. It contained just one reservation: the procedure was valid for this one occasion only, and could not constitute a precedent.⁴ With the issue of this document it came light, as Fr Rua himself could confirm, that there had been an earlier decree, dated 27 November 1884, at the time, therefore, of his nomination as vicar general. What had become of it? It remains a mystery.

Audience with Leo XIII

The second week of February saw Fr Rua in Rome once again. As a past pupil of the de La Salle Brothers' Schools, he was there for the Beatification of Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, and had the opportunity to see Leo XIII. His first concern was to begin the cause for the Canonisation of Don Bosco. The reputation for sanctity that had accompanied Don Bosco during his lifetime, had become a matter of popular acclaim at the time of his illness and following his death. Within twenty four hours of his burial at Valsalice, Fr Rua, who believed wholeheartedly in his sanctity, set to work. He brought together his superior chapter to examine the prospects of promoting his cause in the near future. Then at Rome, among the members of the curia he met, was the promoter of the faith, Bishop Caprara, who was able to tell him how to proceed without delay with Don Bosco's cause. He learned that he must begin by gathering all available documentation on miracles and favours obtained through his intercession. He would entrust that to Fr Bonetti.⁵ On 28 February at a meeting of the superior chapter, Bonetti would be asked to draw up an appropriate format for logging all the relevant facts and virtues of Don Bosco, and to initiate the questioning of first hand witnesses.⁶

The Pope received Fr Rua in a private audience in the morning of 21 February, and a lengthy account of their conversation was sent to all the Salesians on 19 March along with a circular letter. The first major point the Pope made was the need to moderate the extension of the society, so as to avoid repeating the sad experience of some other congregations who set up centres with a personnel of two or three and later suffered the pain of having to withdraw. There followed a series of lessons from the Pope on the ascetic formation to be given to novices. Fr Rua would have to be vigilant, taking great care to ensure that only people of tested virtue were kept, and for this he must have novitiates with a strict regime. “Are you Salesians insisting on that sort of novitiate?” “And if so, how long does it last?” asked the Pope, who must have been well aware of the liberties Don Bosco took in this area. “Yes, Holy Father,” replied Fr Rua. “For candidates to the priesthood, our novitiate lasts for one year, and for brother candidates, two years.”

⁴ Document signed by Cardinal L. M. Parocchi, in L.C., p. 14-15.

⁵ Letter Rua-Bonetti, 20 February 1888, FdR 3859 E5-7.

⁶ FdR 4240 D8.

“That’s fine,” replied the Pope, “but recommend to those in charge of them to ensure that novices undergo a radical change. They enter sullied with the dross of their former life, and so they need to be cleansed of all that and renewed in the ways of abnegation, obedience, humility, simplicity and the other virtues necessary for religious life. At the novitiate, therefore, the main concern, I would even say the only concern must be each one’s personal perfection. If they don’t show any improvement, have no hesitation in sending them away. It’s better to have one less, than to have people devoid of the spirit and virtues of religious life.”⁷ Ten years earlier Archbishop Gastaldi could well have used the same language about the spiritual formation of Salesians. Unlike his benign predecessor, this Pope had no intention of allowing Fr Rua any bending of rules; he was taking a different stance regarding the formation of the *ascritti* (novices) as they were known. A novitiate is not a college or youth centre, but an institution with a specific identity. Leo XIII emphasised the more passive virtues required in someone who wants to live as a religious. Fr Rua was a man of order and discipline, and wanted nothing more than to apply the lessons that came from a higher authority. Under his leadership, well-regulated Salesian novitiates abounded, and the number of *ascritti* to be found in schools, receiving patchy formation from often ill-prepared Rectors, was correspondingly reduced.

It will be seen that these recommendations of the Pope – if in fact they were such as Fr Rua reported them – tally in some degree with what the new Rector Major had to say in his circular to Rectors on 8 February. He too asked the Salesians to exercise restraint, but for financial reasons. He foresaw the possible financial burden the society could have to carry resulting from property law. He also gave warnings to the Rectors, drawing on guidelines left by Don Bosco: “Building work must be suspended; no new houses to be opened (implying that no new initiatives should go ahead in existing houses that would demand extra personnel or large expenditure); no new debts to be incurred; care to be taken, however, to cover all property dues, to eliminate any *laissez faire* attitude, and to make up personnel requirements in existing houses.” He ended dryly: “Let these be the norm, without qualification, for all Salesians.”⁸

His first letter as rector major was dated 19 March, the feast of St Joseph. Understandably, it didn’t reflect any of these preoccupations. Two thoughts were uppermost in his mind at the start of his mandate: promoting the cause of Don Bosco, and fidelity to his example. He wrote that when he was in Rome, Cardinal Parocchi had exhorted him, and insisted strongly: “I urge you to promote Don Bosco’s cause.” As one familiar with procedures for the canonisation process, Fr Rua urged all his confreres to write down anything of importance that they knew about his life, his cardinal, theological and moral virtues, and his supernatural gifts: cures, prophecies, visions and the like.

The submissions were to be sent to John Bonetti in his capacity as general spiritual director, whose task was to put them together as a basis for the introduction of the cause. Fr Rua warned the witnesses that they might eventually be asked to confirm their declarations by oath. It was therefore in their own interest to be totally accurate. It was not until the 2nd June 1890 that Fr Rua would promulgate the decree naming John Bonetti as postulator of the cause.⁹

⁷ L. C., p. 20-24.

⁸ L.C., p. 5.

⁹ Document in MB XIX, p. 398.

Fr Rua was convinced that the Salesians should consider themselves blessed to be the sons of such a father as Bosco. They should be eager to support and, when appropriate, to develop more and more the works that he had begun, to follow his methods and teachings faithfully, and even in their way of speaking and acting “to imitate the model whom the Lord in his goodness had given them in him.” Fr Rua declared solemnly: “My beloved sons, such will be the programme I will follow as long as I hold this office; such too should be the aim and concern of each Salesian.”¹⁰ He would rank as among the great trials of his life the modifications imposed upon him by Rome that challenged his absolute fidelity to the tradition of Don Bosco.

The Salesian Family: Don Bosco’s Heritage

As Rector Major Fr Rua inherited from Don Bosco a tree with several branches, to cultivate and nurture: in short, a true religious family, comprising the Society of St Francis de Sales, known as Salesians, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators.

The statistics of the Salesian Society at that time showed that there were in all 56 houses, and listed 768 perpetually professed (of whom 301 were priests), 95 temporarily professed, 276 *ascritti* (novices) and 281 aspirants (postulants). Apart from the oratory in Valdocco and three houses of formation in Piedmont, the other 52 houses were grouped into 6 religious inspectorates (provinces), named according to their geographical location: Piedmont, Liguria, Rome, France, Argentina, Uruguay/Brasil. The houses in Spain, England and Austria were still attached to the Rome province.

Don Bosco had left his religious sons a spiritual testament which merits repetition here, all the more so since it was Fr Rua first and foremost who had to bear it in mind.

My dear and beloved Sons in Jesus Christ,

Before leaving this world for eternity I wish to fulfil a duty towards you and so satisfy an ardent desire of my heart. First of all, I thank you with the most ardent affection of my soul for the obedience you have given me, and for all you have done to sustain and propagate our Congregation.

I leave you here on earth, but only for a short time. I hope the infinite mercy of God will enable us all to meet one day in Heaven. There I await you. Do not grieve over my death. This is a debt we must all pay; but afterwards, every fatigue sustained for the love of our Master, the good Jesus, will be greatly rewarded. Instead of weeping, make firm and efficacious resolutions to remain staunch in your vocation until death. Watch, so that neither the love of the world, nor the affection of parents, nor the desire of a more agreeable life induce you to make the great mistake of profaning the sacred vows, and so transgressing the religious profession by which you are consecrated to God. Let none of us take back that which we have given to God. If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions.

Your first Rector is dead. But our true Superior, Jesus Christ, will never die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model. But remember that he, in his own time, will

¹⁰ L.C., p. 18-19.

also be our judge and the rewarder of our faithfulness in His service. Your Rector is dead. But there will be another elected, who will have care of you and of your eternal salvation. Listen to him, love him, obey him, pray for him as you have done for me. Adieu, dear children, adieu. I wait for you in Heaven. There we shall speak of God, of Mary, the Mother and support of our Congregation; there we shall bless eternally this our Congregation, the observance of whose rules will have powerfully and efficaciously contributed to our salvation.¹¹

In accordance with the wishes of Don Bosco, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was totally integrated with the Society of St Francis of Sales. By virtue of their constitutions, the Salesian Rector Major was their Superior General, and their constitutions were to some extent based on those of the Salesians. Their apostolic work for girls was to mirror what the Salesians did for boys. For ten years they had already been working in South America. By that time they had 390 professed sisters and 100 novices, with a total of forty nine houses: thirty five in Italy, four in France, one in Spain, six in Argentina, three in Uruguay. Four of these – Turin, Trecastagni in Sicily, Almagro in Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Villa Colon in Montivideo (Uruguay) - were provincial houses. The Generalate at Nizza Monferrato and the house at Almagro both had a novitiate.

The Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators had been set up by Don Bosco in 1874 and was recognised by Pope Pius IX in 1876. Don Bosco had been prevented by the Roman authorities from integrating into his religious society lay members who would live outside the community and observe the constitutions according to their circumstances. This was how he had envisaged it in one of the most controversial chapters of the constitutions. Consequently he composed a rule specifically for them. They were in his mind a kind of third order whose primary aim was their own personal holiness, not so much through prayer, as through practical charity towards the young. Naturally, these Cooperators gave him massive help in his work, and this led to much confusion over the years, equating Cooperators with benefactors. Even Don Bosco contributed to it as he numbered among his Cooperators all those who subscribed to the *Bollettino salesiano*. This confusion was apparent in the months following Don Bosco's death through a so-called "letter/testament" intended for the Cooperators. It was published as an eight-page pamphlet, accompanied by a circular from Fr Rua, dated 23 April 1888, and sent out to subscribers to the *Bollettino salesiano*.¹² The actual editor was John Bonetti, whose mistaken understand was apparent from the opening words, as he addressed it to "My good Cooperators".¹³

It must be emphasised that in Don Bosco's vision the Pious Union he founded would be essentially one that reached out to others. According to the 1876 version of its rule: "The basic aim of the Salesian Cooperators is to seek their own good through a way of life that resembles as much as possible that of the community." Don Bosco's mind was clear. He would say elsewhere: "Many good Christians, wishing to seek perfection and

¹¹ *Memorie from 1841...*, éd. F. Motto, 1985, p. 30-32.

¹² FdR 3993 B7-C4.

¹³ After reproducing it without comment in 1937 in *Memorie biografiche* XVIII, p. 621-623, as having been found among Don Bosco's papers after his death, Fr Ceria would acknowledge 20 years later in a note in his *Epsitolario* IV, p. 393, that this apocryphal item was the work of John Bonetti, editor of the *Bollettino*.

achieve salvation, would willingly leave the world behind so as to avoid the dangers of falling from grace, to find peace of heart, and spend their life in solitude and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. But not all are called to that state. Many are prevented by age, by circumstances, or poor health, and a great many are just not called to that way of life. In order to respond to such a desire, we offer the pious association of St Francis of Sales".¹⁴ Faithful to the original concept of his chapter *De externis* in the early constitutions, Don Bosco made his Cooperators 'religious in the world'. However, these fine distinctions eluded those around Fr Rua when he took on the leadership of the Salesian family. They would come up again, as we shall see, at the Cooperators' Congress in Boulogne.

At that time Cooperators were numbered in their thousands in Italy and France. Many clergy had also joined, together with lay people from all walks of life: nobility, middle class, working families, tradesmen and country folk. The association was open to both men and women. Fr Ceria described the Cooperators as the *longa manus* of the congregation in the midst of society. Fr Rua would call on the help of the Cooperators themselves in an attempt to organise them well; but in his vision, they constituted nothing more than an army of devout benefactors, and it would take another two generations to get back to the original concept of Don Bosco of a Salesian third order.

For this great gathering of people, but most of all for the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Fr Rua sought to be an authentic, loving father in the way that Don Bosco had been. Hadn't he, after all, whispered in his ear on his death bed: "Make yourself loved"? He walked wisely in the footsteps of his spiritual master, whose image would shadow him throughout his years in office – just one challenge among many others. He forbade that anything should be touched in the room where Don Bosco died: the furniture had to stay exactly as it was. He set up his own office in the little room nearby where Don Bosco received visitors during the latter part of his life. He allowed just one change there: a divan was brought in that a brother would make into a humble bed for his nightly rest.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Cooperatori salesiani...*, Albenga, 1876, § III.

¹⁵ E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 148.

15 – Years of Apprenticeship (1888-1892)

In the footsteps of Don Bosco

Don Bosco lived on in Turin, in minds and hearts, so the words of Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda rang true when he delivered a funeral oration for him in the church of Mary Help of Christians on 1 March 1888, thirty days after his death. “God didn’t give us a heart just to weep,” he declared. “He gave us a heart, a mind, an imagination with which to soothe our sorrow with comforting balm. He has given us a wonderful power, that of holding once again in our thoughts, in our imagination and in our affection, the image of those who are no longer with us: the power to bring them to life and clothe them anew, as if before our very eyes. And so I want to see the friend, the benefactor, the Father I knew; I want to see and to speak with Don Bosco...] I don’t know why, but in snatching him away from us, in hiding him from our sight, death has bathed him in radiant light. I shall look upon him now with greater esteem than ever, but always with the same heartfelt love.”¹ If there was one who, more than all others, felt the closeness of this radiant presence of Don Bosco, it was Fr Rua himself, who begged him never to abandon him.

Fr Rua sought to be another Don Bosco. For several months he regularly held the meetings of his Superior Chapter in the very room where Don Bosco had died. His guiding spirit was among them, as his successor wanted it. The authority of his unseen presence would direct the choices they made there. There was for sure a marked difference of temperament in the new leader. People approached the gaunt, ascetic Fr Rua with less ease than they had done with the ever-affable Don Bosco. All the same, the master’s advice, repeated on his deathbed, “Make yourself loved!” would always be in his mind, and to good effect. People were not disappointed in him: Fr Rua was never a man to get carried away with righteous anger or to raise his voice in untimely outbursts. He could settle differences – and there were many – with such calm as never to offend those who disagreed with him.

Every year the days of 23 and 24 June, the feast of St John the Baptist, would recall to mind especially to the past pupils the traditional feasts in honour of their father and master. It was decided to carry on the tradition as a joint celebration honouring his successor Michael Rua as well. Understandably this was out of the question in 1888, the year of mourning; but 1889 was a different story. On 22 June, in joyful preparation for the feast, the chapel at Valsalice containing Don Bosco’s casket was inaugurated with an estimated gathering of 2000 people. This was a chapel that meant so much to Fr Rua; he celebrated the first mass there at five o’clock the following morning. The past pupils of “The Salesian Oratory” had an attractive booklet printed “to honour the memory of the revered Fr John Bosco and our much loved Fr Michael Rua, 24 June 1889.”² A splendid celebration took place at the Valdocco Oratory over the two days: addresses were given on the 23rd and an academy comprising music and literary compositions on the 24th. Significant reminders of these festive days are to be found in the following: an

¹ G. Alimonda, *Jean Bosco et son siècle*, translated from the Italian, Nice, Imprimerie salésienne du Patronage St Pierre, 1888, p. 5-6.

² Turin, T0.00alesiana, 1889, 24 p., FdR 2766 A7-B6.

album printed by the past pupils;³ a spiritual bouquet of “communions and visits [to the Blessed Sacrament] from the pupils at La Spezia for their beloved father Fr Rua, 1888-89”;⁴ a 16-page album “to Fr Michael Rua, from his sons at Alassio”, with signatures of teachers, pupils and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians;⁵ lastly, and of special interest, a large printed sheet entitled: “Homage of filial affection and gratitude to Fr Michael Rua, 23 June 1889, annual day of festivities in honour of Fr John Bosco” with twelve verses of a hymn composed for the occasion and signed J.B.L., namely John Baptist Lemoyne, who would pen a poem on special occasions. The ascetic Fr Rua, who was set on remaining faithful to the example of Don Bosco, was deeply touched by several of the verses.⁶

Dry your tears,
Cease your lament.
Let the melodies of yesteryear
Be heard on the harp.
Sound once more
The joyous notes of love.
Don Bosco lives on,
He dies no more.

Rejoice, young one.
The doors of his faraway place
Are open wide.

In this house
He lives on in the one who leads us
The one God gave to you
Sharing with you
The best of himself.

To you, then, our leader
And now our Father
Our hearts lift up
In song:

For we have with us still
The spirit and the heart
Of our dear Don Bosco.

His is the smile
That lights up your face
His, too, the kindly word

³ FdR 2766 D9-10.

⁴ FdR 2758 B8-C4.

⁵ FdR 2758 C5-D8.

⁶ FdR 2758 B6-7.

That falls from your lips
And reaches the soul.
And his the gaze
That lights an ardent flame
In the depths of my spirit..

The tradition would go on: 23 and 24 June would remain a joint festivity to honour Don Bosco and Fr Rua. Though never carried away by the eulogies he received on these occasions, Fr Rua had good reason to believe that he was following the right path, that of his father and master.

The Burden of debts

After Don Bosco's death, gifts of money went down drastically. On the occasion of a retreat in the summer of 1888 Fr Rua explained to the rectors that such gifts had dropped by fifty per cent. Don Bosco had the secret of loosening purse strings; his successor would have to make every effort to do as he did in this area as in all others. Fr Ceria put a figure of around 600.000 lire on the debts owing at the Salesian centre in Turin – an enormous sum for the congregation. Economy had to be the order of the day. As we know, in his first circular letter the day after Don Bosco's death, Fr Rua had instructed rectors that all building works had to be suspended, no new houses were to be opened, no new debts incurred, and great care was to be taken “to cover all property dues, to eliminate any *laissez faire* attitude, and to make up personnel requirements in existing houses.”⁷ On 10 March 1888 a printed circular from Fr Rua was sent to Cooperators and benefactors, begging for aid to meet the needs of millions of unfortunate people throughout the world.⁸

At the centre of the Congregation there were accumulated debts to be paid off for the construction of the *Sacro Cuore* (Sacred Heart) church in Rome. The man on the spot, Fr Dalmazzo, had been compelled through lack of funds to suspend all work on the hostel so much desired by Don Bosco. In addition there were the missionary expeditions on 11 March, again on 30 October, and preparations were afoot for the great departure of 7 January 1889, that would mobilise thirty Salesians and twenty Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. These ventures called for enormous expenditure.

In order to finance the hostel in Rome, the “Pia Opera del Sacro Cuore” (Pious Work of the Sacred Heart) was set up. Furthermore, Fr Rua learned the art of begging. We see this in January 1889, at the end of the first letter he sent to offer a ‘strenna’. Like Don Bosco he had given an account of recent undertakings and future projects, and after a long paragraph on “charity” as “an efficacious means to support them, he offered his Cooperators three practical suggestions: “1. Each day, each week or each month, put something aside to support our work. ... 2. From time to time, make some sacrifice or some saving for this purpose: you could for example do without some trip, some pleasure, some new article of clothing, or dine more simply, etc. ... 3. To anyone wishing to leave some of his possessions to a work of charity, I offer this advice: do it while you are still alive; it may mean you will give less, but you will have the certainty

⁷Circular of 8February 1888, L.C., p. 3-5.

⁸ FdR 3993 B5-6.

of seeing that your wishes have been carried out..”⁹

Towards the end of 1891 Fr Rua was shocked, when out of the blue, the fiscal office of Turin informed him that, as title owner of the houses in Italy belonging to the Salesian Society or the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians he was personally in receipt of a tax demand for 322,500 lire. This was just the beginning of an on-going dispute. With the assistance of the lawyer Charles Bianchetti, he made an appeal to the city authorities. A series of judgements ensued, first from the Turin court, then the appeal court, and finally the Supreme Court of Appeal, all from within Turin itself. But like Don Bosco in this sort of business, he wouldn't be beaten and had recourse to the Supreme Court in Rome. At the same time, without neglecting to do all that was humanly possible, he recommended this whole affair to the prayers of the confreres. His personal secretary, Angelo Lago, was related to the then head of government John Giolitti (1842 – 1928). Fr Rua therefore had him give a full, updated account of the issue to the minister of state. Giolitti referred it to the Supreme Court for their opinion. They gave a free hand to their president, who ordered the fiscal office to halt their offensive treatment of Fr Rua. Some short time later the president was in Turin and made a point of inviting Fr Rua to call on him and personally informing him of the final outcome of the dispute. The Rector Major, who never had money to spare, found immense consolation in that.¹⁰

The Issue of Church Studies

Church studies of philosophy and theology had certainly not been a high priority for Don Bosco, who had unhappy memories of those he once had to endure himself at the seminary in Chieri. Speculative arguments used to put him to sleep, he was heard to say, referring to Rosmini. In reality, he was interested only in the pastoral practice of the sacrament of penance, biblical study and Church history, subjects which were neglected in the seminaries of that time. The level of knowledge in philosophy and theology among the Salesians was therefore wide open to criticism. Don Bosco had to pray hard before adding a chapter on studies to his Constitutions. With the exception of Fr Piscetta, who specialised in moral theology, the men of letters around Fr Rua – Francesia, Celestine Durando, John Cagliero, Lemoyne and, of course, Barberis – were well versed in the arts and literature, but were certainly not philosophers or theologians. The most competent in those disciplines would seem to be Francis Cerruti, who soon found himself appointed as councillor for studies.

Pope Leo XIII was not unaware of this inadequate situation. The day after the death of Don Bosco, he spoke to Mgr Manacorda of his wish to see an intellectual revival in the Salesian Society through the training of men in the speculative sciences. The minutes of the Superior Chapter for 21 August 1888 show that a suggestion was made to send some confreres to the Gregorian University in Rome. Fr Rua acted on this without delay and enrolled two deacons, James Giuganino and Angelo Festa, for the next scholastic year. They would each be given a room in the hostel at *Sacro Cuore*. The following 29 January Fr Rua devoted a short, succinct circular letter to the rectors

⁹ «Lettre de l'abbé Michel Rua aux coopérateurs salésiens», *Bulletin salésien*, January 1889, p.7-9.

¹⁰ Testimony of Melchior Marocco, *Positio super virtutibus*, 1947, p. 513-514; taken word for word from E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 211.

dealing exclusively with the study of theology in their respective houses.¹¹

This issue of church studies would dominate the general chapter in Valsalice in September 1889. To understand the background to the discussions, it's important to be aware of the situation at that time, which in due course would be remedied. There were by then in the Salesian Society scholasticates of philosophy where clerics attended courses given by qualified teachers. However, on completion of such a course, clerics went on immediately to study theology, and in the absence of scholasticates for this discipline, their formation depended on the random availability of suitable resources in the houses they were sent to. A few privileged ones went to the Gregorian; others attended courses in a diocesan seminary. Wherever it was possible to gather a certain number together from neighbouring houses, such as the Turin Oratory, Valsalice, Marseilles or Buenos Aires, lessons were organised for them with professors from within the Congregation or from outside. In the case of isolated houses, which were becoming more and more numerous, the teaching was left to such priests as were available locally. The rule required that, whatever their situation, clerics should take examinations two or three times a year (the third one in the event of courses being done during the holidays); the examiners were to be designated either by the General Councillor for Studies or by the respective Provincial. As a final remark, we must observe that the theology studied was based, not so much on the lectures received, as on a manual of theology, the contents of which had to be memorised.

The first session of the General Chapter held on 3 September 1889 looked at the following issue: "The study of theology and philosophy. Is it time to change the text books (manuals)? What should replace them? What improvements can be introduced for the study of philosophy, theology and biblical hermeneutics." The aim from the start was the setting up of true scholasticates of theology, and in the meantime to make improvements to the current situation. So much depended on the choice of manuals. The commission set up under the presidency of Francis Cerruti discussed the *Compendium theologiae* by John Perrone which they considered to be quite difficult, then the manual of moral theology by Del Vecchio, which they quickly settled for. They found it impossible to reach an agreement on the substitute they all felt was needed for Perrone. The issue was passed over to the Superior Chapter, but no solution was reached until the following 24 October when it was proposed that three authors should be tried in the course of the scholastic year: Sala at the Oratory, Hurter at Valsalice and Schoupe at Marseilles. In the end it was the *Medulla Theologiae Dogmaticae* (The essence of dogmatic theology) by Hugo Hurter (1832-1914) that won the day. This *Medulla* was itself a reduced version a *Theologiae dogmaticae compendium* (3 vol., Innsbruck, 176-1878), namely a digest of dogmatic theology which had been rapidly adopted in the seminaries because of its wide-ranging documentation, its clarity, and its sensitive link with pastoral ministry.

The *Medulla*, a single-volume digest, was manageable by Salesian students of average ability, who often had to cope on their own with theses of little interest to them. An indication of the concern felt in this area is a circular to provincials from the Prefect General Belmonte, dated 28 January 1891, containing a request from Fr Rua for an exact list of houses which had no theology course.¹² Again towards the end of 1891, in a

¹¹ L.C., p. 30-31.

¹² FdR 4064 B10-C1.

series of “norms for provincials”, we find Fr Rua declaring that “in certain colleges courses in theology and liturgy” were “seriously neglected”. “Make sure”, he told them, “that such courses are always provided, and are given the importance they deserve.”¹³ In fact, in the majority of cases, young Salesian clerics were imbibing lessons through sheer hard work, with little benefit to themselves, and with deplorable consequences. This comes out in a circular from Fr Rua to Rectors on the study of theology: at examinations, he said, students showed “inadequate understanding” of the theses studied, and consequently were unable to give “clear and precise” answers.¹⁴ The training of students in theology would be a constant source of concern for Fr Rua, who counted on the efficient help of the councillor for studies, Fr Francis Cerruti, as we see from the collection of his circular letters and teaching programmes covering the years 1885 to 1917, published by José Manuel Prellezo (Rome, LAS, 2006).

Literary studies

The Salesian world, male and female, consisted mainly of classroom teachers. In a circular to Salesians on literary studies dated 27 December 1889, Fr Rua consistently used Don Bosco as his point of reference. Quite serious differences had arisen among the Salesian teaching personnel in Italy regarding the education system and the Latin classics. Fr Rua recalled the (prudent) involvement of Don Bosco in the dispute that broke out forty years earlier between the Abbé Gaume and Mgr Dupanloup. It was a dispute stirred up by Louis Veuillot after the publication of the Abbé’s book *Le Ver rongeur ou le paganisme dans l’éducation (1852) (The Canker or paganism in education)* which he said was poisoning young people’s minds through the Latin and Greek classics. Even Pope Pius IX had felt compelled to get involved. Rather than denigrate the Christian Latin authors, such as St Jerome, Don Bosco had encouraged his Salesians to speak highly of their undeniable qualities; and since the classics had to be studied, he had set about editing a selection of profane authors, duly expurgated of all that could be offensive. If we are to be faithful to Don Bosco, Fr Rua instructed, let us be united in applying his principles. The profane classical authors are necessary to teach us the elegance of the Latin language, but the Christian Latin authors are also necessary because they are vehicles of truth. Teachers must learn to hold the writings of the Fathers of the Church in high regard.

There was argument, too, about the Italian language: some wanted to hold on to the classical style, whilst others wanted to become familiar with and express themselves in the language of modern authors. Here again Fr Rua’s point of reference was Don Bosco, who had studied the Italian classics in some depth, and even in his old age could still recite long passages from Dante. But not everything in classical literature is suitable for young people. He therefore brought out a *Biblioteca dei classici italiani*, duly selected and expurgated accordingly. Anyone who put these works into the hands of young people in their entirety would certainly be going against the wishes of Don Bosco.

He had found out to his sorrow that some of the houses had introduced modern authors, well known for their hatred of religion and their scorn for the most common rules of morality. At the Superior Chapter on 21 September 1888, it was considered

¹³ See L.C., p. 70.

¹⁴ Circular of 29 January 1889, L. C., p. 30.

deplorable that works by Carducci and Leopardi had been introduced at the novitiate.¹⁵ “How distressed Don Bosco would be,” exclaimed Fr Rua, “to learn such things!”, he who, at the beginning of each school year, so as to eliminate all undesirable literature, would demand from every boy a list of the books he had brought with him. The Rector Major’s final thought was a caution against public fault-finding. No teacher should indulge in openly criticising a colleague for his teaching method or subject matter. He should speak to him face to face or ask some good friend to say a word. His last words were: “Let charity and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ reign in our hearts at all times.”¹⁶

Ten years later, on 6 January 1890, he sent a similar, printed circular letter, this time for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, his “Care Figlie in G.C.” (dear daughters in Jesus Christ). He wanted to protect them from the serious dangers which, in his opinion, threatened the Sisters and their pupils, both boarders and day pupils. He was convinced that the flood of undesirable newspapers and even worse novels constituted one of the worst plagues of modern society. These harmful publications had spread far and wide, in towns and villages and even into the heart of the countryside, in bookshops, kiosks and railway stations. Once again his point of reference was Don Bosco as he suggested how to deal with a scourge of this kind. As one well acquainted with Italian literature he was fully aware of its pitfalls, and for that reason he had expurgated editions published in his ‘Library of Italian classics for use by young people’. His practical advice was that, in the classroom, the teacher should never quote from an undesirable book, or even worse, speak in praise of it; better, where necessary, to highlight sound doctrine so as to forestall any harm from it. In general, one should provide the antidote to offensive publications by recommending good reading, such as the *Catholic Readings*. His lengthy letter went on to offer advice for teachers and catechists, similar to what he gave to the Salesians, touching especially on the following: never handle children roughly, never humiliate them, look out especially for the neediest, and finally, come what may, avoid passing judgement on each other. His letter filled four well-presented pages.¹⁷ Fr Rua, from the outset, was embodying a kind of intellectual magisterium in his task as Rector Major of the two Congregations.

Towards a wise leadership

Provincials and Rectors formed an indispensable link between the Rector Major and the confreres. From the time of the first general chapter in 1889 Fr Rua was offering them pieces of advice, recorded as fully as possible by the secretary. In their apparent simplicity they illustrate his own thoughts on good governance of the society.

“The Rectors,” he told them, “are a kind of beacon for their community: *constitui te in lumen gentium* [I have made you a light for the nations]. The confreres observe everything about their Rector, down to the smallest detail – the way he speaks to them, how he treats them or relaxes with them... I know from my own experience. He must be mindful of them, and see that they too accept the need to be a good witness to others in everything they do. They should celebrate Mass and pray the breviary *pie, attente ac devote*; in short, let them be exemplary as regards the practices of piety. I would remind

¹⁵ *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore*, FdR 4240 E7.

¹⁶ «Studi letterarii», 27 December 1889, L. C. p. 35-44.

¹⁷ Turin, Tipografia salesiana, FdR 3987 D3-5.

you of the first of the confidential recommendations Don Bosco left for Rectors: *Niente ti turbi* [Let nothing trouble you]. It was a principle of St Teresa and St Francis of Sales. In that way we can have a serene mind in making judgements and decisions regarding the community and whatever else lies within our responsibility. Always be even-tempered: it's so necessary, and so much good comes from it. It inspires confidence, and wins the hearts of the confreres. Rectors must lead the way by their spirit of work. I know they already do a great deal, and I can only thank the Lord for that. *Deo Gratias*. At the same time they must be careful not to want to do everything themselves. Rather, they must share the work with others. It's the secret of success. In a workshop, if the head works on his own, he works with his own two hands: if he shares out the work, he's working with the hands of all. If a Rector takes on a job outside the house which prevents him fulfilling the one he has in the house, he must let go of it. He will see that the Prefect's books are in order, take note of how the Catechist's work is being done, and check on the running of the workshops. When he is not constrained by his own workload, he is better able to guide others. That is how Don Bosco always wanted it to be, especially where there are young clerics coming from their study of philosophy; he is then well able to meet the needs of his community.¹⁸

Who could fail to see, in this image of the Rector, that of the Rector Major Fr Rua wished to be in the midst of his Superior Chapter? That he stood out by the example of his work and spirit of prayer, no one could argue. Fr Rua was a spiritual beacon for his close helpers, and he showed discernment in allotting tasks to others.

Following the death of Fr Bonetti in 1891 and the appointment of Paul Albera in 1892, the Superior Chapter took on a more stable shape. By 1893 its membership was made up of the following: Dominic Belmonte, Prefect; Paul Albera, Spiritual Director; Anthony Sala, Administrator (*economus*); Francis Cerruti, Councillor for Studies; Joseph Lazzaro, Councillor for Technical Schools; Celestine Durando, Councillor (in effect, this councillor without portfolio was Provincial of a unique [*sui generis*] province known as 'All Saints', which comprised the houses scattered across Switzerland, Spain, England, Poland, and eventually Africa and Asia); finally, John Baptist Lemoyne, Secretary. Co-opted onto the chapter proper, were Giulio Barberis, Novice Director, Caesar Cagliero, Procurator General in Rome, and John Marengo, Vicar General for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The Rector Major kept himself informed about the work of each chapter member, but was careful not to encroach upon his area of responsibility, as could be seen in his relations with Fr Cerruti, Fr Durando and Fr Barberis. In this he showed himself to be a faithful disciple of Don Bosco who, though it is often forgotten, wanted there to be at the head of his society not a president surrounded by a 'council' of ministers, but a 'superior chapter', namely, a collegial body whose president would be simply a *primus inter pares*.

An example of this comes from 25 May 1888, when the Superior Chapter debated a proposal of Fr Alberione to hand over his printing press to the Salesians, which would involve printing the *Osservatore Cattolico*. Fr Rua was inclined to accept. Cagliero opposed it: he reminded them that Don Bosco would have nothing to do with the printing of a newspaper. The Chapter went with Cagliero's view. If the Congregation was to expand and consolidate under Fr Rua as Rector Major, it would be due in no

¹⁸ FdR 3973 B10-11.

small measure to his personal drive and the wisdom of his collegial form of leadership.

He held reins of power with a sure hand. We see this in the early months of his rector-ship when he issued 'Norms' for Provincials and Rectors on 'using the book of privileges' (8 June 1888),¹⁹ and on 'administrative accounts' (29 November 1888),²⁰ likewise in the requirement for provincials, issued through his Prefect General Belmonte, to make a yearly visit to each house around December/January, to clarify what each confrere owned, and to get each Salesian who had reached the age of majority to draw up a last will and testament, a copy of which should be sent to Turin.²¹ These rules, undoubtedly compiled with the help of his 'Superior Chapter', were duly signed and authorised by the Rector Major.

¹⁹ Intervention reproduced in *Annali* II, p. 40-41.

²⁰ L. C., p. 25-29.

²¹ Belmonte circular to provincials, 23rd November 1889. FdR 4064 B2.

16 – Daily Life of the Rector Major at Valdocco

Fr Rua the Confessor¹

Fr Rua's day began as a rule with the community meditation, at half past five in winter time and five o'clock in summer, after which he would take his place in the confessional in the former sacristy. There were other confessors in the church, but almost all the confreres and, according to Fr Ceria, the majority of the apprentices and students, who attended one of the two Masses that followed, went to him. Confessions would go on until eight o'clock when he himself celebrated Mass.

At the canonisation process some of his former penitents spoke of their experience. He was discreet in his questioning, brief and concise in the advice he gave. He would make references to the saint of the day or the current liturgical celebration. Often he would recall advice given previously, in this way providing continuity. Two testimonies to his spiritual direction were given at the diocesan process. One of these came from Fr Rigoli, parish priest of Somma Lombardo: "I often made my confession to him. I confided in him totally, as did many of my companions. As I think back to the direction he gave, with my own experience now, I can say that it was truly enlightened and from a priest totally given to God."² The other testimony was given by professor Peter Gribaudo: "He inspired great confidence; so much so that, in spite of his apparent strictness, you could make your confession to him with untroubled mind. Once, when I felt the need to make a general confession, I again went to him and came away deeply consoled."³ At the apostolic process, the Salesian Melchior Marocco made the following deposition: "He was my spiritual director for ten years, and I always found him to be a man of admirable kindness, discerning, wise and holy." For Fr Rua, the ministry of the confessional was of the highest importance, and when he was engaged in it he would not allow any interruption whatever. One day, when he was hearing confessions, someone came to tell him that a distinguished person wanted to see him: he replied bluntly that no matter who wanted to see him, he must never be called away from the confessional.

As for himself, on one of the weekdays, after hearing the confession of Fr John Baptist Francesia, he would change places, kneel down and make his own confession there and then, in full view of all those who were waiting their turn. During his journeys, when his day for confession came round, he would ask a Salesian confessor to oblige. One or other would be rather bashful and try to make himself scarce, but Fr Rua, with dignity and firmness, would tell him there was no need to stand on ceremony.

Receiving visitors

Once the confessions were over and he had celebrated Mass, he would retire to his

¹ To describe the daily life of the Rector Major in Valdocco, I follow very closely the chapter by Fr Ceria on his "daily and periodic occupations" (*Vita del Servo di Dio*, p. 198-206). This reliable historian speaks as a well-informed witness, and is, I believe, trustworthy as he makes his observations. Unfortunately his text, and therefore ours too, is generally lacking in precise references, which, in certain cases is very regrettable.

² *Positio* 1935, *Summarium super dubio*, p. 134.

³ *Positio* 1935, *Summarium super dubio*, p. 257.

study and be available to receive visitors until mid-day, welcoming anyone who wanted to speak to him. It could be some eminent person, sometimes a Salesian or a religious sister, a married couple, often a benefactor, but also and quite often some ordinary, poor man or woman. One could be seeking advice, another comfort, and yet another looking for help. His empathy with the sufferings of others was reflected in his face. He could listen patiently to interminable stories, knowing that he was allowing those in distress to find some comfort in sharing their troubles. He could be visibly moved by the misfortune of others. Many whom his secretaries had seen come in looking pensive, worried and sad, came out again with joy in their eyes. These comings and goings could go on without break for up to three hours. Fr Rua's lively faith and ardent love gave his words the power to change hearts. Fr Ceria read a testimony from a Salesian priest who was scrupulous and often in need of a kind word of support; he wrote: "My pen can't truly express, as I would dearly wish, the delicate attention I received from this holy and faithful servant of God, in order to tell with what exquisite and sensitive love his heart was filled in reaching out to the least of his sons." A good, and somewhat ingenuous soul was heard to exclaim: "If it is so sweet to converse with saints, how sweet it will be to come face to face with God."

His letters

Fr Rua wrote extensively. The files in the Salesian archives in Rome, which contain only a small section of his correspondence, list for example, from January to December 1889, a total of 42 letters signed by him to Cesare (Caesar) Cagliero, his Procurator in Rome. His correspondence, which up to now is still inadequately collated and studied, reveals a characteristic aspect of his system of governance. As Rector Major, he kept up his custom of maintaining personal relationships with his confreres without distinction. As long as the Congregation numbered only a few dozen members, such links were easily kept. When they began to approach a thousand, however, personal contacts were more problematic. At the time of Don Bosco's death they were still less than nine hundred. Nevertheless, as Rector Major Fr Rua tried to keep up personal contact when numbers went over the thousand, and even the two thousand mark. Not content with maintaining contact with the congregation by means of circulars, albeit with a fatherly concern for all, he would have loved to cultivate the same intimacy with each one, even those he didn't really know, through direct or indirect individual communications. All knew that they could feel free to write to him, in the certainty that he would not fail to reply. They would write about their needs, real or imaginary; one would pour out his troubles, another would make a request. Should there be some who seemed to want to be overlooked, Fr Rua would break the ice by inviting them to let him know what news they had.

Such an abundant personal correspondence, in addition to business matters, meant that every day saw a great number of letters arrive on his desk. In spite of his poor eyesight, he read them all carefully, and either replied personally or had a reply sent as each case demanded. All this required time and availability. To meet this, between three o'clock and half past five in the evening, he would go to the home of a benefactor where he wouldn't be disturbed, and there he would deal with all the most urgent business. People who accommodated him were only too happy to put a room at his disposal where he could do his writing in peace. Often these two hours or so were not enough, and he would have to continue his correspondence late into the night.

You don't have to read many of his letters in order to recognise his rather unadorned style. A considerable percentage of them are in fact the work of secretaries, who were not intent, any more than he was, on making them into literary masterpieces. A serious study of them would have to bear that in mind. Whilst in his letters you don't see any more of the terse style from his years as prefect general, neither, on the other hand, do you expect any epistolary work of art. Fr Ceria is right in saying that you will look in vain for gems of imagination or some originality of ideas or presentation. Personal letters were done hastily, and for reasons of economy, were often written on scraps of paper. And yet one is inclined to endorse the opinion of his kind biographer, who admired their calm character, and the kindness, the simple, unpretentious openness of heart, the warmth and frankness that flow in them. They were thought-provoking and moving for those who received them. Fr Ceria is correct in saying that here was "the language of the heart".

I take the liberty of including here a translation of two signed letters which I find significant; one is from the early days of his time as Rector Major, the other from towards the end. The first is a reply, dated 5 June 1892, to Fr Louis Cartier (1860-1945), Rector of the community in Nice. A sprinkling of humour – perhaps unintended – about the "blessing" of medals by Don Bosco, four years after his death, gives it a little sparkle.

Very dear Fr Cartier,

I am replying to your letter dated 24 May. 1. I am sending you twelve medals blessed by the Holy Father as requested. These are the only ones I had left. Send them to the lady who asked for ones blessed by Don Bosco, and tell her that they were placed on his bed. 2. I haven't been able to read the article about the Oratory of St Joseph, but I hope all goes well. 3. As to the [chaplaincy of] the Visitation, you could try Fr Canepa [Catechist at the *Patronage St Pierre*]. Who knows whether a move could be good for him? 4. I hope that your feast of Mary Help of Christians went well. I wish you every blessing, whilst I remain yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary. Michael Rua, priest.⁴

The second example is his reply, dated 7 March 1907, to a letter from Anthony Aime (1861-1921) Provincial of Bogota in Colombia, and as courageous a missionary as you could find.

Very dear Fr Aime,

The good news you gave me of the cure of our dear confrere is very consoling. May Mary Help of Christians complete the good work by restoring him to full health, if that is for the good of his soul and for the good of others. - In your letter of 27 January you remarked on the inappropriateness of certain articles being published in the *Bollettino* of November and December. It was felt that this was in order, given that the content of these articles came almost exclusively from information published in your own country, and probably on the order, or with the consent of the government. Seeing that you have now written to me about it, we need speak no more about it. – You asked me for three priests. But where can we find them? Many more have been asked for from various places. But

⁴ FdR 3879 C11.

we have to give the same answer to all: we can't send them; we don't have them. – Take courage, and try to make a fire with your own wood. At the same time, cut back on your involvement to match your resources. In the meantime I shall not fail keep you in my prayers. Yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary. – Michael Rua, priest.⁵

In every case Fr Rua showed concern for the spiritual welfare of the one he was writing to. If some religious festival was drawing near, he wouldn't fail to mention it. He showed special sensitivity for his correspondents on their patronal feast or birthday. He had to deal with some strange requests. A cleric in Ecuador asked for a dozen manuals for the teaching of plain chant; Fr Rua had them sent off by return of post. Fr Trione, writing from the college at Randazzo, in Sicily, had a request for the coming feast of the Rector, Peter Guidazio (1841-1902): the text of a hymn to go with music already written! Fr Rua immediately got someone to write verses and had them sent in time for the feast.⁶ There are some gems of fatherly care. Michael Borghino (1855-1929) a young Rector in Uruguay, preached to his confreres about the mild and gentle way of St Francis of Sales and St John Bosco, but had a well-founded reputation for behaving very differently himself. One day he received a small parcel from Turin: the address was evidently in Fr Rua's handwriting. He opened it and found a small pot of honey with a short note which read: "Here you are, Fr Borghino: take a spoonful of honey every morning. Fr Rua." Fr Borghino would become an enterprising superior, and, all things considered, a good Salesian.

Fr Rua's replies to confreres show a deep level of understand for each one. A bad-tempered one who had overstepped the mark was gently made to see the errors of his ways by a compassionate father. He had at times, as Fr Ceria points out, to deal with bizarre people who would write pages of nonsense, convinced they were explaining gospel truths. Many would have taken one look at them and thrown into the waste-paper basket. Not Fr Rua. For him this was a case of a sickness to be treated as such. A sick person may be considered a nuisance, but the doctor attends to him all the same. After Fr Rua's death, says Fr Ceria, one hundred and fifteen letters were found from a mentally sick Salesian priest who wrote endless, trivial observations, as if they were of the matters of immense gravity. Fr Rua sent a painstaking reply to every single one. Fifty six of these replies have survived; the other fifty nine have been given as a gifts to people wishing to have something written by the hand of this saintly man. They could end up in the hands of anyone at all; but, as his biographer says, the candour, kindness and detachment of their contents would forestall any suspicion of the mental state of the one they were sent to.

There was exactness in his replies. He would give the precise date of the letter he was responding to, then get down to the details, showing that he had fully understood the contents. In short, his letters, though simple and without adornments, are a witness to his fatherly goodness and his genuine spirituality, implied rather than explicit. "To anyone who knew him," concludes Fr Ceria, "they reveal the qualities and virtues that were his."

⁵ FdR 3836 B4-5.

⁶ During the Fr Rua's time as Rector Major, Fr Peter Guidazio (1841-1902) was Rector at Randazzo from 1889 until his death in 1902.

Annual celebrations

In his own house in Turin, Fr Rua was centre stage in all the various celebrations throughout the year. From 1868 onwards, as Prefect of the Oratory, then Prefect General, he had taken part each 24 May alongside Don Bosco for the celebrations in honour of Mary Help of Christians. Now as Rector Major it fell to him to preside at them. As we know, from 1889 onwards, on 23 and 24 June Valdocco honoured both Don Bosco and Fr Rua. As far as he was able, he presided at the Oratory prize-giving on the feast of the Assumption, and he would not miss speaking to the pupils in the church before they set out for their holidays. He did his best to maintain contact with the young people in the house, and whilst he didn't have direct responsibility for them, he made the most of every opportunity to be seen with them both in church and outside. They all knew that they could approach him as often as they wanted. He was happy to be around with them during the after-dinner recreation, and as a rule would speak to the students from the senior classes once a week.

He had exceptional pressures to face from mid-August until early October: this was the time for the Retreats for the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. For the Sisters it was enough for him to put in an appearance and, at most, preside at the closure of the retreat. For the Salesians it was a different matter: at each Retreat he had to be there for the whole time. He had to be entirely at the disposal of the retreatants, who always came in large numbers to Valsalice and Borgo San Martino. Once he had celebrated Mass – always on his own in those days – he would hear confessions for several hours, before and after dinner. This placed a great strain on him, and sometimes he would faint whilst hearing confessions, but as soon as he came round again he would go straight back into the confessional. In the course of a day he would receive anyone who wanted to speak to him. Most of the confreres wouldn't want to end the Retreat without seeing him personally, so at any time there would always be several of them waiting outside his door. He would spend the so-called 'moderate' recreations after lunch chatting with those around him, and every night, after prayers, he would give the Good night, a short, interesting talk. Finally, at the closure of the Retreat, he would deliver the sermon, offering some recommendations. This two month period sapped his physical energy; but when someone remarked on this, his reply was: "These are my harvests." As Fr Ceria would say, the harvests went on for the whole season.

His biographer ends his chapter with some general observations about the delicate issue of the nomination of Provincials and Rectors. When Fr Rua had to appoint a rector or provincial, or a new member of his Superior Chapter, he didn't go for someone he liked, but for a confrere who was observant, one who was faithful to the Constitutions and the Salesian traditions. Then he would pray and consult individually with each member of his Chapter. Generally, the outcome would prove to be appropriate. Must we fully endorse the view of Giulio Barberis, given at the informative process for Canonisation, when he declared: "I do not recall any serious complaints in this area; on the contrary, we have to admire the fact everyone willingly accepted his decisions"⁷ Not at all. I say this from my own knowledge of the disturbing consequences of the appointment in France, from 1904, of Fr Peter Perrot and Fr Joseph Bologna, which we shall speak about later. All the same, on close observation, we see that in every difficult case the Rector Major did his utmost to mitigate problems arising from decisions made

⁷ *Positio* 1935; *Summarium super dubio*, p. 377.

in consultation with his Superior Chapter.

To sum up, in the house at Valdocco, with those around him, with the many strangers who came to visit him, and for the young people in the school, the austere, saintly Fr Rua was always the kindest of fathers, totally forgetful of himself, all things to all men, as his master Don Bosco would have wanted to see him, were he still alive.

17 – Exploring the Salesian world in Europe

Italy

1888 was a year of mourning following Don Bosco's death, and for the most part Fr Rua remained in Turin. The following year, however, he started a gradual visit of all the Salesian houses in Europe, beginning naturally with Italy.¹

With the help of Fr Ceria, we shall group these Italian visits, made in the first few years of his time in office, endeavouring to highlight the salient features. Starting in 1889 and running into 1890, he made contact with the northern houses. We find him first of all in the summer of 1889 from 31 May to 5 June, preaching the retreat to the Salesians at Nizza Monferrato, then at Sampierdarena near Genoa on the Ligurian coast, and finally at the important college at Alassio. It was here that at the end of his visit he was presented with an album, signed by all the pupils and teachers. The album opened with a very moving address for a man whose main concern was to walk in the way of his master Don Bosco. It declared: "Beloved father, thanks to your visit, we have spent three days of happiness. Through your presence and your words we have experienced pure joy and spiritual enthusiasm. We make bold to say that we have had among us, not the successor of Don Bosco, but Don Bosco himself. We thank you from the bottom of our heart."² On 25 June Fr Rua was at Borgo San Martino for the feast of St Aloysius Gonzaga. Whilst he was there, the Salesian Sisters in a neighbouring house asked him to come and give a blessing to a sister in their infirmary who had been given up by the doctors. Fr Rua simply asked them to join him in praying three Hail Marys at her bedside for her recovery, and at the 'good night', he recommended the pupils to do the same before going to bed. Meanwhile the sister fell asleep. The following day the doctor could detect nothing more in her condition than extreme weakness. This news prompted Fr Rua to rejoice at the power of Mary's intercession. As for the Sister in question, Philomena Bozzo, the Sisters would call her 'Fr Rua's miracle'. She died twenty-five years later on 22 May 1914, when she was the head of a college at Damas, in Syria.³

On 13 July we find Fr Rua at Faenza, in Emilia, a pretty little town, but a place where anticlericals were giving the Salesians at the local college a hard time. He had come to bless the college chapel and he was full of admiration for the support the Cooperators were giving to the community. His visit became a three-day celebration. On the final evening, after his farewell talk, it took more than an hour for him to move away from the crowd of people, all wanting to get close to him. Some wanted a blessing or a piece of advice, others just wanted to hear a word from him, kiss his hand or touch his clothes. Fr Lazzerio wrote about it to Fr Cagliari: "To sum up, they were doing nothing less than they did for our beloved father, Don Bosco".⁴ Fr Rua went on to visit the houses in Florence and Lucca, and came back to Turin in time to attend to the retreats for the Salesians and the Sisters, as well as the meeting of the superior chapter at Valsalice from 2 to 7 September.

¹ For Fr Rua's journeys from 1889 to 1892, see Lazzerio's agenda, FdR 3001 A11 to 3002 A7, quoted here; and E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio*, p. 163-222.

² According to E. Ceria, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

³ According to E. Ceria, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁴ Quoted in E. Ceria, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

In January 1890 he went as far as Rome, where the building of the home (hostel) at the *Sacro Cuore* was dragging out. He was there by the 13th and was expecting an invitation from Leo XIII to a private audience.⁵ This took place on the 22nd when the Pope received him along with Fr Caesar Cagliariero and Fr Lazzaro. We can imagine his joy when he heard the Pope say: “The work undertaken by the saintly Don Bosco was blessed during his life-time, and will continue to be protected now that he is dead.” He expressed his interest in Salesian work in missionary countries, especially Colombia, and he gave his blessing for the coming projects in Africa and Asia, continents where they had not yet set foot. “We can have peace of mind,” Fr Rua would write in his circular of 1 February, “if we get requests for missionaries in these regions, because this mission has come from the vicar of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore from God himself.” As they spoke about the parish of the *Sacro Cuore*, the Pope exclaimed: “Be courageous. Carry on your work. We’ve seen that whenever we go ahead in spite of the problems of our times, people are not slow to respond, and it’s to their benefit.” Fr Rua got back to Turin on the 25th, visiting en route the work at La Spezia, where he gave a very fruitful conference to Cooperators in the church of *San Siro* at Genoa. As a newspaper reported on 28 January: “With the love of a father and the compassion of a brother, he recommended the care and protection of marginalised children.”⁶

In April/May 1891, Fr Rua completed his tour of Salesian work in the north of Italy, firstly by visiting the Italian-speaking centres of Trent (then part of Austria/Hungary) and of Mendrisio (in the Swiss canton of Tessin). [After some hesitation, Don Bosco had agreed to take on the management of the municipal college at Mendrisio.] At Trent, the Salesians had taken charge of an orphanage attached to a local foundation that had an article in its regulations prohibiting the acceptance of orphans from outside the city. In his conference to Cooperators Fr Rua told them that only a short time ago, the Salesians had found an eleven-year-old boy perished with cold and had taken him in straight away. The poor lad was from Trent. He’d been abandoned by his older brother and was begging at the door of a hotel. God knows where he would have ended up if safe Salesian hands hadn’t rescued him. His audience were very moved by this story. So much so, that the one who had most vehemently defended the controversial article came to regret it, and the article was removed.⁷ At Mendrisio Fr Rua was impressed by the high standard of the Sunday oratory, and the excellent way it was run. The following 12 May he informed his superior chapter that at Mendrisio “the Salesians are highly thought of by all the public authorities and politicians, principally because of this Sunday oratory”.⁸ During his term of office, Fr Rua was the apostle of the festive oratory throughout the Salesian world. The oratory, for him, was the preferred way with the young, much more so than colleges and schools.

In April 1891, after a brief stay in Turin, he was on the road again, this time for Venice where, to his great satisfaction, he was able to take part in a solemn high mass sung entirely in Gregorian chant by the pupils of the college at Manfredini de Este. Such

⁵ Accounts of this audience in circulars of Fr Rua to Salesian Rectors, 1 February 1890, FdR 3978 D3-6, and to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, 2 February 1890, FdR 3987 D6-7.

⁶ Quoted in E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 171.

⁷ According to E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 173-174.

⁸ Minutes of the Chapter, 12 May 1891.

an experience couldn't fail to give him enormous pleasure. In a circular of the previous 1 November he had recalled Don Bosco's preference for the chant, and the fact that he had invited Bishop Cagliari to devise a programme for teaching it. He was aware, as he wrote in the circular, that "in many Catholic countries these days, the chant is studied assiduously, and that in colleges of high repute, apart from other music, young people are being trained in Gregorian chant."⁹ It made him happy to see that this was true of the college at Este.

From there went down to Emilia Romagna, heading for Bologna, Imola and Faenza, from where he made his way north again to Parma. He was delighted to see the progress made in the various Salesian centres, not least in Parma, thanks to the efforts of the genial Fr Charles Baratta (1861 – 19100), since this was a region where a shameless anticlerical lay movement was riding high.

It was not until January, February and March of 1892 that Fr Rua would visit the Salesian centres in southern Italy.¹⁰ In mid-January, along with Fr Francesia, he was in Rome where Leo XIII kindly granted him an audience and asked him for news about "his dear Salesians".¹¹ Fr Rua would report that in the eyes of the Pope "Don Bosco has a high standing before God, the Church and people everywhere". It prompted Fr Rua to exclaim: "Happy are we to belong to a school with so spiritually-gifted, and so holy a master!"¹² From Rome he went south to Naples, took a boat for Palermo, in Sicily, where he met some Cooperators, and then moved on to Marsala. For some time there had been negotiations afoot for the Salesians to take over an orphanage there: Fr Rua was able to finalise the arrangements. At Catania he had the satisfaction of seeing the high esteem in which the Salesian daily oratory was held. He found it well attended and full of life. Crowds of young people came running to him as to an old friend, and he could see that they were very fond of the young Rector of the oratory, Francis Piccollo (1861-1930). The college at Randazzo, the first Salesian foundation in Sicily, had gone through a time of crisis from 1885 to 1889, following the transfer of its Rector and founder, Fr Francis Guidazio, but now that Fr Guidazio was back again, it was returning to its former vitality. Fr Rua didn't overlook the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. On the contrary, he visited their centres in Catania, Bronte, Trecastagni, Mascali and Ali Marina. At this last-mentioned, he received a particularly enthusiastic welcome. As soon as they knew that Fr Rua was about to arrive, the oratory children ran to the station to give him a rousing reception, then they escorted and cheered him all the way back to the oratory for what the *Salesian Bulletin* called a little "concert of music and recitations". Back once more in Calabria on the mainland, he passed through Taranto and Bari and on to Macerata to visit a newly- opened Salesian college. In an autobiography that remained unpublished, Fr Francesia wrote of this college: "The house had been open only a short time but was full to overflowing, a sort of Salesian 'Noah's Ark', with students, apprentices and oratory boys, kept afloat simply by love."¹³ Fr Rua made a prayerful pilgrimage to Loreto, where he visited the 'holy house' of Mary, and from there headed for Venice, with short stops at Ancona and Rimini, setting foot again in Piedmont at Novara. Here, the local bishop had built a magnificent oratory

⁹ Circular letters, 1 November 1890; L. C., p. 50-51.

¹⁰ E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 212-216; «Don Rua en Sicile», *Bulletin salésien*, April 1892, p.51-53.

¹¹ According to the report of Fr Rua to his superiour chapter, the following 9 March

¹² Letter, Rua to Costamagna, Marsala, 2 February 1892. FdR 3891 D5-8.

¹³ According to E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 215.

for the Salesians, destined to be the springboard for an outstanding and successful Salesian presence. When Fr Rua finally touched base in Turin on 8 March, sadly no one was expecting him, since there hadn't been any advanced notice of his arrival. It must have been a great joy for him, however, to have done a complete tour of Salesian work throughout the peninsula and its island dependency.

Fr Rua in the south of France

In the meantime, between February and May 1890, Fr Rua had already completed other excursions that took him to France, Spain, England and Belgium.¹⁴ He was little known, if at all, in these countries, whilst the memory of Don Bosco was still very much alive. On 27 January of that year he was back in Turin following a trip that had taken him as far as Rome. On 4 February he was on the move again, this time making for France via San Pier d'Arena.¹⁵

The first French house to benefit from the presence of Fr Rua was naturally that of Nice, founded by Don Bosco fifteen years previously, marking the expansion of Salesian work beyond Italy.¹⁶ Its title of 'Patronage Saint-Pierre' shouldn't deceive us: Nice didn't have a Salesian 'patronage' in the usual sense of the word. Its boarding school, like the Turin oratory, was made up of two sections, one for students, and the other for apprentices. How Fr Rua spent the time during his visit is well documented in the house chronicle. This will obviate too much repetition in describing similar situations.

It was eight o'clock in the evening of Saturday 8 February, a wintry evening, and night had long since fallen. The entrance and courtyard of the Patronage Saint-Pierre were lit up and decked with bunting in expectation. Fr Rua appeared, and music and cheers broke out in a joyous welcome for the successor of Don Bosco. *Vive Don Rua! Vive Don Rua!* We can take up the opening lines of the welcome address given by one of the boys (written by Fr Cartier), which must have resonated fully with Fr Rua's own feelings. Was it not his aim, after all, to be in every regard another Don Bosco? It began: "You come to us today, my beloved Father, and finding again in you the soul, the spirit and the heart of the one we lost, or rather finding everything of him in you, our eyes see the light, and we feel in our inmost being that our Father, our Master is not dead as long as we can say: Is not our heart burning with love when his voice sounds in our ears?" Deeply moved by this, Fr Rua replied in these terms: "The memory of Don Bosco evokes deep sorrow in me; at the same time, it rightly calls to mind all that our revered father did, and all that we ourselves must do. Don Bosco is now in heaven, and already, on many occasions, we have felt the benefit of his help. He encouraged you to love me just as you loved him; to be obedient to me as you were to him. If you follow his advice, you will make my task light and easy: and that, as you know, consists in doing whatever is for the good for souls."

The following day, Sunday 9 February, the community was celebrating the feast

¹⁴ Interesting presentation, E. Ceria, *Vita*, p. 179-197.

¹⁵ According to the agenda of Fr Lazzero, working as secretary, typed copy, FdR 3001 E5-6.

¹⁶ On Fr Rua at Nice, see lengthy account in *Bulletin salésien*, February 1890, p. 25-29 et avril 1890, p. 44-45

of St Francis de Sales. From half past six in the morning Fr Rua was in the confessional besieged by confreres, then by the youngsters, since everyone thought it a blessing to make their confession to Fr Rua. He only left the confessional to celebrate the community mass at half past seven. The Cooperators had been invited to their regular conference following vespers in the church of Our Lady at three o'clock, and there Fr Rua addressed them in the presence of the Bishop of Nice. In his 'charity sermon' as it was described in the religious weekly, he asked his congregation to support the Sunday patronages, orphanages and educational establishments, and finally the missions. Fr Rua was not ashamed to beg, any more than Don Bosco had been, since all these projects made great demands on resources and it was only thanks to the generosity of the Cooperators that they could be kept up.¹⁷ On Monday 10 February two groups who regularly supported the house in Nice were invited to a talk from Fr Rua: they were the "Committee for the promotion of the workshops of the Patronage" and the "Ladies Patronesses". There was an almost full attendance from both. Fr Rua commended them for all the work they had done for the house, but he felt compelled to express at some length his regret that, alongside the patronage for boys, both residential and external, there was not a similar patronage for girls under the care of Salesian Sisters. "Don Bosco", he told them, would be delighted with all the good that you do to help young workers. But there are still many more children in need of help." It was only if their needs were met that the Salesian work in Nice could be considered complete in the eyes of Don Bosco.¹⁸ The week was taken up with visits to Cooperators and the Catholic Circle, receptions, words of advice to confreres, and lengthy periods in the confessional. Monday 17 February, Fr Rua's last full day with them, brought this memorable visit to a happy conclusion with games and a stage performance. The next day was to be *mardi gras*, which would explain why a rather tearful Fr Rua, in his farewell good night to the boys, recommended that they should all "offer their prayers and communions for the souls in purgatory, so that on a day that would be profaned by the unworthy behaviour of many, they would bring some joy and comfort to the souls of the just still detained in purgatory."¹⁹

On Tuesday the 18th, whilst the youngsters in Nice were having their exercise for a happy death and preparing to celebrate the carnival, Fr Rua was making his way to the house in La Navarre, not far from Nice, from where he made a lightning visit to Toulon to deliver an hour-long conference in the principal church of *Sainte Marie*, and to visit a few Cooperators.²⁰ On the 19th there had been a welcome gathering in the course of which the "compagnies" [sodalities] and boys from the various classes read addresses in his honour. On Saturday 22 February, it was their turn to have the exercise for a happy death. Fr Rua made himself available for confessions, "the best pedagogy", he said, quoting Don Bosco. At ten o'clock precisely, reports the chronicle, and with the authorisation of the bishop, he proceeded to baptise two protestant orphans rescued in Toulon by the Rector, Peter Perrot. Soon after lunch, retracing his steps towards Nice, he made for Cannes where Don Bosco had made many friends. There, on the Sunday afternoon, he was able to deliver a "charity sermon" in the church of Notre-Dame du Bon Voyage, speaking about Don Bosco, his apostolic work, and his Cooperators. His

¹⁷ According to *Bulletin salésien*, article quoted, p. 26.

¹⁸ Talks in *Bulletin salésien*, article quoted p. 27-28.

¹⁹ *Bulletin salésien*, article quoted, p. 45.

²⁰ On Fr Rua at la Navarre, Toulon, Cannes and Marseilles, *Bulletin salésien*, April 1890, p. 45-51.

appeal prompted a very generous response (2000 francs in the reckoning of Fr Lazzero). He spent five days in Cannes, visiting benefactors and religious communities. On Wednesday the 26th, he went on to St Cyr sur Mer to visit the St Isidore orphanage run by the Salesian Sisters, where he was welcomed by the chaplain Fr Anthony Variara.²¹ On the 27th he gave a conference to the local Cooperators, dined with the Count de Villeneuve along with local clergy, and in the course of the afternoon made himself available for the Sisters.

On 28 February, the oratory of Saint-Leon in Marseilles received a telegram at one o'clock in the afternoon announcing the arrival of Fr Rua that very evening. He would, in fact, spend a whole week there, the same length of time as he had spent at the Saint-Pierre Patronage in Nice, since here was the Provincial house, with Fr Paul Albera the Provincial. Not that Saint-Leon would have him all to themselves. He would spend two days (there is some discrepancy of dates between the *Bulletin* and Fr Lazzaro's chronicle) – Wednesday 5 and Sunday 9 March – in the novitiate house, known as La Providence, in the Sainte-Marguerite suburb of Marseilles. There he found thirty French Salesian novices, who celebrated his arrival with a beautiful "academy", after which he interviewed all those who had asked to be professed or to put on the religious habit. He showed an interest, too, in the adjoining farm and countryside.²² The 7th and 8th were also taken up with visits: to the Parish Priest of Aubagne, and to the Count de Villeneuve at Roquefort –both of whom had a strong personal attachment to Don Bosco. At Saint-Leon itself Fr Rua received visitors, heard confessions of both confreres and boys, spoke with patrons both male and female, and gave two very lengthy good nights to the boys, one encouraging them to approach the sacraments, the other on devotion to St Joseph. Of particular importance was the substantial conference he gave to Cooperators on 6 March in which he praised the work of the Sunday oratories (or patronages). He told them: "The impact they have is very consoling. In one town where our Salesians recently opened a patronage, the area where they set up used to have a very bad reputation. No self-respecting person could pass through the place without being set upon by youths hurling stones and mud at them. Six months later, it had changed beyond recognition. I've seen for myself that these same youngsters have not only learned self respect, but are now polite and respectful of others." He enlarged also on missionary work among "savages".²³

²¹ The chronicle of the *Bulletin salésien* is silent on Fr Rua à St Cyr. Brief information in the agenda of the secretary, Lazzero, for that date

²² According to Lazzero's agenda for that date.

²³ Edited talk with the title: «Conférence des Coopérateurs salésiens», *Bulletin salésien*, April 1890, p. 49-50.

Fr Rua in Spain

In the evening of Monday 10 March, Fr Rua and Fr Giulio Barberis left Marseilles for Spain. For Fr Rua this was a return visit, just four years after his memorable journey alongside Don Bosco in 1886.²⁴ He would visit two Salesian centres: Sarrià, in Barcelona, and Utrera in the Seville region. As these were at a great distance from each other, it would involve long, tedious journeys on modest means of transport.

On 11 March, after a whole night on the train, he arrived to a magnificent welcome in the station at Barcelona. Later in the morning he was able to celebrate Mass in the private chapel of the benefactor *Doña* Dorothy Chopitea, after which he lost no time in going to greet the bishop, who showed him “extraordinary kindness” (Barberis). By four o’clock in the afternoon he had finally arrived in Sarrià, where he would spend over a week, from the 11th to the 20th precisely. His arrival was greeted with instrumental music, songs and cheers. The playground was decked out, and there were lights all round the arcades and up to the first floor. Don Bosco himself had never been greeted with such magnificence in an establishment that was still quite new. “The people of Barcelona paid great honour to Fr Rua, seeing him as truly a second Don Bosco”, wrote Giulio Barberis to Louis Piscetta on 15 March.²⁵

His days were taken up receiving visitors, and especially calling on benefactors, notably Fr Louis Martí-Codolar. A fitting climax to his stay in Barcelona came on 18 March with the official inauguration of a new development in a particularly poor suburb. *Doña* Chopitea had financed a whole new complex, comprising a school and a Sunday oratory, entrusting to the Salesians the mission of teaching and providing pastoral care for the whole area. The building was blessed by the bishop and all gathered in a large hall for a formal address, tributes, poems and musical items much to the credit of the youngsters of Sarrià. We get an idea of the event from the *Correo Catalan* which devoted a whole article to it. There we read: “Beneath a rich canopy erected for his Excellency the Bishop, was a beautiful portrait of Don Bosco; seated on either side of the bishop, who presided at the ceremony, were the Very Reverend Fr Rua, Superior General of the Salesian Congregation, the Vicar general of the diocese and the President of the Catholic Associations”.²⁶ Fr Rua’s visit was brought to a close on the 19th at Sarrià, when he joined the whole community to celebrate the feast of St Joseph, a devotion dear to his heart, and to attend a theatrical production put on by the young people.

The following day, the two travellers began their journey to the second Salesian house in Spain, Utrera,²⁷ going via Madrid and Seville. Writing to Fr Piscetta, Fr Barberis began his rather poetic description of this journey with these words: “Above all, I have to begin by telling you that this journey from Barcelona to Utrera is long, very long, longer even than from Turin to Barcelona. I must add that here in Spain the

²⁴ Information on this journey to Spain in the letters of Fr Barberis FdR 3002 A8 & ff. and «Don Rua en Espagne», *Bulletin salésien*, June 1890, p. 73-75.

²⁵ FdR 3002 B9.

²⁶ According to the article quoted in the *Bulletin salésien*, June 1890, p. 73-74.

²⁷Tr. note: we are informed that in fact Utrera was the first Salesian work in Spain (1881). Sarrià-Barcelona was the second.

trains are not very fast, and there are very few direct ones, so that the journey seems even longer.²⁸ *Doña Chopitea* had actually purchased first class tickets for them, but the reality was that, leaving Barcelona at eight o'clock in the morning, they reached Madrid at the same time the next morning, still only half way to their destination. Fr Rua had been uncomfortable and not able to sleep during the night, and so was extremely tired. Undismayed, however, as soon as they left the train in Madrid, and since they wouldn't be leaving again until the evening, their first aim was to celebrate Mass. In the event, Fr Rua celebrated in the private chapel of a rich benefactor, whilst Fr Barberis found a small church nearby. In the course of the day they made some important calls: firstly on the cardinal of Seville, who happened to be in Madrid, then the Bishop of Madrid, the Apostolic Nuncio, and the Vicar General of the diocese.

The overnight journey by train from Madrid to Seville would take thirteen hours. They left on 21 March therefore, at half past six in the evening, and arrived in Seville at half past seven in the morning. In spite of the discomfort, Fr Rua did manage to catch some sleep. Once in Seville, their first concern again was the Mass, celebrated probably in the cathedral, which Fr Barberis described as "one of the wonders of the world". Several hundred workers were engaged in restoration work, he remarked. After a visit to the Alhambra²⁹, and calls on a few benefactors, they were on the train again, this time for Utrera, a small town with a population of about twenty thousand. This final lap of the journey took "not more than three quarters of an hour, reported Barberis.³⁰

As could be expected, they were given a magnificent welcome in the station at Utrera, where the Salesian presence was much appreciated. If we are to believe a letter of Fr Barberis written on 25 March, twenty cars were at the ready to transport Fr Rua, the two local parish priests, the mayor, the 'praetor', the Chapter of the Salesian house, all the other local priests, various dignitaries and a few friends. All wanted to "make the acquaintance of the successor of Don Bosco, and by honouring him, to give honour to Don Bosco himself," he tells us. They made a fine motorcade as they made their way to the Salesian house. Barberis was so charmed by the exuberance of the Andalusian youngsters that he exclaimed: "Utrera! Utrera! Never shall I forget you."³¹ As soon as the main gate opened, one hundred and thirty youngsters, all lined up with their Salesian assistants, began shouting: 'Evviva!' They clapped and strained their eyes to catch sight of the one they had been waiting so eagerly to see, and they sang a hymn of welcome for him. This was a house that had been open for ten years and had never had a visit from a superior, so the presence of Fr Rua was a great boost for the confreres. On the 23rd, all the youngsters wanted to make their confession to Fr Rua, who, unlike Fr Barberis, had sufficient knowledge of Spanish to get along.

On the Sunday evening here was a splendid academy with music and literary items. Fr Barberis, and almost certainly Fr Rua too, was greatly impressed by what he saw as "Catholic Spain". He wrote: "The Andalusian can't speak without singing the praises of his Saint Hermenegild, Saint Ferdinand, Saint Isidore, and without recalling

²⁸ FdR 3002 B12-C1.

²⁹Tr. note: We are informed that L'Alhanbra is in fact in Granada. The error most likely comes from Barberis, the source, who may have written "Alambra". H eshould have written Alcazar or even La Giralda, the belltower of the cathedral where they celebrated Mass.

³⁰ FdR 3002 C5-6 et 8.

³¹ FdR 3002 C6.

the period of Moorish domination which was only brought to an end through the help of Mary. Several compositions dwelt on these themes.”³²

Fr Rua took the opportunity whilst he was there to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Consolation, patroness of Utrera and of the whole of Andalusia. He also made visits to the mayor, the Archpriest and to two or three families of benefactors. On the 24th he gave a conference to Cooperators. “His simple, sincere words touched the hearts of all” reported the *Salesian Bulletin*, with the result that the altar-boy who took up the collection had difficulty holding the plate laden with the money they had given.³³ Finally, on the evening of the 25th, the two travellers were all set for the return journey to Turin. They would do it again in stages, hoping to arrive back on the 30th, in the early morning of Palm Sunday. They were coming home full of admiration for “Catholic Spain”, for the generosity of the Cooperators, and the attachment to Don Bosco they had found there.

Fr Rua in Lyons and Paris

Fr Rua spent two weeks of prayer and reflection with his council, and although he felt a pressing need to go to Battersea, in England, where the new venture was getting off to a shaky start, he decided first of all to make two brief visits to Lyons and Paris,³⁴ accompanied by Fr Louis Roussin, editor of the French edition of the *Salesian Bulletin*.³⁵ He left Turin in the morning of 14 April and was met at the station in Lyons by the Quisard family who welcomed him into their home. The following day, he celebrated Mass with the Poor Clare nuns in rue Sala, close to the place where St Francis of Sales had died. This last detail meant much for Fr Rua, who had a great regard for relics of saints. He then began a round of visits such as pressure of time would permit, in particular to the Vicar General M. Belmont (in the absence of Cardinal Archbishop Foulon) and to the office of the ‘Organisation for the Propagation of the Faith’, which supported the Salesian missions in South America. Bishop Cagliari, Vicar Apostolic in Patagonia, and Bishop Fagnano, Prefect Apostolic in Tierra del Fuego, who had been informed beforehand of Fr Rua’s visit, both sent their greetings and good wishes to the organisation. The Secretary General showed Fr Rua several artefacts from the missions which were kept in a glass case. On the 16th he climbed the hill of Fourvière, where building work was in progress for the large basilica which would soon become the pride of the city, and he celebrated Mass in the historic chapel where Don Bosco had also been in 1883. The publication *L’Echo de Fourvière* spoke favourably of Fr Rua’s whole approach: “He habitually depends on Divine Providence to provide the daily bread for a hundred thousand children rescued from misery, and on the courageous ranks of missionaries who take the good news of the gospel to the far-off regions of Patagonia. – Fr Rua ranks alongside his late master by his zeal, his gentleness, and above all his vibrant faith which moves mountains.”³⁶ In the evening he

³² Barberis, FdR 3002 C12.

³³ Barberis, FdR 3002 D2-3.

³⁴ Stages minutely reported in the *Bulletin salésien*, June 1890, p. 76-79.

³⁵ The presence of Fr Roussin with Fr Rua is indicated in a letter of his to Fr Durando, London, 21 April 1890; FdR 3897 A4.

³⁶ *L’Echo de Fourvière*, 19 April 1890, according to the *Bulletin salésien*, article quoted, p. 77.

left Lyons, taking the night train for Paris, where he intended to spend just two days, knowing that he would be back for a longer stay after his return from England.

He devoted the whole day of 17 April to the small boarding school set up at Paris-Ménilmontant, close to the oratory which was the true cradle of this work. He was given a rapturous welcome, and to his great satisfaction the Mass he celebrated that morning was accompanied by Gregorian chant sung by the boys. In the afternoon the same boys treated him to a homely concert. Although small, the oratory of Sts Peter and Paul was quite evidently full of life. The following day was spent almost entirely away from the house. In the morning he was with the Benedictine Nuns of the Blessed Sacrament in *rue Monsieur*. First there was Mass, sung in plainchant, then a “fatherly chat” with the community, as Louis Roussin described it in the *Bulletin salésien*, when he spoke about Salesian work in Europe and the American missions, and the debt of gratitude the Salesians owed to these religious, who supported them by their prayers and their generosity. In the afternoon, together with the Rector, Fr Ronchail, Fr Rua was received by the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Rotelli. As one would expect, his Excellency spoke warmly about the work at Ménilmontant, where the field of apostolate open to the Salesians was so vast. Next, Fr Rua gave a conference to Cooperators in the church of the Assumption in *rue Saint Honoré*, where, according to the chronicle, the attendance was rather sparse “because of the bad weather”. Fr Rua simply repeated what he had said at Nice and Marseilles about Don Bosco, his apostolate for poor and abandoned children, and the progress of the Salesian apostolate, notably in the foreign missions. He also insisted strongly on the “absolute necessity of extending the property at Ménilmontant” where, with eight hundred requests for admission, only ninety places could be offered. The Cooperators were therefore invited to put their hands in their purses, and Fr Rua himself passed along the rows to collect their offerings. They concluded with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, after which Fr Rua held a few private interviews in the sacristy. All in all, this visit confirmed how strong the memory of Don Bosco remained in Paris.

Fr Rua in England, northern France and Belgium

Shortly before his death, Don Bosco had taken on a Catholic mission in Battersea, a very poor, working-class area of London.³⁷ The beginnings had proved very difficult, especially as the first superior, Edward McKiernan had died on 30 December 1888. Fr Rua devoted six days, from 19 to 25 April, to this budding project, now being led by Father Charles Macey. The two travellers found there a small church in sorry shape, a house that served as office and presbytery, a flourishing mixed school with 315 pupils run by religious sisters, subsidised partly by the state but administered financially by the parish, a Sunday oratory for boys, and the beginnings of an orphanage with three children living in the presbytery.³⁸

The parish consisted of around two thousand Catholics, mainly Irish people. On 21 April Fr Rua wrote: “The church and school are both well attended, and the good

³⁷ Description in a note from Francesco Dalmazzo, tradtranslated in the *Bulletin salésien*, December 1887, p. 149-150.

³⁸ Lengthy description of Fr Rua’s days in England,, *Bulletin salésien*. June 1890, p. 79-85.

that is being done for Catholics in the area is considerable. Even the Protestants benefit as well, since there are many conversions, sometimes of entire, large families, something rarely found elsewhere. He remarked that “the Sunday oratory is going well. It’s true that the boys who attend are not as numerous as those at Fr Pavia’s oratory [in Turin], but we hope that little by little it will do just as well.” He considered getting the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians involved in the English mission: “The mission is still in its early stages: if we were to make this into a joint project, we could send some of our Sisters to look after a Sunday oratory for girls, who would come in large numbers and would be a good source of vocations once the spark is lit.”³⁹

Fr Rua did a careful inspection of the property. He was pleased to see that the perimeter wall around each of the playgrounds had been raised, so as to stop young rascals climbing over and breaking windows; but he was disappointed with the zinc roof of the church which didn’t offer enough cover for the faithful when it rained. Most importantly, he saw that the school was quite inadequate, and he urged Fr Macey to extend it so as to double the number of pupils.

The first of his special visits was to Bishop Butt, Bishop of the diocese of Southwark, who took him to see a school nearby with a thousand pupils, built with help from the diocese. For him, as Fr Rua understood well, the Catholic school was a high priority. Other visits followed: firstly he went to greet the parish priest and curate of the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, who had supported the first Salesians on their arrival in Battersea; then the Sisters of Our Lady of Namur, who looked after the school; finally, the community of the Helpers of the Holy Souls, who did much work among the poor. He was interested to experience church services both with the Anglican community of Westminster and with the community of Italian immigrants. As could be expected, he found the atmosphere somewhat cold with the Anglicans, whereas he found his Catholic compatriots both pious and spontaneous, filling the church with their singing. According to the chronicle, many Protestants attended the Italian church services and came along to the concerts they organised.

On 25 April Fr Rua crossed the English Channel once more to return to the continent, and the following day was writing to Cesare Cagliero from Guînes, near to Calais, where the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were in the early stages of setting up an orphanage.⁴⁰ Fr Rua blessed their community chapel,⁴¹ then in the evening of the same day he was given a solemn welcome at the Salesian orphanage in Lille, with illuminations, brass band, addresses and songs from the school choir. After night prayers the Rector, Ange Bologne told the boys that their spiritual retreat would begin the next day, and that Fr Rua would be available for them most of the time either in the confessional or in his room. He gave the opening sermon on 27 April and likewise brought it to a close on 1 May. From 2 to 6 May his time was devoted to meeting civil or ecclesiastical people of note who had become friends of Don Bosco and promoters of the Salesian work in Lille. The Rector Bologne wanted to finance the purchase of a factory close to the house which would allow them to double the size of the orphanage buildings, basing his hopes on a long report presented on 6 May in the course of a conference to Cooperators, presided over by the Rector of the Catholic Faculties of

³⁹ Fr Rua to Fr Durando, London, 21 April 1890; FdR 3897 A4-6.

⁴⁰ FdR 3863 A10.

⁴¹ On Fr Rua at Guînes, Lille and Liège, copious article in the *Bulletin salésien*, July 1890, p. 89-98.

Lille.⁴² Fr Rua expressed his full agreement with the speaker. According to the chronicle, which was often, in my opinion, too mellifluous, “speaking for three quarters of an hour, with simplicity and candour he explained both the progress and the needs of the Salesian apostolic work. He emphasised that the Don Bosco orphanage in Lille must be enlarged, and warmly recommended this undertaking to our Cooperators in the northern region.” Finally, on 7 May, Fr Rua entered Belgium accompanied by Bologne and Roussin.

A few weeks before his death, Don Bosco had accepted a proposal from the Bishop of Liège, Bishop Victor Doutreloux, to set up in his town an establishment similar to the one in Valdocco. It fell to Fr Rua to carry it through. On 8 May he was present at the blessing of the first stone for the Salesian orphanage of Saint John Berchmans in the industrial area of Laven, and Bishop Doutreloux insisted on entertaining Fr Rua at his own residence. The ceremony, conducted with all due solemnity, was presided over by both the apostolic nuncio from Brussels and Bishop Doutreloux himself and was conducted in two stages: an introductory session in the church of Sainte-Véronique, then an open-air Mass and formal blessing on the building site.⁴³ At the church ceremony Fr Rua had the principal role. The Liège *Gazette* reported: after the singing of the *Veni Creator*, “we saw a foreign priest with a sallow complexion, and as thin as an anchorite, make his way to the bishop’s throne. What struck us even more than his gaunt figure was the serene light that shone from beneath his eyelids, reddened from his nightly vigil... He spoke simply and precisely, with generosity of heart, and though his French could be clearly understood, he had an unmistakable Italian accent.” Fr Rua was simply giving them a brief account of the life of Don Bosco and the foundation of the Salesian Society, and telling them of the risks taken in accepting this new venture in Liège. He therefore ended with a fervent appeal to the people of Liège for their support for this house whose future would depend totally on public charity. The *Gazette* summed up his talk: “delivered with simplicity, warmth and conviction, with evidence of his own strong faith, it left his hearers convinced that Don Bosco could not have found anyone more worthy or better equipped to take his place.” It was naturally fitting that the festivities should be followed by a banquet at the bishop’s residence at which toasts were offered. Fr Rua spoke in his turn, expressing his thanks especially to the nuncio with a fascinating anecdote. The Salesians, he told them, have been able to set up a house for needy young people in Catania, where there is no lack of Cooperators. Amongst these, he said, “there is a lady who lives opposite the building, whom the youngsters call ‘mother’. She is none other than the very worthy mother ... of Bishop Di Nava, Apostolic Nuncio in Brussels.”⁴⁴

From the 9 to 17 May Fr Rua toured almost the whole of Belgium visiting the many benefactors, and often well-to-do friends the Salesians had made in the country.⁴⁵ His journey took him to Namur, Louvain, Brussels, Malines, Anvers, Gand, Bruges, Courtrai and Tournai, after which he returned to France.

On 19 May Don Bosco visited the newly set up agricultural orphanage named

⁴² Anyone interested can read at length in *Bulletin salésien*, article quoted, p. 92-94.

⁴³ Minute description of this double ceremony in a signed article, L. H. Legius, *Gazette de Liège*, 10-11 May 1890, reproduced in the *Bulletin salésien*, May 1890, p. 63-68.

⁴⁴ *Bulletin salésien*, July 1890, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Detailed account of this journey in an article in the *Bulletin salésien*, August 1890, p. 105-109.

‘Le Rossignol’ [The Nightingale] at Coigneux (Somme), under the care of the thirty-nine-year-old Père Jean-Baptiste Rivetti.⁴⁶ It was for all the world another Bethlehem: a dilapidated farm building with adobe walls standing in the middle of a clearing of ninety hectares. A narrow, ground-floor room had been made into a chapel, whilst the orphans slept in the loft, crammed into every last bit of space. They had two cows and a couple of pigs. Fr Rua gave his blessing to the children, expressing his hope that he would soon be able to come back and find it well provided with all the things it still lacked, through the generosity of benefactors in the Somme and Pas-de-Calais area. The *Bulletin* listed what was needed: Utensils and vestments for Mass, bedding, furniture, clothes, fabric, tools and ploughs, vehicles, horses and cattle, provender, etc., etc.” In 1890 this agricultural orphanage was little more than a black hole of misery.

The following day Fr Rua and Louis Roussin set out for Paris, calling en route at Amiens to greet the bishop and a few benefactors.⁴⁷ At the oratory of Sts Peter and Paul in Paris they found the playground decked out with bunting as the children welcomed them to the sound of their brass band. On the 21st, as the editor of the *Bulletin* wrote: “Don Bosco’s successor, as befits his responsibility and his concerns for our Salesian mission, took on a whole round of visits.” 22 May saw him spend much time looking round the workshops of the Assumptionists in *rue Francois Ier*, who published both *La Croix* and the *Pèlerin*. From there he went to call on the Cardinal-archbishop François Richard, who had great affection for Don Bosco, and finally returned to Ménilmontant to meet the Nuncio, Bishop Rotelli, who wished to thank him for having called to see him on the occasion of his recent visit to Paris. The boys were beginning their annual retreat, preached by a Redemptorist priest. On the 25th, Pentecost Sunday, Fr Rua preached the closing sermon, suggesting various ways of preserving the fruits of the retreat. The afternoon was devoted to recreation, organised beneath a large tent. It began with a very thoughtful address to Fr Rua from the president of the patronage committee, but was interrupted by “a veritable hurricane” during the first act of a drama, entitled *Le Prêtre*.

On the 26th and 27th Fr Rua made farewell visits, especially to the Benedictine Nuns in *rue Monsieur*, and the Redemptorists in *boulevard Ménilmontant*, and that same evening, (taking the night train as usual, so as not to waste time) he was on way his back to Turin. En route he made stops of varied length in Paray-le-monial, Cluny and Laizé, (with the Quisard family in Lyons), arriving back on the 30th at the Porta Nuova station in Turin at eight o’clock in the morning.

Thus ended Fr Rua’s first, grand, exploratory tour of Salesian work in western Europe. At the same time, however, he was putting the finishing touches to a venture that would see the Salesian Congregation set foot in the Holy Land. That would involve a journey beyond all his expectations.

⁴⁶On Fr Rua at Rossignol, *Bulletin salésien*, September 1890, p. 117-120.

⁴⁷Detailed account of this last part of Fr Rua’s journey in an article in the *Bulletin*

18 – The Middle East

Fr Anthony Belloni in the Holy Land

In the minutes of the meeting of the Superior Chapter of 25 August 1890 it was reported that “Fr Rua read out the confidential proposal from Canon Belloni for a merger with his congregation for Abandoned Children in the Holy Land in Bethlehem, Betgialla [i.e. Beitgemal], Nazareth, etc., with a handover of all existing property, his main collaborators being in full agreement. Belloni would come to Europe, and the Chapter, whilst giving a general consent to the proposal, would await his arrival for a fuller discussion.”¹ A major turn of events in Fr Rua’s time in office was under way: the Salesians were about to set foot in the Middle East.

Canon Anthony Belloni (1831 – 1903) was no stranger to Fr Rua.² This Vincent de Paul of the Holy Land, originally from Italy, had come as a missionary to the region in 1859 and was soon appointed as professor of Sacred Scripture and spiritual director at the major seminary. He became deeply troubled by the sad state of many young boys who were being exploited and perverted and were devoid of any sort of religious knowledge. His first personal response was to take in a boy abandoned by his blind parent. Soon three more unfortunate youngsters joined him. He taught them and found work for them; but since their presence was considered undesirable in the seminary, he rented a run-down property nearby, and soon he saw his little flock increasing. Benefactors came to his help, to the extent that one fine day he decided to set up a substantial orphanage. The site he chose was in Bethlehem, beside the road leading to the sacred grotto. With the authorisation of the Latin patriarch, who dispensed him from his teaching post in the seminary, he set up home there himself.

In 1874, already with 45 youngsters around him, he looked to the future and made the decision to found a Diocesan Congregation of Brothers of the Holy Family to support him in his charitable work. The first three aspirants came from among his own orphans. The following year, in the course of a European tour to promote his work, he found a valuable collaborator in the person of an Italian priest, Raphael Piperini (1842 – 1930), but unfortunately the enterprise didn’t come up to this good man’s expectations. If we are to give credence to a much later and uncertain witness,³ Fr Belloni met Don Bosco in Turin in 1878, and already at that stage was offering to hand over all his work

¹ *Minutes of the Chapter*, 25 August 1890.

² Regarding Anthony Belloni, see the biography by Giorgio Shallub, *Abuliatama. Il Padre degli orfani nel paese di Gesù*, Turin, SEI, 1955.

³ Anonymous article «Un’era della carità in Palestina. Abuna Antun Belloni», *Osservatore Romano*, 21 August 1935, reproduced in MB XVII, p. 896.

in Palestine. He later acquired an estate in Beitgemal to set up an agricultural orphanage, which he put into the hands of another Italian priest. By 1885 he had gathered 80 youngsters in Bethlehem and 56 in Beitgemal, and in addition had opened a day school in Bethlehem for up to 150 pupils. The following year he began a third centre at Cremisan, not far from Bethlehem, to provide a home for his Holy Family aspirants. Lastly, he acquired a site on the hill of Nazareth with a fourth centre in mind. All in all, this constituted a fine patrimony, despite its on-going dependence on public charity with all its uncertainties.

The merger of the Holy Family with the Salesian Congregation

The merger of Fr Belloni's work in the Holy Land with the Salesian Congregation went ahead rapidly. From the minutes of the meeting of the Superior Chapter of 6 October 1890, presided over by Fr Rua, we learn that "Canon Belloni, founder of the homes for abandoned youngsters in Bethlehem, Baitgialla [i.e. Beitgemal] and Nazareth was present in person. "The requests submitted in writing by Canon Belloni concerning the merger of his congregation with ours were examined: in each case the chapter replied in the affirmative. Fr Durando was authorised forthwith to draw up the formal articles of an agreement to be presented to the [Congregation for] Propaganda in Rome." Three days later Canon Belloni was present again at the following meeting, when the minutes reported: "Fr Durando read out the agreement for the merger of the two societies which was approved by both parties."⁴ As for Fr Belloni himself, he wasted no time. He went immediately to Rome to present his plan to Leo XIII; the latter approved, gave him a gift of seven thousand lire and invited him to settle the matter with Propaganda Fide. The only condition required by the Cardinal Prefect, Simeoni, was that Fr Belloni should ensure that the Latin Patriarch of the Holy Land, Archbishop Piavi, who was actually in Rome just then, would see no obstacle to this agreement. Everything proceeded so well that by 9 November the rescript was ready.

All that remained was to make it a reality. At the chapter meeting of 7 February 1891, as the minutes record, "Fr Rua explained that Canon Belloni wrote to ask that two Salesians should accompany the official visitor at the end of May. The chapter approved and agreed on the names of two priests who seemed well suited for work in Palestine."⁵ These would be Fr John Baptist Useo and Fr Corradini. Consequently, on 15 June 1891, the Canon and the three Salesians, Barberis, Useo and Corradini, disembarked at Jaffa. Later that year, on 8 October, four clerics and three Brothers arrived, together with five Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Finally, seventeen Salesians, comprising Fr Anthony Variara, leader of the group, six clerics and nine Brothers, joined the rest on 29 December. The merger was now complete.⁶

Nevertheless, there was a bumpy road ahead of them. Several of Fr Belloni's helpers abandoned him and joined the Latin Patriarchate. Others accepted the new situation with bad grace. Hostile rumours went around. The Salesians threatened to pull out the Sisters. Money was short. At the Patriarchate there were some who contested the ceding

⁴*Minutes of the Chapter*, 6 and 9 October 1890.

⁵*Minutes of the Chapter*, 7 February 1891.

⁶Report in E. Ceria, *Annali* II, p. 180-184.

of goods to Fr Rua since, they claimed, gifts had been made, not on a personal basis (*intuitu personae*), but for the benefit of the Patriarchate (*intuitu Patriarchatus*). The matter reached such a critical juncture that Fr Rua sent Fr Celestine Durando as an Extraordinary Visitor to Palestine in an attempt to calm the situation. He arrived there on 23 July 1892, and when he went along with Fr Belloni to present himself to the Patriarch, the latter asked him point-blank: “Have you come to withdraw the Salesians?” “We’ll see, we’ll see”, replied Durando, at which Fr Belloni interrupted: “If the Salesians leave, I leave, too.” At that, the Patriarch left them.

The only demand made of Fr Belloni was that he should surrender his canonical title, which he did with good grace in the presence of two representatives of the Patriarch. From then on he identified himself fully with the Salesians. During the summer holidays of 1893, he made his final vows as a Salesian before Fr John Marengo who had come to preach the annual retreat. Fr Rua paid off any outstanding debts and from that year onwards he allotted an annual subsidy of twenty thousand francs.

Fr Rua’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Critics soon fell silent in the three foundations of Fr Belloni, now in Salesian hands. Nothing could be better to unite minds and hearts than a visit of Fr Rua to the Holy Land. This he decided to make in 1895.⁷

On Saturday 16 February, accompanied by his general spiritual director, Fr Paul Albera, Fr Rua set sail from Marseilles aboard the *Druentia* of the maritime company Cyprien Fabre, destined for Alexandria, Egypt. The Marquis de Villeneuve-Trans, a Salesian Cooperator from Marseilles, travelled with them. They had intended to make the voyage on a liner of the Messageries maritimes, which would have been more comfortable, but as it didn’t sail that day, they had no option. The first few days were terrible: a fierce east wind produced huge waves that threw the travellers about and twice obliged the captain to change course and make for calmer waters by the Italian coast. On Sunday the 17th, a ghastly pale Fr Rua emerged from his cabin with the intention of celebrating Mass as previously announced, but he was compelled to stay on his back the whole day, sometimes having to hold on tight to a fixture to avoid being flung across the floor. Luggage was thrown about and barrels rolled and clattered across the deck. All this time, as Fr Albera tells us, he did his best to remain calm and to read or pray. Finally during the night between Monday and Tuesday, the storm abated, and on the 19th both Fr Rua and Fr Albera were able to celebrate Mass, each one in turn serving the other. The journey became a sort of retreat for them as together they read the breviary, following the canonical hours, made their meditation (using a text read aloud according to the practice of that period) as well as their daily spiritual reading.

The crossing from Marseilles to Alexandria took a week, and the ship finally approached land on Sunday 24 February. That day the two priests celebrated Mass on board, chatted with the captain and crew who had shown them much kindness, and eventually disembarked in Alexandria, a picturesque city that Fr Albera took great

⁷On Fr Rua’s journey in the Holy Land, there are long letters from Paul Albera to Fr Domenico Belmonte, prefect general, printed immediately and sent out to Rectors; they are to be found in FdR 3003 C10 at 3004 A11, over 38 large pages. Report: «Don Rua en Palestine», *Bulletin salésien*, 1895, p. 189-195, 137-139, attributed in the first place by the *Bulletin* more or less legitimately to the Marquis de Villeneuve Trans, who accompanied them. We have not given precise references to Fr Albera’s letters. Anyone doing research can easily find them.

delight in describing to Fr Belmonte. Before setting sail for Palestine, they stayed for a while with the Jesuits at the St Francis Xavier college, where, according to Fr Albera, these fathers “were prolific in their attentiveness to our revered superior”. Fr Rua took the opportunity to visit the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Corbelli, who emphasised the urgent need to set up a Salesian professional school in Alexandria. Evidently he convinced Fr Rua, since his wishes were granted the following year. Fr Rua also tried, but with little success, to meet up with Cooperators, but in a city with nameless streets and houses without numbers it was well nigh impossible.

On Wednesday 27 February, Fr Rua and his two companions embarked for Jaffa on a postal ship belonging to a Turkish company, and Fr Rua found a quiet corner to deal with correspondence. There was no chance to celebrate Mass on the 28th, the day they sailed into Jaffa, but to their great delight, a boat with Salesians on board sailed in and took them and their luggage with them, saving them any amount of trouble.

In the town Fr Belloni was waiting for them impatiently at the Franciscan residence. The telegraph link between Alexandria and Jaffa had temporarily broken down, so it hadn't been possible to warn him of their arrival as Fr Rua would have wanted.

Bethlehem and Jerusalem

Having set foot finally on Palestinian soil, and eager to the utmost degree, says Fr Albera, to make their journey a true pilgrimage, our travellers immediately sought out a church where they could recite a *Te Deum*, an Our Father and a Hail Mary so as to gain the plenary indulgence granted to pilgrims on their arrival in the Holy Land. They received a warm welcome from the Franciscan community. The three – Rua, Belloni and Albera – then boarded the train for Jerusalem. Uppermost in the mind of Fr Rua and Fr Albera was the desire to visit all the biblical places, authenticated or apocryphal, that were made holy by the presence of Jesus, Mary or the Apostles. These included the house of Simon the leather-worker from Jaffa, Joppe, where Tabitha was raised to life, Ramleh, formerly Arimathea, home of Joseph and Nicodemus who attended to the burial of Jesus, the valley of Sharon, made famous by Samson and the three hundred foxes with burning torches, etc., etc.

In the station at Jerusalem a large group comprising priests, clerics and young people was there to welcome Don Bosco's successor, and in no time at all they were on their way towards Bethlehem. The young people escorted them, some riding horses or donkeys, others simply running alongside their carriage. En route they called at the well of the Magi and Rachel's tomb. About a mile from Bethlehem some youngsters from the orphanage carrying lanterns were waiting for them. Whoops of joy went up, and gradually the numbers became so dense that the way ahead was completely blocked, and Fr Rua had to leave his carriage and continue on foot. The scene was one of “utter confusion” says Fr Albera. Finally, amid a chorus of cheers they reached the chapel, where priests in full vestments and clerics in surplices were expecting them. The band played a fanfare and Fr Rua was led to the altar where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, and amid flickering lights and clouds of incense the *Te Deum* was intoned.

Fr Rua was extremely tired, but he agreed to make his way into a hall for a welcome address to which he gave a very warm-hearted reply. From there the whole orphanage family gathered in one dining room. This, in the words of Fr Albera, gave the youngsters the chance throughout the meal to study “the kind, fatherly face of our

revered superior". Undoubtedly, Fr Rua the Rector Major had left behind the severe manner of the Prefect General with an eye for the slightest infringements of the rule.

On Friday 1 March, Fr Rua joined the community for meditation and then celebrated Mass. It pleased him very much to see that at the Bethlehem orphanage the first Friday of the month was dedicated to the Sacred heart of Jesus. Later he paid a visit to the Father Guardian of the Franciscans, then made his way to the grotto of the Nativity. Here he was devastated by what he saw: the nave of the ancient basilica of St Helena had become a parade ground for Turkish soldiers, and the choir had been made into a church for use by the Greek Orthodox (crudely named as "schismatics" by Albera in his letter to Belmonte). In the grotto itself, above an altar table, was a silver star with the words: *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*. [It is here that that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary]. There Fr Rua lay prostrate in prayer for some time, but he could see no possibility of celebrating Mass there himself, since the altar was reserved for the Orthodox and Armenians. A few feet away a marble manger marked the place where "the shepherds and the Magi worshiped the divine Child" (words of Fr Albera). There was another altar available for Catholic priests, and it was there that Fr Rua celebrated the Eucharist the following day. In the vicinity there was no lack of places claiming historical connections: the cave where Joseph had the dream that would send the Holy Family into Egypt; the one where the dead bodies of the Holy Innocents were placed; the tomb of Paula and Eustochium, disciples of Saint Jerome, etc. The devotion of Fr Rua, who had a marked interest in sacred relics, was amply rewarded by the experience of so many holy places.

On 2 March Fr Rua spent much time chatting with confreres and boys. On Sunday the 3rd, Fr Rua, Fr Albera and the Marquis de Villeneuve-Trans were invited to a meeting with the Conference of St Vincent de Paul, set up in Bethlehem through the initiative of Fr Belloni. As Fr Albera confirmed, they found the same spirit of charity, the same prayers, the same concerns about helping poor families as in similar European meetings. The Marquis came away greatly enthused. On their return to the house they found that the youngsters were all set to take to the stage: they had rehearsed a play written by Fr Lemoyne entitled "Patagonia". "The actors", wrote Fr Albera, "mostly Arab children, received well-deserved, hearty applause. They had made a great effort to learn their Italian script, and they interpreted their roles with admirable skill".

Monday the 4th was set aside for a visit to Jerusalem. At a short distance from the city, the pilgrims skirted the valley of "Gehenna", now little more than a cesspool full of stagnant water. Fr Rua was eager to go and prostrate himself at the Holy Sepulchre, but he felt duty-bound to go first of all to make himself known to the Latin Patriarch, Archbishop Piavi, who only a few years previously had wanted to be rid of the Salesians. "Although in great pain", wrote Albera, "he received Fr Rua most kindly. He repeatedly expressed his great joy to meet Don Bosco's successor and recalled the names of Salesian superiors he already knew". Leaving the Patriarch's office, Fr Rua passed through that of his Coadjutor Bishop Apodia and into the seminary attached to the Patriarchate. From the terrace he gazed silently over the city, but seminarians came on the scene wanting to kiss his hand and hear a few words from him. Here we can quote from Fr Albera's letter of 7 March to Fr Belmonte. "Fr Rua acquiesced willingly, and speaking with simplicity and warmth he urged them to nourish a spirit of study and prayer so as to do great good in that Mission where schismatics and Protestants were actively engaged, and even Freemasons who just then were gathering in Jerusalem,

bringing from their own distant lands their hatred for Jesus Christ and his Church.” There we have it! At that time France provided a sort of protectorate for Eastern Catholics; Fr Rua therefore went to greet the French Consul. The latter received him with a certain veneration, introduced his family and showed great interest in Salesian work, considering it to be quite providential for any country in the world, but especially for Palestine. The formal visit to the Italian consul was kept for the afternoon. It would be very long.

Fr Rua was finally free to visit the Holy Sepulchre, Calvary, the church of St Helena “where the Holy Cross was discovered” and “so many other places venerated devoutly by the faithful, all contained in the great basilica of the Holy Sepulchre” (words of Fr Albera). But it was getting late, and Fr Rua was due to have his evening meal with the Franciscans who had offered him board and lodging so that he could celebrate Mass at the Holy Sepulchre at four o’clock in the morning. It meant he would be sharing a room with two other pilgrims, but that was of no consequence to him. In any case, he didn’t have much sleep since, as Fr Albera says, he went into the upper galleries, and there “with his gaze fixed on the Holy Sepulchre, his prayer continued long into the night.”

The following morning Fr Rua, “visibly moved” celebrated Mass, served by Fr Albera and the Marquis de Villeneuve. Fr Albera then also celebrated, whilst Fr Rua, kneeling on the stone floor, made his thanksgiving. The pilgrims then set off in the footsteps of Jesus. Following part of the *Via Dolorosa*, they stopped at various stations on the Way of the Cross, called in at the church of the Sisters of Sion where they contemplated the *Ecce Homo* arch, then made their way towards Gethsemani. However, they didn’t go in: instead, they climbed the Mount of Olives. The Carmelite convent built there “stands above the place where Jesus taught the Our Father” (Albera). There is also the grotto of the Credo, so called “because it’s there that the Apostles gathered and composed the Apostles’ Creed before going their separate ways” (Albera). The Carmelites provided a guide as far as the church of the Ascension, where they kissed the stone “which still bears the footprints of our Saviour” (Albera). So be it! Fr Rua also visited Bethphage from where Jesus gazed over the city of Jerusalem and foretold its ruin; likewise the place where Jesus was betrayed by Judas, the cave of the Agony, and the burial place of Mary “which is in the hands of the schismatics” lamented Albera.

The three had a constant, heightened sense of devotion throughout, which explains the tenor of Fr Albera’s comment on their afternoon visits. He writes: “They came across many English people, among whom were several pastors, but they behaved more as tourists and never showed the slightest sign of piety or devotion. That’s what comes from abolishing external forms of worship.” Such a contrast with our three pilgrims, above all Fr Rua himself, who maintained a spirit of prayer throughout their visits.

At Cremisan

Back again in Bethlehem, on 6 March Fr Rua devoted the whole day to a visit to Cremisan. Though it was a fair distance, and the road was in poor condition, he insisted on going on foot. In Cremisan were all those who were aspiring to become Salesians, as clerics or Brothers. It was Fr Rua’s hope that this would become a real nursery of vocations. It was their day for the exercise of the *Bona Mors* (Exercise for a happy Death), proof that the Salesian way of life was well rooted in these former Holy Family houses. The exercise was followed by an academy, with items in Latin, Italian, French

and Arabic, and after the evening meal there was a theatrical production in Italian. “You would have thought you were in Italy” commented Fr Albera. Fr Rua asked to see the vineyard and the wine cellar. He regretted that the previous year’s production was not yet on sale. Fr Albera made a similar complaint: “Marketing is so difficult, but money is short”. All the confreres had their spiritual talk with Fr Rua, and even the lay staff all wanted to confide in him.

On 9 March five confreres from Beitgemal turned up in Bethlehem. They had walked for eight hours in the rain to meet Fr Rua, believing that he would have so little time to devote to their own house.⁸ 10 and 11 March were spent in a variety of visits. These included the Hospitalers of St John of God who celebrated their founder’s feast on the 10th, and on the 11th an important visit to the Patriarch Parvi with whom he had much business to conduct regarding the houses in Palestine. Fr Albera, who was present at this meeting, would write: “In this situation I was able to observe the high esteem in which the Patriarch held our Rector Major, and at the same time the wisdom and astuteness of Fr Rua”⁹

At Beitgemal

The visit to Beitgemal was scheduled for 12 March. Fr Rua had scarcely taken his seat in the carriage for the trip to Jerusalem, when Fr Albera, who was travelling with him, read out an article from the Italian newspaper, the *Corriere* telling of the assassination of Fr Francis Dalmazzo, Rector of Catanzaro, by one of his seminarians. Fr Rua was deeply shocked, and between Bethlehem and Jerusalem he went back over this horrendous news again and again, convinced that the wound had not been fatal, though sadly this proved not to be the case. They went by train from Jerusalem as far as Deyroban from where they made their way to the agricultural centre at Beitgemal. According to local custom, horses and donkeys had been made available at the station, but Fr Rua preferred to go on foot, despite the heat and the distance involved.

As they reached the entrance to the property a hymn was sung then several addresses of welcome were made. Fr Rua could see just how eagerly the boys and even more so their teachers had been waiting for him. He was full of admiration for the floral garden as he made his way up to the house. This was a sort of grand castle towering above a hill. The young people pressed around him, eager to catch every word he said, whilst some on horseback pranced around him adding to the celebratory atmosphere. The visit of the house itself was begun by the singing of the *Te Deum*. Fr Rua was then shown around the different areas, much to his satisfaction. At dinner almost all the food was home-grown, thanks to the hard work in the fields, and was prepared by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who worked in the kitchen and the laundry. There was a surprise in store for Fr Rua: when he took the lid off the soup tureen, out flew a white dove as a sign of welcome! Among other dishes he was offered the meat of a wild boar that had been killed by the shepherd on the estate. The meal was followed by various speeches and an interminable concert by a musician from the village whose rasping voice gave little joy to Italian ears. Fr Rua was then shown the stables, and other

⁸ At this point in Fr Albera’s account a name appears unexpectedly: that of of a French Salesian Athanase Prun (1862-1917): it was he would set up the orphanage in Nazareth dedicated to Christ Adolescent. He was ordained subdeacon that day.

⁹ Letter of the 19 March, FdR 3003 E6.

features of the house, all of which he took in with great interest. 13 March was a festive occasion. The day began with general communion; at ten o'clock there was sung Mass with Gregorian chant, then the blessing of a Lourdes grotto in the playground. In the afternoon all the confreres made a personal visit to Fr Rua for a friendly talk. All in all the welcome given to Fr Rua in this humble farming community left nothing to be desired.

At Nazareth

Perched on a donkey and surrounded by all the youngsters, Fr Rua finally said farewell to Beitgemal on 14 March, dearly hoping to see this centre prosper, since it was currently working through a serious financial crisis. His destination was Nazareth where, as we know, Fr Belloni had acquired a site for a future orphanage similar to the one in Bethlehem. The first leg of the journey for Fr Rua and his companions was by train from Deyroban to the port of Haifa, then by boat to Jaffa from where they would make it to Nazareth by carriage. The sea was calm, and the boat journey, which lasted no more than six hours, was peaceful enough. At Jaffa, the Carmelites welcomed them in spite of the late hour (it was almost midnight), and at seven o'clock the next morning they were already on their way to Nazareth.

Here they were at last at their destination, where they stayed with the Franciscans. As soon as breakfast was over, the pilgrims set out to venerate the *Santa Casa*, the house of Mary. Fr Rua devoutly prostrated himself before the altar above which was the inscription: *Verbum caro hic factum est*. [Here the Word became flesh]. According to Fr Albera's written account, "they could see traces of the foundations of the house that the Angels removed to Loreto, indicating its dimensions, the cave carved out of the rock against which the house was built, and another cavity which they say served as Mary's kitchen."¹⁰ Fr Rua would have liked to spend some time there to meditate at length in these places made holy by the presence of Jesus and Mary, but they had to climb the hill to look over the site intended for new buildings and to decide on their future use. The proximity of a protestant establishment urged him on. On their way down they called on the owner of the piece of land. He offered them a drink and provided seats for them, whilst, to their amazement, the members of his family sat on a carpet spread out on the floor.

On 16 March Fr Rua had the joy of celebrating Mass at five o'clock in the morning in the Marian shrine. As previously, Fr Albera followed him whilst Fr Rua, kneeling on the stone floor made a long and fervent thanksgiving. Our two pilgrims did their best not to miss any memorable site in Nazareth: Mary's fountain, the chapel where Joseph's workshop had stood, where they read the words: *Hic Jesus subditus erat illis* [here Jesus was subject to them] and also the *Mensa Christi*, namely "a huge rock where they say Jesus dined with his disciples". The fact that we owe these various explanations to Fr Albera in no way implies that he gave credence to all these pious, local traditions.

Fr Rua also visited the synagogue where Jesus opened the scroll and explained the words: "He has sent me to give good news to the poor and to heal the contrite of heart." He was also shown the hilltop where the Jews dragged Jesus and threatened to throw him down. From there they could see Mount Tabor and regretted not being able to go there. After a collation with the Franciscans (it was the season of Lent) Fr Rua and his

¹⁰ FdR 3003 E9-10.

two companions set out by carriage for Haifa and Mount Carmel. At the monastery the Carmelites gave them a very warm welcome, and after the divine office there was a plentiful meal ready. Fr Rua declined it, referring to the fasting laws, but the prior said “I exempt you, by virtue of a faculty granted me by the Patriarch in Jerusalem”, at which Fr Rua acquiesced.

Return to Bethlehem

Meanwhile the travellers had bought tickets for the boat that would take them to Jaffa. It was due in at Haifa the following day, 17 March, at three o'clock in the morning. Around half past one a brother called the two priests to celebrate Mass, and after a quick breakfast the three set out to catch their boat. However, a rough sea, and the sight of passengers from Beirut disembarking looking decidedly sick, led Fr Albera to take a decision for which he would later accept full responsibility in writing, and which he would have reason to regret. His motive for this decision was that in his opinion “the Superior General of a Religious Congregation should not take risks in such conditions, and that the confreres would have every right to reproach them should an accident occur.” With some difficulty he managed to convince Fr Rua, but only after the captain had informed him that he would probably be obliged to make for Port-Said, which would make it impossible for the rector major to reach Bethlehem as planned for the feast of St Joseph. Their tickets were refunded.

Finally, the three were once again en route for Jaffa, this time by coach, with a trusted coachman who turned out to be German. Little did they know that they were embarking on a totally unexpected adventure. There were some pleasant experiences on the way, as when they passed through a well-kept Jewish colony where Fr Rua visited the synagogue, or through a picturesque settlement of Bedouins with their tents and animals. Others, however, were to prove less agreeable.

Things began to go badly at nightfall. After nine o'clock no further travelling was possible: the driver couldn't see where he was going, and there was the danger of attacks from Bedouins, as Fr Albera would explain later. The coach pulled up at a village of primitive mud huts. The village chief was happy to welcome them, but the travellers had no wish to dine surrounded by spectators or to sleep in a hut with a floor mat as a bed. They thanked him but declined his invitation. They did have a meal of sorts – an egg, some sardines and a little wine – but they would sleep in the carriage while the coachman slept on the ground. A Turk would keep watch. Unfortunately a cold wind blew into the open front of the carriage. By two o'clock in the morning of 18 March, their legs aching from the humid air and the cramped position, the travellers felt they'd had enough. Fr Rua had tried to shield himself from the cold with his cloak over his head, but his legs were stiff. He made several attempts to persuade the coachman to set out again, but he pretended not to understand. Finally, around three o'clock, the horses were harnessed and the coach moved off. Albera would write to Belmonte: “I can assure you that not only did it seem opportune to make the sign of the Cross, as we did each time the coach started out, but also to commend ourselves from the depth of our hearts to our Guardian Angel.” We soon realised why, on this uneven terrain, the coachman had been so reluctant to set off before daybreak. They held their breath every time they crossed a ditch, and when the carriage tilted to one side they were afraid it would overturn. This almost happened when one of the wheels suddenly struck a hidden branch on the road, and only the swift reaction of the driver avoided a collapse as he slid

to the very edge of his seat to counterbalance the carriage. As they drew near to an unprotected bridge above a waterfall, they were terrified. Fr Rua begged the driver to get down and lead the horses across by the bridle, but without turning a hair he reined the horses together, whipped them and drove them forward close to each other, whilst his passengers held their breath and called upon Mary Help of Christians as they cast a furtive glance into the abyss below where the torrent of water roared and cascaded. This seems an appropriate moment to repeat what Albera would write in his letter to Belmonte: “Fr Rua didn’t let these occasions pass without saying to his travelling companions: What are these setbacks compared to the hardships of our missionaries! He would tell them that the Lord had brought them there to give them some idea of the dangers they faced on their journeys.” The Rector Major was always mindful of his missionaries in the Amazonian and equatorial forests.

Finally, it was daybreak. The two priests had already said their morning prayers; now they read their breviaries. Around nine o’clock, the coachman, breaking his customary silence, pointed out in the distance the bell-tower of the church in Jaffa. By ten o’clock, they were in the town’s pilgrim residence.

The return journey to Bethlehem was more standard: train from Jaffa to Jerusalem; a short break at Deyroban where they were greeted by confreres, sisters and young people for Beitgemal (one wonders who had told them...), and at Jerusalem friends or acquaintances of Fr Rua who offered their carriages to take him to the orphanage in Bethlehem. It was half past six in the evening when the three finally reached their destination.

19 March, Feast of St Joseph, regarded with exceptional veneration in the Holy Land, was to be a fitting conclusion to Fr Rua’s pilgrimage to the land of Jesus. He celebrated a solemn, sung Mass in the chapel of the Orphanage, and after the meal he received several religious professions and gave the habit to a number of novices. The ceremony concluded with benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Close by, in the oratory for girls run by the Salesian Sisters, there was great anticipation: a young sister from Bethlehem was to be given the habit. There had never before been such an event to celebrate. “The enthusiasm of the girls and their families was unbelievable” wrote Fr Albera. After the ceremony, Fr Rua spoke in Italian. Though his young audience understood very little, they listened “in prayerful silence” as someone commented.

As this was Fr Rua’s final evening in the land of Jesus, he took the opportunity to give some final words of advice and encouragement which touched the hearts of all who heard him. When he gave a last blessing to the confreres and the boys as he was finally leaving at half past six the next morning “almost everyone was in tears” (Albera)

Return to Europe

On 20 March the three pilgrims boarded ship at Jaffa: it was the Sindh, making for Marseilles via Port Said and Alexandria, but the three would leave it at Port Said and pick it up again at Alexandria after crossing Egypt from south to north by train. On the way new friendships were struck up. A French doctor of Polish origin, who had met the Marquis de Villeneuve in a Jesuit retreat house in Marseilles, was delighted to offer his cabin to Fr Rua as soon as he heard that he was the Superior General of the Salesians. So it was that the Rector Major found himself in a veritable small chapel with walls

covered in religious carvings. He celebrated Mass there with the doctor as altar server. A certain Monsieur Descamps, a rich businessman from Lille, with considerable knowledge of Palestine and of the East in general, turned out to be a Salesian Cooperator. In conversation with M de Villeneuve, he realised that they had both been pupils at the college at Rollins, in Paris. To please the three pilgrims, he also left the ship at Port Said to join them for the train journey to Alexandria.

A stop in Cairo couldn't be missed. On the 22nd the group were with the Jesuit fathers, and Fr Rua took the chance to look up local Cooperators. There was general agreement among them that a Salesian technical school was needed in Cairo, but unlike the Cooperators in Alexandria, they would have to wait until well after Fr Rua's term of office for their wishes to be fulfilled. Atypically for Fr Rua, he accepted a proposal from the Jesuit Father Minister (bursar) to make a semi-tourist trip to the Pyramids, though admittedly it did take in a visit on the return leg to Matarieh, where, according to local tradition, the Holy Family lived after fleeing from Herod's massacre. They crossed the Nile, which recalled the child Moses in a basket under the watchful eye of his older sister, and they were full of wonder at the enormity of the Pyramids. Their pleasure was spoiled only by the inappropriate demands of a number of Arabs to be their guide or to get them to ride on a camel, or even to receive payment for services they hadn't rendered. The Jesuit bursar even had to use a driver's whip to threaten an extremely violent man.

At Matarieh they looked first of all for the tree "beneath which the Holy Family rested". "It is an object of veneration even for the Muslims", as Fr Albera would delight in recording. Then they went to drink at the well where the Holy Family quenched their thirst. After a short detour through Heliopolis, the coachman took them to the ancient part of the town, to "the house where it is thought the Holy Family lived during their exile in Egypt". Their critical faculty was being put to the test! Nevertheless, as Fr Albera would write, "The tradition which holds that this really is the house where Joseph and Mary most holy lived is not without foundation". He added somewhat regretfully, "It is in the hands of the Copts."

After Mass the following morning, the Jesuit superior went along with Fr Rua to the Cairo railway station. By mid-day the group were already in the fine Jesuit establishment in Alexandria, where the three pilgrims had stayed a few weeks before, and on the 24th they were once again joining the many passengers on board the Sindh, that would take them directly to Marseilles.

The doctor sprained his ankle rather badly: he couldn't walk, and needed to keep his leg up. Fr Rua was concerned that he should be occupying his cabin just at the time when the doctor really needed it, but he would hear nothing of it. Throughout the crossing, he would drag himself along each morning to be present at Fr Rua's Mass.

At meal times, the five or six priests on board sat at the same table in the dining room, prayed together and discussed religious matters. But of course this was still Lent, and Fr Rua was careful not to forget about it. He would observe the fast throughout the whole voyage. Fr Albera comments: "With a constancy that not everyone had the courage to maintain, Fr Rua would arrange matters so that one dish would provide his collation at mid-day and the other his evening meal. This meant that at times he had to make do with a few olives and a pear, since all the food had a fat content."¹¹ He never

¹¹ FdR 3004 A10.

had time for exemptions from strict application of the fasting laws as proffered by casuists. He was always demanding on himself.

The weather sometimes changed, and a stormy sea would cause the ship to reduce speed. Some travellers were so affected by this, wrote Fr Albera, that they there were not to be seen until the ship arrived in Marseilles. That was not the case with Fr Rua, thanks perhaps to the severity of his regime. Because of the changing weather pattern the captain chose not to pass through the straits of Bonifacio. Instead he sailed round Corsica, which added a further ten hours to the scheduled time. Finally, around three o'clock in the afternoon of 29 March, the Sindh sailed into Marseilles. The Salesians who came to meet Fr Rua were in for a surprise: bowing to an ancient custom of pilgrims to the Holy Land, he had grown a beard!

This pilgrimage had given Fr Rua the chance, to his great edification, to relive the life of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It had also firmly bonded the links between the Salesian congregation and the various foundations of Fr Belloni in Palestine, and at the same time it gave him helpful, personal experience of people in the Middle East about whom he had no previous knowledge. He would return to Turin a different man, but not before making some short visits in the south of France. At all costs, he had to be back for Holy Week, and for the immediate preparation for the big gathering of Salesian Cooperators planned to take place in Bologna in April.

19 – The Salesian Congress in Bologna

Organising the Salesian Cooperators

Don Bosco's aim to have external Salesians was finally achieved in 1876 when he set up the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, with its own book of regulations. Members had subsequently grown in numbers in France, in Spain and especially in Italy. In the course of a journey in July 1894 which would take him to Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium, Fr Rua would discover that Don Bosco had many fervent admirers in the Swiss Cantons of Tessin (Lugano) and Argovie (Muri), in Alsace (Oberrhein, Andlau, Sainte-Marie-aux Mines), in Lorraine (Metz), in Belgium (Liège, Hechtel, Brussels) and as far as Maastricht, in the Netherlands.¹

Some formal organisation and inspiration was needed for this large number of people who, in the mind of Don Bosco, constituted a kind of third order. Though his reason for setting it up was often misunderstood, Don Bosco had made this perfectly clear in a conversation with Fr Lemoyne on 19 February 1884: "The true purpose of the Cooperators is not to serve the Salesians, but to serve the Church, the bishops and the clergy under the direction of the Salesians. To help the Salesians means to become involved in one of the many activities of the Catholic Church."² Fr Rua could see that this called for real engagement with dioceses, so he convoked the first Congress for Italian diocesan promoters of Cooperators to be held at Don Bosco's burial place in Valsalice for the 12 and 13 September 1893. Twenty six dioceses responded to the invitation. Right from the opening session Fr Rua was at pains to point out that, as far as the hierarchy was concerned, it was Don Bosco's intention that "this whole body of Church workers were at the service of the bishops and therefore of the Vicar of Jesus Christ."³ The ultimate proof of the success of the congress, as Fr Rua said a few days later, came in the form of a collective letter of thanks.⁴

Further progress was made in 1894 when Fr Rua produced a guide for all those with responsibility within the Pious Union. He gave it the title "A practical and theoretical manual for decurions and directors of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators."⁵ The first part defined the following roles: the 'decurion', responsible for a group of ten Cooperators; the diocesan coordinator (a priest); the vice-coordinator in a large town; the Salesian committee; the sub-committee for female Cooperators; and finally the 'zelatori' or active workers. The second part, devoted entirely to 'zealous works', contained some essential elements of apostolic spirituality: prayer and activity, instruction in the faith ("each Cooperator should be a catechist"), vocation promotion (in the family and in schools), the press (distributing literature among the people, at catechism classes, in the oratories, workshops and hospitals) needy children (helping in places where they were cared for and supporting the work of the Salesians), and finally finance, and the need to use money wisely.⁶

¹ «Une visite de Don Rua à nos Coopérateurs de la Suisse, de l'Alsace-Lorraine, de la Belgique et de la Hollande», *Bulletin salésien*, September 1894, p. 143-145.

² The original is in Fr Lemoyne's notebook, *Ricordi di gabinetto*, p. 58. See MB XVII, 25.

³ *Bulletin salésien*, 1893, p. 212.

Preparation for the Bologna Congress

It has to be said that the success of the Congress at Valsalice for the diocesan co-ordinators planted the germ of an idea in the mind of Cardinal Dominic Svampa, Archbishop of Bologna. He was a great admirer of Don Bosco, keen to have the Salesians in his diocese, and had been a guest at the Oratory during the Eucharistic Congress in Turin in September 1894. He envisaged an event on a grand scale, not just for those with leadership roles, but extended to all Cooperators in Italy and beyond. The idea appealed at once to Fr Rua, and in November he suggested to the cardinal that his city of Bologna should be the chosen place for this major Salesian congress. His Eminence was delighted to accept this; but more than that, he insisted that he would be personally responsible for it. It called for maximum publicity. At this point another Salesian came on the scene: Fr Stephen Trione (1856-1935), a powerful orator and a fine organiser⁷⁷ On 26 November, with an audience of eminent clergy, “nobility, matrons, workers, ordinary men and women” according to the General Secretary of the Congress, Fr Trione delivered a talk on “Don Bosco and young people of the 19th century”. Taking advantage of a well-disposed audience, and confident of the archbishop’s support, he proposed a gathering in Bologna in the spring of 1895 for Salesian Cooperators, “who promote and support the work of Don Bosco”.

Preparations went ahead like lightning. The morning after the talk, 27 November, the archbishop helped Fr Trione put together an organising committee. That same evening, all those selected were present at a meeting in the archbishop’s residence. In the presence of the archbishop Fr Trione explained the purpose of the meeting: to promote the first Congress of Salesian Cooperators, to be held in Bologna on 23, 24 and 25 of the following April. Its aim was to make known far and wide the effective and timely work being done by Don Bosco’s foundations, which provide good education for the young through Sunday oratories, hospices, colleges, academic and trade schools, in addition to their care of Italian immigrants in South America, and their foreign missions in Asia, Africa and among the indigenous people of the Americas. Such a Congress would encourage and stimulate the initiatives of the Salesian Cooperators, “whose presence among us is like that of a Third Order of Don Bosco, who wish only to live by his spirit and continue his kind of work .”⁸

The committee with its designated responsibilities, was duly constituted that same evening, with Bishop Nicola Zoccoli, Bishop of Sebaste and the archbishop’s Vicar General as its president. They formally requested Fr Rua that he should accept this project, informing him that Cardinal Svampa would be honorary president of the said congress. “Your Excellency can imagine what joy it gives me,” replied Fr Rua to the president, “to give my approval to such a wonderful project. I am quite prepared, when the time is right, to give it all the publicity and support that I can among our good Cooperators. If, in due course, it seems fitting that as head of the Salesians I should take

⁴ «La ringraziamo...», FdR 3995 B9.

⁵ *Manuale teorico-pratico ad uso dei decurioni e direttori della Pia associazione dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1894.

⁶ Analysis of M. Wirth, *Don Bosco et la Famille salésienne*, Paris, 2002, p. 415-416.

⁷ On the Bologna Congress, *Atti del primo Congresso internazionale dei Cooperatori Salesiani tenutosi a Bologna ai 23, 24 e 25 aprile 1895*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1895, 256 p., quoted hereafter as ‘Acts’; and detailed account in E. Ceria, *Annali* II, p. 409-444.

⁸ *Atti*, p. 4.

on the actual presidency of the congress, I shall accept your kind invitation, though not without some trepidation, counting on the support of the committee and the good will of the Cooperators who will take part.”⁹

Fr Rua was full of admiration and gratitude as he saw the detailed work that went into preparations for the assembly. The committee set up six commissions: 1) To identify and adapt a suitable assembly hall, 2) To collect funds and obtain reductions for rail fares, 3) To find accommodation for participants, 4) To arrange for publicity, 5) To consider topics and speakers 6) To prepare liturgy. The general programme was devised to cover four areas: education and instruction, Salesian missions, publications, organisation of Cooperators.

It was essential to evoke the interest of the hierarchy in this project. In January 1895 the president of the committee sent two circulars to all the Italian bishops, one giving them official notification of the Congress and inviting their Excellencies to take part, the other requesting them to appoint some individual to liaise with the committee and see to the eventual distribution of circulars and invitations.

There was an immediate high-level response. Cardinals and bishops were delighted at the prospect of an assembly that could restore some vitality to the Church and to society. For good measure, Cardinal Svampa’s Lenten pastoral letter carried an announcement of the congress. Two ‘single issue’ publications with appropriate articles and illustrations were issued by the Congress committee “for the press”. The various Salesian bulletins also did their part, and so the news spread beyond the confines of Italy. When the committee’s president was assured of the participation of Cooperators from at least seven European countries, he had no hesitation in speaking of it as an international congress. This gathering of Salesian Cooperators was turning into a sensational event for the city of Bologna.

The Congress

Fr Rua arrived in Bologna by train in the afternoon of 21 April accompanied by Fr Philip Rinaldi, Provincial in Spain. Many of the committee members were there to meet him. Along with Cardinal Svampa he had the opportunity to admire the magnificent assembly hall set up in the baroque church known as ‘La Santa’ (namely Catarina de’ Vigri). A huge canopy hung from above the choir: the centre piece was a bust of Leo XIII; there was a two-tier platform: one level for the honorary president, the other for the active president. On opposite sides of the choir were two busts: one of Pius IX, the other of Don Bosco.¹⁰

The opening ceremony took place on the morning of 23 April in the basilica of *San Domenico*. At eight o’clock, in the presence of an immense gathering of people, a long procession began to make its way from the sacristy: altar servers, clergy, parish priests, canons, Fr Rua, twenty one bishops and archbishops in *cappa magna* with mitre and crozier, the Cardinals of Ravenna, Ferrara and Milan, and finally Cardinal Svampa who would celebrate a pontifical mass of the Holy Spirit. The music of Palestrina was a fitting embellishment for such a splendid ceremonial.

At the conclusion of the Mass the Congress participants, each with a personalised membership card, moved into the church of *La Santa*, already set up for the assembly,

⁹ *Atti*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Photograph of the hall at the end of the volume of *Atti*

and soon all the seats were taken. On the benches reserved for the press were thirty nine Italians representing newspapers of all shades of opinion, four from Spain, seven from Austria, four from France, one from Germany, three from Switzerland and two from England. The entry of the twenty five prelates was greeted by loud applause, whilst the arrival of Fr Rua is best described in the account of a newspaper from Milan: "As the volume of the applause and the sound of voices was petering out, it suddenly rose up louder than ever: people were on their feet, craning their necks and straining their eyes: what they were seeing was the gaunt, humble figure of a priest, modestly taking his place at the president's table, his face radiating a childlike joy. It was Fr Rua, who has taken up the heritage of Don Bosco, reliving so well in his own person the virtues of his father, that we haven't had cause to lament too long at the tomb of the apostle of Turin"¹¹

Cardinal Svampa greeted the assembly, beginning with the distinguished churchmen present, among whom he placed Fr Rua himself who, he said, had taken on not only the role but also the very spirit of Don Bosco. The general secretary read out Leo XIII's Brief to the Congress in which he gave high praise to the work of the Salesians for the education of young people and for the spreading of the faith among people who still didn't know Christ.

Next, speaking on behalf of the organising committee, their president explained the importance of the Congress and how it had come about. Finally Fr Rua thanked the organisers, in particular Cardinal Svampa who, he said, had always been a great admirer of Don Bosco since his days at the junior seminary in Fermo, where he had been chosen to read a poetic address in his honour on the occasion of a visit he made to the seminary. Loud, spontaneous applause erupted as Fr Rua kissed the cardinal's hand, whilst the cardinal embraced Fr Rua and kissed him on both cheeks.

As already indicated, the Congress members were grouped according to the four themes: 1) Education and instruction, 2) Salesian Missions, 3) Publications 4) Organisation of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators. Each of these would have a president, a secretary and a reporter. The daily programme was quite intense. At 8.00 am on the second and third days, there was low Mass celebrated by one of the cardinals; at 8.30, meetings of the various groups, each of which would prepare motions to be submitted at the general assembly; 10.00, general assembly; 13.00, further group meetings; 15.00, general assembly; 17.00, sermon by one of the archbishops in the basilica of *San Domenico* followed by benediction. In the evening of the third day there was an academy in the assembly hall in honour of the Congress members. So as to mark the event at diocesan level, the archbishop arranged that on the 26th, namely the day following the closure of the congress, parishes would make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of The Virgin of St Luke.

The list and content of interventions made in the course of the congress, all of which were thoughtfully prepared, is enough to illustrate the variety and degree of concerns expressed by the members. They were: Don Bosco and his work; Salesian 'Cooperation'; how the Salesian Cooperators originated and the nature of their mission; Don Bosco's educational system; Sunday oratories and catechetical work; religion classes; primary and secondary schools; colleges and boarding schools; education of girls and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; the education of

¹¹ Alfonso Ferrandini, in *La Scuola Cattolica*, May 1895, quoted by E. Ceria, *Annali* II, p. 421.

young workers; Salesian agricultural schools; Salesian missions; care of migrants; financial help for Salesian work; the popular press; school text books; Salesian work at the service of the Church and the well-being of society; and finally “the Pope and Don Bosco”.

In all fairness we must add to those the many motions submitted by the various sections, adopted by the assembly and made more widely known in the Acts. These dwelt especially on the contribution of Cooperators to the religious education of children; their participation in family and parish catechesis; their determination to have introduced into public primary schools a form and content of religious teaching as requested by the Church; their care to make choices for their own children of schools and colleges run entirely according to principles inspired by Catholic faith and morals; their intention to use their authority or their influence to see that local authorities give preference, in appointing teachers, to those whose education, academic background and moral qualities would give some guarantee of a high level of performance, both from a pedagogical and a religious point of view; the help that Cooperators must provide for migrants; their opposition to immoral and blasphemous publications, and their support for a good-quality popular press; and finally on the need for parents to be vigilant regarding their children’s school work. The eleven motions concerning the condition of workers, all in full accordance with “the admirable encyclical *Rerum Novarum*” of *Leo XIII (1891)* could well be reproduced here *in extenso*, given that they show how well it had been heeded in the Salesian world. We shall refer to them again. In all, they constitute a wide-ranging programme of apostolic work, at least for the Italian Cooperators for whom they were immediately targeted. It remained only to make the programme a reality, which is the case with any declaration of this kind.

The closure of the congress

The final general assembly took place in the afternoon of 25 April.¹² As effective president of the congress, Fr Rua, who had tactfully chaired all these meetings, addressed the audience “in a voice trembling with emotion” according to the chronicler. He was expressing his abundant thanks: in the first place to Pope Leo XIII for his Brief to the congress; then to the four cardinals, the four archbishops, and the twenty five bishops, for their presence at the congress; and to the priests, lay people, and men and women Cooperators who had come in such great numbers to spend these days in Bologna. “23, 24 and 25 April 1895”, he said, “will be written in letters of gold in the history of the Salesian congregation; and at the centre of it all, there will shine out radiantly the name of his Eminence Cardinal Svampa”. These last words were greeted with thunderous applause.

The vice-president, Achilles Sassoli-Tomba, speaking on behalf of the Salesian Cooperators from Bologna, thanked the organisers and the general public.

Cardinal Svampa, honorary president of the congress, then spoke. Some of his address was reproduced in the Acts, quoting his exact words. Despite their somewhat oratorical nature, it seems appropriate to repeat them here, since they help us to savour in some small way the atmosphere at this closing ceremony of a highly successful congress. We shall see how he truly ‘raised his hat’ to Fr Rua.

The Cardinal’s happiness at the unqualified success of the Congress was, he said,

¹² Description, *Atti*, p. 70-76.

“slightly tinged with a feeling of frustration, because this is the last time we are together; because we have to leave behind so many very dear people; because we shall hear no more of those practical and interesting talks that stirred up such hope in our hearts. Oh! why aren’t those discourses carved out in letters that will last for ever! Yet the memory of them lives on in the hearts of all, and it is consoling to think that what has been said will be carefully preserved. There is, however, something that pains my heart: it is that soon I shall have to tear myself away from people who have become very dear to me; people who, in the course of these few days, have honoured us with their presence, and have made possible the accomplishment of all that the promoters envisaged; people who today thank us for the hospitality they have received, whereas we are the ones who must thank them for having accepted our invitation; people whose expectations have been fully met, because they are so well disposed. For my part, as long as there is only a separation of distance between people, the thought that we shall have other opportunities to meet again reassures me. It pains me, too, to say goodbye to my very dear Salesians, especially to bid farewell to my very dear Fr Rua, who was the soul of this congress. But it won’t be for long, because he has said as much, and Fr Rua always keeps his word (*hearty applause*). It’s like a signature on a pre-dated cheque. We, too, will have the Salesians here, no longer as guests, as they are today, no longer just passing through, but here to stay (*applause*).¹³

Each one leaving the Congress will return home fired with a new eagerness to share in this worthy cause, blessed by God. Let us put our shoulder to the task; yes, let us work together, all of us united in a common cause. United in faith, in heart, in love, we shall ensure that there’s no place for those disastrous divisions that destroy many a good work. We must learn to master ourselves and rein in those ruinous passions of pride, ambition and vanity. May God strengthen our holy endeavours and give them his blessing. The Virgin of St Luke, who has helped and guided us throughout this congress, is waiting to meet us tomorrow in the shrine of La Guardia to bless us yet again. Let us bring to her the fragrant bouquet of our devotion; she will bless all that we do now and always, and will ensure that we, who have so joyfully gathered in this church of La Santa, now our cenacle, will one day be happily gathered to enjoy from God that hospitality which Fr Rua wishes for all of us, and which is the reward granted to those who persevere.” As he ended this magnificent address, writes the chronicler, his audience broke out into tumultuous applause that went on and on.

Fr Rua’s feelings on the Bologna Congress

On his return to Turin, Fr Rua wasted no time in drawing up a circular for his Salesians, devoted entirely to the Bologna congress.¹⁴ He still trembled with emotion as he tried to match his natural modesty to the splendour of the event.

“For four days I had the joy of taking part in such a sublime spectacle of faith, of zeal, of love and, I can say, of good will towards our humble society, that my heart is still overcome and my spirit full to overflowing. I can’t even attempt to put before you all that I was privileged to see and hear. In spite of all my efforts, I could only offer you a poor, pale picture of what took place. I would have to tell you about such beautiful, such extraordinary and such wonderful things, that it would all seem so exaggerated to

¹³ In fact the Salesian Institute in Bologna was founded in 1896.

¹⁴ Circular of the 30 April 1895, L.C., p. 130-136.

anyone who wasn't there to see it all with their own eyes.”

He would therefore leave it to others to tell the story and paint the picture of a Congress “which will become one of the most beautiful pages in the Annals of our Pious Society”. He would content himself to declare that it had been a magnificent revelation of the goodness of the Lord “towards the humble sons of Don Bosco”. The original idea of the congress, the enthusiasm it unleashed in the city of Bologna, the indefatigable work of the organising committee, the choice of the basilica of *La Santa* for the meetings, the example of the most distinguished families providing lodging for the participants, the devotion of a whole people at the religious services morning and evening in the basilica of *San Domenico* “with a capacity of fifteen thousand”, and all in this one congress, seemed to Rua unbelievably extraordinary. The day after the closure of the congress, in a final crowning event, around fifty thousand people climbed the hill of La Guardia together with the members of the Congress to thank the Virgin of St Luke for its success.

In his letter he couldn't omit referring to the special kindness of the civil authorities in Bologna towards the participants. Nothing had been spared to ensure good public order. Everywhere the Congress members had been shown exquisite courtesy. They had been given free entry into the Bologna museums simply by showing their membership card. bishops from Italy and further afield had, in the event, “given the most touching proof of their affection and esteem for the poor sons of Don Bosco”. Four cardinals, and more than thirty bishops had made personal interventions in the course of the congress, and “innumerable others had expressed their support in such sensitive terms and with such words of praise, that they left us quite embarrassed.” Over and above all that, the superb letter of approval from Leo XIII, addressed to Cardinal Svampa, had been read out at the opening session. The assurance of his blessing had greatly encouraged him. You could say, in fact, that the Congress had taken place under his presidency, since his majestic bust reigned from above the assembly. He had been with them in heart and in spirit.¹⁵

What had made the deepest impression on the heart of Fr Rua and left him with the fondest memory was the true fraternity, the deep unity of minds, the complete accord of feeling and desire which, so to speak, could be seen in the faces of those taking part. In the hall you were breathing a true Salesian air: these were members of one family gathered together, who listened with rapt attention as people spoke of their common father Don Bosco, of Salesian projects which were also their own, who welcomed with signs of approval and hearty applause whatever was proposed to them for the good of souls.

Cardinals, bishops, priests, as well as learned and zealous lay people had given eloquent talks that resonated with the most delicate sensitivities in the hearts of their listeners. Salesians had been strongly and insistently encouraged to go ahead with their various enterprises, whilst Cooperators had been exhorted, to good effect, to give them moral and material support. Cardinal Svampa had been right to say in his final speech that every Cooperator had learned something new.

Writing for his Salesians, Fr Rua also said: “You may be surprised to know that someone was so enthused by the congress, that he called it the triumph, the apotheosis

¹⁵ A note in the circular expressed Fr Rua's intention to send a copy of Leo XIII's Brief to each of the Salesian houses to be kept in the archives.

of the Salesian congregation. I would have been reluctant to repeat those words, which seem to offend the modesty that every Salesian should practise, were it not that it seemed to have been predicted in Don Bosco's dream of the 10 and 11 September 1881. After frightening us by describing the dangers our congregation would face because of the laxity of some of its members, Don Bosco reassured us by adding: *around 1895, a great triumph*. Dear Father, your word has come true."¹⁶

Fr Rua continued his letter, indicating in his own words the lessons his professed Salesians should draw from the congress. In the first place, such a great achievement compelled them to give thanks to God. Right from the beginning of the project he had turned to him through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians seeking a happy outcome for "such an arduous" task. "Thanks be to God and to the Virgin Mary, because the result exceeded all our expectations. Heaven preserve us from claiming as our own the smallest part of what is uniquely the work of God. To Him be all the honour, to Her all the glory!"

The Salesians could count themselves happy that their first Congress brought joy to "The August Old Man of the Vatican", who had kept himself informed on every detail of the Acts of the assembly. One of the first fruits, therefore, was a closer bond between the Salesian family and the Vicar of Jesus Christ. Let's rejoice, he went on, that the bishops value the efforts of the Salesians to match their zeal and to fight "the Lord's battles" alongside them. Wherever we are, let's be exemplary in showing respect to their "sacred persons" and obedience to their commands. The splendid outcome of the Congress must also make the Salesians hold ever more dear their belonging to our Pious Society which they entered in response to a call from God. Even if they know already, in a thousand ways, that God blesses and protects in a special way the Institute to which they belong, may this Congress convince them of it even more and impel them to be ever more worthy of heavenly grace. As true sons of Don Bosco, let them give thanks to God that during the congress, whether in the meeting hall, or in the basilica of *San Domenico*, for three days he has glorified his faithful servant and their most revered founder and father. From the rostrum cardinals and bishops sang his praises as they would for a saint. They inspired in their hearers the highest esteem for his virtues and his work, which they incessantly deemed to be "providential".

After his advice on prayer and thanksgiving, Fr Rua asked his Salesians to make an examination of conscience and to reflect on the quality of their own moral and religious life. Did they deserve to be suddenly raised to such lofty heights? He, who knew them so well, had his doubts. "I have to confess to you, my very dear sons in Jesus Christ, that I have sometimes felt covered with confusion to see in what high esteem our poor Salesians are held everywhere. At the Congress they were held up as model religious, full of zeal for the salvation of souls, masters in the difficult art of the education the young and of their spiritual formation. The wish of many bishops and Cooperators to see Salesian establishments in their towns and cities is greater than ever: they expect miracles from them for the regeneration of today's society. But you will forgive me if, in my heart of hearts, I've been asking myself if we are in fact what people believe us to be... Often I've been assailed by the unpleasant thought that our all-too-kind Cooperators would change their mind if they were to have a closer view of the conduct of some of our confreres... Ah! if those confreres lacking in piety, with little observance of our Holy Rule, or neglectful of their duties had been present at the congress, I have

¹⁶ This dream in MB XV, p. 183-187.

no doubt that they would have made a resolution to change their way of life. I entreat you: let us all be united in upholding the honour of our Pious Society; let us live according to the spirit of Don Bosco, be more like him, in such a way that people may have reason to believe that we are led by the hand of God.”

As he ended his circular, Fr Rua expressed the wish that the general chapter planned for the following September, would provide a strong stimulus for the Salesians to measure up to the expectations of their Cooperators. With God’s help, the rectors gathered around the tomb of Don Bosco in Turin-Valsalice, would come away from their meetings filled with a zeal and fervour that they would take back to their houses and to all their confreres.

20 – SALESIAN EXPANSION IN AMERICA

Fr Rua's enthusiasm for the missions

The Bologna congress had made the Salesian Missions one of its main themes. For his part, Fr Rua never let up in encouraging among his Salesians the love for the missions that Don Bosco had sparked off in 1875. His efforts paid off, and he had no problem finding volunteers for the new missionary expeditions that went off practically every year in the course of his period of office.¹ To have some idea of the conditions they faced, it's enough to think how means of transport and communication have been revolutionised since their time: no air travel, no radio, no e-mails. They were completely isolated, often for long periods. Letters took at least a month to cross the Atlantic. Fr Rua therefore did all he could to ensure that departing missionaries were well prepared for such an adventure.

At the Oratory in Turin, before the traditional farewell ceremony in the church of Mary Help of Christians, it was Fr Rua's custom to gather them together in the small chapel next to Bosco's room. There he urged them to be worthy sons of such a father by their zeal, their love and their religious observance; then he blessed them in his name. Though they were sometimes a large group, he chose to gather them there, rather than in the church, so that he could talk to them informally, as a father to his sons. At the end of the missioning ceremony in the church, they would come up to him in turn to embrace him: it was then that he would whisper his final, affectionate word to each one, a word they would always remember.

Once they had left, it was as though he never lost sight of them. Very precious to him above all were the detailed accounts of their journeys. This is evident from the opening lines of an incredibly long letter of Bernardo Vacchina, written from Rawson, telling of his visit to the Tehuelches Indians in November-December 1895: "It's your wish, dearly beloved father, that your sons in Jesus Christ, scattered far and wide in the various mission posts in uncivilised countries, should always send you a detailed report of their apostolic journeys and the results they achieve..."²

Fr Rua himself would write to them quite often, even when he was on his own travels, especially to those with posts of responsibility such as provincials and novice masters. I have found, for example, that within the year 1890 he wrote eight letters (all still preserved) to Fr Joseph Vespignani, master of novices in Argentina, the first in February from Nice, the second from Brussels, the third from Turin, another from San Benigno, and the last one in November from Turin. In reality, his actual letters to individual missionaries were quite rare: normally, so as to economise on time and postal charges, he would put together parcels of short notes which were avidly received and religiously kept. He did his best to oblige whenever missionaries requested money. Fr Cagliari would testify that when he was in Patagonia, Fr Rua bent over backwards to respond generously to his pleas for help. He did the same for Bishop Fagnano, whose

¹ Here I'm picking up again chapters from E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio*, p. 258-274, completed in *Annali II*, and from M. Wirth, *Don Bosco et la famille salésienne*, p. 293-307, all devoted to missionary issues in America.

² B. Vacchina- M. Rua, Rawson, June 1896, in *Bulletin salésien*, 1897, p. 76.

intense apostolic work often landed him in serious financial trouble. Fr Rua was intent on doing his part for the spread of the kingdom of God in these distant territories.

South America

At Don Bosco's death the Congregation had two provinces in South America: Argentina/Chile and Uruguay/Brasil, followed soon by Ecuador. Its missionary activity properly so-called was carried out in two ecclesiastical areas recently set up by the Holy See: a Vicariate Apostolic comprising north and central Patagonia, and a Prefecture Apostolic comprising southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. In the course of Fr Rua's time as Rector Major and with his wise encouragement, the Salesians went into seven new countries of south and central America: Colombia (1890), Peru (1891), Mexico (1892) Venezuela (1894), Bolivia and Paraguay (1896) and finally El Salvador (1897).

Colombia. The Agua de Dios venture

Colombia headed the list, following repeated requests from both the national Government and the archbishopric of the capital, Bogota: requests made not only to Turin but also to Rome.³ Salesians were wanted in Bogota, come what may. This was a cause of some embarrassment for Fr Rua. In 1889, still under pressure from the Pope's insistence not to set up any new projects, he was deeply hurt by a note from his Cardinal Protector Parocchi dated 30 March: "I have just come from a papal audience," he wrote, "sad to have been told that my dear Salesians have unwittingly offended His Holiness. The Holy Father is very eager that the Salesians should accept the offer of a new house in Colombia, yet the Congregation is not willing. I can understand the problems facing a new foundation, given the shortage of personnel and the many other needs to be met, but you must comply with the Pope's wishes. Even though he seems to be asking the impossible, approach it with the faith that can move mountains." Fr Rua replied immediately to Cardinal Parocchi: "You can't begin to imagine what heartache this news has caused me. I will put you in the picture right away." It was just not true that the Salesians were refusing to open a house in Colombia. Since May of the preceding year they had been working on an agreement on this very matter with a representative of the Colombian government. The sticking point was that he wanted the Salesians there by January 1890, whilst the Salesians "were holding out for 1891."⁴ More discussion were held. The Colombian representative was present at a meeting of the superior chapter at the end of April 1889. Leo XIII kept on insisting. Finally the Salesian missionary expedition for Colombia set sail from St Nazaire on 10 January 1890 under the leadership of Fr Michael Unia, a forty-year-old priest. At the same time in Chile Fr Evasio Rabagliati received instructions to pack his bags and become Rector of the new house in Bogota.

The Colombian mission took on an exceptional character on account of Fr Unia's work at Agua de Dios.⁵ He was told that there was an isolated village at two or three day's journey from Bogota where several hundred lepers lived in complete material and spiritual isolation. Even their letters remained unopened through fear of contagion. As

³See *Annali* II, p. 124-130.

⁴ These letters in *Annali* II, p. 126-128.

⁵ On the venture in Agua de Dios, I take up *Annali* II, p. 141-154.

he read the gospel account of the ten lepers healed by Christ, Unia felt called to put himself at the service of these unfortunate people, rejected by everyone, with scant help from the authorities, and with no priest to minister to them. His Rector, Fr Rabagliati, was willing to let him to go, provided that Fr Rua was in agreement. Unia explained his wishes to Fr Rua in a letter dated 18 August 1891. Meanwhile, the Archbishop of Bogota gave his blessing to a venture that filled everyone with a sense of disbelief.

For the lepers, Fr Unia's arrival among them was like that of an angel from heaven. They couldn't believe their eyes. All those who were able-bodied, men women and children, gathered round him and began to dance for joy. He then went into the leprosarium to find the ones unable to get up. They were covered in revolting sores from head to foot. Some no longer looked like human beings. In spite of all advice never to touch them, and an understandable repugnance, Unia even embraced them. The Archiepiscopal Curia appointed him as chaplain to the village of Agua de Dios. On 28 August Unia wrote again to Fr Rua, declaring his intention to stay there no matter what risks he was running. However, it looked as though Fr Rua didn't want this extraordinary apostolate to go ahead. As it happened, Fr Unia's letters crossed, somewhere over the Ocean, one from the Rector Major instructing him to go to Mexico as Rector of a new house there. Fr Unia submitted, but the lepers, in a letter to Fr Rua dated 17 October and bearing fifty-four signatures, gave vent to their distress at seeing their priest leaving them, and begged him not to deprive them of the great comfort he brought them.

Fr Unia did, in fact, leave the lepers on 25 November amid cries of lamentation from all those sad people. The authorities in Bogota were alarmed: they telegraphed Turin and Rome asking that Fr Rua should revoke his decision. In fact, this had already happened. He had replied to Fr Unia as early as 13 October, telling him: "I am very happy with your generous resolve to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the lepers. I give my full consent, and I ask God to grant you his greatest and most abundant blessings. You are prepared to sacrifice your life, and for this I salute you. I do recommend you, however, to take every precaution to avoid contracting this terrible disease yourself, or at least to delay its onset to the utmost. Maybe another Salesian, following your example, will be prepared to join you and work alongside you in all your spiritual and temporal needs. Although you are living among lepers, we still consider you as our dear Salesian confrere. More than that, we look upon Agua de Dios as a new Salesian colony, and we would like to be able to help those sick people in every way possible. It would give us such great satisfaction. I leave it at that for now. Give them our affectionate greetings and tell them that we love them very much and we are praying for them."⁶

Unia did the work of ten for his dear lepers. He built a children's home, set up a fund for a new hospital, restored the church, piped drinking water from a nearby hill, organised religious festivities and promoted music. Four years of exhausting work eventually wore him down. He returned to Italy to recover his health but died there on 9 December 1895 at 45 years of age.

Over the years the Salesian work in Colombia became more extensive. After setting up the technical school in Bogota, known as the Leo XIII College, the Salesians were given responsibility in 1892 for a parish in Baranquilla, a prominent seaport in the Antilles. In 1893 a novitiate was opened, first at Fontibon, then later transferred to

⁶ This letter in *Annali* II, p. 145-146.

Mosquera. Projects began in the immense plains of San Martín, in the Amazonian regions to the east of the country, but the revolution of 1895 and the lack of personnel prevented any further progress beyond those tentative beginnings. At Agua de Dios two Salesians, Crippa and Variara, took up and developed the work begun by Fr Unia. The Colombian Province was set up in 1896. In order to develop agriculture, a school would be set up at Ibagué in 1905. Under Fr Rua the Columbian Province went ahead steadily, despite the political upheavals typical of that continent, which always had serious consequences for work supported by the government of the day.

Salesians established in Peru

The Holy See showed great interest in seeing the Salesians established in Peru, as was the case with Colombia. In March 1890, Cardinal Rampolla informed Fr Rua that Leo XIII wanted Salesians to be sent to the capital, Lima, as soon as possible, to take on the care of young people. Eager to avoid a repetition of the Colombian contretemps, Fr Rua gave a categorical reply to the cardinal: “You can assure His Holiness that we will do everything we can to respond to his revered wishes”. The negotiators needed some time all the same.

The text of the contract is quite revealing about the close cooperation between the South American governments and the Salesian Congregation. On 6 June the superior chapter modified a number of points in a project put forward by the Peruvians. Their government accepted them. On 25 July the Minister Plenipotentiary of Peru in Italy, Charles Elias, was present at the Turin Oratory for a chapter meeting to discuss setting up an orphanage for boys in Lima. In the agreed statement we read:

“With the charitable intention of providing Christian instruction and education for poor and abandoned youth in the city and province of Lima, the following agreement has been reached between the government minister and the very reverend Fr Michael Rua: 1. The government on its part will grant absolute ownership or usage in perpetuity of a house and all its annexes: playgrounds and gardens large enough to cater for at least three hundred young people. - 2. It will provide all the furniture and all equipment required for dormitories, workshops, classrooms, kitchen, refectories, etc., and appropriate linen. - 3. It will also provide sacred vestments and benches for the chapel, or, in addition to suitable premises, as below, the sum of 50.000 lire to set it up. (*This second alternative was, in fact, what the Salesians preferred.*) - 4. For ten years the initial travel expenses of each member of staff appointed to the orphanage will be covered by the government. - 5. Fr Rua commits himself to open within the year (blank) an institute of arts and trades, as well as primary and secondary education classes for suitable candidates. - 6. The Rector of the orphanage, in his role as representative of Fr Rua, will have the freedom to direct each young person either into a trade or into academic studies. - 7. The Rector will be given complete freedom as the one responsible for the administration and discipline of the institute. - 8. Preference for admission will be given to those boys recommended by the government, provided that they are between ten and fourteen years of age, that their health is good, and that they are free from any physical abnormalities. - 9. The government will provide for each of their recommended youngsters the sum of 40 gold francs a month. If one of them shows bad behaviour, becoming a source of scandal for his peers, or becomes afflicted with some chronic or contagious disease, the government will withdraw him at once when informed by the rector. - 10. This contract remains valid for five years, and will be

considered valid for a further five, unless one or other party gives advance notice two years before it is due to lapse.”⁷

The principles established by Don Bosco were rigorously followed by Fr Rua: support sought from civil society, but absolute freedom for the Salesians in the education of young people.

Fr Angelo Savio had paved the way for the Salesian presence in the country through contacts with a charitable society in Lima. Three Salesians and nine Daughters of Mary Help of Christians arrived in the capital towards the end of 1891. The orphanage began as a school of arts and trades, and Father Anthony Riccardi, previously working in Argentina, was its first rector. An oratory was soon formed alongside. The charitable society of Lima entrusted a business school to the Sisters, and in 1896, on the completion of the first five years, the Peruvian Senate approved the setting up of further Salesian schools. The revolution in Ecuador had led to the expulsion of several Salesians, who thus became available, making it possible for two new houses to be opened: an agricultural school at Arequipa in 1897 and a college at Callao the following year. Within the next ten years (1905 and 1906) the Indian towns of Cusco and Piura also saw the arrival of the Salesians.

The Ecuador venture

From the time the Salesians arrived in the capital, Quito, on 28 January 1888, Salesian work in Ecuador flourished. The house in Quito had a total of fourteen workshops, all fully operational, and from the early nineties the presidential authorities began to show exceptional interest in them. Other centres followed: Diorama (1891), Cadence (1892), and a novitiate was opened in Angelique. By 1894 Fr Rua saw fit to create an Ecuadorian Province, and he appointed Fr Louis Calcagno (1857 – 1899) as its first Provincial.

Around the same time, the Holy See offered the congregation an important mission in the eastern part of the country, where the population was made up of Indian tribes as yet uncivilised.⁸ On 26 March 1889 a letter was read out to the superior chapter from the secretary of the congregation for Extraordinary Affairs expressing the wish for the Salesians to accept responsibility for the new Vicariate Apostolic of Mendez and Gualaquiza. The following 6 September Cardinal Rampolla put it clearly to Fr Rua: “His Excellence Flores, president of the Republic of Ecuador, wrote to me recently with the request that the Holy See should entrust the mission of Mendez and Gualaquiza to the priests of the well-deserving Congregation of which you, most reverend Father, are Superior.”

The request was accepted, and in 1892 Fr Angelo Savio was sent on an exploratory visit. Sadly, he died there on 17 January from pneumonia, having slept in the open on an exceptionally cold night. In Turin Fr Rua bided his time until the document from the Congregation for Extraordinary Affairs arrived on 8 February, announcing the setting up of the new Vicariate and its precise geographical boundaries. Its proximity to Cuenca, where a house had just been opened, suited him fine. This time the exploratory visit to Gualaquiza was entrusted to a young priest, Giochino Spinelli (1868-1949) and a Brother, Giacinto Pankeri (1857-1947). They set out for a tour that would last thirty-six

⁷ Edition in *Annali* II, p. 136.

⁸ On the origins of the vicariate of Mendez et Gualaquiza, see *Annali* II, p. 283-296.

days, taking them to the beginning of October 1893. In spite of every sort of problem, a mission with a small technical school was soon set up at Gualaquiza, though it was in quite a wretched state. Workshops, classrooms, chapel, and even the house itself were little more than wooden huts with roofs of primitive thatch.

In 1894, however, the president of the Republic, Flores, asked the Holy See for the Salesian James Costamagna, whom he had come to know and esteem in Quito, and who was currently Provincial in Argentina, to be made Vicar Apostolic of Mendez and Gualaquiza.⁹ Fr Rua wasted no time in providing the required 'obedience'. On 3 December Costamagna bade farewell to all at the college in Almagro, and by Christmas Day he was at the Oratory in Turin.¹⁰ At a private consistory on 18 March 1895, Leo XIII conferred on him the title of bishop of the titular see of Colonia in Armenia, and on 23 May, in the church of Mary Help of Christians, the Archbishop of Turin Riccardi, assisted by his two Auxiliaries, consecrated him bishop. Thus, following Bishop John Cagliero and Bishop Louis Lasagna, he became the third Salesian bishop. Unfortunately, this Vicar Apostolic of Mendez and Gualaquiza, who was eagerly awaited in the territory, had been ordained at a time of serious political unrest in Ecuador, and as one appointed through the influence of President Flores, he was considered as *persona non grata*.

In effect, problems arose for all the Salesians in Ecuador with the liberal revolution of 1895. In that country being 'liberal' meant also being 'anticlerical'. Friends of the previous government were now considered enemies of the new regime. In 1896 disaster struck. Accused of anti-government activities, the Salesians were arrested and their houses requisitioned. Nine religious, including the Provincial Calcagno, were subjected to a terrible journey to the Peruvian frontier. Their ordeal lasted forty days and left them more dead than alive.¹¹

Alerted to the situation, Fr Rua sought the intervention of the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Visconti-Venosta, who had a letter sent to the Italian consul in Guayaquil in Ecuador, and also to his Plenipotentiary Consul in Lima, Commander Castelli, seeking precise information and requesting intervention on behalf of the Salesians, all of whom were Italian nationals. That triggered a diplomatic ballet performance, but we'll spare the reader any details of the footwork. The Salesian provincial, Calcagno, presented his case, and from early 1897 the whole affair seemed to unravel. But this proved to be no more than a fantasy. In September Fr Rua again put pressure on the Italian minister for Foreign Affairs to get a formal judgment from the Ecuadorian government. Salesian Brother Giacinto Pankeri, who had remained on the spot, did his best to protect Salesian property in Quito. The Italian minister chose to hand over to the Spanish minister all responsibility for defending Salesian interests before the government in Quito. On 29 March 1898 the government made an agreement with Pankeri to set up an arbitration commission. The work of this commission went on until 1902...¹²

Meanwhile however, the Salesian work in general gathered momentum in Ecuador, thanks to the support of enterprising Cooperators in Quito who were in no way resigned

⁹ Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 28 August 1894.

¹⁰ On the Costamagna episode, *Annali* II, p. 291-293.

¹¹ On the accusations brought against the Salesians and their expulsion, see *Annali* II, p. 549-577.

¹² For the details of these dealings, see *Annali* II, p. 590-598.

to seeing it suppressed.¹³

Mexico

In October 1892 Fr Rua decided to send a pioneer group of Salesians to Mexico, where they had been expected for at least four years.¹⁴ On 12 May 1887, when Don Bosco was in Rome for the consecration of the church of the Sacred heart, he received a visit from a group of pupils from a South American college. Some of them asked him when the Salesians would be coming to Mexico. He told them: "I'm not the one who will send Salesians to Mexico; my successor will do what I can't. You can be sure of that." Fr Rua saw to it.

After Don Bosco's death the good name of the Salesians in South America spread as far as Mexico, so much so that on 23 June 1889, seven members of the Catholic Circle of Mexico, eager to see how their country could take advantage of such a promising group, came together to study how best to make this happen. One of the members let it be known that he was a Salesian Cooperator, whereupon the whole group decided to sign up for the Pious Union. An action committee was set up led by Angel G. de Lascurain, who sought the blessing of the Archbishop Pelagius Labastida and made contact with Fr Rua to inform him of these tentative beginnings. Fr Rua expressed his delight at their initiative and sent each one a Salesian Cooperator's certificate of membership. This gave a spurt to the spread of knowledge about Don Bosco and his work throughout the Republic. Even some of the Mexican bishops asked to become members of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators. The name of Don Bosco became very popular in the capital where many began to look forward eagerly to the arrival of Salesians to work for young people.

At this juncture a rich lady Cooperator offered her house to the committee to be made into a college; but with no immediate prospect of Salesians arriving, the group of friends took matters into their own hands. They opened an institute under the direction of a priest, Enrico Perez Capetillo, with workshops for printing and shoemaking, as well as an elementary class for nine orphans, whose number rapidly rose to thirty seven, all from the poorest families in the capital. When Fr Rua was informed, he gave his blessing to the project, promising to send Salesians as soon as possible. On 4 February 1891 the death occurred of the Archbishop of Mexico, an outstanding promoter and benefactor of the work. Next the priest Capetillo withdrew. Total collapse of the work seemed inevitable. However Fr Rua, acceding to the pressing pleas of the Mexicans and encouraged by the Holy See, finally decided in October 1892 to send a pioneer group of Salesians.

They reached Vera Cruz on 1 December and were given an enthusiastic welcome by the Cooperators. The capital celebrated their arrival. There were five of them: three priests, including the Rector Fr Angelo Piccono, a cleric and a Brother. Without delay they presented to the new archbishop, Alarcon, a letter of recommendation from Cardinal Rampolla entrusted to them personally by Fr Rua. When the Cardinal gave it

¹³ On this renaissance, see *Annali* II, p. 598-602.

¹⁴ On the arrival of the Salesians in Mexico, see the 18 letters of Angel G. de Lascurain and of his friends to Fr Rua in 1889 and 1891, FdR 3305 D9 at 3307 A11. Accounts in Ceria, *Annali* II, p. 137-140 and in Francis Castellanos, «*El nacimiento de la obra salesiana en México*», RSS, 15, 1989, p. 399-429, which brings out the role of the Salesian Cooperators in these beginning. 15. Edited in *Annali* II, p. 139.

to him on 19 October 1892, he wrote also that the Holy Father had expressed great satisfaction at the news of this latest missionary expedition. In his official recommendation he wrote:

“My letter will be handed to you by the head of the group of priests who are coming to take possession of the house that has been opened for them in that metropolis. I am fully convinced that you will give them a most fatherly welcome, and that you will use your position and influence to support and protect them in their mission, and in this way ensure the success of their noble project, for which they are leaving their own country for far distant regions. Granted all that, I didn’t wish to miss the opportunity of providing them with this letter of recommendation. I want you to know that your welcome will give great satisfaction to the Holy Father and to myself. These worthy sons of Don Bosco deserve the full support of the Holy See for the good they do, both spiritually and materially, especially by educating young people in both letters and trades, and also by responding to the needs of the faithful in a wide-ranging ministry.”¹⁵

Provided with such lofty recommendations, the Salesian mission went ahead with record speed. On 3 January 1893 Fr Piccono presented his plans to a group of Salesian Cooperators. At once a lady name Julia Gomez made him a gift of a piece of land measuring twenty thousand square metres, and an engineer named Sozaya prepared drawings for a college large enough to take four hundred young people. Offerings of money flooded in. On 29 January the archbishop was able to bless the foundation stone in the presence of an immense number of people. The Mexican Republic joined the list of countries in Latin America where Salesians had taken root.

Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, El Salvador

First of all we give a brief summary of the coming of the Salesians to four other countries of Latin America during Fr Rua’s time, and under his influence.

Venezuela had figured for many years on lists held by Don Bosco and Fr Rua.¹⁶ Among the precursors of the Salesian work in the country there was, as in Mexico, a priest, Richard Arteaga, and a small group of Cooperators. Furthermore, the Archbishop Crispolo Uzcategui lent his support to their request to Fr Rua for Salesians to be sent to Caracas.¹⁷ At the same time the archbishop asked the Pope to negotiate on his behalf with the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.¹⁸ All this was much to the advantage of the Salesians once they were on the spot. They set sail from Genoa on 1 November 1894. In principle, the Government in Caracas was handing over to them an existing school of Arts and Trades, but in fact this was a pure fiction. Administration and discipline in the school remained in the hands of lay people operating in direct dependence on the government which was awash with anticlericals. The Salesians gradually pulled out of the Caracas school, and with the help of the archbishop went elsewhere to develop their apostolate.

We’ll stay for few moments with Venezuela. A Venezuelan diocesan priest, Victor

¹⁵ Edited in *Annali* II, p. 139.

¹⁶ On the Salesians in Venezuela, see *Annali* II, p. 513-524.

¹⁷ See the letter of Crispolo Uzcategui à Fr Rua, 26 May 1890, FdR 3224 C2, and the minute of the reply of Fr Rua en FdR 3224 C3-5.

¹⁸ See the letter of the secretary of this congregation to Fr Rua, Rome, 28 April 1891, FdR 3224 D2-3.

Arocha, a man with a truly Salesian spirit, had been sent to Turin by Archbishop Uzcategui to ask Fr Rua to send Salesians to his city of Valencia. He waited there for a year and was finally ready to return in November 1894 with a very small group: the rector, Andrew Bergeretti (1846–1909), a missionary priest who had made his final profession as a Salesian on the preceding 23 September, and two clerics. In Valencia they opened an elementary school in an existing house, but not knowing any Spanish, they had to take on lay teachers. At least it was a beginning. Numbers of boys increased, and they were obliged to look for property elsewhere. They acquired a piece of land with a few old but well-built houses. This was the start of what was to become the Don Bosco College of Valencia. In 1897 the minister for Public Instruction was welcomed at the station by the band of the Salesian Institute, and formal visit was made to all the classes. The college developed year on year in proportion as the Salesian personnel grew, with both primary and secondary schools. Religious feasts were celebrated with great solemnity, drawing great numbers of people. In 1899, when there was a severe outbreak of smallpox in the city, Fr Bergeretti was outstanding for his dedication to the sick, for which the government granted him a medal of Honour and Gratitude. Whilst it's true that in the early days in Venezuela Salesian work struggled to get on its feet in Caracas itself, there was a minor success story unfolding in Valencia right from the start.

The first Salesian to set foot in Bolivia was Fr Louis Costamagna (1866-1941), nephew of Bishop James Costamagna. This country is at the very heart of South America, hemmed in by Brasil, Chile, and Paraguay.¹⁹ The Bishop of La Paz, Mgr Borgue, had written to Fr Rua on 23 September 1889, asking him to give a favourable hearing to his request to found a school of arts and trades in his city, but Fr Rua could offer nothing more than hopes for the future. A further move was made on 20 June 1891 when Mariano Baptista, the Minister Plenipotentiary for Bolivia in Buenos Aires, came up with a proposal for a contract with his Government to found two colleges of arts and trades, one in La Paz, the other at a place yet to be decided. The conditions offered could not have been more favourable.²⁰ Fr Rua agreed in principle, but needed time to make it happen. Meanwhile Baptista, who had now become President of the Republic, gave his Foreign Minister in France, Manuel de Argandoña, full authority to formulate the terms of a contract with Fr Rua. It wasn't until 8 October 1895 that the document, offering extremely favourable financial arrangements, was finally signed. It read as follows:

1. The Reverend Priest Fr Michael Rua pledges to have a group of at least ten Salesians ready for work in Bolivia no later than November of this year 1895.

2. The superior designated for Bolivia, in collaboration with the government representative, will acquire and assure delivery of all the materials and equipment required for the two proposed foundations.

3. The Bolivian government will pay travel expenses for all personnel destined for the college in Bolivia over the first ten years, including any journeys deemed necessary in the interests of either of the institutes.

4. The Bolivian government will hand over to the priest or priests designated by the Society of St Francis of Sales the building or buildings and all adjoining holdings

¹⁹ On the foundation of the work in Bolivia,, see *Annali* II, p. 525-534.

²⁰ The document in FdR 3267 A4-7.

assigned by the government for the founding of colleges of arts and trades, together with all furniture, machines and equipment to be purchased in Europe.

5. The government will give to the superior chosen for Bolivia, or to the priest designated by him, the total sum required to cover the initial cost of setting up a college.

6. The Salesian Society and its houses will be exempt from any rates or import duties and other fiscal taxes, and will enjoy the same immunity and privileges granted to other Religious Associations.

7. If, for unforeseen reasons, that the Salesians were to leave these establishments, they would hand them back to the government in the condition in which they found them, and would give prior notice of their departure one year before.

8. If the government decides to break this contract, it must give the superior four years prior warning and refund all expenses incurred in the transfer of personnel.

9. Extern pupils will be received free of charge and, for their teaching, the government will set up a monthly subsidy for each of the establishments, or will agree on an honorarium to be paid to each Salesian or employee engaged by the Salesians.

10. Boarders will pay a maintenance fee agreed by the government and the superior of each establishment.

11. Overall management and internal administration, as well as disciplinary policy will depend solely and exclusively on the Salesian Society.²¹

In signing this contract, Fr Rua was forestalling any repetition of the setbacks in Caracas where they had found themselves totally dependent on lay administration. The personnel for the Bolivian mission had, in fact, been appointed even before the signing. There would be fourteen of them, seven of whom would go to La Paz. They reached Buenos Aires the following 23 November, but as a result of a catalogue of misunderstandings and complications whilst travelling through Chile, by train, boat, and some horse-drawn vehicle, they didn't make it to their destination – first La Paz, then Sucre - until February 1896. It goes without saying that they were given a rapturous welcome.²²

Negotiations between the Holy See and Don Bosco should have led to Salesians going to Paraguay as early as 1879. It was a country rocked again and again by revolutions that affected even the clergy themselves in the only diocese of Asuncion.²³ At that time Salesians from Buenos Aires were prepared to go there, but political unrest prevented them. The Apostolic Delegate then turned to the Vincentians, who readily accepted such a challenging mission.

Thirteen years later we find the Salesian Angelo Savio in Paraguay, on an exploratory journey in the vast region of Gran Chaco.²⁴ From the time he arrived in the capital Asuncion, Fr Savio would send lengthy reports to Fr Rua of his findings in an area formerly evangelised by the Jesuits (the 'Reductions of Paraguay'). He painted a sorry picture. "Thousands of savages can be seen living along the river banks. How

²¹ Edition in *Annali* II, p. 527-528.

²² On the Salesian foundation at La Paz, see the letters of Louis Costamagna to Fr Rua in 1896, FdR 3267 B10-E1.

²³ On the arrival of the Salesians in the Paraguayan republic, see Fr Ceria's, chapter, *Annali* II, p. 535-548..

²⁴ Letter of A. Savio to Fr Rua, from Chaco, 8 July 1892; FdR 3812 E11 at 3813 A2.

many more can there be in the interior? One hundred, two hundred, three hundred thousand? There are so many tribes, and some seem to have retained distant memories of earlier missions. But the impression I have just now is that they have regressed to a savage condition, since they have no priest to teach them religion, which is the only source of civilisation. In the past idiotic governments have hounded out the priest, killed the bishops and thought they could govern without God.” He would add that the military government of the day had actually paid his return ticket and expressed their wish to see a priest back among them, though he believed it was from political motives.²⁵ He also shared his thoughts with the diocesan administrator, who wrote that same day to the Cardinal Prefect of the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, in an attempt to get Salesians to send a mission to Gran Chaco.²⁶ Sure enough, on the instruction of Leo XIII, Cardinal Rampolla roused Fr Rua’s interest in the idea,²⁷ but it would only come to fruition after his term of office had concluded.

The valiant Salesian, Louis Lasagna (1850-1895), ordained titular Bishop of Tripoli in 1893, was next on the scene. He visited Chaco and saw the Indians for himself, and he felt that in a country such as this, ravaged by war, the most urgent need was the training of young people in the towns and cities. On 19 May 1894 he urged Fr Rua to open a boarding school in the capital for poor young people.²⁸ The idea had the support of political leaders, and the following year, on 19 August, the Paraguayan government even passed a law which handed over to Bishop Lasagna, as Salesian Superior, ownership of a an old but well-built house in Asuncion with adjacent land. The intention was to set up a school of arts and trades with a capacity for hundred boarders, for which the Salesians would have total responsibility. Thanks to his close friendship with the Paraguayan president, who was a man of action, Bishop Lasagna was able to restore good relations between Paraguay and the Holy See which had been broken off in the aftermath of the assassination of the legitimate bishop of Asuncion, then that of his usurper. Sadly, the accidental death of this outstanding bishop at Juiz de Fora (Brasil) on 6 November 1895 delayed the eventual presence of Salesians in the capital. However, the Paraguayan Consul at Montevideo, Matia Alfonso Criado, acting on the advice of Bishop Costamagna, wrote to Fr Rua on 25 November asking him to honour the arrangements made by Bishop Lasagna. “My sad Republic,” he wrote, “has suffered most from the shocking death of Bishop Lasagna, which we lament with great sadness. You alone, as the most worthy Rector Major of the Salesians, are in a position to attenuate the consequences of such a great misfortune.”²⁹ Meanwhile, back in Asuncion, pro-Salesian politicians were successful in having an oppressive article struck out from a law passed onn 19 August 1895.

The first Salesian missionaries to Paraguay set out for Asuncion from Montevideo (Uruguay) on 14 July 1896. They were four in number, all from the Uruguay province: the Rector, Fr Ambrose Turriccia, one other priest, a cleric and a Brother, accompanied by the Provincial Fr Joseph Gamba.

They made the journey by boat, firstly to Buenos Aires, then on to the capital

²⁵ A. Savio to Fr Rua, Asuncion, 24 July 1892; FdR 3813 A11-12.

²⁶ See Ceria, *Annali* II, p. 539.

²⁷ Rampolla to Rua, Rome, 14 December 1892; FdR 3800 A11-12.

²⁸ Lasagna-Rua, Asuncion, 19 May 1894; FdR 3755 E5 at 3756 A4.

²⁹ From *Annali* II, p. 542.

following the rivers of Parana and Paraguay. On the 23rd they disembarked at Asuncion, introduced themselves to the religious and civil authorities and found that they had been assigned a building put up some time previously by the Jesuits. Fr Turriceia made it his business that same day to write to Fr Rua: “God grant that we, latecomers in this part of the Lord’s vineyard, may be able to do just one thousandth of the immense good done by the illustrious sons of St Ignatius of Loyola. Even today, so long after their expulsion, you can still see the great faith they were able to instil among these nations.”³⁰ At Asuncion, as was often the case, the Salesians began their work in October by opening a Sunday oratory for any boys who wished to attend, then a boarding school of arts and trades for thirty orphans, which was given the name ‘Monseñor Lasagna College’.

In 1895, the Italian Mgr Vecchiotti, Vicar General of the only diocese in the republic of *El Salvador*, drew the attention of Fr Rua to the needs of this country.³¹ A Catholic committee had engaged him to negotiate with Turin about sending Salesians there.³² Fr Rua told him that nothing could be done before 1898, but the Salvadorians had recourse to Rome. Imagine his surprise then, a few months later, to receive a letter from Cardinal Rampolla, who wrote: “The President of the Republic of San Salvador recently informed the Holy Father of his efforts to provide for the education of young people. He expressed his great confidence in the work of the Salesians, and his desire to see them firmly established in his country. It is his ardent wish that, instead of waiting until 1898 to send some of your priests, as you promised, you would be prepared to do so as soon as possible. However, in order to respond to the laudable wishes of the President of the Republic, His Holiness feels that it is only right to leave this in your hands, so that with your accustomed zeal and prudence, you can take whatever steps seem most appropriate to bring about a happy solution.”³³

Fr Rua gave way, promising to do everything possible and stating that he would wait for clarification from the President of El Salvador. However, it wasn’t a letter from the president that came, but another message from the Secretary of State. The finance minister from El Salvador had come to Rome, with recommendations from both the president and the bishop, commissioned to do whatever was need to set up a school to be entrusted to the Salesians. The minister travelled to Turin with a letter from Cardinal Rampolla urging that everything should be done “according to the wishes of all concerned and for the good of young people in that faraway Republic.”³⁴

Fr Rua called upon a keen supporter of the Salesians, the Vicar General Vecchiotti, to speak with Fr Angelo Piccono, Rector in Mexico, with a view to fine tuning a contract with the government for the founding of a school of arts and trades and agriculture in El Salvador. Piccono’s project, after scrutiny by Fr Rua, was formally accepted by the government on 28 April 1897. The Salesians finally arrived on the following 3 December, led by Fr Louis Calcagno, still officially provincial in Ecuador, having been expelled by the revolutionaries. Two priests, three clerics and three brothers made up the group. The bishop took good care of them, and the Salesians soon

³⁰ Quoted in *Annali* II, p. 543.

³¹ On the arrival of the Salesians in El Salvador, see *Annali* II, p. 578-587.

³² Letter M. Vecchiotti-Rua, San Salvador, 25 January 1895, in *Annali* II, p. 579.

³³ Vatican, Secretary of State, 22 June 1895; see *Annali* II, p. 579.

³⁴ Vatican, Secretary of State, 23 August 1895; *Annali* II, *Ibidem*.

won the esteem of the local people, attracting many Cooperators. President Gutierrez honoured them with a visit.³⁵

In spite of all, Fr Calcagno was very cautious. Already on 17 January 1898 he was writing to Fr Rua: “Knowing from experience how things turn out with houses held from the government, we must be prepared for the one we now occupy here to end up like the rest. The situation is very precarious.” In February he made the point again: we must have houses free from political shackles.³⁶ As it happened, an opportunity arose in the small town of Tecla, not far from the capital. Fr Piccono had recommended to Fr Rua a wealthy doctor from the town, a certain Manuel Gallardo, an excellent Catholic and a man with a heart of gold. Fr Rua sent him a cooperator’s certificate of membership. In his letter of thanks, Gallardo wrote: “I’m doing my utmost to deserve the great honour Your Reverence has shown me. With this in mind, I’m having a building put up to provide a home for orphan children. It will be ready within a few days, and it’s my hope to entrust their education to the Salesians. I would consider it a great honour should you accept.”³⁷ Fr Calcagno gave his full support: at least, he thought, in this house the Salesians would have complete freedom of to do things their way.

The doctor was disappointed when Fr Rua’s first reaction was to ask him to wait until 1901. But Providence was on his side. There was a change of government, and at the beginning of 1899 problems began for the Salesians in the capital: non-payment of allowances, and a deaf ear to any claims. Towards the end of January, a group of Salesians led by Fr Calcagno, made their way to Santa Tecla, where the house, small but perfectly adequate, was all ready for them. The others waited for developments, which came thick and fast, so much so that in 1900 they went to join their confreres. As a consequence, an authentic Salesian college, with both students and artisans, got off the ground in Santa Tecla under the patronage of Saint Cecilia, so named after the doctor’s late wife.

With the foundation in El Salvador, the Salesians had set foot in seven new countries in Latin America in the course of the first ten years of Fr Rua’s rectorship. The experience had taught them all, especially Fr Rua as the one ultimately accountable, the need for great prudence in making contracts with their governments. For the rest, they would have to manoeuvre constantly as best they could according to the rhythm of the ever-changing politics of a perpetually unpredictable continent.

The United States

Over the same period of time the Salesians came to the north of the American continent. Large numbers of Italian immigrants were now settled in the United States, especially on the west coast. In 1896, Fr Angelo Piccono came from neighbouring Mexico, where he had been assigned earlier, and made his way to San Francisco. On the 2nd July, Archbishop Patrick Riordan called him: “In addition to the Italian parish of St Peter and Paul in the city, he was offering the Salesians a vast and fertile field where they could begin to work as they saw fit.”³⁷ Negotiations with Turin got under way at once.

³⁵ *Annali* II, p. 583-584.

³⁶ Gallardo-Rua, Santa Tecla, 15 February 1898; *Annali* II, p. 584.

³⁷ Letter Angelo Piccono - Fr Rua, S. Francisco, 2 July 1896, FdR 3788 E4-7.

On 23 November of the same year, the archbishop declared his acceptance of a contract proposed by Fr Rua as follows:

“1. His Excellency Archbishop Riordan a) will entrust to the Salesians the Italian parish in San Francisco, b) will provide travelling expenses and initial costs for the four Salesians who will leave Turin for San Francisco in December 1896. – 2. The Very Reverend Michael Rua a) will send a first group comprising two priests, a cleric and a brother, to take charge of the said parish and, when circumstances permit, open a ‘festive oratory’, begin day and evening classes, and eventually set up an Institute of Arts and Trades to serve the needs especially of poor and abandoned young people; b) oblige the Salesians to restrict their work to the Italian sector of the population of San Francisco.”³⁸

The archbishop was eager to forestall any opposition from the local clergy. Accordingly, at the beginning of 1897 the Salesians took possession of the Italian parish of San Francisco; then in 1898, a second parish was entrusted to them in another quarter of the city, followed by yet another for Portuguese immigrants. In the same year, over on the East coast, in New York, where around four hundred thousand Italians lived, the Salesians took on the parish of St Brigitte, whilst from Turin Fr Rua gave his blessing to all this apostolic progress. Such were the beginnings of Salesian expansion in this great country.

³⁸ From the article of A. Lenti, «The Founding and Early Expansion of the Salesian Work in the San Francisco Area from Archival Documents», *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 7, Autumn 1996, p. 18.

21 - ALGERIA AND POLAND

During the 1890s, Fr Rua introduced Salesian work to two new countries: Algeria and Poland. Setting up in Algeria did not create too many waves. In Poland instead things went much less smoothly.

Salesians in Algeria

In Paris in 1883, Don Bosco had promised Cardinal Charles-Martial Lavigerie (1825-1892), Archbishop of Carthage in Tunisia, to send the Salesians to Africa.¹ It was 21 May and they were both in the Parisian church of Saint-Pierre du Gros-Caillou. The Cardinal had requested the Salesians from the pulpit and Don Bosco answered: "I am in your hands, your Eminence, to do whatever Divine Providence asks of me in Africa. Yes, yes, be sure that if we can do something in Africa, I and the whole Salesian Family will be at Your Eminence's disposition. I will send my Italian and French sons there".² The Cardinal, then, had been waiting for the Salesians in Tunisia for some years. In 1891 Fr Rua informed him, out of courtesy, of an imminent foundation in Oran. The Cardinal replied on 2 July in a somewhat offended tone:

Very Rev. Father,

I received your letter in Carthage on 16 June, along with Fr Bellamy's. I was, I must confess, very surprised to learn that two saints (though not yet canonised) like Don Bosco and Fr Rua, had failed me in a promise made publicly to found a house in Tunisia, and that you, Rev. Father, tell me calmly and quietly today about opening a work in the diocese of Oran. Certainly I can forgive the insult, and I must, since Our Lord gave us the command and the example; but to thank and congratulate those behind goes beyond my virtue, which is without doubt very fragile. So I limit myself to noting that I have received your letter sent last month, and I assure you I am your

humble and obedient,

though not desperate servant,

Charles Card. Lavigerie.³

The person chiefly behind the manoeuvre was the Bishop of Oran, Géraud-Marie Soubrier (1826-1899). In October 1889, he had asked his Vicar General to meet the Provincial, Paul Albera, in Marseilles. Looking after the youth in Oran was urgent. The city had almost seventy thousand inhabitants of various nationalities, especially Spanish. A large number of youth wandered the streets without any notion of catechism without which they could not be admitted to first communion.⁴ Fr Rua told the bishop he accepted the proposal, but he was awaiting further details. They came. Fr Rua did not

¹*On the origins of the Salesian mission in Oran, cf. Oran Dossier, 1890-1892, in FdR 3517A11-3518A6. See also the account in the Annali II, 306-312.*

² According to *Don Bosco à Paris, par un ancien magistrat*, Paris, 1883, 108-111.

³ FdR 3758C9-10

⁴ Letter of Fr Albera to M. Rua, Marseilles, 22 October 1889, in FdR 3676B2-4.

respond immediately. So on 31 August 1890 Bishop Soubrier wrote: "Rev. Fr Albera, in a letter which reached me yesterday, said he was very surprised that you had not yet written to me. Knowing how busy you are, I am not surprised and I make the same request which St John the Baptist's disciples made to the Divine Master: *Tu es qui venturus es, an alium expectamus?* [Are you the one who is to come or must we expect another?]. I have no doubt indeed that you intend to respond to my appeal, but allow me to address you with the prayer of the Macedonians to St Paul: *Transiens ad civitatem nostram episcopalem nostram adiuva nos.* [Come across to Macedonia and help us]".⁵

Prudently, Fr Rua told him that he would send two priests to visit the houses which the bishop wanted to give the Salesians. In fact Fr Celestine Durando and Fr Charles Bellamy, then novice master in Marseilles, went to Oran in December 1890. On his return Fr Durando explained to Fr Rua and the Superior Chapter that the bishop was giving the Salesians two houses which belonged to him, one in the centre of the city, the other on the heights of Eckmühl. The first was an old courthouse next to a building called the "Cathedral choir school", with a fair-sized auditorium which could be turned into a chapel. This house, according to the bishop, could hold the festive Oratory, the Cathedral school (meaning the altar servers whom the bishop considered a nursery of priestly vocations) and classes for day students. The bishop intended to have it restored, giving twelve thousand francs for that purpose. The other house could serve as the boarding school. Two Cooperators, Sisters, were ready to give the Salesians some adjacent land to develop this second work.

The agreement between Turin and Oran was quickly concluded. The agreement was signed in Turin by Fr Rua on 2 February 1891, feast of the Purification, and in Oran by Bishop Géraud Soubrier on the following 12 April, Good Shepherd Sunday.⁶ There were ten articles. The introduction expressed the intentions of the two parties and spoke of Fr Rua's desire to follow up Don Bosco's promise to Cardinal Lavignerie in 1883: "His Excellency, Bishop Soubrier, wanting to provide for the Christian education of the young in the city of Oran, especially the poor and neglected, was proposing that Rev. Fr Rua open works in this city, inspired by the spirit and Rule of the Pious Society founded by Don Bosco, of happy and venerable memory. Fr Rua accepts the proposal gratefully, and is happy to be able to carry out Don Bosco's wish to send his sons to enter the African regions for the salvation of souls".

The Salesians would carry out the project within the terms established in this agreement. As the first article indicated, in October 1891 Fr Rua sent the necessary personnel to Oran to begin the work, at least six Salesians, including priests, clerics and lay people. They took up the running of the Saint Louis Cathedral School, adding primary classes and an Oratory (art. 2). In October 1892 Latin courses were to begin (art. 3). Classes were not free (art. 4). Besides, "Given that the principle aim of the Pious Salesian Society of Don Bosco is to take care of poor and neglected youth, the superiors intended to open a boarding section or orphanage once Divine Providence had provided the necessary resources" (art. 7). In view of this foundation, Bishop Soubrier would give the Salesians the house and land he owned near the parish church of Oran-Eckmühl (art. 8). Other articles concerned financial matters, which Fr Rua was always interested in, as also Bishop Soubrier, in order to be clear about and possibly settle the

⁵ FdR 3517B8-10.

⁶ FdR 3517E5-7.

details: expenses for adapting the old courthouse, travelling expenses and setting up for the Religious, stipends for the teachers.

The French Salesian Charles Bellamy (1852-1911), originally from Chartres, was given the role of Rector-founder of the work by Fr Rua. The bishop had liked him during his exploratory visit. "I hope the Salesians will accomplish great work in Oran. It seems to me that Fr Bellamy is gifted with many qualities", he had written to Fr Rua on 4 January 1891.

The Oran foundation in 1891

The seven members of the Oran expedition, Fr Bellamy, a priest, two clerics, a brother as head carpenter and two young brothers to work in the vineyard, took part in the traditional farewell ceremony for missionaries in the Mary Help of Christians church in Turin on 16 August. Cyprien Beissière, one of the group, said that Fr Rua brought them together in the morning in the old chapel in Don Bosco's room in order to chat with them. "I am sending you like angels into the midst of wolves", he said.⁷ In fact there were any number of administrative annoyances, too complex to be described here. The two reached Marseilles and the Saint Léon Oratory from Turin. There the Provincial, Fr Albera, gave them a solemn farewell. His moving speech, as usual, developed a biblical theme: "How beautiful are the feet of those who go far off to proclaim the Gospel of peace"! The public were deeply moved. "The troubles, trials and tribulations of the missionaries, the blood that perhaps will stain their crown, is never forgotten". I especially greet the three Salesians of the group who had been the "lads from Saint-Léon". According to the news item in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, "we remind everyone that the head of the expedition [Charles Bellamy] had been a dear benefactor of Don Bosco's, and always a worthy son".

On 22 August, the seven left on the steamer *La Città di Roma* direct to Oran. On the 24th they were already at their destination. They were not met by any civil or church representatives: they were all on holidays in Europe. The Salesians, led by Fr Bellamy who knew where to go, went immediately to the Cathedral to greet the Lord and meet the diocesan personnel: the bishop's secretary general and the cathedral vicars, who did their best to look after them. Then they went looking for *rue Ménerville* to check the state of the old courthouse: they found it in a pitiable condition. But they were courageous and full of a spirit of sacrifice, as we see on 26 August in a letter of Bellamy's to Fr Rua.⁸ They rolled up their sleeves and adapted to the circumstances. The bishop, on his return from France, feeling sorry for them, made a generous offer. On 5 October classes began (primary and lower secondary), not in the old courthouse still under renovation, but in the parish school which Bishop Soubrier had made available. They wanted to open the Oratory on 1 November, but succeeded only on 15 December (the day when the diocese celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception), in the presence of Bishop Soubrier who blessed the chapel in the old courthouse. The day finished off with a concert. Thanks to some young actors who put on a spontaneous but lively performance, one of Don Bosco's own plays was staged, *The House of fortune*, to the great satisfaction of the bishop who was in the front row of the audience.

⁷ C. Beissière, *Cinquante ans d'apostolat en Afrique du Nord*, Tunis, 1941, 21.

⁸ Cf. «Les Salésiens en Afrique», in *Bulletin Salésien*, November 1891, 179-181, where Fr Bellamy's letter is reprinted.

Now it remained for articles 7 and 8 of the agreement to be put into action. The property given by Bishop Soubrier on the heights of Eckmühl consisted of a house and a large garden. The Salesians set up there on 31 January 1893. The farm area grew and was quickly improved. They planted trees, set up dormitories, classrooms. Soon there were four workshops organised for the working boys, a student section (for 10-12 year olds), an aspirant section, including some late vocations. A second Oratory was also opened with its *Joyeuse Union*, modelled on the *Società d'Allegria* set up by Don Bosco. The Eckmühl work in the 1890s was simply a Salesian house in miniature, with around ninety pupils. But they had great dreams for development.

Up until 1896 the two works in Oran functioned under the leadership of their founder, Charles Bellamy. At times they encountered serious problems. In 1895, the newspaper *Le Petit Africain* led a ferocious campaign against the Salesians. On 26 October, the Prefecture administration, without explanation ordered the closure of the chapel at Ménerville, "around the same time it authorised the opening of a Masonic lodge", Father Bellamy noted sourly. His reaction arrived on 30 October in an open letter to the Prefect. Fortunately things stopped there.⁹

Polish Salesian Bronisław Markiewicz

Let's alter direction completely and move from Africa to the Polish province of Galicia, under Austrian administration until 1919. At the request of the bishop of Przemyśl, Fr Rua sent Fr Bronisław Markiewicz there in 1892 as assistant in the parish of Miejsce Piastowe, which became the first Salesian work in Poland.

That year, Bronisław Markiewicz (1842-1912), despite being fifty years of age, was still a "young Salesian".¹⁰ Born in Pruchnik, near the city of Przemyśl, in Galicia, he entered the major seminary, not without hesitation, when he was twenty one and was ordained priest three years later. A gifted priest, he studied pedagogy and philosophy, first at Leopoli then Krakow. Thus he was able to successfully pass the exam for parish work (27 and 28 October 1875). He was parish priest of Gać (1875) and Błażowa (1877-1882) for seven years. He applied himself to the ministry zealously: catechism, preaching, confessions, care of the poor and the sick, founding a "teetotallers confraternity", in an area where alcoholism was endemic. He was much admired. So Bishop Łukasz Solecki, who had witnessed his qualities, made him professor of pastoral theology in the major seminary (1882). Nevertheless Bronisław, at forty three years of age, began dreaming of a more demanding spiritual life which would fit in with the practice of his ministry. In November 1885, in agreement with the bishop, he left for Rome in search of a religious congregation able to fulfil his expectations. At the beginning he thought about the Theatines. But he was impressed by the lifestyle and

⁹ On the origins of the Oran house, cf. The long article by Charles Bellamy, «Les Oeuvres salésiennes d'Oran», in *Bulletin Salésien*, April 1899, 97-107.

¹⁰ The Bronisław Markiewicz bibliography is important. Here I refer only to documents and accounts more or less directly concerned with him: Salesian Central Archive in Rome, in particular: FdR 4206B2-4209A5; Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum, *Premislien. Latinorum Canonizationis Servi Dei Bronislaw Markiewicz, Positio super vita et virtutibus*, Rome, 1990; Id., *Premislien. Latinorum Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Bronislai Markiewicz... Relatio et Vota congressus peculiaris super virtutibus die 30 novembris an. 1993 habiti*, Roma, 1993; Maria Winowska, *Aux portes du Royaume. Père Bronislaw Markiewicz, curé de paroisse et fondateur des Michaélites*, nouvelle édition, Paris, Téqui, 1994; Mariano Babula, *P. Bronislao Markiewicz, fondatore della Congregazione di San Michele Arcangelo*, Rome, 2000.

spirituality of the Salesians in Rome where he had gone to celebrate Mass, and so decided to turn directly to Don Bosco. On 30 November 1885 he met him in Turin and very much attracted to him, asked if he could enter his Congregation.

The general Society catalogue for 1887 places him amongst the *ascritti* (novices) in the house of San Benigno Canavese. He began his novitiate in March 1886, after two months of postulancy. No documents on his religious profession have survived. He always said that he made his profession into Don Bosco's hands on 25 March 1887. Secretary Viglietti recorded all the movements of his superior. On that date Don Bosco was in Turin. On 25 March, then, Bronisław met him in Valdocco where, noting his age and qualities as a good priest, he allowed him, in the intimacy of his room and before him alone, to make his vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Probably the secretary general was not told about it, which is why the Salesian Society catalogue for 1888 does not include him in the list of temporary professed nor in the list of perpetually professed. Instead we find him listed as perpetually professed, in the editions from 1889 and 1892. He spent two years at St John the Evangelist's in Turin, and two in the rest home at Mathì. He was suffering from tuberculosis. In these communities, he said, he was looking after the clerics, giving them lessons in history and theology and, sometimes, preaching to the Salesians. He had a very demanding view of the spiritual life. "Don Bosco's spirituality" he wrote on 30 August 1888 in his spiritual notes, "consists in denying oneself for the love of God and neighbour. The neighbour who is entrusted to our care is often hostile towards us: one needs to keep quiet, put up patiently with insults, suspicion, calumnies, always responding charitably. If our neighbour does not want anything from us, we need to be charitable and allow others to worry about them. So there is a constant need to forget our own selves, suppress our egos".¹¹ He would always preach self-denial, kindness and humility.

When he made his profession, Bronisław dreamed of returning to Poland to devote himself to the service of his own country, especially poor Galicia which he used compare, inwardly, with rich Piedmont. His friends wanted him as a Salesian in the parish at Miejsce which depended on his diocese of origin, but which was under secular patronage.¹² When the parish was made free, the parish "patron" wrote officially to Fr Rua asking him to accept the parish as a work of the Congregation and make Fr Markiewicz the assistant. Fully in agreement with this proposal, on 19 October 1891 Fr Rua wrote (in Latin) to the bishop of Przemyśl: "For a while now I have had the intention of opening a work in Poland to take in youngsters, especially the poor. Up until now, a lack of priests and teachers has always prevented me. Though the harvest is great, the labourers are few. Now to satisfy his pious desire, I willingly grant Fr Bronisław Markiewicz the right to go there and take up the work of the parish".¹³ Fr Markiewicz set to work at the end of 1891,¹⁴ and Fr Rua officially authorised him.¹⁵

¹¹ *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 61.

¹² Documentation in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 53-57.

¹³ Latin letter published in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 64.

¹⁴ Cf. his letters of 23 November and 21 December 1891, in FdR 4207C11-D4.

¹⁵ Cf. the letter to Bishop Solecki, 3 January 1892, in FdR 4207E8-9; and testimonial letters carrying the same date, in FdR 4207E6.

The Polish foundation in 1892

Having returned to Poland, Fr Bronisław arrived in Miejsce Piastowe on 24 March 1892. He began to serve the parish, but especially began to look after neglected youth. He knew that Fr Rua was thinking of a regular Salesian work, so he started the "Don Giovanni Bosco Istituto" (the actual title in the Salesian catalogues from 1894 to 1897 at the "house" at Miejsce).

Fr Markiewicz launched himself vigorously into this work. He lived in the presbytery while neglected boys and girls lived in an outbuilding. They were working on the farm and countryside belonging to the parish "benefactor". In 1895 he also set up workshops for them for shoemaking, dressmaking and other trades. He began to choose the best of his boys to make Salesians of them to serve their companions. The girls had their own female organisation. Fr Markiewicz applied an educational method inspired by the best of Salesian tradition, based on reason, religion and kindness.¹⁶ In the list of personnel at Miejsce the Salesian catalogue for 1894 listed eleven "aspirants": three laybrothers and eight students. In 1895 three of them appeared as "*ascritti*", meaning novices, and the number of aspirants grew to seventeen (five working boys and twelve students). Turin found these numbers intriguing. The catalogues for 1896 and 1897 listed only two more "*ascritti*", but no aspirants. In 1898, the community at Miejsce disappeared from the catalogue. We can see the reason straight away.

In his letter to the Cooperators in the *Bollettino Salesiano* for January 1895, Fr Rua spoke warmly of Markiewicz's work: "In Poland now for some years a Salesian priest, sent as parish priest to Miejsce, a town in Galicia, began gathering poor and needy youngsters in his parish quarters to instruct and support them. The small hostel began to grow little by little. There was already a need to send personnel to help the poor parish priest who was unable to manage on his own; and by the end of the previous year the number of inmates had risen to around fifty".¹⁷

In 1896, Fr Rua authorised a Salesian Sister to take part in the formation of teachers (they were preparing to be consecrated) who wanted to embrace religious life.¹⁸ But Fr Markiewicz's ever more audacious initiatives were about to test the system to breaking point, as the minutes of the Superior Chapter in its 23 November 1896 meeting said in summary fashion: "From Miejsce, Fr Markiewicz is proposing new enrolments [of novices] and some professions. It was decided to send Fr Veronesi to the community, to get a clear idea of what was happening. Meanwhile neither the enrolments nor the professions ceased".¹⁹

The crisis of 1897

Poverty reigned in the *Don Giovanni Bosco* house in Miejsce Piastowe. The number of youngsters taken in was now approaching one hundred. But a serious crisis was in the offing. In June 1897, Fr Rua, concerned by the news reaching him from the out-of-

¹⁶ Cf. possibly the testimonies of L. Bialoczynski and W. Michulka, in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 72-75..

¹⁷ *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1895, 3.

¹⁸ Letter of G. Marengo to B. Markiewicz, 21 September 1896, in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 76-77.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 23 November 1896, in FdR 4242A9.

control orphanage, acted on a decision of the Chapter and sent the Provincial, Fr Moses Veronesi, as Visitor. He received a warm welcome. But Bronisław Markiewicz found his conclusions disconcerting.

After having them approved by Fr Rua to be sent to Fr Markiewicz by letter (a letter not preserved), the visitor, who was living at Mogliano Veneto, wrote up his decisions in a letter sent to the dean at Rymanow on 14 October 1897.²⁰ Women had to be housed in a separate building; the boys should no longer be living in the presbytery; there needed to be a more varied diet for the young men and the religious; there should be no more than twenty youngsters; girls should not have been brought in; Fr Markiewicz needed to look after the parish, the twenty boys remaining, and send the others somewhere else.²¹

Faced with such a drastic position Fr Markiewicz decided to leave Fr Rua's Congregation and set up a Society which was more faithful, so he thought, to Don Bosco's original intentions. On 29 December 1897, the secretary of the Superior Chapter wrote in the minutes: "A report was read out concerning Markiewicz's intention to go ahead with his defection. He has carried out a clothing ceremony for his clerics and accepted the vows of several girls". That was all.²² We have Fr Markiewicz's long letter, dated 28 December 1897, in response to the bishop of Przemyśl who had asked him his reasons for breaking away from the Salesians. Here are the major points: 1) The Salesians have altered their original Rule, which gave pride of place to the motto "Work and Temperance"; they are looking after the middle class and have left out the "poor and neglected". 2) They have centralised their novitiate. 3) They have centralised financial management to the advantage of the Italians. 4) They want to Italianise the Poles who come to them. 5) You see the same tendency in the missions: "Italianising these countries, especially South America, is the main aim of Salesian missionaries, rather than converting savages". Consequently, "after exhausting all my arguments after eleven years, I can see clearly now that for me, my institute, Poland and the Church, it is more useful for me to separate from the Italian Salesians and found a separate Congregation which holds to Don Bosco's primitive Rule. To this end, on 23 September this year I presented my request to the Most Rev. Bishop of Przesmyśl and to the Holy Father".²³ This saw the beginning of the Work and Temperance Society, and the civil administration willingly gave its approval to the priest.

The bishop for his part did not believe he "needed to oppose his idea of founding a Congregation according to Don Bosco's primitive spirit, inspired by similar examples in the Church's history", as we read in the minutes of the Superior Chapter for 14 March 1898. "Fr Rua answered that Markiewicz refused obedience after we had written him asking him to put his house in order following advice that the bishop himself had communicated to him; that we could not allow this new Congregation to bear our own title; that we were releasing Markiewicz from his vows in accordance with our Rule, and that as a consequence he no longer shared in our privileges". The Chapter decided

²⁰ Typewritten copy, ASC, dossier Markiewicz.

²¹ Cf. also the letter of B. Markiewicz to Bishop T. Lekawski, quoted in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 82.

²² *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 29 December 1897, in FdR 4242C2.

²³ Letter of B. Markiewicz to the bishop of Przemyśl, Miejsce, 28 December 1897, given to me and translated by Tadeusz Jania, Krakow.

to send the Procurator in Rome, Caesar Cagliero, a copy of the bishop's letter and the response so that he could present it to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, meaning the Holy See.²⁴

In fact Fr Markiewicz had been insistent with Rome, which was turning a deaf ear. At the end of a long letter to the Pope, dated 5 April 1898, after listing his reservations concerning what he called the "new Salesian Society", he wrote:

..] When the latter [Fr Veronesi], first in word then by letter, insisted under obedience on the introduction of these [Italian customs], forced by conscience I ceased all contact with his superiors and set up a separate Congregation which followed the primitive Rule and observance of Don Bosco because, aside from the annual retreat in the spirit of St Ignatius of Loyola, the Don Bosco house in Miejsce stood out positively from the other Salesian houses in Italy, especially since its pupils showed the virtues which Don Bosco insisted on, like work and temperance, especially in regard to the excellent aspect of temperance which is humility.

The undersigned has four clerics and four perpetually professed confreres with him and forty novices. I humbly beg Your Holiness to grant this Congregation the privileges which the Holy see has granted to the Congregation founded by John Bosco of glorious memory, of whom I am a son and the most faithful imitator.²⁵

Fr Markiewicz placed his Society under the patronage of St Michael the Archangel. This was the origin of the male and female Congregations known as the Michaelites, recognised by Rome after their founder's death.

In this event it is Fr Rua's sentiments that we are most interested in. These we know in letters sent to the Bishop of Przemyśl in 1897 and 1898, Bishop Solecki. On 19 December 1897, he simply announced that Fr Markiewicz had left the Salesian Congregation:

Faced with his contumacy and persistence in his opinion, after patiently waiting three months for him to retract, there is little else that we can do other than releasing [Fr Markiewicz] from his vows and removing him from the list of members of our Congregation. However, we did not want to take this last step without previously informing Your Excellency and without first hearing your opinion. If Your Excellency is in agreement, starting from now, from this letter, we place Reverend Markiewicz under your jurisdiction and remove him from the list of members of our Congregation.²⁶

On 27 March 1898, following a letter from the bishop, quoted above, and examined at a meeting of the Superior Chapter on the 14th, Fr Rua sent a further letter in Latin, which contained the following detailed criticisms:

Heartfelt thanks for your letter, full of humanity and kindness, which I have the pleasure of receiving. I will not add much further on Fr Bronisław Markiewicz whose disobedience and stubbornness has made me suffer personally as well as other superiors. Your Excellency knows that he has set up a house for boys and girls in Miejsce which contravenes the rules of our Pious Society. This is dangerous for good morals and

²⁴ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 14 March 1898, in FdR 4242C4.

²⁵ Document provided by Tadeusz Jania, Krakow.

²⁶ Quoted in *Positio super vita et virtutibus*, 83.

consequently goes against my will. When the Visitor, Fr Veronesi, whom I sent to Miejsce, offer him all the observations and warnings they involved, in a spirit of charity and gave him directives according to Your Excellency's own wishes, Fr Markiewicz, audaciously maintaining his own opinion, claimed that he was the only one following the Rule of the Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales, and that all the other superiors had deviated from the ancient, proper path. What audacity! Or rather, what stupidity! When everyone knows that not a single iota has been changed in the Rule received from our most venerable Founder. The infidelity and disobedience of a few do not affect the Rule. First of all then, may our dear Fr Markiewicz learn obedience and humility; then he will see that nothing has changed in our Rule. Because of such serious disobedience and flight, in accordance with our Constitutions (Ch. II, art. 5), Fr Markiewicz has been rightly excluded from the Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales, confirmed by this letter. He returns to the simple status of secular priest, under his bishop and will no longer benefit from the privileges of the Regulars. I recommend him to Your Excellency, hoping that he may be an excellent parish priest. But I will never allow him to usurp the name of the Salesians and our most revered Fr John Bosco in any way. I will oppose that with all my strength. If he intends to set up a Pious Society, he can call it after St Stanislaus Kotska or St John Berchmans. But he cannot usurp an already known title, which would generate enormous confusion, against the opinion of the Holy Father Leo XIII, who makes every effort to guide Religious Families to unity.

Unworthy as I am, I entrust both myself and my Pious Society to Your Excellency's powerful prayers.

Your most humble and devoted servant,

Michael Rua, priest,

Rector Major of the Pious Salesian Society.²⁷

In April 1898, in a new letter written in Latin to the bishop, and written at the request of his Auxiliary, Bishop Weber, Fr Rua took up the story of Fr Markiewicz in Poland once again.²⁸ It is too long to be reproduced in its entirety, so I quote just new complaints about him. Despite the fact that the Rule permits this, Fr Markiewicz had forbidden the Salesians sent to help him from confiding their complaints to their superiors. He claimed that the Salesians were holding onto money collected in Poland for their own use, while in fact it was intended for maintaining young Poles in formation in the houses at Foglizzo, Ivrea or Lombriasco. This last-named house was commonly known as the Polish house. "Why be amazed that the Polish Cooperators, well aware as they are", exclaimed Fr Rua "have helped us and approve the use of the money they send us!..It has not been possible to send some of these young men back home to look after youth because they have not yet finished their studies, but everyone knows this is my intention". He himself personally assisted Polish emigrants to America or England: "This is sufficient to refute Fr Markiewicz's objection that up till now, the Salesians have done nothing for Poland". He concluded his letter, clearly bitter about things, with what he considered to be the most serious issue:

²⁷ Latin copy in FdR 4207E10-12.

²⁸ Manuscript copy attributed to April 1898, in FdR 4208A8-B3.

Do not be surprised, Excellency, that I deplore this schism so painfully provoked in our Society by Fr Markiewicz by his disobedience, and especially his audacity in calumniating the entire Congregation as if it had betrayed its original spirit. If Fr Markiewicz truly wants to serve God and work for the salvation of souls independently of his legitimate superiors, it is not right for him to usurp the name of the Salesians, or call himself a son of Don Bosco, or alienate other Polish priests and clerics from their vocation.

In fact it is painful that Fr Markiewicz, in various letters, has urged other Salesians to leave the Congregation to come and join him. Some have rejected the proposal, but one cleric called Orlemba, after his profession, has gone to Miejsce and, so as he would not feel sorry for having done so, Markiewicz appointed him director of the boarding school. Cleric Orlemba was never dispensed from his vows. Let him give another name to his Congregation and not be allowed to alienate priests and clerics from their vocation or write to Cooperators asking for money, creating a lot of confusion. This has happened in letters on 2 April last where he urged priests to celebrate Mass for his intentions and send the money to what he calls "Don Bosco House".

Prostrate at the feet of Your Excellency, I recommend myself to your fervent prayers, I personally and the Pious Society which I lead, despite my unworthiness.

The Postulator for Fr Markiewicz's Cause told me: "It was a lack of harmony between two Saints". Certainly, seeing that the Church has beatified both, recognising the heroic nature of their virtues: Michael Rua in 1972, Bronisław Markiewicz in 2005... But we need to confess that in 1897 and 1898, the one who suffered most in the "battle between two saints" was our Fr Rua, for sure. The first foundation on Polish soil made him suffer enormously, so scrupulous was he in imitating Don Bosco, faithfully following in his footsteps. Publicly accusing him of lacking in fidelity to his master, imagining that there might be a more austere version of the original Rule, something which in fact never existed, and thus creating a current of antagonism, if not a real schism in the Congregation: it would have been difficult to find a more refined form of torture.

In 1898, the new foundation, certainly tough but successful, of the house at Oświęcim, would be balm to soothe his heart.²⁹ Miejsce could be forgotten, Oświęcim would assume pride of place amongst the Salesian works in Poland.

²⁹ On the foundation of Oświęcim, cf. *Annali* II, 679-685.

22 – Journey to the Iberian Peninsula (1899)

It would be tedious to follow Fr Rua on all his numerous journeys through Europe.

Those that he made in 1899 to Spain and Portugal and which took him as far as Algeria deserve our attention, as much for the fact that in some towns the enthusiasm in his regard both from young people and the crowd recalled the same enthusiasm provoked by Don Bosco in Paris and Lille in 1883. As they had done with his master 16 years before, they now revered Fr Rua as a living saint.¹

In Catalonia and the Basque country.

Arriving from France, Fr Rua was accompanied by Fr John Marengo, his Vicar General for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and Fr Philip Rinaldi who had joined them at the frontier. They disembarked at Barcelona at one in the morning on 5 February 1899. Everyone was waiting at the station to make them welcome. A group of young workers from the Salesian Oratory of San Jose tried to detach the horses from the carriage sent by a Cooperator and themselves pull him along the Rambla, the brightly lit street running through the city. They were politely encouraged to desist from this plan. The travellers went immediately to Sarrià and its Salesian School, also well lit up. There Fr Rua had to walk between 400 boys standing in line, fascinated by him.

Two weeks hardly sufficed to visit the Cooperators in Barcelona and give them conferences, present his compliments to the religious and civil authorities and give interviews to those wanting to meet him. The St Joseph's Oratory, the last work set up by the saintly Cooperator Dorothy Chopitea, made a strong impression on him. He spoke of it at Bologna on 30 May following.

Only a few years ago immorality and irreligion reigned in this district and young people were insolent and offensive through the bad example of their elders. They used insult passers-by so grossly that the forces of public order had to frequently intervene. Here I find a calm and polite population and young people who are lively and cheerful but very respectful to the priest, whom they greet and approach with great confidence. Everyone attributes this marvellous change to the oratory which has only been working in this area for a few years and they bless this institution which, by instructing and educating the children, has in fact had the same effect on the parents and their families.²

With regard to the first four houses that he visited, two were run by the Salesians and two by the Salesian Sisters. Fr Rua wrote to his Prefect General, Fr Belmonte, on 15 February. 'Here things are going very well. The houses benefit from a great deal of sympathy'. He devoted two days to a fifth house, the novitiate of St Vincent dels Horts, which was quite near to the city. It was during the last days of the Carnival season. The

¹ Cf. the letter of G. Marengo to D. Belmonte in this journey, in FdR 3004A12-C1, which I make frequent reference to without quoting directly. For the journey to the Iberian Peninsula, cf. «Il viaggio del Ven.do nostro Superiore Don Rua», *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1899, 120-122; June 1899, 145-147; I closely follow the account by Ceria, *Vita*, 295-308.

²Amadei II, 534-535.

novices were making their retreat. Fr Rua heard confessions and gave the 'good night' and the sermon to conclude the retreat. The local population took such a wholehearted part in the novitiate feast that they seemed to forget the usual masked games. No one even saw a mask. Fr Rua was satisfied. From the novitiate he wrote to the Prefect General. 'Here too it seems that things are going well.' The Rector Major never overstated his ideas. He wanted to say that despite some faults and inevitable weaknesses the essentials were assured. The Barcelona houses and the nearby novitiate had impressed him by their good Salesian spirit.³

An agreeable surprise awaited his return to Sarrià, a meeting of past pupils, the first to be held in Spain. 'This was a truly admirable spectacle such as we have never seen before', asserted a weekly newspaper of the place.⁴ Encouraged by Fr Rua these young people formed a permanent association aimed at gathering together all the past pupils of Sarrià.

On Friday 17 February, Fr Rua reached the house at Gerona, where he had to bless the foundation stone of the church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. It was raining heavily as he arrived and persisted the whole night long; there was little sign of it letting up. The people had been suffering a long drought, so they thanked the heavens and Fr Rua himself, since his arrival seemed to have prompted the rain. But the rain worried the Salesians who feared that it might wreck their feast. Fr Rua saw this and reassured them. Then on the Saturday, he suggested they recite morning and night prayers well so everything would go off properly. In fact on Sunday the 19th the sun broke through and allowed the ceremony to take place in the open air in front of a huge crowd of people.

On 21 February Fr Rua left Catalonia and headed for Portugal. The journey was long and more tiring than he had thought it might be. He made four stops along the way. He stopped at the Bilbao, Santander, Bejar and Salamanca houses. Everywhere 'sincere outbursts of enthusiasm, affection, reverence surrounded him not only on the part of the Salesians and their pupils but also from others, above all from some Cooperators' wrote Fr Marengo to Fr Belmonte on the following 5 March.⁵ Fr Rua was constantly besieged by people waiting for advice, journalists lining up for interviews, sick people imploring his blessing. "It was Don Bosco all over again, including people cutting off pieces of poor Fr Rua's clothing". The people were getting themselves cheap relics. As in Catalonia, people from city hall, ordinary people and clergy came to meet him. The bishops and the Jesuits from Bilbao and Salamanca, the Scolopians from Saragozza, who offered hospitality, the Carmelites from Alba de Tormes where, in response to the wish of the Bishop of Salamanca, Fr Rua venerated the relics of St Teresa. In various ways everyone demonstrated their esteem.

Portugal

On 4 March after Salamanca, Fr Rua temporarily suspended his visits to the houses in Spain to go directly to Braga in the north of Portugal. This journey held a

³See letter in FdR 3756D9-10.

⁴ *El Sarrianes*, 25 February 1899, quoted in Ceria, *Vita*, 297.

⁵ *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1899, 121.

disagreeable surprise for the three travellers. At the entrance to Quejigal Station their train mistakenly (switchman's error) took the track that led to a siding where several goods wagons were parked. There was the rending sound of a crash. Frs Rua, Rinaldi and Marengo found themselves suddenly thrown onto travellers sitting opposite, then ended up on the floor, luggage from the racks falling on top of them. Fr Rua received a light blow to the forehead and had a blood nose. Other travellers from the compartment were unhurt. Elsewhere some had cuts and bruises. The locomotive managed to pull them to the next station where it was replaced.

The late hour of the arrival at Braga did not stop the Portuguese from giving Don Bosco's successor a good welcome. The following day, 5 March Archbishop Sebastião Leite de Vasconcellos, a great admirer of the Salesians in Portugal, organised a reception for Fr Rua at the seminary. A well-known speaker employed all his oratorical skills in description of Don Bosco, describing his work and drawing up a profile of the Salesian Cooperator. The archbishop, who was a great character and much beloved for his charity, gave a short, fervent speech. Then Fr Rua thanked everyone as best he could in Portuguese. The seminarians were enthusiastic. On 9 March Fr Marengo was able to write to Fr Belmonte: "The academy they put on in Braga in honour of Fr Rua was a great success and very important for the city". He went on: "When Fr Rua left for Vigo, on Tuesday at 11.30, the station was full of people. The best known benefactors were there to say goodbye and thank him for the honour given to Braga through his visit. The city band played, while the crowd broke into applause and shouts of 'Long live...'", until the train had disappeared. We should not forget the flowers thrown along the way to the carriage".⁶

The station at Vigo was three kilometres outside the city. The children were waiting for Fr Rua there, They accompanied him in full voice "Long live Fr Rua"! and ran alongside his carriage to the Salesian Oratory. Their shouts announced the arrival of Fr Rua to the citizens who were surprised by the manifestation. Fr Rua spoke of it at Bologna along with the St Joseph's Oratory at Barcelona. He said: "I was made welcome in a little village by a crowd of youngsters of all ages and status and they gave me a rousing reception with a guard of honour for some three kilometres, a clear sign of esteem and affection".

Cooperators both male and female were waiting at the entrance to the college, because of the crowds already massed in the courtyard. On the following day, Fr Rua went down to the fishermen's section near the seaside where the Salesians had been working for three years. These simple folk were waiting in the Church where they wanted to hear him. He talked with them very familiarly, promised that the Salesians would work for their spiritual needs and publicly asked the Cooperators to help them in this. His desires came to fruition when a little afterwards the Salesians took charge of the parish there.

From Vigo on the 9th he re-entered Portugal. After a day at Porto among friends who received him with open arms, he entered Lisbon on the morning of March 11. The beautiful capital seemed to want to reserve to itself the best welcome of all. Even the liberal Press had announced his coming. The chief authorities and aristocrats spared neither word nor gesture to show him respect and esteem. During this time in Portugal

⁶*Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1899, 122.

there was little mixing of social classes. As Fr Ceria put it, at the Salesian school where they wanted to make use of Fr Rua's presence to solemnise the pupils' prize-giving, "you could see that the aristocrats did not turn up their noses at offering young apprentices the prizes their efforts deserved". The prizes were tools of the trade.

The Marquis De Livieri, "a fellow countryman of Don Bosco, who had lived in Portugal for many years" according to Fr Marengo in a letter of 14 March, organised a banquet in honour of Fr Rua. Amongst the personalities invited were the Provincials of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Vincentians and Holy Spirit Fathers. The Rector Major replied politely to the toasts which followed. This seemed to encourage the generosity of the Marquis, a great friend of the Salesians in Lisbon for many years. They were operating in an inadequate location and looking for somewhere to conveniently set up their technical school. The Marquis offered a hundred thousand francs to Fr Rua and a vast property where his sons could put up a building capable of responding to their needs. When this became public, this gesture encouraged others to give money or support to the Salesians... At Lisbon Fr Rua gave a conference in French, which most people were able to follow.

When he learned that the Royal Court would appreciate a visit, Fr Rua went there. He first met with Queen Amelie who received him with great kindness. She had wanted the Salesians to take over a reformatory where, she said, young people went in as children with problems and came out as real scoundrels. "But", she added, "as it is a government institution the process will not be easy. At the very least it will take time! So develop the work but keep your freedom in doing so. I will continue to protect it. It really will do good work". Fr Rua then went to the rooms where her two children were, the young princes, but found only the youngest there and chatted with him for a few minutes; he gave him his blessing and a medal of Mary Help of Christians. The following day he went to see the heir to the throne, Louis Philip, who spoke about his impending First Communion. Fr Rua put a medal of Mary Help of Christians around his neck and gave him his blessing. The Prince received the blessing devotedly, kneeling. Finally, on 14 March, he visited the Queen Mother, Maria Pia of Savoy, who greeted him warmly.

At Pinheiro de Cima, not far from the capital, the novices were feverishly waiting for the Rector Major who for his own part was very keen to meet them. He went there on 16 March and received the profession of two novices. He left Lisbon the following morning. Friends and admirers went to the station to renew their demonstration of affection. Fr Rua told the Rector: "Believe me when I tell you I am leaving a part of my heart in Lisbon". The following day the Rector, sending him a copy of the gift of land from the Marquis of Liveri, wrote: "Our youngsters are not happy that you are leaving them". Some of them, much influenced by what they had seen and heard, asked to become Salesians, indeed they wanted to become missionaries. The *Correo de Andalucia*, which published news of the imminent return of Fr Rua to Spain, wrote: "Fr Rua has greatly affected the cities he visited and traces of his visit will not disappear too quickly".

Andalucia

From Lisbon Fr Rua went directly to Seville which became his point of departure for his visits to the houses of Andalucia.

Seville's welcome was sensational. Hardly had he got off the train when the Cooperators pressed round about him. The saintly Archbishop Marcelo Spinola - to whom we owe the little book, *Don Bosco y su Obra*, published in Barcelona in 1884 - was the first to greet him. In the square in front of the station, where a line of fine carriages were lined up, a crowd of people applauded Fr Rua,. The archbishop made Fr Rua ride in his carriage. A crowd, mostly workers, was waiting in front of the Salesian Institute. As soon as the carriage came near, a shout went up along with fireworks, drowning out the youngsters who were singing to the accompaniment of the band. Fr Rua, almost borne aloft by the people, headed for the large church which was soon packed. The pupils were eventually able to make themselves heard and sang a *Te Deum* solemnly from the altar. Then there were welcoming greetings in the courtyard: a short but brilliant speech from a university professor, affectionate words from the archbishop and a moving reply from Fr Rua in good Spanish. With great difficulty, Fr Rua was finally able to extract himself, so much was he pressed on every side by the crowd. Once he had managed to get back to his room, he saw that they had slashed his poor cassock, and he asked the Rector, Peter Ricaldone to beg them not to do this again. Fr Ricaldone promised, but to pacify him, he said with a touch of humour: 'Relax, tomorrow you will have another cassock, but allow me to say, however, that they have never wanted to slash mine'. Fr Rua smiled. On the days that followed some of the better-known families sent along towels, sets of crockery, linen, bed clothes, tapestries, furniture, hoping that they might be used at least once by him and then kept as relics.

The visits lasted two days. On 19 March Fr Rua wanted to join the working boys for St Joseph's feast day. Then he went to the Salesian Sisters to see a recently opened Salesian community dedicated to St Benedict of Calatrava. On 21 March he interrupted his stay in Seville to go to the first college in Carmona, then to Valver del Camino where the Salesian Sisters were, then to the Salesians and Sisters in Ecija, in the new community at Montilla, the Utrera institute and the school run by the Sisters at Jerez de la Frontera, all small cities in the province of Seville⁷. In Ecija, while the train was coming into the station, the city bells were ringing out loudly. Nobody of importance was missing to welcome him. The following day large crowds turned out to farewell the "saint". On 25 March in Utrera, the first Salesian house founded in Spain, he was given a welcome in the city, as if he were a king or member of the Royal Family, so they said. Fr Rua sang the Palm Sunday Mass, then went with the youngsters on retreat for the first three days of Holy Week, heard confessions, spoke to them at the Good Night and the closing sermon. On 30 March, Holy Thursday, he went back to Seville in time to preside at the washing of the feet in the evening.

On Good Friday, he seemed deeply moved, as Fr Rinaldi wrote, taking part in the traditional procession for "Christ's death". People did not cease admiring him, watching him so deeply recollected. On Holy Saturday evening, at the end of Lent, youngsters from the Catholic Club at St Benedict's Oratory came to collect him. The boys from the Oratory wouldn't leave him alone for one instant. There was an academy with speeches,

⁷Perhaps not all! Also worth noting that Valver del Camino is in Huelva, Montilla in Córdoba and Jerez de la Frontera in Cádiz.

songs, music. Then they made him stay for a play performance, written by Fr Peter Ricaldone. Fr Rua, who supported the work of the oratories so much, gave himself to everything that was happening with a calmness that Ceria described as “superhuman”. At the conclusion they went across to the church, where parents were waiting for him to bless their children. Andalusian hymns sung under a clear Sevillian sky made for a happy evening, which finished late evening with a fireworks display.

Easter Monday was the final show for his days in Seville. It took place in a beautiful hall in the archbishop's palace in Seville. The authorities, aristocracy, more respected citizens were all there. At the end Fr Rua thanked them in Spanish, then he asked the archbishop to bless, through his own 'humble person' the Salesian Congregation and everyone there. The archbishop wanted to say something first to Fr Rua, then the citizens of Seville. To Fr Rua he said: “You may go back home happy and satisfied. Your Salesian sons are doing great good here and the city recognises this and esteems them”. Then turning to the people he added: “As a people you know how to appreciate the benefits, recognise the service, see what is worthy of praise, applaud and honour those who bring it about and respond to today's needs. A people with resources like this is a great people able to give itself new life”. The scene that followed was one of indescribable emotion. The archbishop protested that he could not accept Fr Rua's request to receive his blessing. Instead he wanted to receive, along with the rest, the blessing of Don Bosco's successor. Fr Rua tried to get in early by kneeling down, but the archbishop kindly obliged him to stand and give a blessing to him and the others. They both ended up on their knees. The room fell quiet in amazement for a moment. Witnesses say that when Fr Rua said the words of blessing, you could hear his heart beating in the words.

In Seville and surrounds, Fr Rua encouraged the Salesians, spoke with the boarding students, spoke to them all in his Good Nights, heard confessions every morning and took a particular interest in the festive oratory. At the Bologna Congress on 30 May, he spoke at length about the benefits of the Barcelona Oratory, and those of the “place near Seville”.

The boys from that area were split into two factions, and often fought amongst themselves with slingshots, which they all knew how to handle with great dexterity. The police often intervened, but with little or no success, and were even themselves put to flight at times since the kids ganged up against them; meanwhile some pretty wild scenes, not always bloodless, plagued the place. That is when a need to educate the youngsters was felt. The *festive Oratory* was the result and the kids came running to it, attracted by games and amusements, and after a few months the benefits were felt. Some trophies of the victory won by religious education over these wild characters were hung around Mary's statue, in the Oratory chapel, slingshots hung there by the young converts, who had given up their sad and dangerous game for love of the Madonna. It seems to me that this is a wonderful story in the history of the festive oratories.⁸

On the morning of 4 April Fr Rua made his farewell to Seville amidst the kind of manifestations we can imagine. He had promised to give a conference to the Cooperators at Mura. He had already been there but because it was Holy Week he had

⁸Quoted by Amadei II, 535.

not been able to speak in public. He returned there and was able to give all his time to some friends who were particularly fond of the Salesians.

He then went on to Malaga Andaluca. The Salesians there too were admired for their selfless service of the young. The Oratory was full of young people. Between 7 and 12 April Fr Rua visited everyone and got to know everyone. The Cooperators had prepared a solemn reception in his honour. The bishop presided. Some eight hundred people came together, “the flower of the city”, as Fr Ceria wrote. When on the evening of 12 April he left by ship for Almeria, a great crowd followed him to the port. When the anchor was raised and Fr Rua could be seen on the bridge, the crowd knelt as one person asking loudly for his blessing. He blessed them and they all waved goodbye, he waved back.

Fr Rua arrived in Almeria on the morning of 13 April. It was at Almeria that he had to board ship for Oran. Despite the fact that there was no Salesian house there nor many Cooperators, the people gave him a solemn welcome: clergy and laity. The port Commander took him in his boat. Twenty carriages escorted him to the palace of a well-to-do Cooperator. But a sudden squall forced them to delay their departure to Oran. Fr Rua seemed so tired that Fr Marengo suggested that he give up the trip to Africa but he was determined not to disappoint those waiting for him there. He looked for a sign from heaven. As they came near the port he threw a medal of Mary Help of Christians into the sea. ‘If the wind dies down here tomorrow I will leave’. In fact the following day it seemed to be calm. Thus Fr Rua set sail. But he was disappointed because the journey to Algeria was so stormy that instead of eight hours the ship took almost nineteen hours to reach Oran.

After Malaga, Fr Marengo who was perhaps a little over-sentimental, summed up the way the Iberian Peninsula felt about Fr Rua.

We are about to say goodbye to the noble land of Spain, which has given Fr Rua testimonies and veneration beyond anything we could imagine. Our superior's journey is nothing less than an uninterrupted triumph. In more than one place, at Carmona for example, Ecija, Mantilla, I could hardly believe my eyes. And in view of the enthusiasm of whole towns, and all the people I said to myself: How great Don Bosco's name is in the eyes and hearts of the crowds.⁹

The African Outpost.

Fr Rua could only spend four days in Africa, or more exactly, in Algeria.¹⁰ They expected him on Saturday 15 April. Fr Rua, accompanied by Fr Marengo, disembarked after a difficult night on Sunday 16th at 6 am. But he put on a good front with his customary valour. St Louis, the work in the centre of town had hoped to see the first of his visits: but the unexpected delay meant that the Oratory of Jesus the Adolescent on the heights of Echmuhl took their place.

That day was first communion day, and according to French custom it was given

⁹Letter of G. Marengo to D. Belmonte, 11 April 1899, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, June 1899, 145.

¹⁰On this journey, cf. the article, probably written by Charles Bellamy, «Première visite de Don Rua aux Missions d'Afrique», *Bulletin Salésien*, July 1899, 175-180. The quotations are drawn from this article.

great importance in the Oratory. Fr Rua celebrated mass at 8.30, and as the somewhat sentimental entry in the *Bulletin Salésien* puts it he spoke to the children before communion “simply and appropriately for their age and situation; faith, piety and love were distilled from his lips. He was welcomed in the house in a room all decked out in lilies. Fr Rua particularly liked one of the sayings he saw written there. On the pages of a large half-open book, you could read a verse from Ecclesiastes (30, 5): “*Mortuus est pater... et quasi non est mortuus, similem enim reliquit sibi post se*”, which we might translate as: “Our Father Don Bosco is dead, but we could say he is not dead, in fact he has left another of himself in Fr Rua”. Fr Rua's happiness was particularly great when the first four Salesians for Algeria were presented to him

The tables had been prepared in the open air for a banquet bringing together the family in Oran: pupils, past pupils and family members and confreres from the two houses in Oran. Rain disturbed the festivities a little during the afternoon. So then they all gathered in the countryside *Mater Admirabilis* chapel to sing hymns and litanies and hear Fr Rua speak “with respectful familiarity”. Evening prayer, youngsters kneeling around Fr Rua, as the chronicle tells us, “his Good Night kept as a relic, finished a day which some of the youngsters said was the most wonderful day of their childhood, pious, happy, all in Salesian intimacy”.

The second day in Africa was devoted to visits in Oran. He carefully inspected the house in Ekmuchl where he was staying. Then he was at the *rue Menerville* in the Oratory of St Louis which reminded him of the negotiations in 1890-91 with Bishop Soubrier. The whole establishment had been decorated in his honour. He admired the decorations. We can believe the chronicler when he wrote: ‘the finest ornament of the house in his eyes were the crowds of youngsters who thronged there and who showed their ardent affection in their shouts and songs’. Fr Rua made a visit to the new bishop, Bishop Cantrel and to his predecessor Bishop Soubrier with whom he had negotiated for the establishment of the Salesians in the city. Bishop Cantrel would love to see the Salesians ‘undertake some educational and zealous works for the well-to-do classes’. Fr Rua who was probably recalling Valsalice in Don Bosco's lifetime, promised to think about it.

Tuesday 17 April was reserved for the Salesian Cooperators. Fr Rua, very much devoted to the Pious Union, fervently wanted to make their acquaintance. To avoid disappointing too many important people he had decided to have two meetings: one in the morning at St Louis, *rue Menerville*, and the other in the afternoon at Eckmuhl. Bishop Cantrel presided at the conference in the morning. According to the chronicler Fr Rua spoke of Don Bosco as the instrument of Providence, the privileged child of Our Lady Help of Christians, and he did it with a modesty of manner and simplicity of words that touched each one and gave them all the feeling that they were listening to Don Bosco telling his own life story. At any rate this was impression the bishop had. In his speech he said he was delighted and with him the whole assembly to have seen and heard in Fr Rua, another Don Bosco, a true son filled with the spirit of his venerable Father who had become, so to speak, his incarnation. At Eckmuhl the Cooperators' meeting took on a recreational style with the play: ‘St Louis' godson’, interspersed with some other acts. Fr Rua spoke to the Cooperators at the exit as they were leaving, giving medals, a blessing, some advice.

Fr Rua devoted the Wednesday to the Salesian Sisters at Mers-el –Kabir. In the village of St Andre they occupied a relatively large building where they were converting

two large rooms into a chapel on the ground floor. The municipal fireworks chief announced the arrival of Don Bosco's successor with noisy and numerous explosions. Fr Rua, scrupulous at observing the proper rituals, blessed the chapel, placing it under the title of Help of Christians. After this he celebrated Mass accompanied by the singing of the house choir. That morning he received the profession of a young Sister entering the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. At lunchtime the mayor of Mers-el-Kebir, who was not well, was represented by his first deputy. Fr Rua thanked him for 'the confidence and kindness with which the municipal authorities had honoured the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians'. In the course of the afternoon the chronicle tells us: 'to the sounds of artillery salvos which punctuated the principal event of the day with remarkable accuracy, and which now redoubled in their intensity, Fr Rua bade his farewells to the worthy Sisters, their pupils, the good citizens of Mers-el-Kebir and above all the parish priest, thanking them all for the lengthy reception which he would remember. It was something more than he ever expected to receive on African soil.

Fr Rua re-entered Eckmuhl where the house was getting ready for the Exercise for a Happy Death the next day. He made himself available to the youngsters to hear their confessions. On 20 April he was to leave Oran. The mass which he celebrated first thing in the morning was accompanied by Palestrina's music in response to a wish which he had often expressed. Late in the afternoon pupils and confreres went to the harbour where the Abd-el-Kader was waiting for Fr Rua and Fr Marengo to take them to Marseilles. The parting was not without tears. Two days later those in Oran received a telegram:

"Good voyage. Fr Rua affectionately greets the Rector, confreres, benefactors, young people of Algeria. Sharing the same good wishes -Marengo".

And two days later a note arrived in Fr Rua's handwriting:

Marseilles Harbour 22 April, 1899. I am still full of the spirit of my stay in Oran, the dear confreres, the young people etc. May the Lord bless you all! Thank God the voyage was fine. We are about to disembark shortly. Greet the confreres, the young people and the past pupils in the name of your very affectionate friend in Jesus and Mary- Fr. Michael Rua.

The Iberian journey, which had taken Fr Rua successively to Catalonia, the Basque country, Portugal, Andalusia and as far as Algeria, came to an end at the port of Marseilles. Everywhere he had gone his visit had aroused feelings of respect and reverence. Some found a Don Bosco in him, the teacher he had made every effort to emulate. The Bishop of Oran had even spoken of Don Bosco's "reincarnation" in Fr Rua. Nothing could be more moving for him.

23 – GENERAL CHAPTERS IN THE FIRST TEN YEARS

General Chapters under Fr Rua

A General Chapter is a very important factor for a Congregation, and therefore also for its Superior General. It is a fruitful meeting amongst the people most relevant for the institute, to discuss, take decisions of common interest which can preserve or strengthen the institute. At the beginnings of the Salesian Congregation, General Chapters were every three years. During the first ten years when Fr Rua was Rector Major he called four General Chapters (1889, 1892, 1895, 1898). In the twelve years following his death, there were only two (1901, 1904).

The four assemblies in the first decade normally involved the members of the Superior Chapter, Provincials, all the Rectors of houses, the Master of Novices and the Procurator General in Rome.¹ Their distance meant that special measures needed to be adopted for the American centres. Thus in 1889, after deciding that only the American Provincials or their delegates would take part in the Chapter, as well as one Rector for every Province chosen by the Provincial in agreement with the Rector Major, only the Provincial, James Costamagna, and two Rectors and Parish Priests, Stephen Bourlot and Dominic Albanello, finally made it to Turin. The Chapters, always brief, were held at Valsalice near Don Bosco's final resting place. Proposals and interventions by Fr Rua, as Rector Major, were accurately taken down by secretaries during the sessions.

Fifth General Chapter (1889)

The Fifth General Chapter of the Salesian Society began on the evening of Monday 2 September 1889 and finished on the morning of Saturday 7th. There were forty two Chapter members. From the outset, first in the chapel, then at the opening session, Fr Rua provided participants with an idea of what he wanted to give the assembly. The Chapter, he said, was aimed at the progress made by each house, at maintaining the right spirit in the Congregation and the good of the souls entrusted to it. So there was a need to pray for its success. The big problem at the time was to keep fully to the ideas and intentions of Don Bosco. Fr Rua feared any kind of deviation.

"One thought pains me" he exclaimed during the opening session, "Don Bosco is not here...However we can console ourselves; we are close to his body, and just as the saints' relics are a source of blessing, so in a special way is Don Bosco's body; not only his body, but his spirit will guide us and enlighten us in the deliberations of the various commissions and sessions... Let us pray, but let us especially be informed by his sentiments. Let us examine well what his intentions were, see how he was led by God in his undertakings... In everything he wanted [did] it was for the glory of God and the good of souls. I have asked the Oratory to pray and get others to pray, but I ask you especially to pray, so that no passion may cloud our intellect, and that we aim only at the good of the young and souls. Let us place ourselves under the intercession of Mary Most Holy as Seat of Wisdom, St. Francis of Sales so that we may always act in his spirit. With this help and Don Bosco's everything will go well. Let's have confidence in this, and all our

¹ For these General Chapters, I base myself on various minutes of assemblies, in FdR 4005D12-

deliberations will be for the good of the Church, civil society and the greater glory of God".²

On 3 September, at the end of the session dedicated to the clerics' studies, a problem which we have broadly addressed in Chapter 15, Fr Rua felt the need to give a lesson to the Rectors gathered there, saying they had to be like beacons for their young confreres. On 4 September he intervened again on the question of how a Rector should act: when he has to correct a confrere he should keep calm; he should especially avoid unseemly expressions as sometimes happened, because these would be remembered by the individual for the rest of his life. In these warnings we see Fr Rua the inspector' of the affiliated houses during the 1870s.

During the third session, when the Chapter was discussing holidays for the aspirants, novices and confreres, he took the podium to recall how Don Bosco always recommended confreres to keep usefully occupied during the holidays, as he had done as a cleric and with the boys in the early days. Then the question arose of opportunities for aspirants to take part in the Retreat for Salesians during the holidays after the Assumption. Fr Rua had this to say about it: "This very year, out of 54 young men from the Oratory [who had taken part in the Retreat] only 4 or 5 went on to secular life, others to the seminary and 42 to the Congregation. The Retreat had helped them make a good decision. Had they gone home first, how many might have come back?".³ His opinion won the day: aspirants were not to go on holidays to their families immediately but take part in the summer retreat for the Salesians.

On 5 September, in the morning, Fr Rua took up his address to the Rectors again, insisting on certain clear points: their dependants have to be treated like brothers, entrusting each with tasks according to his capacity; violent means were forbidden, and even more so, caresses or signs of affection with the young; they had to look after the Brothers and other workers in the house with much charity, and not treat them as mere domestics; they should take an interest not only in instructing the young but also in their spiritual and physical well-being; finally, the Rector should be personally involved in cultivating vocations, teaching the young how to make a good confession: "Don Bosco gave a lot of time to this so imitate him". Fr Rua always looked to Don Bosco's magisterium and example.

The Sixth General Chapter (1892)

The Sixth General Chapter was held at Valsalice from 29 August to 7 September 1892. In his letter of convocation 12 March, Fr Rua entrusted the Chapter with the task of studying the best ways to ensure the consolidation and development of the Salesian Society, to the spiritual and general benefit of its members. This time the Chapter really became "general"! All Rectors of houses were involved, even of the smallest communities. Maybe because of this, during the Chapter the question of their participation was raised. The appointed moderator, Fr Francis Cerruti, wrote: "The Rector Major has asked the next General Chapter to take up the task of responding to this question and has decided that for this year we keep to the tradition of previous

4035C10, and on accounts in *Annali* II, 37-47, 238-249, 445-460, 732-742, always trying to highlight interventions by Fr Rua

² *Report from the Fifth General Chapter in Valsalice*, FdR 4014B4-5.

³ *Report from the Fifth General Chapter in Valsalice*, FDR 4014C8

years, that the Rectors of these houses will take part in the General Chapter, and the election of the Superior Chapter, but are dispensed from the need to bring a professed confrere with them". There were sixty nine Chapter members on opening day.

Seven topic outlines were provided for examination by the Chapter, as listed here: 1) theology studies; 2) reviewing and bringing into a single volume all the deliberations of the various General Chapters; 3) a special manual of practices of piety for Salesians and the boys, and norms for compiling such; 4) regulations for the houses for *ascritti* (novices) and studentates for the clerics; 5) regulations for the Province 'provider' and the one in overall charge of running the workshops; 6) study of the Encyclical *Rerum novarum* by the Holy Father on the worker question and how it might be applied concretely in our hostels and oratories; 7) various proposals from the confreres. The programme saw that work would be interrupted on 31 August, to elect members to the Superior Chapter.

In the introductory ceremony, which took place in the chapel at Valsalice, Fr Rua spoke to the Chapter members. He noted that for the first time since Don Bosco's absence they were having a Chapter to elect superiors, "but his memory is so alive amongst us that we can really consider him as present". He said that Salesian work had undergone considerable expansion over the last six years: between 1886 and 1892 the number of confreres and houses had more than doubled. He could clearly see Don Bosco's hand in this; in December 1887, some days before his final illness, he had told a group of Cooperators: "Pray that I may die well. In fact I can do much more for my sons and my poor boys in Paradise than I could ever do for them on earth".

On the evening of 30 August, a day dedicated to work in commissions, before Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament Fr Rua tried to respond to some of the criticisms that were doing the rounds. At that time the distribution of personnel in the houses of the Congregation was organised by the major superiors, in fact by Fr Cerruti, General Councillor for Schools. Some thought that the Superior Chapter had too easily accepted proposals for new works and so found itself with the impossible task of finding the personnel needed for the existing houses. Fr Rua made it known that the major superiors energetically resisted requests, except when Roman authorities intervened to make these obligatory. According to others, the personnel appointed did not always respond to local needs: certainly, answered Fr Rua, the Chapter could not take account of all the different situations.⁴ And finally, others questioned the formation given to clerics. Fr Rua maintained that formation was done properly, but given the inevitable faults of individuals, it was up to the houses to do something by helping the young confreres.

On 1 September, faced with the problem of bringing together all the deliberations of the Chapters in a single volume, Chapter members judged it wiser to ask the Rector Major to set up a commission to do this. On 2 September reflection on the manual of piety for the boys and the confreres led Chapter members to ask that Latin be kept for common prayers: *Pater, Ave, Credo, Angele Dei, Angelus*. Fr Rua seized the opportunity for an 'apologia' for the language: "Just like despots want to abolish a people's language to reduce them to slavery, so the enemies of the Catholic Faith want to abolish Latin to ruin the unity of the Church. Therefore in our work we have to insist on slipping in Latin whenever possible, contrary to inveterate habit, as it is used in the

⁴ For our part we consider that it was time to entrust this task to the Provincials.

Liturgy of the Roman Church".⁵ Vatican II would open seventy years later: maybe some of its decisions would have disturbed Fr Rua.

That day while they were debating the regulations for the Provincial Administrator (*Economo*) and the person managing the workshops in the technical schools, Fr Rua found a way to offer some recommendations which drew from the *Confidential Reminder to Rectors*: "It is recommended that Rectors get to know their personnel well, calling individuals aside and reading that part of the Regulations to them which touches on their duties thus giving them appropriate advice. Secondly it is recommended that Rectors take every care to know something of the moral relationships that exist between assistants and teachers, them and their students, and amongst the students themselves. Thirdly it is recommended that during the manifestation, with the Regulations in hand they question their subordinates and get to know the difficulties they find in their tasks. Finally, they are recommended to constantly encourage devotion to Mary Most Holy and to the Blessed Sacrament, the two inexhaustible fountains of grace".⁶

On 3 September, introducing the general assembly, Fr Rua spoke broadly on the subject of vocations and how to nurture them. Among other things he said it was necessary to arm young people against a worldly spirit which, through newspapers, bad books and bad companions, smothered budding vocations. He recommended care of vocations, when the occasion presents, to parish priests and other priests in the parishes. Considerable attention should be given to young people as they strive to keep the virtue of purity: we can compromise where intellectual abilities are concerned, but never in this area. Work and example from Salesians are the most effective means for attracting the young and encouraging them to embrace the religious or ecclesiastical state. Then he came to the question of holidays, a time which Fr Rua, as did Don Bosco before him, looked on with suspicion. If we cannot abolish the summer holidays, he said, let's at least try to break them up a bit. The Rector should show much patience and kindness towards budding vocations, pray for them, and assure them he is praying for them. At the end of their secondary studies he should advise students to choose the state of life which will give them most consolation at the moment of death. But he should dissuade a young man from choosing the ecclesiastical state solely for the good of his family or for mere financial interests...

On the same day, discussion of the regulations for the novitiate (at the time they preferred to speak of the "houses for *ascritti*") and studentates, led the Rector Major to give some directions. It would be appropriate to identify early, in the houses, likely candidates suitable for becoming Salesian clerics or brothers, and hold two conferences monthly for them. For these it would be good to start with the manual of piety in use, the *Companion of Youth*, to teach them how to behave as good Christians, but without ever speaking of vows or the Congregation. Then comes the novitiate, a bit like a sieve which separates the chaff from the wheat. The Salesian Congregation is not made for someone who lives a worldly life. "We need members who are secure, who come to us aiming for Christian perfection".⁷ As a consequence the Master of Novices admits to vows and the Rectors present for ordination only those candidates of guaranteed moral

⁵ *Sixth General Chapter – August-September 1892*, FdR 4019E11-12.

⁶ *Sixth General Chapter – August-September 1892*, FdR 4019E12-4020A1.

⁷ *Sixth General Chapter – August-September 1892*, FdR 4020A7.

probity.

Fr Rua concluded the general assembly of 5 September with an exhortation on collective humility: "We should thank the Lord who has continued to bless our Congregation and has never left it hindered: so much so that we can say *nihil habentes*..., we lack nothing.⁸ This all means we should be humble and lowly, and regard ourselves as least amongst the Congregations. We should never criticise them but be grateful for them, since they all in one way or another give us a hand in Europe or America. Therefore we should never criticise and never look down on them. It can only do good and save us a lot of bother".⁹

On 6 September, during the closing session, Fr Rua left Chapter members with three tasks which the secretary summed up succinctly: "1. Promote the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators; 2. Make known and spread the *Catholic Readings*; 3. Make known and spread the Association of the Sacred Heart of Jesus".¹⁰

The results of the Sixth General Chapter were communicated to confreres in a circular letter on 11 November 1892.¹¹

The Seventh General Chapter (1895)

The Seventh General Chapter was especially short, taking place from 4 to 7 September 1895. According to minutes of the sessions Fr Rua made few interventions. At the beginning of every session, he read and commented briefly on a passage from the *Confidential Reminders* of Don Bosco to Rectors, a slightly extended adaptation of the advice he had received when he was sent as Rector to Mirabello.

When the question of religious instruction in Salesian schools was examined, Fr Rua asked, as Don Bosco had done before, that catechism be taught and recited *ad litteram*, word by word, and long explanations be avoided. The problem of time given to religious instruction of the working boys provoked a lot of discussion. During these debates Fr Rua did not intervene. There is simply a note recorded of his regret that in some houses, especially the Oratory in Turin, religious instruction had been reduced to one hour a week and only for six months of the school year. He observed however, that by contrast with other more demanding institutions indicated by Chapter members, Salesians used additional means for ensuring religious instruction of the young: the Good Night, Sunday preaching, exhortations in class, etc. Thanks to this, he said, "our instruction is as complete as the others". Finally, when Cooperators were spoken of and the question arose of the contribution of the houses to expenses of the *Salesian Bulletin*, he insisted on asking Rectors only for the minimum amount of one Lira a year for every subscription.

On 7 September, during the concluding assembly, Fr Rua read out the letter of an admirer who had taken part in the Congress at Bologna. It expressed the wish that the Salesians would continue to stand out for their humility, purity and great charity. The minutes of the final assembly were signed by ninety six Chapter members.

⁸ Adaptation of 2 Cor. 6:10: «Tamquam nihil habentes et omnia possidentes».

⁹ *Sixth General Chapter – August-September 1892*, FdR 4020B5-6.

¹⁰ *Sixth General Chapter – August-September 1892*, FdR 4020B7-8.

¹¹ «Relazione del sesto Capitolo Generale e delle nuove Ispettorie», in L.C., 85-92.

The Eighth General Chapter (1898)

The Eighth General Chapter brought some two hundred and eighteen Chapter members together. It was held at Valsalice between 29 August and 7 September 1898.

It was prepared for over seven months, under its moderator Francis Cerruti. All members took part in the opening session on the evening of the 29th, under Fr Rua's presidency. There were the general superiors (except for Fr Lazzero who was ill), Bishops John Cagliero and James Costamagna as Vicars of the Rector Major for the two sides of the South American Continent, the Procurator General, Caesar Cagliero, the Master of Novices, Giulio Barberis, the Vicar for the Salesian Sisters, Fr John Marengo, ten Provincials, a hundred and twenty four Rectors, and seventy one confreres as delegates (communities with fewer than six confreres did not have the right to elect someone to accompany the Rector). Work was divided into ten commissions. There were three topics to cover: a) How to persevere in one's vocation; b) How to structure the teaching of philosophy and theology; c) How to keep the spirit of Don Bosco intact amongst the Salesians. These were topics especially dear to Fr Rua's heart, but the minutes do not document his interventions on the days given to these discussions (31 August, and from 1 to 2 September). 30 August was reserved for election of members of the Superior Chapter. The six year mandate, begun in 1892, finished on 31 August. Fr Rua wanted to submit his mandate as Rector Major to the vote.

Fr Rua is re-elected as Rector Major

In effect the years were passing and the 19th century was coming to a close. Fr Rua was thinking of his successor. The Holy See had confirmed him for twelve years in 1888. His mandate would come to an end in 1900. But he had good reasons for wanting to finish earlier.¹² He presented these in a circular on 20 January 1898. He said that the twelve years of his mandate were to finish on 11 February 1900. Nevertheless, he went on:

This year our beloved father Don Bosco would have completed his second period of twelve years as Rector Major, from 1874, when the Holy see approved our Constitutions. The Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII, had chosen me to succeed him, during his second twelve year period, and I complete my mandate this year, once the twelve years are up. If I have to complete the twelve years in office, it would put the election of the Rector Major at an inconvenient time, which would cause grave difficulties for our houses. So I invite members of the Eighth General Chapter to hold the election of the Rector Major at the same time as the elections for the other members of the Superior Chapter.¹³

He had the right to renounce two years in office. Nevertheless to proceed in a perfectly regular manner and not give the impression of lapsing in the mission entrusted to him by the Holy Father, on 4 November 1884 Fr Rua asked his Procurator, Caesar Cagliero, to speak with the Holy Father about it or with the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars or even if needs be, with others, to approve the measure he was proposing out of pure convenience. The Procurator addressed a petition to the Pope which ended as follows: "Fr Rua comes back insistently on this matter and addresses you, not in order to be relieved of office, but to obviate the serious problems resulting

¹² For this paragraph I am following, *Annali* II, 732-737, where the quotes come from.

¹³ Circular of the 20 January 1898, in L.C., 162-175.

from calling together 300 confreres from all over the world, costing many thousands of lire for so many people to make the journey". The answer arrived on 20 August through Cardinal Parocchi, Protector of the Congregation. It informed Fr Rua that the Holy Father, "*attentis specialibus casus adiunctis attentoque insuper consensu Rectoris Maioris Sodalium Salesianorum*" [in consideration of the particular nature of the measure and also given the consent of the Rector Major of the Salesian Society], granted all the necessary faculties. Seven days later, Secretary of State Rampolla, in a letter to the Procurator, communicated a special papal blessing for Fr Rua:

The Holy Father has learned with pleasure that the assembly of all the Rectors and confreres with the right to elect the Rector Major and members of the Superior chapter will take place in Turin on 29 August next . He has also learned with pleasure that afterwards the General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco will take place. His Holiness, wanting to show the Congregation a sign of his good will, has pleasure in giving all confreres in both assemblies his apostolic blessing, praying that God may bestow abundant blessings on them, so they may do their best for the greater glory of God and the good of the Church.

This way nobody could chide Fr Rua for his initiative. Once he had received the Pope's blessing, he even looked happier.

On the morning of 30 August, after the invocation to the Holy Spirit, Fr Rua presented his case in the terms we are already aware of. Then he went on to a reading of the Rule and the Chapter deliberations regarding elections. Bishops Cagliero and Costamagna both gave a short speech. Cagliero, who wasn't fond of changes in the Superior Chapter, asked the Chapter members to respect "the ancient statutes" of the Congregation. And Costamagna approved of this. Prefect General Fr Belmonte presided. The two bishops took their place at the presidential table. Fr Rua, when asked to come up, categorically refused and sat in the front row with the secretaries for the session. They sang the *Veni Creator* and amidst the most religious of silences, Bishop Cagliero read Cardinal Rampolla's letter which spoke of the papal blessing on the assembly. Then the moderator read out the rollcall to which 217 out of 227 Chapter members from the previous day responded *present*, (ten were absent for justifiable reasons). A note from Fr Rua was read out: he was advising that the two bishops were not eligible and that the confrere nominated for the role of Rector Major should not be too old, which would allow him to carry out a difficult role under the best of circumstances.

The poll involved three scrutineers and two secretaries. The assembly was informed that an absolute majority was 110 votes. Fr Rua was immediately elected with 213 votes. Only four votes were missing to make it a unanimous vote. We came to know later that two confreres, influenced by Fr Rua's note, had chosen Councillor Bertello and that a third, a Brother delegate from Montevideo (Uruguay), had simply written on his voting sheet "Long live Don Bosco". The fourth vote, which opted for Fr John Marengo, then Vicar for the Salesian Sisters, could only have come from Fr Rua.

At the end of the elections for the other members of the Superior Chapter, Fr Rua took the podium to thank those present for agreeing to his re-election. He saw in it simply a homage to Don Bosco who had chosen him as his Vicar and a sign of devotion to the Sovereign Pontiff who had chosen him as successor to Bosco. He urged the assembly to persevere in these sentiments which would be an effective guarantee of

prosperity for the whole Congregation.

On 3 September, all Chapter members took part in the blessing of the foundation stone of the new church that needed to be built at Valsalice "as an international homage to Don Bosco", according to the terms of the committee promoting the event. The ceremony took place in the presence of Cardinal Manara, Bishop of Ancona, the Archbishop of Turin, six other bishops and many civic personalities. The festivities brought the wonderful days of the Eighth General Chapter to a close.

24 - DAWNING OF A NEW CENTURY

Salesian Rectors as confessors of their subordinates

Fr Rua thus began his second twelve year mandate which was to be often tested by heavy trials. Let us begin with the affair of the rector-confessor.¹

In order to understand this affair, which obliged Fr Rua to abandon a deeply rooted tradition in the Congregation, we need to go back to the beginnings of the Oratory. Don Bosco, the only priest, was also the confessor for those who lived with him. Later other priests joined him, but while he did not hesitate to make use of outside confessors, the majority of the boys and the confreres continued going to Don Bosco for confession. The fact that he was superior did not stop his dependants from confiding the secrets of their conscience in him, since in his way of exercising authority he was more a father than a superior. In the 1860s, when he began founding boarding schools (*collegi*), the Rectors, formed in his spirit, behaved in the same manner, and sought to win the affection and confidence of everyone, exercising their authority in a fatherly way. They were very interested in ascetic questions, but in the eyes of the confreres they seemed to have a spiritual authority made up of an indulgent kindness which gave people confidence. So every Rector was above all the confessor for the community. Just the same, Don Bosco, through personal word and example, had suggested a precaution which he referred to in two passages from his spiritual testament, two of which should not be separated if we want to understand his deeper thinking:

6. - The Rector is mostly the ordinary confessor for the confreres. But he will prudently give ample freedom to anyone who wishes to confess to another. It will be understood though that such particular confessors are known and approved by the superior according to our Rule.

7. - Since whoever seeks out an exceptional confessor shows little confidence in the Rector he, the Rector, should keep his eyes open and be particularly observant of the other rules and not entrust that confrere with certain burdens that might be beyond his moral or physical strength.²

So although the Salesian had the undeniable freedom to choose a confessor who was not his Rector, this freedom was, according to Don Bosco's spirit, strongly circumscribed. Anyone who did not go to his Rector for confession was somewhat suspect.

This style, certainly dangerous as new communities sprung up everywhere, continued for twelve years after the saint's death. The Rector heard the confessions of his subordinates and the pupils in the house.

But complaints began to arise over time, probably from the Salesians themselves initially. On 26 September 1896, Cardinal Parocchi wrote a letter to Fr Rua complaining of the lack of freedom in Salesian houses regarding choice of confessors.³ Fr Rua defended himself saying that in Salesian houses in fact there was a variety of

¹ For this affair of the Salesian Rector as confessor, I am closely following Ceria, *Vita*, 338-348. Salesian documentation can be found all together in *Summarium additionale* in 30 pages, towards the end of the volume called *Positio* 1947.

confessors.⁴ Following this the Holy Office asked that Fr Rua's precautions be rigorously observed in the Salesian Society.⁵ But the Rector Major, alerted by the warning, recommended that Rectors, through the Prefect General Fr Belmonte, invite extraordinary confessors into the house every month, or better still even every fortnight.⁶ This way freedom of conscience seemed to be guaranteed. But Rome was of another opinion.

Holy Office decree (5 July 1899)

The Church obliged the Salesians to change their approach. The reason was, according to a letter from the Procurator General, Fr Marengo, to Bishop Cagliero, that the Holy See, seeing the worldwide spread of the Salesian Society, did not want a practice introduced that was not fully in conformity with the spirit of the Church.⁷ To tell the truth, Rome was afraid of three things: a) that in Salesian boarding schools the freedom of the boys to confess their sins might be to the disadvantage of sacramental integrity; b) that superiors bound by the secret of the confessional might be less free in the exercise of their duties; c) that they might be suspected of using information gained from the confessional. It was pure and simple wisdom.

The Holy See proceeded in stages. Especially, with the Holy office decree of 5 July 1899, it forbade any superior, major or minor, from hearing the confessions of their subjects and pupils resident in their houses in religious communities, seminaries or Roman colleges. The decree concerned the city of Rome exclusively, but it was also introduced in other dioceses. The Cardinal-bishop of Frascati, for example, immediately extended it to his own jurisdiction. So the Salesian Rector of the Sacred Heart Hostel in Rome and the Rector of the boarding school at Frascati, had to stop hearing confessions in the house. Meanwhile word got round that there was a more radical provision in the offing.

Fr Rua felt a duty to adopt a position, more so since the decree had been published in some specialised magazines. On 29 November 1899 he wrote a long circular to Provincials on the sacrament of penance, where Don Bosco's principles clearly emerged.⁸ He introduced it by claiming that the Holy See's document referred only to confessions of students (*alumni*) by the superior. He reminded them that according to the two previous pontifical decrees, the ordinary confessor for the novices was the Master and that religious superiors could hear the confessions of their subjects if they spontaneously asked for it. For the rest, since the decree in question was not obligatory outside of Rome, Rectors could continue to hear confessions as they had in the past. Nevertheless he issued seven directives on the matter: not to exercise their authority in "serious matters"; let others look after discipline; entrust the Prefect with the task of

² F. Motto, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel Sac. Gio. Bosco a' suoi figliuoli salesiani*, in RSS 4 (1985) 117.

³ Summarised in *Annali* III, 166.

⁴ Letter of M. Rua to Cardinal L. M. Parocchi, 6 October 1896, in *Annali* III, 166.

⁵ *Annali* III, 167.

⁶ Circular from Fr Dominic Belmonte, 29 March 1897, in FdR 4067E1-3.

⁷ Letter of G. Marengo to Bishop G. Cagliero, Rome, 27 June 1901, in Ceria, *Vita*, 339.

⁸ The original printed version can be read in FdR 3973E4-3974B7; cf. L.C., 190-206 (but the text reported in L.C. has been curiously cut).

dealing with the students' parents; do not take part in giving conduct marks; do not read out these marks in public; invite outside confessors every Saturday into their houses and set them up in a place where the young people could go without being seen by the Rector; conquer the hearts of their dependants with piety and kind and patient charity.

At this point he went on to speak about the responsibility of Rectors regarding the confreres, without overlooking the boys. These, he said, have to be "guides to other confreres on the way to perfection, vigilant watchmen over the young entrusted to them, guardians over the spirit of Don Bosco, authoritative interpreters of the superiors' intentions, indeed those who represent their authority". So the Rector is the first one responsible for his subjects' progress "to perfection". If left to themselves many do not know how to progress. "The Saviour's command is addressed to you especially: *Euntes docete*. Go and teach the understanding of all understanding, that of the saints, the only kind really necessary, a teaching that cannot and should not be entrusted to others. Teach the practice of perfection in conferences, confession and manifestation; teach it in all the kinds of conversation that Don Bosco had". The Rector of a community, then, should take special care of the junior professed. "Do not be surprised to find they have defects, or if you have to say the same things over and over again: you know they do not become perfect all of a sudden".

Evidently Confession was but one tool amongst others in the Rector's hands. Fr Rua, for example, gave far more importance to the manifestation than Don Bosco did. Nevertheless, in the final days of the 19th century, he continued to firmly insist on fidelity to the tradition bequeathed by the Founder, who wanted the Rector to be the normal confessor of the confreres in order to ensure spiritual progress.

Decree of 24 April 1901

Fr Rua tried to buy time. The very idea of shattering a tradition so dear to Don Bosco, lasting more than sixty years, made him feel awful. Faced with the possible extension of the Roman decree to the entire Congregation some degree of discouragement was felt amongst the confreres, especially the elderly ones. In fact Rome was keeping a wary eye on Salesian practice. On 26 November 1900, Cardinal Gotti, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, complained to Procurator Fr Marengo that outside Rome, Salesian Rectors were obliged to hear the confessions of their subjects and that the manifestation dealt with intimate matters.⁹

In 1901, shortly after the closing of the festivities for Mary Help of Christians, news arrived from Rome that a measure from the Holy Office was ready which expressly forbade Salesian superiors from hearing the confessions of their subjects. It soon arrived. It bore the date of 24 April, but was communicated to the Salesian Procurator only on 29 May.¹⁰ It was expressed in severe terms. We can read in an attachment: "The Holy Office Commissioner, in consigning the authentic decree of 24 April 1901, asks the Very Rev. Procurator of the Salesians to let him know as soon as possible in writing that this decree has not only been accepted by the Institute but has been quickly and fully implemented in all the houses of said Institute".¹¹ Once he had the text, Fr Rua

⁹ *Annali* III, 170.

¹⁰ The decree *Quod a Suprema* of the Holy office can be read in *Summarium additionale*, 2-4.

¹¹ This is added, dated 24 May 1901, in *Summarium additionale*, 5. The exchange of letters in June 1901 can be found in *Summarium additionale*, 5-9.

quickly asked the Procurator to send the following declaration to the Holy Office: "I have the honour of letting Your Excellency know that I have given the Rector Major your decree of 24 April from the Supreme Roman Inquisition and that it has not only been accepted by the Institute, but will be fully implemented in all houses with the haste requested by the same decree".

But Fr Rua was concerned, and hesitated at the risk of provoking the Holy Office. He immediately asked if communication of the decree could be deferred until the next General Chapter in September. On 22 June he was asked to make the communication *sine mora*, without delay. He then took another approach. Was the *sine mora* to be understood in a strict sense or could it be reconciled with the order contained in the same decree to communicate *intra annum* (within a year) the execution of the decree to the Salesian Congregation? As a consequence would it be licit to delay the communication of the decree to the whole Congregation until after the closure of the next General Chapter?

Meanwhile Fr Rua gave brief conferences to the confreres at the Oratory, in the Church of St Francis of Sales. Many were amazed that for some time his secretary was to be found taking his place in the confessional. He justified it by telling the story of the two decrees, the Roman one and the one extended to the entire Congregation. They asked him: what would Don Bosco have done in similar circumstances? He would certainly have obeyed immediately. And this is what he meant by absenting himself from the confessional. So he asked not to be put in an embarrassing situation by being asked to hear confessions. Then he read out the decree of 24 April in Latin and immediately afterwards in Italian. Without further ado, he said the final prayer and let the assembly go.

On 6 July he extended the communique to the entire Congregation via the Provincials. His circular asked that each Rector gather the professed confreres and read the decree aloud so it could be understood; then without further explanation to explain the decree to those who could not understand Latin; the document was to be dutifully preserved given that it came from the highest authority of the Church. And he concluded:

Up until now according to the deliberations of the General Chapters we have held to a path that seemed best suited to our circumstances: now the one whom God has asked to guide the people and their leaders, tells us we must change; we recognise and fully respect what has been prescribed and will carry it out fully and willingly, thus imitating our good father Don Bosco who obediently and reverently carried out any indications from the Holy see. We are not to ask how on earth such an order has come to be given, what person or event might have caused it: we maintain that it from loving Divine Providence which is Jesus himself who deigns to speak to us through his Vicar, so let us get down to implementing these orders with the greatest fidelity.¹²

Just the same, Fr Rua meanwhile set up a theological study which would have given him a considerable degree of trouble. Two difficulties were foreseen in the immediate implementation of the Roman decision. How to find a confessor in each campus with the required qualities and free of duties which might be incompatible with the tenor of the decree? How to overcome the repugnance felt by many confreres, especially the

¹² Ceria, *Vita*, 344-345.

older ones, at such a brusque turn of events? He had Fr Louis Piscetta, a much admired Salesian moralist, study the problem. He consulted the auxiliary of the Archbishop of Turin, John Baptist Bertagna, who as Fr Rua wrote, "has taught moral casuistry to priests preparing for the ministry of confession for more than forty years, to universal acclaim". After mature reflection, Fr Piscetta handed over his conclusions to Fr Rua, who quickly had them printed. On 15 July 1901 he sent them to the Provincials, along with a circular which explained how they had come about.¹³

Despite the precautions taken, Piscetta's responses fell into the hands of the Holy Office who considered it a very serious matter indeed. The Salesian Procurator was immediately called in by the Commissioner of the Holy Office, who gave him a hard grilling: it would seem to the Sacred Congregation that Fr Rua was trying every means to avoid full implementation of the decree; he was to be reproached for wanting to interpret such a document, as this kind of thing was strictly reserved to the Holy Office. The Commissioner expressed himself in severe terms and obliged the Procurator to inform Fr Rua that the interpretations of the theologian were to be immediately revoked, after the Holy Office itself had responded to the questions raised. All this would not have happened had Fr Rua kept in mind that the interpretation of Holy Office decrees was allowed only by those from whom the decrees emanated. Notwithstanding his good intentions to do things well, he was giving the impression of being rebellious, and would have to suffer the consequences of that. He kept his cool and on 15 August wrote to Provincials revoking Fr Piscetta's responses:

I have happy news to communicate: I have come to learn that the revered Congregation of the Supreme and Universal Inquisition will give us the official solution to the various doubts arising from the implementation of the Decree *Quod a suprema* of 24 April this year. In expectation of this much awaited document I revoke the solutions written and printed by me and anything I have said in response to questions in the past on the argument. Let us thank the Lord that he deigns to give us such a sure guide and let us continue to pray that he help us to always be faithful in carrying out his teachings.

But this happy expectation did not last long. The questions submitted to whoever had to offer an opinion produced the unexpected effect of having Fr Rua himself called to Rome. He left immediately and once at his destination, personally had to undergo the reprimanding that was earlier given him via his Procurator. He also got the idea that he was being ordered to leave Rome immediately. This terrible treatment given him in Rome caused swelling in his chest and aggravated the inflammation of his eye, something he had already been suffering from for some years. Only God knows the intensity of the moral suffering he had to bear on that occasion, certainly something worse than physical suffering.

Between 1 and 5 September the Ninth General Chapter of the Congregation was to take place at Valsalice. Three days prior to its opening, the Holy Office sent the solutions to the difficulties, dated 21 August.¹⁴ They repeated, in an even more imperative style, the earlier dispositions. Fr Rua immediately ordered that a thousand copies of the Roman response be printed. He wanted them distributed to Chapter members. He asked that the document be read out to members of the General Chapter.

¹³ Original in FdR 3974E7-10. This circular to Provincials, to which the «Soluzione di alcuni casi relativi al Decreto 24 Aprile 1901» is attached, is signed Sac. L. Piscetta, and was not part of the collection of circulars published in 1910.

The Procurator, Fr Marengo, read it at the beginning of the assembly. Then, as the minutes say, Fr Rua spoke briefly about the questions and answers, confessing that he was ignorant of problems regarding the decrees of the Holy Office needing to be resolved exclusively by the Holy Office itself. So he was revoking solutions he had given earlier and recommended that: "We have to absolutely eliminate any malign interpretations. [The decree] has come from the Pope, therefore from God, so we accept with absolute and prompt submission and thank God too for giving us light by means of our supreme Superiors, ascribing such a decree to an act of special benevolence, with a view to bringing us in line with other Societies and Religious Congregations similar to ours".¹⁴

The orders had to be implemented. In the space of a year, beginning with the date of publication of the decree – therefore by 24 April 1902 – they needed to present the Holy Office with a copy of the *Deliberations* of the General Chapters which had been corrected in points regarding confession and confessors. There was not enough time. He asked for and obtained more time. But in the circular for 9 March 1902,¹⁵ Fr Rua was careful to advise confreres that the delay in printing the corrected documents did not dispense them in any way from complete implementation of the decree.

The boys adapted without any problems. Many professed Salesians instead found it difficult to go to confession to priests who had often been their subordinates. Here is an example drawn from the minutes of a meeting of the General Chapter in 1905. On 16 February the Holy Office Commissioner called Procurator Marengo to inform him that in a Salesian house, "individuals were morally obliged to go to confession to someone who did not enjoy common confidence; that in any doubt, the Holy Office turned, as usual, to the Ordinary for information, to confirm things, and following this the Holy Office would ask the bishop to provide".¹⁶Fr Rua, for his part, gave laconic answers to the objections presented to him. He evidently wanted to avoid any discussion, since he wanted full and total obedience given to the Roman decisions.

The consecration of the Salesian Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Fr Rua had begun this painful first year of the 20th Century with an action that he probably judged to be the most important one of his time in office.¹⁷

For many years he had thought about fulfilling the desire expressed by the heroic Salesian Andrew Beltrami (1870-1897), who at the end of a book of his on the apostle of the Sacred Heart, Margaret Mary Alacoque, had written: "We want our Sweet Saviour and his Most Holy Mother Mary, to always consider the Salesian Society as a beloved child and embellish it with flowers of the most special kinds of blessings. And even though my own voice is not so zealous, I want the Salesian Society to be solemnly consecrated to this adorable Heart, from which it will draw new graces of eternal life". In 1899, Fr Rua hoped that every Salesian would personally make his consecration to the Sacred Heart. But he knew about Fr Beltrami's vow and wanted it carried out. Even

¹⁴ The printed questions can be found in FdR 3983D5-7; in FdR 3983D8 we find the responses dated and approved by the Pope on 21 August.

¹⁵ FdR 3983E1-3984A2; L.C., 269-285.

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 27 February 1905, in FdR 4244E4-5.

¹⁷ For this paragraph on the consecration to the Sacred Heart, I am closely following Ceria, *Vita*, 332-337.

more so in a time of great devotion to the Sacred Heart, he had been asked from many sides, especially from the studentates, to make an extraordinary gesture. Having reflected at length and taken advice from the Cardinal Protector on the opportunity and ways of consecrating the entire Salesian Society to the Sacred Heart, he considered that now was the time to act.¹⁸ In his circular of 21 November 1900 he wrote to the Salesians: "I now intend that each one be consecrated anew, in a very special way, to the most Sacred Heart; indeed, I want every Rector to consecrate the entire house which he looks after and invite the boys to also make this holy offering of themselves and instruct them about the great act I am about to carry out and give them every chance to be properly prepared".¹⁹

He proposed to celebrate the public act on the evening of 31 December 1900, at the beginning of the new century, and he indicated the formula to be used:

Jesus, we are already Yours by right, since You have redeemed us with Your precious Blood, but we also want to be Yours by choice and by spontaneous, absolute consecration: our houses are already Yours by right, since You are the Master of every house, but we want them to be Yours, and Yours alone, also through our spontaneous desire; we consecrate them to You: our Pious Society is already Yours by right, since You inspired it, You founded it, You had it come from, we could say, Your very Heart itself. So we want to confirm this right of Yours; we want it, through the offering we make to You, to become a temple in which we can truthfully say that the Lord our Master and Saviour Jesus Christ dwells! Yes, Jesus, conquer every difficulty, reign in our midst: it is Your right, You deserve it, we want it.²⁰

He also asked that the solemn consecration be prepared for by a triduum of prayer and preaching, beginning with the feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December, the anniversary of the death of St Francis of Sales. Fr Rua wanted the act to involve everyone: boys, novices, confreres, superiors and the greatest possible number of Cooperators. He reminded them that the Pope had granted, for the evening of 31 December an indult to celebrate a solemn Mass at midnight, with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. So it was necessary to assemble half an hour before Eucharistic adoration, and after a quarter of an hour everyone would renew their baptismal promises, then confreres would repeat their religious vows. Then each one would make a personal consecration, the consecration of the house and consecration of all humankind to the Heart of Jesus, following the formula drawn up the previous year. At the same time in Turin Fr Rua and the Superior Chapter would consecrate the entire Congregation. Following this Mass was to be celebrated and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament given, singing the *Te Deum* and reciting other prayers prescribed by the Pope and bishops for the occasion. The event could be carried out the following morning in the Festive Oratories.²¹

As head of the Congregation Fr Rua wanted a special formula, duly approved. On 6 December he wrote to Leo XIII:

¹⁸ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 27 November 1900, in FdR 4242C7.

¹⁹ L.C., 223-224.

²⁰ L.C., 224.

²¹ Cf. L.C., 222-227.

The impulse which Your Holiness has given to devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the order from last year for all dioceses and peoples to be consecrated to the Divine Heart has aroused the desire in us to make a special, solemn consecration of the Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales, founded by our unforgettable father, Don Bosco, and a consecration of all the works and people dependent on us in any way, on the night that separates the dying century from the new one, a night in which, through Your Holiness' paternal kindness we can celebrate the Holy Mass. Trusting that this will be pleasing to your heart burning with devotion for the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus whose Vicar you are, allow us to present you with a formula for this consecration, so that, along with your blessing, it may be more pleasing and attract the abundant graces and favours we need to work ever more speedily to spread the Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ and for the salvation of souls.²²

The Holy See returned Fr Rua's request with its approval: "The Holy Father has warmly praised your pious proposal, and blesses you with all his heart". Thus, on 31 December 1900, while all Salesian houses went ahead with the consecration, Fr Rua, prostrate before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar of Mary Help of Christians, and with other members of the Superior Chapter, pronounced the special formula with the intense participation of everyone. Through it he consecrated people, houses, works of the Salesian Society to the Sacred Heart, along with the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Pious Union of Cooperators and youth entrusted to the Salesians and to the Sisters.²³

The act of consecration is brief, noted Fr Rua at the end of his circular, but its results should be lasting. And this is why he thought it opportune to recommend to Salesians a certain number of devout practices approved by the Church and "enriched with many indulgences by it". So he suggested, in his devout fervour, that the annual Feast of the Sacred Heart be solemnised in all houses; that a special ceremony be celebrated every First Friday of the month recommending that each confrere and each youngster make a "communion of reparation" on that day; to get each confrere to subscribe to the "practice of the Nine Offices" (or nine *Services* to the Sacred Heart: Adorer, Lover, Victim, Disciple, Servant, Promoter, Supplicant, Zealot, Repairer). He invited every community to join the Confraternity of the *Honour Guards*. He suggested a *Holy Hour* (Thursday night, in memory of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemani) be instituted in novitiates and studentates. He could not imagine that all of these practices would fall into disuse in the space of a few decades, even their significance, illustrated in the long "Instruction on devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" which accompanied the circular,²⁴ would be lost on future generations. A normally calm Fr Rua, like many of his contemporaries, could get very enthusiastic when dealing with honouring the Heart of Jesus.

The ceremony on 31 December 1900 opened a century that would see the Salesian Society develop in a wonderful way, but also suffer much. The sufferings were not long in coming. 1901 for the French Salesians was a time of "persecution".

²² Ceria, *Vita*, 335.

²³ Il *Formula which will be sued by the Rector Major with the superiors of the Chapter to consecrate our entire Pious Society and all its works to the Sacred Heart*, is attached to the circular; it can be found in L.C., 255-257.

²⁴ L.C., 228-254. The author of this instruction, written in scholastic style, is unknown.

25 – THE FRENCH AFFAIR

The twenty fifth anniversary of Salesian work in France

The first French Salesian house was founded in Nice at the end of 1875. In 1901 it was celebrating twenty five years of existence. The Rector, Fr Louis Cartier, wanted to celebrate the jubilee in the first days of February, in the presence of the Rector Major. Cartier considered that Fr Rua could celebrate the silver jubilee of the Salesian presence in France at the same time, a presence which was flourishing. The general catalogue for 1900 tells us that the Provinces of Paris and Marseilles taken together had 18 houses, 212 confreres and 94 novices.

Unfortunately relationships between the two Provinces were not warm. The Provincial in Paris, particularly, the effervescent Fr Joseph Bologna, did not have much time for the Provincial in Marseilles, the discreet and precise Fr Peter Pierrot. Besides, the tough political climate, while legislation was being drawn up on Religious Congregations, made it inadvisable for Salesians to hold a too visible celebration. At the time, for example, the Italian origins of the Congregation had aroused a certain amount of animosity against the house at Dinan in Brittany and occasionally also in Paris. There was a fear that Fr Rua's presence at the festivities could be taken as a kind of provocation. On 9 January 1901, in a letter to Cartier, Fr Bologna expressed strong reservations and said that, for his part, it wasn't opportune for him to take part in the festivities. Pressure was then put on the Superior General, Fr Rua.

His view, which was marked by a religious refinement and wise prudence, not at all fearful, is expressed in an important letter to Fr Cartier on 19 January:

They are writing to me from various parts of France about the Jubilee festivities in Nice: some say they may be too costly and that these costs might make some benefactors cold towards us: some say that at a time when the legislation on Congregations is under discussion having festivities like this is counter-productive; some say we should ask the advice of the Nuncio in Paris. Without disregarding any of these observations I think the festivities can be a tribute of thanks to God and also to our Benefactors, however as much as possible we should avoid making much noise about it, especially in newspapers; it would be good too to keep expenses limited; and if some have to come from far afield it would be opportune to seek all possible reductions from the railways: if you keep things limited this way to give the idea of a simple festivity of devotion and in the family, I hope nobody will say anything and nor do I believe it is necessary to ask permission or advice.

...

I have let the two Provincials know that I want them to accompany me to Nice: I hope they give me this consolation. I tell you this in confidence, since you show a laudable desire for union between North and South.

May the Lord help us: and may Mary Help of Christians, who has already visibly favoured France at various times over these past thirty years, protect it again in these difficult circumstances. May Don Bosco who so loved this nation, intercede for it also.

Yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary

P.S. For your information I am hoping to bring with me the new Councillor for Technical Schools, Fr Bertello.¹

Thus, between 3 and 8 February, the festivities took place in a respectable manner and without regrettable consequences. Almost all the Rectors took part. Even Fr Bologna, who had softened somewhat, joined his confreres on 4 February.

Fr Rua arrived in Nice on the evening of 2 February. The festivities began on Sunday the 3rd, under his presidency, with a family day that brought together past and current pupils from the St Peter's 'Patronage'. The good superior was discreet and stayed in the shadow of the festive celebrations. His name did not appear on the programme for the public events that took place between 5 and 8 February except for a meeting of the committee and friends of the work, held inside the building on the afternoon of 5 February. The events taking place in the city did not involve him.²

On the mornings of Tuesday 5 and Wednesday 6, Fr Rua spoke with Rectors of the houses in France. The remaining time he gave to the Institute. Salesians, pupils and past pupils appreciated his warm contact, which reminded them of Don Bosco always dear to their hearts. The past pupil who wrote up the events repeated this often:

The greatest reason for our happiness was being near Fr Rua, enjoying his presence, his conversations. He gains the same reverence and love in the Salesian Society as Don Bosco did: a word of advice, another word spoken, sometimes just a glance become for the Salesian confrere or past pupil an encouragement. ... When Fr Rua crosses the courtyard, it is difficult to find a gap in the crowd of pupils around him; there is a contest for who can take his hand or get closest to him. Father was happy with these manifestations, which just the same stole precious time, and only the requirements of the Rule or when visitors turned up succeeded in taking him away from this. ...

During the day there was an endless coming and going in front of the revered Father's door: teachers and pupils were happy to open their hearts to him. Many outsiders benefited from his experience and priestly zeal, happy to get his blessing. After the prayer, Fr Rua gave the Good Night which is customary in the Salesian Society. The boys listened to his words with an attention that nothing could distract them from. You could see this from their stillness, their gaze fixed on Fr Rua: you could see that they considered the good Father to be no ordinary preacher, but as they thought Don Bosco was.

The festivities officially came to an end on the evening of 8 February. Fr Rua left the St Peter's Oratory in Nice the following morning. As the chronicler explains, "the boys formed two lines under the arcades and he went between them. They had the joy of kissing his hand for the last time; then they went back to their usual tasks".³ It was the last time Fr Rua could publicly greet his sons in France.

¹ FdR 3881B4-5.

² this programme is reported in *XXVème anniversaire de l'Oeuvre de Don Bosco en France et de la fondation du Patronage St Pierre à Nice*, par S. B. ancien élève du Patronage, Nice, Imprimerie de la Société Industrielle, 1902, 27.

³ *XXVème anniversaire...*, 125-128.

The French law on associations

However he left Nice with a somewhat anxious heart concerning the future of the entire work in France, for which he had just celebrated the twenty fifth anniversary. A year ago he had begun to get very worried about it. What would happen if the Government of the Third Republic's plans for religious congregations were implemented? Turin sought a preventive juridical solution for the hostile measures which seemed imminent. On 26 June 1900, at the beginning of the school holidays, Fr Rua invited Fr Cartier to Turin with two lay advisers, the lawyer Gaston Fabre and Mr Vincent Levrot. They had spoken with the Provincials in France.⁴ But probably influenced by their right wing friends, Provincials Bologna and Perrot, along with Charles Bellamy, superior in Algeria, were of a different opinion. Fr Rua gave in to their view, at least for the time being. So on 19 July, he wrote another letter to Louis Cartier on the situation:

My dear Fr Cartier, thank you for your kindness regarding this affair of the imminent legislation. However I need to inform you that Fr Bologna, Fr Perrot and Fr Bellamy when asked, were not of the view that they need to come here or elsewhere, to talk about it. They hope the legislation will undergo such modification as to become virtually harmless or will enable new ways out. It will not be necessary to disturb these good friends [Fabre and Levrot], unless there is some other urgent need. Thank them however, for our part...⁵

Visibly worried, on 1 August he came back to the question of the Turin meeting which, after all, could be held in a restricted way.⁶ In Fr Rua's judgement, the best way out – which Don Bosco had already used successfully – was in refusing to be like religious. Applying the logic, Salesians were not part of a Religious Congregation, but a "Charitable Society". They were an association of ecclesiastics and lay people for humanitarian purposes. During the enquiries conducted at Nice, it was preferable to present the Salesians as a "Société de prêtres et de bourgeois libres", noted Fr Cartier on 3 January 1901, in very correct French but deceptive, since you could read into the term *bourgeois* the Italian *borghesi*, meaning citizens, or civilians.⁷

While the months were moving on, the French Government's law on associations was taking shape. One of the plans, presented on 14 November 1899, distinguished two kinds of association. In broad terms the contracts of associations could be freely drawn up by declaration given to the Prefecture; but associations euphemistically called "small-bourgeois", "resulting in denial of commercial rights" were forbidden, unless authorised by the government.⁸

The law was promulgated by the President of the Republic, Emile Loubet on 1 July 1901. While it was very liberal for civil society, the law became restrictive in the long third paragraph aimed entirely at religious congregations. These associations posed serious problems for the French State, at the time decidedly anticlerical. One read there: "No Religious Congregation may come into existence without legal authorisation,

⁴ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 26 June 1900, in FdR 3881A1.

⁵ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 19 July 1900, in FdR 3881A3-4.

⁶ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 1 August 1900, in FdR 3881A5-7.

⁷ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 3 January 1901, in FdR 3881B3.

⁸ Cf. ultimately J.-P. Machelot, *La République contre les libertés*, Paris, 1976, p. 369-370.

which will determine its manner of functioning. No institute may be founded except by express decree of the State Council. The Council of Ministers can promulgate decrees ordering the dissolution of a Congregation or the closure of any Institute" (art. 13). Those behind the legislation foresaw that Congregations would try some kind of subterfuge. Twenty years previously these subterfuges were successful, to the scorn of left-wing politicians. Thus the law was strengthened to avoid loopholes: "No one is allowed, either directly or through another person, to run a teaching institution of any kind, nor engage in teaching if s/he does not belong to an authorised Congregation"; transgressors would be punished, and institutes concerned could be closed down (art. 14). "Any Congregation set up without authorisation will be declared illicit. Those involved will be punished... The punishment applied to founders or administrators will be doubled" (art. 16). One article declared all acts between living persons or their wills null and void, done for consideration or free of charge, directly and indirectly, having as their object the enabling of associations legally or illegally formed to evade the provisions of the Act (art. 17). Finally, according to article 18, existing Congregations not previously authorised – which was the case for most religious societies, male or female, and especially the Salesians and Salesian Sisters – needed, within three months, to request authorisation to continue to exist; without it, their goods would be put up for sale, meaning confiscated and liquidated.

The Salesian tactic in the face of the new law

The Salesian authorities, Fr Rua at the head, had to decide how to act before 1 October. July, August and September of 1901 were critical for the Rector Major and the French Provincials. Decisions could be taken only in Turin, under Fr Rua's control. To do nothing would be to condemn oneself to a quick death. After the law was promulgated Fr Rua wrote to Louis Cartier:

...Regarding the new law on Congregations, it would be good for you to get exact information from other Congregations and legal people who understand the situation in depth and then come here immediately after the Assumption bringing some good friends with you who you believe are best suited to throw light on this thorny question ... Try to come well prepared on all the points and agree with Fr Perrot on the time to come.⁹

Decisions had to be taken urgently, in fact the request for authorisation had to be presented at the latest in the first days in October. Two weeks later, Fr Rua told Cartier that the meeting was brought forward to 29 July and we had the name of the "dear friend": "See if you can come with the Lawyer Favre [Fabre] and anyone else you think opportune".¹⁰ Lawyer Gaston Fabre would end up being Louis Cartier's main legal advisor and, as a consequence, advisor for the Salesians too on the question of the Congregations during the first phase of the debate.

In summer 1901, two series of meetings were held in Turin on the problem, under Fr Rua's aegis.¹¹ The first, from 31 July to 2 August, influenced by good friends of Fr Bologna, agreed that it would be necessary to request, in the name of all Salesian houses

⁹ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 5 July 1901, in FdR 3881C1.

¹⁰ Letter of M. Rua to L. Cartier, Turin, 22 July 1901, in FdR 3881C2.

in the country (Algeria included), the authorisation to exist under the necessary forms, for a *Congregation of Don Bosco* with its main centre in Paris. In this case Fr Rua demonstrated much trust in his French sons by allowing them to create a Congregation other than his own. But at the beginning of September, during the second meeting, things changed.

At the time all Rectors of the French houses were in Turin for the Ninth General Chapter. They were discussing things amongst themselves. A new factor emerged: the Rector of the Salesian house at Montpellier, Paul Babled, had received a letter from the bishop of the city, de Cabrières (1830-1921), who was advising against a request for authorisation. According to him if it were to be accepted it would cause problems of all kinds. He was suggesting "secularisation" of the French Salesians, a measure that had been considered by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars themselves in a letter to Superiors of Congregations dated 10 July 1901. Bishop de Cabrières' opinion carried a degree of weight for the Salesians, especially those in the South of France, who were always looked on kindly by him. With Louis Cartier's support his proposal, which everyone saw as advantageous, won the vote: at the beginning of September the twenty two Rectors present said they were in favour of secularisation. Fr Rua gave assent, on condition that Rome approved. Louis Cartier immediately went to Rome and came back with every authorisation possible from Cardinal Parocchi, Protector of the Salesian Congregation, and Cardinal Gotti, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars.

The French Salesians took six decisions in the assembly in view of their secularisation. 1) *Secularisation*: all priests and Salesians in major orders (subdeacons and deacons) were to present their request for secularisation to Fr Rua, who would grant it. Brothers would be considered as paid members and would sign a monthly receipt for a stipend (fictitious). The Sisters would wear ordinary clothing, modest, though not a uniform, for reasons which were easy to understand. In their non-autonomous houses, meaning the ones attached to Salesian works, they would officially receive a stipend and in their autonomous houses, they would be officially considered as teachers in free schools. 2) *Novitiates*: the two novitiates in France (Saint-Pierre des Canons and Rueil) would become one and novices sent out of the country. 3) *Goods*: immovable goods were always dependent on civil society, while movable goods would be assigned to the respective Rectors of the works. 4) *Correspondence*: letters for superiors or written by them would be placed in a double envelope and sent to agreed upon destinations. This seemed to be an easy way to hide the identities of correspondents who instead of being "fathers" or "confreres" would simply be "Mr", "friends" or "uncles". 5) The *Bulletin Salésien* had to also take account of secularisation,¹² reassuring Cooperators, however, of the continuation of Salesian work in France. 6) Finally, the *General Catalogue* of the Congregation would say nothing about Salesian work in France. Government hostility was forcing the Salesians to operate clandestinely.

Then came a new and serious misadventure: in a letter dated 6 September 1901, the elderly Cardinal-archbishop of Paris, François Richard (1819-1908) – who was to accept Fr Joseph Bologna, Provincial of Paris and Rector of the work in Paris amongst his clergy – spoke out against secularisation to gain authorisation. The unanimous view

¹¹ Sources for reconstructing this event are found in ASC, Nice dossier. Regarding the French episode, cf. the documented chapter in *Annali III*, 124-143; cf. also F. Desramaut, *Don Bosco à Nice. La vie d'une école professionnelle catholique entre 1875 et 1919*, Paris, Apostolat des Éditions, 1980, 103-116.

¹² «Heure d'angoisse», in *Bulletin Salésien*, October 1901.

reached on the vigil of the event now came apart. Louis Cartier was not about to change his mind; the group of Rectors from the South pulled together around him to support him. Fr Rua also continued to push for secularisation. In the northern Province, Angelo Bologna, Rector of the important house in Lille and brother of the Provincial in Paris, did likewise, distributing to confreres the Roman rescripts that officially secularised them. But the Provincial in the north who was following a conciliatory policy with the authorities and wanted to keep on good terms with his bishop, was holding to Cardinal Richard's formula and gradually drew the rest of the Province to this point of view.

Back home to put the final touches to his request for authorisation, he wanted to present a united Salesian front at all costs. Through a last minute manoeuvre which he had hidden, he tried to include the southern region in his request. Fr Bologna even tried to force Fr Rua's hand. On 1 October, the day before the request for authorisation was to be lodged, he telegraphed "Michael Rua, Turin: Question whether the authorisation is to be requested for all houses or just those in the North". The Salesian archives have preserved this telegram with the brief wise response from the Superior General: "Present the request just for the north". Fr Rua had not changed his mind and thus rendered a great service to the Provincial in the south who was saved as a result. This kind of disavowal did not disarm Fr Bologna, who – unsuccessfully – tried to put pressure on the Provincial in Marseilles. A sketch of his attempt, featuring the name of Fr Rua, appears in a letter which the Provincial, Fr Peter Perrot wrote to Louis Cartier on 4 October:

... If I have sent you a telegram today, it is because I have learned from a letter from Fr Bologna, which arrived yesterday at 3pm asking, with Fr Rua's permission, authorisation for the north and committing me to do the same. You have answered negatively and I believe that you are right. I have asked the Rectors, just to be scrupulously clear, seeing that time is limited and I cannot call people together. We will not change the decisions already taken.

P. Perrot.

The Provincial in Paris followed the same route. From Turin Fr Rua could do nothing else but watch the events develop. The new Salesian Congregation, with its different centres duly registered, all dependent on the Paris Province, seemed initially to have won a degree of favour. While the Government submitted the majority of requests for authorisation to the Chamber of Deputies – the more anticlerical one – and divided them into groups of progressively worse degrees (monk teachers, monk preachers, monk businessmen...), Fr Bologna's request was sent to the Senate along with five other religious associations. Emile Combes, who had become President of the Council of Ministers, took up the matter personally on 2 December 1902. But he associated the Salesian request with calumnies on exploitation of child labour by religious who were members of a foreign Congregation and the ideologies they were instilling in their pupils. He was convinced that the Salesians were harmful to business and private industry, so he needed to refuse their request for authorisation. The Salesians (Louis Cartier and Joseph Bologna) protested in two short publications in an attempt to have him change his view. They did not succeed.

Then the Salesian affair went to the Senate. Despite the favourable memories passed

on by past pupils and friends in Lille, Dinan, Oran and Paris; despite a very correct debate which went on for two sessions on 3 and 4 July 1903, and which might have altered the scene had it been less sectarian, the final vote went against the Salesians. On 4 July, ninety eight senators declared themselves in favour of the application of the law, therefore authorisation, but a hundred and fifty eight voted against. "The Senate has not given approval", concluded the *Journal Officiel*. The Salesians in France's north were defeated. During the summer all the houses were cleared out (Paris, Lille, Dinan, Mordreuc, Rueil, Ruitz, Coigneux, Saint-Denis). We find them outside France, in one or other house with a group of orphans: Switzerland, Belgium, Guernesey, Italy, and some in mission territories. Others took refuge down South.

The houses in the south, whose members were officially "secularised" and from a legal point of view, no longer dependent on administration from Turin, followed their own separate paths. The smaller works (Nizas, Montmorot) soon disappeared. One of them (Romans) succeeded in being recognised by the civil authorities under cover of an administration that was declared to be "secular". As for the more important houses—Nice, Marseilles, la Navarre and Montpellier – despite setting up lay administrators, they succeeded to survive but only at the price of searches and being cited in court for illicitly reconstituting a religious congregation, resulting in fines, sale of goods and other problems. But they did not lose heart. In the final years of Fr Rua's time as Rector Major the French territory still saw Salesian works operating with real religious men and women, all officially secularised.

The Rector Major could not have done more for the houses. His most serious problems came from the Provincials Peter Perrot and Joseph Bologna. These were so complicated that we need to present them in an chapter on their own. And then we will have a way of understanding Fr Ru'as method of governing, since he was a key figure in these events.

26 – THE CRISIS OF THE FRENCH PROVINCIALS

The Provincial Peter Perrot loses power

The upset of the Salesian Congregation in France put the two Provincials, Perrot and Bologna, in a hitherto unknown situation which was to be a cause of great embarrassment to the Rector Major. The developments following their removal from office seem excessive but they allow us to know better Don Rua's method of government. We begin in the south, where the case of the Provincial Perrot became increasingly explosive.¹

The unfortunate Provincial of Paris, Joseph Bologna, had obtained French nationality. After that fatal vote of July 1903 he could, therefore, live in an apartment in Paris as an ex-Salesian, in order to try to help the French religious of his Province dispersed all over, in France, Guernsey, Switzerland, Belgium and in Italy. This was not the case for the Provincial in Marseilles, Peter Perrot, who, with all the Italian Salesians in the southern Province had had to return to Italy, his country of origin. In 1904, now definitively exiled from France, he was living at Bordighera on the Ligurian coast between San Remo and Ventimiglia where, in a place called *Il Torrione*, the Salesians ran a school and looked after a parish. From there, the Provincial of the southern Province sought to watch over his own confreres. Fr Rua, though, understood that it was an impossible task and thought of his replacement on French soil.

In 1904, the official closure of the house of Montpellier left Fr. Paul Virion available; he had become the Rector there after the death of Paul Babled in 1901. Paul Virion (1859-1931) was a Frenchman from Alsace; he was a prudent and good administrator. The minutes of the meeting of the Superior Chapter of 12 January that year, presided over by Fr Rua, inform us, 'The Chapter decides to entrust Fr. Virion with the visit to the confreres of southern France, because for now Fr. Perrot is unable to go to France. He will be informed of this arrangement.'² Power was beginning to slip away from Fr. Perrot. He attempted to re-capture it by gathering around him all the confreres obliged to live in exile in Italy. Why should he not imitate the Provincial of Paris who had set up his provincial centre in the Belgian Salesian house at Tournai, near the French border? On 25 June 1904, the minutes of the Superior Chapter recorded, 'Fr. Perrot proposes that for the southern French Province part of the house of Bordighera be set aside in order to gather the confreres that might come from France and that the *educatorio* [the school] be transferred to Varazze' a Salesian boarding school near Savona. 'The Chapter does not approve.' One can understand its refusal to empty one school so as to welcome confreres most probably destined to another school with French pupils.

Between 23 August and 13 September 1904 an important General Chapter was to be held at Turin-Valsalice (we shall speak of it later). For the first time each Province had elected a delegate of the Provincial as a member by right of the Chapter. In France, Angelo Bologna would have accompanied his brother, the Provincial in the north. In the

¹ I refer here to my article, *Les crises des inspecteurs de France (1904-1906)* in RSS 16 (1997) 7-56 (quoted below: *Les crises...*)

² All the deliberations of the Superior Chapter during Don Rua's time can be found under their respective dates in FdR 4240D8-4250D7

south the choice had fallen on Paul Virion, which suited Fr Rua completely; he wrote to him the following affectionate letter at Strasburg:

Turin, 4-VIII-1904

My dear Fr Virion,

I have heard that you have been elected to accompany the Provincial. In the circumstance, I think it would be good for you to spend a few days at Dilbeck, near Brussels, to check the work on the studentate there. [Virion was a professional architect] and then leave with the Provincial to come [to Turin]. Here we shall speak about Montpellier and Marseille and decide on the future.

Give my respects to your mother and our friends on whom I implore from God as for you, every kind of blessing.

Your affectionate friend,

Fr. Michael Rua.³

Fr Rua was preparing Fr Virion for new responsibilities.

Fr Perrot is exonerated from office

Fr Perrot participated regularly in the general Chapter at Valsalice. On 3 September he was called with Fr Bologna to a meeting with the Superior Chapter where the feasibility of closing the houses in southern France was discussed. The minutes are very terse: 'The Bishop of Montpellier agrees to the withdrawal of the Salesians from his diocese. Some temporary measures are drawn up for placing personnel in the houses still in existence.'

Could the Provincial, Fr Perrot, still shoulder the responsibility which he struggled to fulfil? The majority of the Superior Chapter thought not. This position was backed especially by Fr Paul Albera, the Spiritual Director and Perrot's predecessor at Marseilles. Ten days after the closure of the General Chapter, the Superior Chapter was faced with the proposal to 'exonerate Fr Peter Perrot from the office of Provincial of the southern French Province, since his six year term of office fixed by the Rule has expired.' The minutes continued with a remark that must be borne in mind throughout the whole episode. 'Fr Rua would like him to be reconfirmed. A secret ballot is held. By four votes to one, Fr Perrot is released from the office of Provincial. It is decided to put someone simply in charge in his place.' Only Fr Rua had opposed the proposal.

The person *in charge* was Paul Virion who, the following day received a letter of presentation in the name of Fr Rua and a note with the stamp of the Salesian Congregation. The first was directed above all to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and informed them, 'Given that Fr Perrot has finished his term of office as Provincial, Fr Virion has been chosen to take his place in whatever regards our Pious Society and in the care of personnel of both sexes in the former southern French province. The second, dated 27 September 1904, declared that the Rev. Paul Virion was placed in charge of the affairs of the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales and as such was recommended by Fr Rua to the kindness of the Co-operators and benefactors of the Salesian works.⁴ The Salesians above all had to be informed. On 28 September, in a

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Salesian provincial archives, Paris, Paul Virion file.

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circular letter destined explicitly for the 'Salesian confreres living in southern France', Fr Rua announced to them that the voting for the reconfirmation of Fr Perrot as Provincial had not been favourable and that consequently his mandate was terminated.⁵

The news did not enchant Fr Perrot who failed to see anything satisfactory proposed in exchange. He tired of waiting at Bordighera and decided to make his voice heard in Turin. Beginning a month after the nomination of the *confrere in charge*, Fr Rua was bombarded with his protests. Twelve of his letters to the Rector Major have been preserved just for the period from 20 October to 30 December. They repeated that he would only accept a responsibility of equal dignity to the one which they had deprived him of. The direction of an important Italian house was not sufficient; he did not feel like heading a missionary expedition to the Far East etc. After the first of these letters, Fr Rua, who shared Fr Perrot's suffering, was asked not to answer him any more; the secretary of the Chapter would take charge of replying. The minutes of the Superior Chapter on 6 December summarised the exchanges between Bordighera and Turin:

... Fr Perrot has written several times that he wants to be given a responsibility of equivalent standing to the one he had previously; for example, Visitor of the Sisters in Spain – something that cannot be granted him. Fr Rua suggests the direction of the house at Sampierdarena but that does not correspond to his wishes; assistance of the Italian emigrants in Naples – too wearing on his health; leading the mission to China, to which he replies that he is no longer young and ends by threatening to have recourse to Rome. Fr Rinaldi suggests offering him the post of secretary to Bishop Cagliari. Fr Rua concludes that he will propose it and then let him do what he thinks. That, however, adds the compiler, just shows that he was really unworthy of the charge that he had.

Fr Perrot persisted. January 1905 saw four more letters arrive in Turin from Bordighera: two were addressed to Fr Rua and two to the Councillor, Celestine Durando. His complaints were getting on the nerves of the Chapter members. In the minutes of 1 February 1905, we read, 'Fr Durando is given the task of writing to Fr Perrot to say that the Chapter has nothing to add to what it has already written and he should do whatever he prefers.' The ex-Provincial, though, was not to be silenced. On 3, 5 and 24 February, and then on 5 March, he continued his campaign for rehabilitation with letters to Fr Durando. He was angry at the different treatment shown to the Provincial of northern France, Fr Bologna, who against the opinion of the majority of the confreres, had refused the option of secularisation and requested government authorisation for his province, thus losing all the houses. He, too, had been appointed in 1898 but the 1904 expiry had not been fatal for him; his failure had cost him neither his title nor his power.

Fr Perrot's impulsive defence and his recourse to Rome.

The year is 1905. The 'exonerated' Provincial now asked for a judicial appraisal of his case as drawn up by two theologians who, in his view, would in effect be his lawyers. These were the Councillor Joseph Bertello and the moral theologian Louis Piscetta. He obtained from them a petition which was to cause serious embarrassment for Fr Rua.

These two autograph documents of Don Rua are found in the Salesian provincial archives in Paris: Paul Virion file.

5

Autograph of Don Rua in FdR 3984C9-10.

If, as he now believed he could assert, Perrot had been officially elected Provincial for six years only on 19 March 1902, the date of the canonical confirmation of his mandate, then he was the victim of an unjust measure and could claim reinstatement or an equivalent position. In his view, the judgement of the theologians favoured him on some fundamental points which he explained thus: ‘The first appointment (in 1898) was invalid; consequently only the 1902 appointment was valid. A serious necessity is required to remove him from office. The Rector Major is obliged to uphold the honour of the confrere. Counsel, *ad suavius regimen* (for an agreement reached in a friendly way), to let him know the reasons for his removal from office.’⁶ The affair was becoming unpleasant. Fr Rua avoided making a decision by himself alone on how to deal with the situation. On 5 March, the minutes of the Chapter carefully laid down the Superiors’ position:

Following Fr Perrot’s letters of 24 February and 3 March, the Chapter charges the pro-secretary [Calogero Gusmano] to reply: a) that in his letter of 5 February, he spontaneously proposed a theological consultation, formulated the questions and gave the names of the two theologians he desired to be consulted, concluding that: ‘Although this way of proceeding only offers me a relative guarantee, nevertheless, I am satisfied with it’. The Superiors carried out his wishes to the letter; b) that in his reply to the answer given by the two theologians, he adds, ‘Now, the last word rests with Fr Rua’; c) that Fr Rua did not wish to act alone but together with his Council which invites him to give up thinking of the office of Provincial or any position of equivalent dignity and submit unconditionally in obedience to his lawful Superiors.⁷

Fr Perrot replied that he had never disobeyed because he had not been ordered to do anything. With this reaction he shot himself in the foot. On 10 April, the scholastic Councillor, Fr Francis Cerruti, was asked to propose to (or rather impose on) Fr Perrot that he take over the direction of the house at Oulx, near the French border.⁸ The letter of obedience was sent the following day. The ‘exonerated’ Provincial, who hoped to return to the hierarchy of his Congregation, considered it a pretence. The Oratory of the Sacred Heart, founded at Oulx in 1895, was a branch house of three or four confreres lost among the foothills of the Alps. So he did not move and sent two letters of protest, one after the other, to Fr Rua. The Chapter was frustrated by his resistance and on 18 April issued an ultimatum via the pro-secretary Gusmano, ordering him to submit within a fortnight, that is by the beginning of May.⁹ With his heart in turmoil, the poor fellow resigned himself. On 4 May he wrote from Oulx, communicating his submission. But he was not at all resigned and put into effect his threat to have recourse to the Holy See by sending a letter to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in which he requested to be reinstated in an office similar to the one of which he had been unjustly deprived. The Congregation acknowledged it. Unfortunately for Fr Perrot, it had very

6

According to the memoir written by Fr. Perrot, ‘In yesterday evening’s conference...’ in ASC, Peter Perrot file. Several of Perrot’s letters which are referred to here are found in the same file.

7

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 5 March 1905, in FdR 4244E7.

8

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 10 April 1905, in FdR 4245A1.

9

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 18 April 1905, in FdR 4245A3.

simple ideas about the obedience religious owe to their superiors in virtue of their vows. Fr Perrot's casuistry was not well accepted. His recourse was returned with just one sufficiently explicit word: *remittatur* (to be rejected).

Nevertheless, Fr Rua, who in his goodness would have preferred to prolong the mandate of the Provincial of southern France, sensitively took his side. The Roman Congregation had barely returned the complaint to the sender at Oulx when another recourse arrived from Turin, accompanied by a letter of the Rector Major and the consultation of Frs Bertello and Piscetta. This counter move from the authority which had only just been declared within its rights, asking for the judgement in its favour to be reconsidered, irritated the Roman Congregation. The file was passed to the consultant, Gennaro Bucceroni, who was probably the author of the rejection of the first legal complaint. He summarised his solution to the Roman representative of the Salesian superiors. Fr Thomas Laureri (1859-1918) was the substitute at the Vatican of the Procurator General, John Marengo (1853-1921). The consultant summoned him and expressed his judgement with a certain brutality (if one can judge from the account we have). Fr Perrot was a *pessimo religioso* (a very bad religious) and was profoundly wrong (*torto marcio*); this was the sense of the reply the Roman Congregation would send to Turin. The consultant then preached a lesson to the Salesian authorities, that is, personally to Fr Rua. His excessive weakness and the setting up of a tribunal to judge the case had produced an unfavourable impression on the Roman Congregation. Fr Laureri was invited to tell the Superior: 1) not to write any more to Fr Perrot because in doing so he compromised himself; 2) not to give any directive responsibility whatsoever to this confrere for the rest of his life; 3) not to make the mistake any more of having confreres' complaints judged by Salesian consultants, but let the Superior take his decision and allow the possibility of having recourse to the Congregation of Bishops and Regular to whoever wishes it.¹⁰ Fr Rua received the dressing down in silence.

He certainly had no desire to repeat, on behalf of Fr Perrot, the error committed in 1901 in the matter of the rectors-confessors. In any case, even before the Roman injunction not to entrust him with any directive responsibility, Fr Rua had already had him appointed as 'confessor of the confreres and assistant in the parish' at Bordighera, enjoining him to go there within the following fortnight. As he had previously done, he held out against it. The obedience had been signed by the Scholastic Councillor, Francis Cerutti; Fr Perrot retorted that only the Rector Major could issue orders throughout the Congregation. There and then, the Chapter decided not to reply until he had arrived at his destination. At the end of three more weeks, the new confessor for Bordighera was still not resigned. He was definitely in the wrong, and his pig-headedness rendered him a rebel liable to canonical punishment. Fr Bucceroni's judgement weighed on him. During the meetings of 23-25 October 1905, the pro-secretary of the Superior Chapter was asked to inform the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars of the whole affair and to write to Fr Perrot telling him that he must arrive at his post before All Saints' Day. Failing that, as from 9 November, the ex-Provincial of southern France would be suspended from celebrating Mass. Fr Perrot put great store on his 'honour' which he believed had been outraged, but he was a good priest. He replied that he would submit,

10

All this according to the minutes of the session of the Superior Chapter, 11 October, during which Fr. Laureri's correspondence was commented upon.

but he would also send off a third recourse to Rome. In fact, on 31 October he returned to Bordighera. From there, on 2 November he again wrote to Fr Rua, explaining his situation.

The rest of Fr Perrot's exploits do not concern our history of Fr Rua who kept to his last decision. He wrote and printed a long account in self-justification in which he claimed that Fr Albera and Fr Bologna were responsible for his irregular dismissal in 1904.¹¹ The years passed. With the election of Paul Albera as Rector Major in 1910 he lost all hope of being reinstated. In 1914, taking advantage of the war, he returned to France, to the house of La Navarre which he had founded in 1878. He was a valued confessor and died peacefully on 24 February 1928.

Fr. Bologna re-establishes the province of northern France

We now turn to Fr Perrot's colleague, the Provincial of northern France, Fr. Joseph Bologna, who lived through a similar crisis between 1905 and 1906. An active man, always bubbling over with new projects, he never resigned himself to the disappearance of his Salesian Province that occurred in July 1903.

He had an apartment in Paris in *rue Montparnasse* and with the consent of Turin he was able to establish the provincial centre in the Belgian house of Tournai, near the French border.¹² He thought that the money from the French benefactors should be sent to him and that the editor in Turin of the French *Bulletin salésien* should let the readers know this. A quarrel began with the editor who did not give in to his injunctions. Moreover, Fr Bologna considered as his own subjects not only the novices and confreres dispersed throughout France but also those who had fled to Italy, Belgium, Portugal and England. The Scholastic General Councillor, Fr Cerruti, who was responsible overall for personnel, tolerated his decisions in the school years 1903-1904 and 1904-1905 but hardened his attitude at the beginning of the school year 1905-1906. This institutionalised disorder vexed him greatly. He made it known to the Chapter during the meetings staggered between 2 and 11 October 1905. The minutes thus summarise the debate: 'Fr Cerruti asks if Fr Joseph Bologna depends or not on the Superiors; he notes that he does everything to detach the confreres under his jurisdiction from the Superiors. Fr Rua would like one of the Chapter members to go and observe everything in detail and report back before any definitive decision is taken about Fr Bologna.'¹³ Without knowing it, the Provincial of northern France risked sharing the fate of his colleague from the south.

When questioned on his recent enterprises, he defended himself. He had set up a printing press in Paris without permission. True enough! But it was in order to make use of the machines from the Salesian house at Lille which had been closed. His explanation

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Fr Perrot's account: 'Nella conferenza di ieri sera...' printed in 1906 (in 12 double pages), where the names of his enemies are left as blank spaces which the author would later fill in by hand, cf. ASC, Peter Perrot file.

12

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 10 October 1904, in FdR 4244B12.

13

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 2 October 1905, in FdR 4245C3.

was recorded.¹⁴ As the months passed, he continued as he thought best to reconstruct his Province beginning from the house at Tournai. He needed men. According to him, eighty confreres still depended on him. He wrote letters to the French exiled in Italy, Portugal and perhaps elsewhere, calling them back to serve in their Province of origin. He considered it indispensable to have a novitiate under his control, since to his great regret in 1903-1904 he had not been consulted about the professions and the destinations of his novices who had been transferred to Italy. After the closure of a novitiate reserved for the French in Avigliana and the union of the French and German candidates at Lombriasco, in 1905 the French postulants from the north were diverted towards the novitiate of the Belgian Province at Hechtel. They did well there but were outside the jurisdiction of the Provincial of Paris who deemed it necessary to remedy this failing.

On 12 April 1906 he shared with Fr Rua his latest astonishing project. He had just reunited his Provincial Council on the occasion of a visit to Tournai. Only Fr Pourveer, the Rector of Guernsey, was absent. The discussions had concerned the main interests of the Provinces. Taking advantage of the favourable attitude of a rich lady, the councillors who were present planned to rent for 600 francs a year a beautiful property comprising a spacious dwelling and a large garden, situated at Froyennes, some 25 minutes journey from Tournai, near the French border. 'We are of the opinion to recall our novices and place them there next year, that is in September.' He illustrated the advantage of the situation: a vegetable garden which would provide fresh produce for the novitiate and for Tournai, the possibility of housing the 'Sons of Mary' (late vocations), a peaceful and shady park, a tram outside the house which only took ten minutes to reach the local station or twenty five minutes to arrive at the Oratory of St. Charles in Tournai. The lady was certainly favourable to the Salesians and much more could be expected. The furniture and equipment salvaged from Lille would suffice and no new financial obligations would be incurred. The fees paid at the moment for the novices at Hechtel would help to cover the expenses at Froyennes. Having novices 'at hand' seemed an undeniable necessity for the Provincial, Fr Bologna. Creating this centre would not involve any particular canonical procedure, as the novitiate at Rueil, suppressed in 1903, would simply be officially transferred to Froyennes. The Council expected ten novices for 1906-1907. Fr Henri Crespel would be an excellent novice master etc., etc. Fr Bologna presented and extolled his project in a seven page manuscript!¹⁵

The Superior Chapter read his letter in the atmosphere of mistrust which his enterprises, so often considered outlandish, had aroused. His will to create a novitiate in Belgium for his Province alone was about to be his downfall. Fr Rua privately consulted the Prefect general, Fr Rinaldi, and the spiritual Director, Fr Albera. Then, on 22 May, the Superior Chapter debated its response. The marvellous advantages of the situation as described by Fr Bologna failed to enthuse them. 'To Fr Bologna's proposal to open a novitiate near Tournai, the pro-secretary will reply that the Superior Chapter does not

14

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 18 December 1905, in FdR 4245D8.

15

Letter of G. Bologna to M. Rua, Tournai, 12 April 1906, in FdRn3636E9-3637A3; edited in '*Les crises...*', 45-47.

consider it convenient; and that he continue to send his novices to Hechtel where they can be better formed and where the current novices are happy.’ The text continued with a menacing phrase for the over-enterprising Provincial: ‘Fr Rua invites the Chapter to pray and see whether it be a case of recalling Fr Bologna to Italy.’¹⁶

The painful removal of Fr Bologna

The priest concerned was far from imagining the storm his last proposal had unleashed. Five days after the Turin meeting, from his apartment in Paris he wrote to Fr Rua. After dealing with the juridical and financial problems encountered at Lille and Dinan, and having announced that in Paris they were suggesting the establishment of an oratory on the sole condition of having a suitable priest, he noted in the fifth point of his letter that the competitive interest of the Oblates of the Assumption had meant that he had been obliged to sign the contract for the property at Froyennes.¹⁷

The letter from the pro-secretary arrived in the meantime but failed to convince him to retract. He believed that the Superior Chapter was insufficiently up-dated on the situation of the northern French Province. In order to explain it, on 1 June 1906, he sent a memorandum of three long pages, divided into twenty one points and entitled, ‘On the Province of St. Denis, Northern France. Novitiate’. It was the fruit of his reflections on the absolute necessity of having a novitiate in his Province. He wrote that, first and foremost, the Province continued to exist ‘in the eyes of the Church and the Congregation’. Secondly, it had a novitiate canonically erected by decree of 20 January 1902 and established at Rueil, in the diocese of Versailles. It had been transferred to Avigliana in Italy but had been closed without any explanation given. A substitute had to be found. Sure of his position, he ended the memorandum with a rash proposition: ‘21st – The reasons put forward in the letter of the Secretary of the Superior Chapter leading to the refusal of the requested authorisation are groundless and only go to prove that the Chapter is insufficiently informed to make a judgement on the suitability or not, given their knowledge of it.’¹⁸ This somewhat undiplomatic reaction was a false move on Fr Bologna’s part.

The Superior Chapter did not brush aside his objections without reflecting on them. On 12 June it deferred any deliberations on the Salesian administration in France to a later meeting.¹⁹ But the dice were thrown. The axe fell on 19 June during a session dedicated entirely to the Bologna case. The following are the minutes of that decisive meeting.

Fr Rua and Fr Albera communicate that Fr Bologna writes to the French confreres in Portugal, Italy and other places, inviting them to return to France and telling them about the new works he would like to open. The memorandum written by Fr Bologna and his Council is recalled; it lacks respect for the Superior Council. It is decided:

¹⁶

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 22nd May 1906, in FdR 2947A3-4.

¹⁷

Letter of G. Bologna to M. Rua, Paris, 27 May 1906, in FdR 3637A4-7; edited in ‘*Les crises...*’ 47-48

¹⁸

This memorandum, dated 1 June 1906 is found in FdR 3640A7-9; edited in ‘*Les crises...*’, 48-50.

¹⁹

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 12 June 1906, in FdR 3947A8.

1. That the house in Tournai, belonging to the Belgian province and temporarily handed over to Fr Bologna, be returned once more to Belgium.
2. Fr Paul Virion, hitherto simply the priest in charge of the Province, is appointed Provincial of southern France: the proposal was put to a secret ballot with the result of six votes out of six.
3. With six votes out of six, Fr Paul Virion, Provincial of southern France, is temporarily put in charge of the northern Province.

Given the above, it is added that Fr Rua will call Fr Bologna to Turin, communicate in whatever way he thinks fit the decision that has been taken, and entrust to him the office he considers best. None of the Superiors should discuss with him the reasons for which he has been removed as Provincial, saying merely that such a decision was thought best for the Congregation. This will avoid many drawbacks.²⁰

Joseph Bologna, therefore, was dismissed from office and substituted by Paul Virion. The conclusion of the minutes may cause surprise, but there was a reason. Fr Bologna's reprehensible conduct had provoked these measures, as can be deduced from the first lines of the minutes themselves. But the members of the Chapter could not reveal them to anyone, least of all to the man concerned. The motivation of the judgement, therefore, remained secret. Turin obviously feared a complicated debate, not only with the dismissed Provincial himself, but also with his Council, his confreres and his friends in France. There was the other side of the coin. Although the silence was convenient for the superiors, it infuriated poor Fr Bologna who was obliged to submit to what for him was clearly a punishment, without being able to explain either to himself or to others the reasons behind it. For three months he would raise his voice about it.

Having been recalled to Turin by Fr Rua to be informed of the decisions which had been taken, Fr Bologna spent some ten days there in July. On the 13th the Superior Chapter asked the Scholastic Councillor, Fr Cerruti, and the Economer, Fr Rocca, to explain to him that the house in Tournai, where he had set up his provincial centre, would be restored to the Belgian Province. The confreres of French origin, moreover, who were currently dispersed in other Provinces, no longer belonged juridically to him in any way. The superiors did not think fit to suppress the northern French Province, but since in the present circumstances, two Provincials were no longer necessary for the country, the Provincial in the south would take charge of the north.²¹ Four days later, Fr Cerruti reported his conversation with Fr Bologna to the Chapter: he understood that Fr Bologna submitted and reluctantly agreed to withdraw from the Province of northern France. Fr Rua, who had in hand some notes drawn up by Fr Bologna after his talk with Fr Cerruti, was not so optimistic. He did hope, however, to convince the dismissed Provincial. Rather than an appointment as a Provincial in Italy, it seemed to Fr Rua, that he was ready to accept a position in the Oratory at Valdocco.²²

Fr Bologna maintained that he had been removed from office without explicit

20

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 19 June 1906, in FdR 3947A9-10.

21

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 13 July 1906, in FdR 3947B4.

22

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 17 July 1906, in FdR 3947B4.

reasons and wrote a protest against his removal. He demanded a formal process which rightly the Superior Chapter sought to avoid. In this case the Chapter wanted to show its determination. The minutes of 27 July announced, ‘Fr Rua will write to Fr Joseph Bologna that the Superior Chapter has examined what he wrote; nevertheless they have unanimously decided that Fr Bologna, having handed whatever he has to over to Fr Virion, come to Turin where he is expected by October.’²³

At the end of July, Fr Bologna returned to Paris, disappointed and angry. The members of the Superior Chapter had respected the reservation that had been ordered but the cordiality of the conversations had suffered as a result. The disappointed Provincial no longer found the warmth of the Salesian atmosphere that he had always experienced in Turin. Those who had habitually reassured, consoled and calmed him now tormented him. On 29 July he wrote a long, fifteen page letter in French to Fr Albera:

The Council does not seem to have foreseen the vast consequences that my transfer at this moment involves. At Turin, I felt that I had now become a stranger. In the ten days I spent at the door of one or the other member of the Council, I never heard a fatherly word from anyone. No one openly revealed to me what he was thinking. So what had I done? I am not asking for favours, just the exact observance of what the Rule, the Regulations and Norms determine and prescribe. I have a load of urgent things to do and I should not know how to justify the delay which would be detrimental to many people. If I am still allowed to make a request, I do it with my whole heart to ask that I be granted peace of mind by leaving things just as they are at least until the end of my six year term of office.

He thought, then, that he had been reconfirmed for six years in 1904, the year his first six year term expired.

Of what was he being accused? He who had done everything in his power for the Congregation, had he become unworthy? What could he tell the confreres? Would they not have tarred him with the same brush as Fr Perrot, the rebel of Bordighera?

Have I to allow, without motive, all our French confreres to believe that I am considered unworthy, as an expression of Fr Rua has almost led me to understand? *Abbiamo già smosso quell D. Perrot* [We have already changed Fr Perrot] – I would not want to be compared with him and I cannot let it be thought that I am being punished since in my conscience I have not made myself undeserving, and if the contrary is believed, then I ask to be convinced by a proceeding. There must be preliminary warnings; I have never received any and I do not believe I deserve them. It is my firm intention not to give bad example to anyone. That is why I keep everything that I write of myself and I do not speak with anyone about what I feel obliged to write.

Sooner or later he would have to justify himself at least to his Council, which as he communicated in a despatch, was going to meet on 27 July ‘to settle matters in hand’. For this time at least he would say nothing. He would attempt to distance himself from the events: ‘Thinking ahead to the situation which will be created for the Salesians within ten or fifteen years, I think that history will have a great deal to do in order to legitimise the current intervention of the Superior Chapter in matters pertaining to the French provinces. They should be left what little autonomy they have according to the Rules.’

23

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 27 July 1906, in FdR 3947B6.

When he mentioned a 'proceeding'. Turin imagined that he was going to present his complaints to Rome. But Bologna was not Perrot. He did not want to cause pain to anyone. He made a lot of noise but he was a deeply good man and made things clear in his letter to Fr Albera:

If I asked for a 'proceeding' to allow me to know the reasons which have led to my removal *tamquam indignus*, I meant internally in the Congregation and I never mentioned Rome. I have already told you of my wish not to bring trouble to anyone but I also have the right to defend myself because the change that is held out to me, in my opinion, is without sufficient motive, and for me, has all the appearance of a punishment, which I cannot accept without a judgement.²⁴

He had great difficulty in accepting that Tournai, the provincial centre whence he issued his instructions to the French confreres dispersed here and there, should be returned so abruptly to the Belgian Province. According to him, to maintain his houses, he needed to supply the confreres that were asked of him. On 1 August he wrote to Fr Barberis, 'I beg you, I implore you to send us back those who are still in Ivrea. Last year I asked you for Moitel; you didn't let him come to me, and then you sent him to the *South*.'²⁵

On 6 August 1906, Fr Bologna sent his most reasoned protest to the Rector Major. Among other things, Fr Rua read: 'Since the house of Tournai is the Provincial House and the present conditions are the same as those at the time when it was assigned to the Province, it cannot be taken away from it without the time necessary to appeal, that is, at least three years after the *diffida* (notice of intent).' Given that the transfer of the house to the Belgian Province meant, for his personnel, a change of country, they would have had the right to be consulted. If he had passed over this requirement, Fr. Bologna continued, he himself would have kept the Rector Patarelli and four other French priests. It was to be feared, moreover, that there would be a stampede of this personnel. 'Let each one recognise his responsibility', he declared.

In that moment, convinced as he was that the manoeuvre was aimed at the disappearance of the Salesian work in France, he certainly did not want any Virion looking over his shoulder before the end of his mandate, which he believed should be prolonged until 1910. What would Don Bosco have thought of such a work of demolition? 'It is useless to send me Fr Virion or anybody else before the completion of my mandate. I should consider myself a criminal if I did not put all my energies into preventing the complete ruination of Don Bosco's work in France. I can still hear our good father, at Marseilles, exclaiming, '*Che è difficile infrancescare una Congregazione!*' [How difficult it is to 'Frenchify' a Congregation!] Don Bosco loved France and France has served his Congregation. Don Bosco sowed the seed and we have watered the field for 29 years.' Revolution attracted him, since separation from the centre was foreseeable after the laws of 1901 on the secularisation of the French Salesians. 'I have a terrible temptation,' he wrote to Fr Rua, 'to use your letters of

24

Letter of G. Bologna to P. Albera, Paris, 29 July 1906, in FdR 3640B7-C3, edited in '*Les crises...*', 50-51.

25

Letter of G. Bologna to G. Barberis, s. L., 1 August 1906, in FdR 3640A11-12; edited in '*Les crises...*', 52.

proscioglimento [litt. release – understood – from religious vows] and the letters of secularisation from Rome, in order to take care, in our name, of the works that still remain in France and which have cost us so dearly to establish.’ But at this point, the spirit of the loyal religious rose to the fore. ‘I hope, though, that I will not be pushed to this extreme. Were I to listen to the disgust and indignation for the procedures employed to bring me to this point, without a crumb of clarity or openness, I fear I should commit some foolishness.’ He finished the letter with this prayer, ‘May the Help of Christians and Don Bosco come to my aid. J. Bologna’²⁶

His bitterness did not diminish during the weeks of July –August 1906. He appealed to the canonical norms to have some explanation of his dismissal and on the modification of the religious provinces. It appeared to him that there was some sort of conspiracy against the Salesian works in France. ‘The purpose it seems they want to pursue is that of destroying the Salesian work in France’ he wrote to Fr Rua on 17 August – ‘Bear this in mind. We were received at Avigliana, then at Lombriasco but only furtively was the authority of the Provincial attributed to him; they have taken away the personnel who up to that moment depended on him. Fr Albera performed an act of authority and the Province was torn asunder, and the blow that they would still like to inflict would end by annihilating it altogether. It really would be such a shame.’ He denounced the obstinacy of the Superior Chapter. ‘Where has all the opposition come from that has been raised in the Superior Chapter?’ he asked. And he answered, ‘From the fact that I have insisted on defending the interests of the Work in France, from nothing else.’ The thirteen paragraphs of his letter of 17 August to the Rector Major were equally vehement. He ended it very curtly, ‘I dare to hope that they will find a justification for my recourse to the protection of the norms of the Church considering that it seems as though they have treated me as if I had rendered myself unworthy of the Congregation, something which I absolutely do not believe. J. Bologna.’²⁷

Turin read and understood his recriminations. Fr Rua and Fr Albera, the main interpellants, who loved this valiant collaborator, themselves suffered in seeing him suffer. These men of action did not keep a diary which if need be could disclose their pain. But, concerned with the general good order, the Superior Chapter upheld its duty of regularising the situation in northern France. The matter of Tournai had to be settled before the opening of the school year. In Belgium, the Provincial, Fr Francis Scalonì (1861-1926) wanted to know how he should regulate himself. On 11th September the Chapter decided that the house of Tournai which only provisionally and for particular reasons had been separated from the Belgian province, should be reintegrated not later than 1 October. ‘To ensure that everything is carried out in the best way possible, Fr Albera will go there and will also make Fr Bologna understand that the Superiors stand firm in the decision they have taken.’²⁸ In effect, the Spiritual Director general went to Paris in the following days. Fr Bologna was to say that Fr Albera had not communicated

26

Letter of G. Bologna to M. Rua, Tournai, 6 August 1906, in FdR 3647B5-9.

27

Letter of G. Bologna to M. Rua, Paris, 17 August 1906, in FdR 3637C1-4; edited in ‘*Les crises...*’ 53-54.

28

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 11 September 1906, in FdR 4246C2.

anything new; but from Liège, where his journey took him, in a handwritten letter, Fr Albera let him know clearly, since the Superior Chapter had imposed on him the task, that his appeals against his dismissal as Provincial had not convinced anyone.

On 24 September submission finally triumphed in the heart of the ex-Provincial. With great sadness ‘the humble and wretched’ Joseph Bologna expressed his total submission to the Superior General. He could not believe that the measure of dismissal had come from him, in fact he wrote, ‘everything I have done has been done on his orders.’ Whatever may have been, if that was his will, as from 1 October he would behave like an ordinary confrere, without any authority in the northern French province. However, up until the end of the year he would have to put his affairs in order as he thought best.²⁹ And Turin perceived the echo of the ferment boiling up inside him. On 24 October, Fr Rua deplored in the Chapter that in Paris Fr Bologna wanted to sell off everything in too much of a hurry. He promised to write to him to leave everything as it was for his successor, both ‘the active and the passive’. ‘That he act as is usual when a superior is transferred’ so the minutes of the Superior Chapter intimated to him.³⁰ They were concerned about the complete disappearance of every Salesian presence in Paris. A strange note of the Superior Chapter written on 5 November 1906 bears witness to this. It related to the Salesian Noguier de Malijay who had opened a student hostel. ‘Let Fr Virion keep an eye on it.’³¹ This last phrase indicates that by that time in Paris, the change of superiors had effectively taken place. The Provincial of the south became the ‘regent’ of the northern province.

Stoically, Fr Bologna presented himself in Turin on 1 January 1907.³² A room near the church of Mary Help of Christians was assigned to him. On 4 January he celebrated Mass as usual. After a short trip into the city he was seen returning towards ten-thirty. At eleven o’clock he was found stretched out at the foot of his desk, his eyes dead, struck down, it was thought, by a massive stroke. He was not yet sixty years old. The editor of the *Bulletin salésien* informs us that ‘Fr Rua and the principal superiors of our Society could not but weep before the mortal remains of him whom they had learnt to know and love over forty years.’

The general opinion expressed in the *Bulletin Salésien*, attributed the premature death of this courageous man to his misadventures in 1903: the hostile vote of the French Senate, the closure of the houses in the north, the dispersion of the Salesians and the confiscation of their real estate. ‘It was with the utmost sorrow that he saw these houses of work and prayer sold at auction, houses whose every stone told a story for him. It must be added that such strong emotions and such shocks had definitely

29

According to the letter of G. Bologna to M. Rua, 24 September 1906, in FdR 3637C5-10; edited in ‘*Les crises...*’, 55-56.

30

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 24 October 1906, in FdR 4246D10.

31

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 5 November 1906, in FdR 4246D12.

32

I am following here the anonymous note ‘Don Joseph Bologne’ in the *Bulletin salésien*, février 1907, 40-42.

undermined his whole being and the real and true cause of his death must be sought in this anguish which silently threatened his very existence.’

Fr Rua, Fr Albera, Fr Rinaldi, Fr Cerruti, Fr Rocca, Fr Gusmano, members of the Superior Chapter who had read or heard Fr Bologna’s anguished cries, could not share this over-simplified explanation. They knew that his demotion and what he (wrongly) considered to be the will to systematically demolish his province precisely on the part of those who should have supported it, had filled him with bitterness and destroyed his ‘peace of soul’. Landing in Valdocco at this beginning of 1907 certainly did not bring him any serenity. The trials of 1903 had not succeeded in weakening him, it was, instead the crisis of 1906 that brought about his death.

Fr Rua’s style of governing

The account of the misfortunes of the Provincial, Peter Perrot and Joseph Bologna, during Fr Rua’s time as Rector Major provide us with some insights into his style of government.

His government was collegial. Far from being autocratic, he entrusted himself to the Superior Chapter. His collaborators were authentic councillors and never felt compelled to obey him. Several times, he found he had to bow before the opinion of the majority even when contrary to his own, as in the case of Fr Perrot whom he strenuously defended. It is also lawful to think that he submitted unwillingly to the silence about the real motives behind Fr Bologna’s dismissal which was at the basis of the torments suffered by that unfortunate soul, deposed without being given the reasons for it. This style of government was in complete conformity with Don Bosco’s ideas on the Superior Chapter of his Society.

Fr Rua’s government was aimed at the common good, beyond particular interests. The business of Fr. Bologna shows us, that despite the sufferings that his provisions could cause to the persons he loved, he was concerned above all with the general good. The past-pupil of the De La Salle Brothers did not like disorder, and future events would prove him right. The Salesian work in France did not suffer on account of his decisions regarding Fr Perrot and Fr Bologna. The wise Paul Virion, appointed in their place – who was in office both in the north and south until 1919 – prepared in calmness (and suffering) the revival following the first World War. From 1925, the work founded by Don Bosco in France in 1875 was to witness half a century of real resurrection in the north.

In the history of the two unfortunate Provincials, the government of Fr Rua is revealed as firm, flexible, long-suffering, wise and enlightened. He never drew back. There was never ever any hesitation. He went forward having prayed and reflected deeply. It is quite feasible, moreover, that the Spiritual Director General, Paul Albera, who knew the situation of the French Provinces well, having been the Provincial there from 1881-1892, supported and advised him. His firmness was not inhuman. Fr Perrot and Fr Bologna did not have the impression of being maltreated by him. Fr Bologna blamed the Chapter, never the Rector Major. At most, in July 1906, he was sorry not to find once more a fatherly attitude in Fr Rua. But here the Rector Major was following the policy enjoined by his Chapter.

27 – THE GENERAL CHAPTERS OF 1901 AND 1904

The Ninth General Chapter (1901)

The sad business in France coincided with the two most important General Chapters of Fr Rua's time as Rector Major both of which were held at Turin-Valsalice. They played a decisive role in the development of the Salesian Society, especially the second one. By this time, the vast increase in the size of the Congregation had to be taken into account. In 1888 there were 773 professed members and 276 novices spread out among 64 centres. In 1901 there were 2916 professed with 742 novices and 265 houses. By 1904 the number of professed had risen further to 3223 and the novices to 764 in 315 centres.¹ Such numbers required new structures and systems of formation. Fr Rua was well aware of it.

The Ninth General Chapter was held from 1-5 September 1901.² 154 confreres took part. Since someone had questioned the validity of the Acts produced by the previous Chapters, besides which some decisions of this Chapter had been reserved to the judgement of the Holy See, Fr Rua had to wait until the following 19 March to tell the confreres about it in a satisfactory manner.³ In our account we shall bear in mind the circular letter of 19 March 1902.

At the preliminary assembly on the evening of 1 September, Fr Rua presented the decree relative to the ministry of confessions, which has been dealt with above (cf. Chapter 24). By this act, he submitted completely to the decisions of the Holy Office. On 2 December, the question was raised of the suitability of instituting provincial Chapters and the composition of the General Chapter of the Congregation. This was one of the problems which would be left provisionally on hold. Up to that point, the General Chapters were held every three years and were made up of the members of the Superior Chapter, the Provincials and all the rectors of the communities. The General Chapter proposed that for the future, the General Chapters should be celebrated every six years with the participation of the members of the Superior Chapter, the Procurator General of the Society, the Provincials and one, or at the most, two delegates elected by the provincial Chapters. At the end of 1901, Fr Rua approached the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars on this point and carried the day. On 12 February 1902, the Procurator, Fr Marengo, was able to explain to the Superior Chapter that the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars had accepted the proposal of a six yearly General Chapter and in each province that of a three yearly Provincial Chapter.⁴ Therefore, the circular of 19 March announced, 'In the General Chapter of 1904, during which elections will be held, only the Provincials will take part accompanied by one confrere from each province elected by the professed members of the province.'

Provincials and Provinces thus assumed new importance in the Salesian Congregation. The move had been under consideration for several years. Already in the meeting of 12 July 1897, Fr Rua had pointed out to the members of the Superior Chapter that 'it will be necessary, with the appropriate rules in place, to hand over to the Provincials and their Chapters, the acceptance of new works, because the Superior Chapter cannot continue in the midst of so much business to examine the requests which

¹ It should also be remembered that the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, which

are ever more so numerous, causing an incalculable loss of time'.⁵ Decentralisation was necessary. Fr Rua availed of the circular of 19 March to notify the Provincials of what was expected of them. He was very clear and demanding.

'In the first place,' he wrote, 'With firmness, let them see that in every community the perfect observance of the rule and the true spirit of Don Bosco are maintained. This is the foundation and the whole future of our Society. If the Provincials are not vigilant, or if they are weak, disorders will spread rapidly. Then they must remember that they are responsible for preparing the clerics for the priesthood. This is their principal responsibility before God. Finally, let them work in their own Provinces for the formation of confreres with degrees in theology, philosophy, arts and sciences etc. to meet the needs of teaching and preaching, without expecting everything to come from Turin.' The regionalisation of the Society was at hand.

On the evening of 2 September, the General Chapter voted in some important decisions on the formation of the seminarians. Up till then, after the years of philosophy, most of them studied theology while remaining in the various schools until ordination. Dedicated theological studentates were now needed to improve formation. The proposal was approved 'that the Superior Chapter will establish theological studentates, where deemed suitable, to serve one or more Provinces.' The commission charged with the issue noted that since this decision would deprive the houses of the important help afforded by the clerics, it proposed that, at the end of the philosophical studies and before the theological course, they should be sent to work in the individual houses. The Chapter agreed. Fr Rua wrote in the account of 19 March 1902, 'It was decided that after the philosophy course, the clerics undertake a three year period of practical work in the houses of our Pious Society, and after these three years, withdraw for a four year period to work seriously at theology, following the whole course of dogmatic, sacramental and moral theology etc.' He gave the reasoning behind it, 'The need was felt for our clerics to be well formed in sacred lore, and provision for this was becoming more urgent in that the competent ecclesiastical authorities had made observations in this regard.' In fact, the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars and Leo XIII himself had deplored the inadequate theological formation of the Salesians.

Sometimes in the General Chapter, the blame for all this fell on the Superior Chapter. Fr Rua replied to the accusation very clearly on the morning of 3 September. His talk to the members of the General Chapter deserves quoting. As ever, Don Bosco was the model. 'Many times our good Father exhorted us to avoid the spirit of contradiction, criticism and reform, and wanted to insert this recommendation in the special advice he left his sons: avoid itching for reform. I repeat this recommendation to you. Criticism of Superiors is fatal for a community, especially when it comes from Rectors or Provincials. Subjects lose

was still an integral part of the Salesian Society, in 1904 numbered 2143 professed and 358 novices in 248 houses.

² Minutes in FdR 4036C11-4041D10; account in *Annali* III, 144-169.

³ L.C., 269-285.

⁴ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 12 February 1902, in FdR 4243D4-5.

⁵

Minutes of the Superior Chapter, 12 July 1897, in FdR4242B7.

their sense of obedience, they no longer trust their Superiors and your authority is compromised. Not only must this criticism of Superiors be avoided, but also the criticism of your colleagues and predecessors. Their achievements are not to be criticised; find out about their methods, but do not demolish or reform what they have built up unless, after two years, the absolute necessity becomes apparent. Avoid criticism of one's dependants; it is a sign of pride. They also have their reasons and eyes with which to see and judge. It is contrary to charity always to wish to impose one's own opinion; take care not to rebuke anyone while under the influence of your own bad temper; if necessary gather all the due information. Don Bosco was marvellous in the way he praised and showed himself satisfied with what his dependants did: that served as encouragement to perform one's duty and gained their affection.'⁶

On the same morning a debate was held on the clerics' university studies. A circular from the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, addressed to bishops and superiors general (21 July 1896) had forbidden secular and religious seminarians from attending university before finishing their philosophical and theological studies. Their minds could be negatively influenced by books, professors and the whole environment. The Salesians should also have submitted to this ruling. But how could the confreres be persuaded to resume literary or scientific studies after seven years' absence (the three years of philosophy and the four of theology)? Salesian schools would lack degreed teachers and external teachers would have to be employed, thus incurring serious expenditure and disadvantage to the spirit and studies of the students. The commission involved, therefore, asked for the approval of an article to be inserted in the regulations as follows: 'Clerics with the necessary qualifications and who are judged capable by their superiors, may, after the philosophy course, attend university and other higher studies.' The dispensation which was considered essential by the special situation of the Salesian Society had to be requested of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. To the question posed by the commission, out of 146 voters, 131 responded affirmatively, 9 negatively and 6 abstained. In the following weeks Fr Rua presented a well thought out request to the Roman Congregation.⁷ On 21 December, the said Congregation granted the desired dispensation for a period of three years, limiting it to those individuals judged to be suited to teaching and taking all the necessary precautions.

When opening the evening session of 3 September, Fr Rua spoke of the joy and serenity that Don Bosco infused into the community. That was why all those around him felt happy.

How can we be like him? 1st means: exactness in the practices of piety, without which happiness and charity cannot reign within ourselves nor in our communities. It would be a mistake to confuse charity with letting things go too much. 2nd means: with love and amiability make sure the Rules are observed. 3rd means: evident concern also in fostering the physical well-being of one's dependants; forestall their needs if possible in cases of sorrow, ailments etc. 4th means: do not hold too strictly to one's own ideas.

6

Quoted in *Annali* III, 149-150.

7

Cf. the document quoted in *Annali* III, 160-161.

Even in the meetings, willingly hear their opinion and follow it when there is no danger of harmful consequences. Show a certain flexibility of character. In this way, life will proceed in peace, harmony and cheerfulness.⁸

On the morning of 4 September Fr Rua made some recommendation on fraternal charity. He considered it needful ‘to help one another and support and spread knowledge of our works and those of our confreres’. He also offered a few concrete examples: circulate the *Catholic Readings*, buy what is needed for the office from Salesian shops, pay one’s debts to the Salesian houses; pay the quota for the novitiates.⁹ As a preamble to the evening session that day, he believed it fitting to express his ideas on the means of recruitment of Salesian Co-operators and confreres. As Don Bosco had done, he simplified (too much?) the matter for the Cooperators.

‘Don Bosco had the Union of Cooperators very much at heart and he strove to spread it more and more. To do this it is not necessary to question them, it suffices to send them the Regulations. When we come across a well-intentioned person, we send them the diploma [of membership of the Pious Union]. So as not to duplicate things, ask if they receive the *Bulletin*, but without hinting at any obligations, just say it involves doing a little good without any obligation in conscience’. We need to increase the number of confreres, Fr Rua continued. ‘The first means is by making the work of the Society known and appreciated, speaking often of Don Bosco, of the missions and other Salesian works. Do not attract with false promises, but cultivate generous sentiments in whoever feels called to religious life, which is a life of sacrifice. The second means is asking the parish priests with whom we have some rapport to see if they know of any adult who could become a lay-brother or work in our houses, and then take good care of him and bring him to love our Society. This is something that concerns us all.’¹⁰

Every intervention he made in the course of this General Chapter reveals Fr Rua’s orderly, logical and classifying mind, and his will to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Don Bosco.

The coronation of Mary Help of Christians (1903)

17 May 1903 ‘will be inscribed in letters of gold in the annals of our Congregation’ Fr Rua proclaimed in his ‘edifying letter’ to the Salesians on the following 19 June.¹¹ On that day, in fact, at the request of Fr Rua, Cardinal Augustine Richelmy proceeded with the solemn coronation of the image of Mary Help of Christians in her shrine in Turin.¹² Fr Rua’s trusting devotion to Mary Help of Christians was well known. On 20 January 1900, for example, he had written to the confreres, ‘It is through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians that we must hope for light for our minds, strength for our wills, health for our bodies, prosperity in our enterprises and all the helps, temporal and otherwise, that may be needed in our houses. She who obtains so many graces for our Cooperators, how many will she not obtain for her first-born sons if we truly invoke her and honour her as good children?’¹³ He did not repeat himself on that day but crowning her image at Valdocco would be for him the triumph of Mary.

⁸ Quoted in *Annali* III, 152.

⁹ *Annali* III, 162.

¹⁰ *Annali* III, 164.

¹¹ L.C., 475.

¹² In this paragraph, I am closely following Ceria’s account in *Vita*, 374-382.

¹³ L.C., 466.

The idea of crowning the picture of Mary Help of Christians had come from a priest at the Oratory in 1902 and Fr Rua immediately made it his own. The task, though, was not straightforward; the agreement of Rome was required for this particular rite. The Rector Major decided to avail of the jubilee of Leo XIII who, on 20 February had entered his twenty-fifth year as Pontiff, a rare occurrence in the history of the Popes. The Salesians wanted to celebrate the jubilee in a special way. Inspired by Fr Rua, the *Bollettino Salesiano* launched the proposal to all the Rectors and Sisters in charge of the various Salesian houses to start a subscription to cover a great album that would be presented to the Pope along with St. Peter's Pence. The album would contain all the names of those subscribers who had contributed at least ten cents. The result was two large albums with 70,000 signatures and a sum of 12,400 Italian lire. Fr Rua decided that he would personally present everything to Leo XIII, accompanied by a delegation of young people. Making the most of that occasion, he would request the faculty for crowning the image of Mary Help of Christians in her shrine at Valdocco.

He left Turin at the end of December 1902 in the company of four Salesian priests, two students and two apprentices, chosen by their companions by secret ballot. The audience was granted for 5 January 1903. The group from Turin was enlarged by the Procurator General, Fr John Marengo, with two young people from Rome, one from the festive oratory and the other from the Sacred Heart hostel. Fr Rua was first introduced by himself. He explained to the Pope the reason for his visit which was a jubilee homage in the name of Don Bosco's three families; he spoke of the forthcoming Congress of the Salesian Cooperators for which he asked a special blessing and finally he handed over the formal request for the coronation. His companions were then introduced. Two of the young people from Turin delivered the albums to the Pope together with the St. Peter's Pence offering. The conversation was very relaxed. According to the chronicle, to Fr Rua's great satisfaction, Leo XIII concluded, 'Your Superior has told us that the Pious Union of the Cooperators does a great deal of good, that thanks to it, the faith is upheld in many countries, above all through devotion to Mary Help of Christians. To develop this devotion a petition has been presented to us which we are happy to accept. We have granted the favour and only reserve to ourselves to study the way in which it may be carried out.' Fr Rua left, beside himself with joy.

There was no delay in settling the matter. On 17 February Cardinal Richelmy, the Archbishop of Turin, received a *Motu Proprio*. The Pope decreed the coronation of the image and delegated him to proceed, according to the ritual, in his name and with his authority. According to Fr Ceria, the document continued with the words, 'Since our beloved son Michael Rua, Rector Major of the Pious Salesian Society, in his own name and in that of the entire Salesian Family, addressed a humble and enthusiastic request to us, that in this year in which we happily celebrate the silver jubilee of our pontificate, we would consent to crown this venerated image, we who hold nothing dearer nor sweeter than to see devotion to the august Mother of God grow daily among Christian people, have willingly considered it well to grant the request.'¹⁴ The people greeted the news with enthusiasm. A committee of well-off ladies took charge of commissioning the crowns from a jeweller in the city.

From 14-16 May, in Turin-Valdocco, the third International Congress of the Salesian Cooperators was to be held. The Archbishop of Turin was to be the honorary president

¹⁴ Ceria, *Vita*, 377.

and Fr Rua the executive president. The event would draw a crowd of friends and benefactors of Don Bosco to Turin.¹⁵ The festal day for the coronation was fixed for the final day of the Congress, 17 May. Let us leave it to Fr Rua himself to describe that memorable day.

From two o'clock in the morning devout pilgrims begin to assemble at the doors of the church. Such a numerous crowd has never been seen in the church, on the plaza nor in the whole district of Valdocco. As our Eminent Cardinal-archbishop expresses it, they all have but one thought, one desire, to see the brow of the august Queen of Heaven, encircled by the rich diadem. At last the longed-for moment arrives. His Eminence, Cardinal Richelmy, delegated by His Holiness to perform the sacred ceremony, first in the church on the miraculous image and then in the square outside on the holy statue, with trembling hand places the jewel encrusted crown on the head of the Virgin Help of Christians and with a strong but emotional voice, from the height of the scaffolding pronounces the words of the ritual: *Sicut te coronamus in terries, ita a Christo coronari mereamur in coelis*. [As we crown you on earth, so may we be made worthy to be crowned by Christ in heaven]. At these words it is no longer possible to refrain the devotion and enthusiasm of the crowd which erupts in vociferous applause. From every heart breaks forth the cry, *Hail, O Mary Help of Christians!* And a chorus of thousands of voices intones the magnificent antiphon *Corona aurea super caput ejus* [A crown of gold upon her head]. Is it any wonder that at such a demonstration of faith, piety and love for Mary, tears should freely flow? I cannot add anything else for words fail me in expressing the joy of that moment, the sweetest of ecstasies in which the hearts of all were absorbed, the tumult of emotions, the ardour of prayer raised to our most loving Mother.

The ceremony is over but that endless throng of people does not disperse such is its desire to manifest its devotion to the powerful Help of Christians. So it invades the church dedicated to her which resounds throughout the day with hymns and prayers. As evening falls the people of Turin and the pilgrims fill the Valdocco district to take part in the solemn procession in which the crowned statue of Mary Help of Christians is carried in triumph through the streets of the city. They receive the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament imparted from the altar and from the main doors of the church, followed again by vigorous applause and by hymns in praise of the Blessed Sacrament and of the glorious Queen. Night has fallen and the crowd continues to enjoy the illumination of the church, the plaza and almost the whole of Turin. The people seem unable to tear themselves away from Mary Help of Christians. For the next ten days pilgrims even coming from a great distance continue to venerate the crowned Virgin¹⁶

This moving report of the event shows how much the coronation of the Virgin Help of Christians touched Fr Rua's devout heart.

Fr Rua's homage to Pius X

Between the Ninth and the Tenth General Chapter, on 20 July 1903 Leo XIII died. On the following 4 August he was succeeded by Pius X. In going to offer his homage, with the support of Cardinal Svampa of Bologna, Fr Rua tried to obtain some alleviation of the decrees of the Holy Office forbidding Salesian Rectors to hear the confessions of their dependants.¹⁷

¹⁵ For this successful congress, in which Fr Rua rarely intervened since the organization was left in the expert hands of Fr Stefano Trione, cf. *Annali* III, 310-339.

¹⁶ Edifying letter of 19 June 1903, in L.C., 473-477.

¹⁷ The episode is recounted in Ceria, *Vita*, 383-391.

On 26 September, Cardinal Svampa wrote a letter to Cardinal Rampolla, Protector of the Salesian Society, and sent a copy of it to Fr Rua:

I cannot hide from you the fact that in these last years the Salesians have been very mortified by the well known decree of the Holy Office which arrived unexpectedly and was couched in very serious terms, upsetting in no small measure the disciplinary life which had regulated the institute from the time of Don Bosco. Fr Rua, a man of uncommon virtue, to whom his sons would have recourse with great trust, confiding their consciences to him, and who in the frequent visits to the houses had a salutary influence on the formation of souls through the tribunal of penance, suddenly found himself deprived of the faculty of hearing the confessions of his own subjects; the same holds good for all the superiors (that is, the Rectors) in regard to their dependants. The measure was taken without Fr Rua being consulted and without the special nature of the Salesians being taken into account. Among them the Rectors (including the Major Superior) exercise above all the role of spiritual fathers, leaving to the prefects, the councillors and the Supreme Council, the tasks involving strictness and punishment. I witnessed the immense sorrow experienced by the Salesians in this painful situation and the exemplary obedience with which they submitted to the peremptory instructions of the Holy Office.¹⁸

Cardinal Rampolla promised to speak to the Pope.

Fr Rua waited until the end of October to travel to Rome and was received in audience by Pius X on 3 November. He had presented three requests to the Pope which can be summarised a) that during his travels he could confess those who asked him; b) that in cases of obvious necessity, the Salesian Rectors could confess those who turned to them; c) that in cases of necessity the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and their pupils could approach Salesian confessors. During a long and extremely cordial tête-à-tête the Pope wrote on the bottom of the sheet of paper: *Juxta preces; pro gratia. Ex aedibus Vaticanis, die 3 novembris 1903, P.P.X*, a formula meaning that he granted the request.¹⁹

In this way, the Pope softened a little the effects of the decree of the Holy Office, though the rest remained intact. It must be added that Fr Rua used the privilege with extreme discretion and refused to confess the Salesians who had been accustomed to go to him for confession.

The Tenth General Chapter

The Tenth General Chapter of the Salesian Society, convoked by Fr Rua on 6 January 1904 at Turin-Valsalice for the following 23 August, was prepared with special care.²⁰ Fr Cerruti was to be the moderator and its main objective was the election of the members of the Superior Chapter whose mandate expired in August. A review and collation of the decisions taken in previous Chapters was also envisaged.²¹

For the first time in the history of the Congregation, the General Chapter would be composed only of Provincials and Provincial delegates, no longer of community Rectors. This novelty implied the preliminary organisation of the Provincial Chapters,

¹⁸ Ceria, *Vita*, 385.

¹⁹ The document is found in FdR 3832E10-3833A1.

²⁰ The Salesian Central Archive holds a substantial dossier of almost 1400 pages on this Chapter, cf. FdR 4041D11-4064A5. Cf. also the account in *Annali* III, 537-557.

²¹ Fr Rua's circular letter, 'Carissimi Figli...' 6 January 1904, in FdR 4041D11-E2.

juridical entities hitherto unknown in the Salesian world. On that same 6 January, therefore, Fr Rua signed a pamphlet entitled *Information and Norms* on the way to prepare for the General Chapter.²² The document laid down the rules relating to the composition and purpose of Provincial Chapters. Under the presidency of the Provincial, all the Rectors of the Province, together with a delegate from every house chosen by the community, would assemble. Fr Rua's text also determined the role of these Chapters: in the first place they had to elect the provincial delegate and his substitute; secondly, for Italy, they had the task of appointing the novice master and the members of the commission charged with admissions to vows; finally, they had to formulate proposals to present to the General Chapter.

The preparation for the General Chapter ran smoothly. However, of the thirty five canonically erected provinces, only thirty two sent representatives to Turin. The provinces of Ecuador, El Salvador and the United States were missing. Their representatives were absent through illness or other reasons beyond their control. During the preparatory session, on 2 August, Fr Rua suggested that the first act of the assembly should be to send a telegram of filial submission to the Holy Father and to implore his blessing on the work of the Chapter. The telegram was drawn up by Fr Bertello and dispatched immediately.²³ Then Fr Rua greeted the Chapter members in his fatherly fashion, 'The thought of Don Bosco who was truly the man of God and of charity, that charity which must penetrate all our discussions, has prompted me to convoke this Chapter here at Valsalice, where his venerated remains rest.' He then proceeded to recommend that the various issues be treated with calm and charity, without ever offending anyone of those present or those who were absent, 'certain that he is moved by the best of intention'.

As a preliminary item, the active participation of Bishops Cagliari and Costamagna who were coming from South America, was decided upon. After the examination and solution of some doubtful cases, the number of Chapter members reached seventy five.

On 24 August the elections for the Superior Chapter took place in which all those currently in office were reconfirmed. The next day, the Rector Major communicated the news to the Salesians around the world, earnestly asking them to continue praying for the 'successful outcome of one of the most important tasks of our Pious Society.'²⁴ In effect, the Chapter was working on the difficult problem of classifying the earlier deliberations, dividing them into the so-called 'organic' articles, having constitutional value and articles pertaining solely to the regulations, a problem which, moreover, did not reach a good conclusion. The following were drawn up, *ad experimentum*: a Regulation for General Chapters; a note regulating the Provinces; a Regulation for the novitiates and philosophical studentates; and a Regulation-Programme for the theologates.²⁵ The Chapter was officially closed on 13 September, after a total of thirty three general assemblies.

Fr Rua frequently intervened in the course of the assemblies. As the witnesses testify, everyone listened to him almost religiously. Unfortunately, these interventions which were always brief, as was his wont, remain only in the schematic notes taken down by secretaries and in those which he penned day by day in a notebook entitled

²² *Informazioni e Norme pel X Capitolo Generale*, 9 printed pages, in FdR 4041E4-12.

²³ The telegram is found in FdR 4042B6.

²⁴ Autograph and printed version in FdR 3984C7-8.

‘Recommendations made during the 10th General Chapter’.²⁶ We shall now quote a few which seem more representative of his concerns.

On the afternoon of 25 August, he intervened on the question of the use of the Italian language. He invited the non-Italian confreres to study it for three reasons: a) because this is the language of the Mother-House, of our revered father, Don Bosco, and of the Pope; b) because it will be a means for us to understand each other more readily in future gatherings of the General Chapters, as the current experience shows; c) because this will facilitate the relations between subjects and the major superiors since the latter cannot always visit them personally nor learn their language. Insist that the superiors of the foreign houses advise their dependants to write to the major superiors in Italian or Latin. ‘These were the wishes expressed by Don Bosco himself.’²⁷

On 26 August Fr Rua recommended the Provincials to accept chaplaincies and other similar commitments outside the community only with great prudence. Let them be accepted only in the absence of a priest on the spot able to carry out such functions, but immediately a secular priest is available to take care of them they should be handed over. In this way rivalries with the local clergy and neglect of concerns of an internal nature to the house will all be avoided. During the afternoon session he advised the Chapter members to pay careful attention to the monthly letters or the occasional ones of the Superior Chapter and all the printed material sent out to the houses from the Superior Chapter.

The afternoon of 31 August brought a lengthy intervention from Fr Rua on the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. He remarked that the Salesians owed a lot to them. ‘It is thanks to them that the Salesians were able to enter France and many countries in South America. The support given by these Conferences has been very effective. Don Bosco was very fond of this work and spoke of it with real enthusiasm. Archbishop David Riccardi, Archbishop of Turin, used to say that these gentlemen of the Conferences distribute alms very judiciously because they are not only concerned with the material good of the people but, above all, with their spiritual good. They are not content with almsgiving but they themselves go to visit the poor and are occupied with their misfortunes. Let the Provincials, therefore, take the Conferences to heart and encourage their expansion.’²⁸

That year (1904) the modernist crisis shook Catholic intellectuals. On 16 December 1903 the Holy Office had put the books of Alfred Loisy on the Index. The professor’s ‘modernist’ supporters and their conservative opponents faced each other over the question of the historicity of the Gospels. The progressives introduced into the issue the position of the Pope and his curia, the latter judged to be somewhat dull-witted. In this context we can understand why, in the course of the afternoon session of 2 September, Fr Rua gave an intervention on the respect due to the Pope and the Roman authorities. ‘Let the Provincials in their visits, during all the retreats, in their conferences and the short talks in the evening, encourage both in the confreres and the young people a love

²⁵ These texts are found in FdR 4050C8-4052D4.

²⁶ *Raccomandazioni fatte durante il Cap. Gen. X*, five autograph pages in FdR 4042A9-B1. We follow the outline at this point.

²⁷ L.C., 316-330.

²⁸ *Annali* III, 222.

for the Sovereign Pontiff, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, and for the Roman Congregations which are his mouthpiece. This sentiment must be rooted in the confreres. To maintain it inviolate in their hearts, dangerous readings on this point should be avoided. Our revered father, Don Bosco, used to say, “Distrust those who speak against the Pope and the Roman Congregations; they are enemies of the Church and of souls.” Don Bosco was careful to submit not only to the orders but also to the wishes of the Pope, even at the cost of great sacrifice. Let us, therefore, show ourselves in this as well, worthy sons of such a father.’²⁹

On the morning of 5 September, while the regulations for the Provincials were being drawn up, Fr Rua urged them to take to heart the formation of the Rectors. During the visits they should spend as long as was necessary with the new Rectors, receiving them in private conversation, and after the prescribed conference for all the members of the community, they should again speak to them separately, giving them suitable fatherly advice. Above all, they should strive to inculcate love for the holy Rule and meticulous respect even for the smallest observances. It would be good to re-read with them the regulations for Rectors and verify that they observe them. Let them also read the other regulations that concern them and, on this basis, make the necessary observations for the good of the house. They should take note whether or not the Rectors regularly visit the classes and workshops, if they fulfil all that is required in Salesian houses. In particular let them check that the Rectors take sufficient care of the personnel, for the good of the confreres is the main duty of every Rector.

Fr Rua returned to this topic in the afternoon of that same 5 September, this time addressing the Rectors. ‘The Rector should be neither too austere nor too easy-going. Some mistakenly believe that in order to gain the heart of their dependants, they have to multiply concessions. A middle way is preferable, without introducing any abuses. In this way the spirit of our most gentle father and founder will be maintained.’³⁰ In these instructions we find once more the figure of Fr Rua ‘the Rule personified’ and the attentive visitor of the daughter-houses when he was the Prefect General of the Congregation.

The Salesian Congregation had by now become highly international. On 6 September, Fr Rua showed his concern about it. With the aim of better maintaining peace and harmony in the houses and driving away all ill-feeling, he especially charged the Provincials with preventing disputes about nationality. One’s own nation should never be boasted about to the detriment of the others. There is good and evil in everyone. He also recommended that smoking be outlawed in the communities. He absolutely did not want confreres to smoke. Taking snuff should also be moderated. Those who already had the habit, if they really could not give it up, should use it in private; above all, they should not offer it to others.³¹

Before passing to the agenda, the moderator invited Fr Stephen Trione to speak on the matter of Italian emigrants. Fr Trione concluded by voicing two wishes: to attract the good will of the Italian colonies through the use of their mother-tongue and the establishment of secretariats for the migrants; and to institute a permanent commission for emigration. Fr Rua was enthusiastic about Fr Trione’s proposals and there and then

²⁹ FdR 4055B10.

³⁰ FdR 4056A10-11.

³¹ FdR 4056B2-3.

named him as president of the desired commission, with the responsibility of choosing the other members in agreement with the Superior Chapter. 'I so much wish us to work in favour of our fellow Italians. We must not be discouraged, especially at the beginning, with the poor results. What was it that Fr Coppo said to us in New York? That the Lord has perhaps disposed that our poor Italian emigrants, along with the Poles and the Irish, are to be sowers and preservers of the faith in the most distant places. The emigrants of other countries should not be neglected.'³²

That same day Fr Rua declared himself against holidays taken in the family. Only after several years' absence, might the Provincial allow a confrere to spend a maximum of a week at home. In exceptional cases, a fortnight might be allowed. The Provincial should take note of these authorisations and keep himself informed of any abuses. If necessary he should act without delay to correct any that occurred.

The long General Chapter ended with a hymn of gratitude for what it had succeeded in achieving. Fr Rua wrote in his circular letter, 'We spent twenty days gathered together while the Provincials were anxiously awaited in institutes dependant on them, especially for the retreats. Nevertheless, all the members of the General Chapter remained at Valsalice until the evening of 13 September when the *Te Deum* was sung.

The conclusions of the Tenth General Chapter

Fr Rua waited until the following 19 February (1905) to deliver the result of the Tenth Chapter.³³ In the meantime, he had had to gain the approval of the Roman authorities. He expressed his satisfaction with the quality of the discussions in the assemblies. 'It is comforting for me to be able to state that an untroubled calm, a genuinely fraternal charity and an exemplary consensus in cases of diverging opinions, were characteristic of this last General Chapter. In fact, one of the oldest members of the Chapter wrote to me that the meetings had truly been a school of wisdom, humility and charity.'

In the circular he also explained that on 3 September, in the presence of Cardinal Richelmy, the solemn opening of Don Bosco's coffin had taken place, in view of the recognition required by the canonical processes. The contemplation of his features had profoundly moved the hearts of the Chapter members. They had feared that the permission would not have arrived in time and so they would have been unable to gaze once more on the beloved face of Don Bosco, who was buried near the conference hall. But someone managed to obtain it, so that day the members of the General Chapter had the opportunity of contemplating at their ease Don Bosco's mortal remains. 'In fact,' wrote Fr Rua the coffin was transported into the great hall on the ground floor of the new building. Here, after the celebration of many Masses in suffrage of his blessed soul, towards 9.30 the coffin was opened and the eyes of more than two hundred persons were fixed on the remains of our good father, which had not been seen for seventeen years. The body was found to be well preserved, the skin and complexion of the face and hands were intact. However, the eyes which so many times had gazed on us with ineffable goodness had disappeared; his mouth was also slightly open as the lower jaw had dropped. On the whole, though, Don Bosco's face retained almost all the features of the photograph taken the day he died. We were very happy, of course, to have found

³² FdR 4056D2.

³³ L.C., 316-324.

him in this condition but deeply saddened at the same time that death had left such profound traces on that venerated countenance.’

According to Fr Rua, the main results of the Chapter consisted in the decisions regarding the Provinces. On 27 January 1902, thirty one Provinces had been erected.³⁴ Up till then, the Salesian Society had been strongly centralised, depending on the Superior Chapter; it now became regionalised, to the advantage of all. Fr Rua noted in his circular:

It was rightly considered a great step forward in our Pious Society to have erected the Provinces which the Holy See has canonically approved. Having the houses of the same region grouped together under the watchful care of a superior who represents the Rector Major, holds out the hope of much good. The members of the Tenth General Chapter were well persuaded of the importance of this division and made a careful study of the duties of the Provincials and the rapport which must exist between them and the houses under their care. The result was a short regulation which I hastened to send to each house even before I received approval from the Holy See, so that it might serve for now as a guide, reserving the right to introduce those modifications judged opportune by the Holy See. In the meantime, in general, it will be good for the Rectors to have recourse to the Provincials every time they need personnel, some particular financial assistance or when they meet with some difficulty with the ecclesiastical or civil authorities. I have no doubt but that the Provincials will employ the greatest zeal in coming to the aid of their dependants and should they sometimes be unable to do so, they will at least assure the Rectors that they will have recourse of the Superior Chapter to obtain what they themselves are unable to give. The permissions which the individual confreres believe they should ask, will also be handled by the Provincials. I sincerely hope that on the part of the Provincials there is the commitment to practise the gentleness and affability of which Don Bosco was our teacher, and on the part of the confreres, the continual effort to see in the superiors the person of Jesus Christ. In this way, between superiors and dependants there will be those close and cordial relationships which ensure the good government of the Congregation and the peace of each member.’³⁵

The Tenth General Chapter left the Salesian Congregation more flexible, stronger and even more attached to Don Bosco. The decentralisation of government was the most important act of Fr Rua’s term in office. The Congregation would, thus, be able to face with fewer risks its expansion in countries whose culture was not Italian.

³⁴ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 20 January 1902, in FdR 4243D4.

³⁵ L.C., 323-324.

28 The Social Question

'Rerum novarum'

The time of Fr Rua's period as Rector Major was marked by the publication and application of the famous encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, dated 15 May 1891.

At the end of the century industry was on the increase; towns and working class districts were expanding, while the liberal States hardly felt the need to promulgate social laws. The recession of 1885-1890 had strongly underlined the urgency of the so-called 'social question': the working class was becoming aware of its strength and as a result was beginning to organise itself. In 1884, in France, trade unionism had finally been authorised. Socialism was developing with the foundation in 1890 of the second Workers' International. Catholics were concerned above all with the political question: should they fight for the restoration of the *Ancien Régime*, or accept a secular liberal regime? At a social level many were content to attenuate the defects of liberalism by works of charity, the 'paternalism' of the upper classes. Undoubtedly Don Bosco, who was a great preacher of charity and of almsgiving on the part of the rich towards the poor, and his conservative and counter-revolutionary friends, had remained unwavering in this static view of history.

The promulgation of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* brought new ferment to the Catholic world. The text was divided into four parts: critique of socialism; the Church's teaching; the role of the State; the importance of free associations. Some fundamental orientations derived from it:

- 1) Economic society must be based on the right to private property, on free enterprise and on trade, in contrast to socialism which would open the doors 'to envy, to mutual invective, and to discord; the sources of wealth themselves would run dry, for no one would have any interest in exerting his talents or his industry'; in fact, 'the community of goods [...] only injures those whom it would seem most meant to help' (no. 15).
- 2) Capitalism cannot be a law unto itself: the economy must be dependant on morality. One must reject a simple 'laissez faire' attitude, the free play of the pretended 'natural laws', as though 'an invisible hand', dear to Adam Smith, would automatically ensure the best social outcome. 'Let the working man and the employer make free agreement, and in particular let them agree freely as to the wages; nevertheless, there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man...' (no. 45). There is a just wage; and justice must prevail over economics.
- 3) The first real expression of the moral discipline is the legislation provided by the State, whose intervention is expected above all by the weakest members of society. 'The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State, whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State' (no. 37).
- 4) To avoid the dominance of the State, a system of intermediate associations must be revived. In the encyclical the presentation of corporations adapted to the

contemporary world is very detailed. However, corporate membership was not compulsory; citizens were free to join together in associations which 'should be so organised and governed as to furnish the best and most suitable means for attaining their goals' (no. 56). Above all trade unionism should be a free choice. Leo XIII wrote 'It is gratifying to know that there are actually in existence not a few associations of this nature, consisting either of workmen alone, or of workmen and employers together, but it were greatly to be desired that they should become more numerous and more efficient' (no. 56).

The Rector Major, Fr Rua, was a man of discipline and had nothing of the revolutionary about him, but he always bore in mind the teaching of Leo XIII on the just wage and safeguarding the poor.

French workers in pilgrimage to the tomb of Don Bosco (1891)

On the initiative of Léon Harmel, the 'France at Work' immediately wanted to go to Rome to thank Leo XIII for his encyclical on the conditions of working people.¹ When suggesting the pilgrimage, the 'good Father' of Val de Bois had written in the circular of 2 August 1891: 'Are we not moved in hearing the touching appeal of Leo XIII? Are we not ready to make any sacrifice to console his heart, to witness before the whole world our obedience to his voice? If someone raises the question of the expense, we shall remind him of the episode of Mary Magdalen. Let us leave in large numbers; let us go to Jesus Christ living in his Vicar. It is he who will save us with justice and love'.

Léon Harmel, a great friend of Don Bosco and Fr Rua, anticipated a stop in Turin at the tomb of Don Bosco for the French pilgrims bound for Rome. The chronicle tells us that on 1 September he had gone to Valdocco to 'make the final and detailed arrangements with Fr Rua for the pilgrimage, amounting to seven trainloads, from Paris to the tomb of Don Bosco which was then at Valsalice.

Everything was superbly organised. Beneath the great trees of the lower courtyard of Valsalice, a caterer from Turin had set up an open air refectory, protected from the sun and the vagaries of the weather by a large awning. There were four long tables set out at right angles to Don Bosco's tomb, in front of which was the top table placed across the foremost ends of the long rows of tables'. Here the pilgrims were able to take refreshment during their stop between Paris and Rome. 'A long time before', the chronicle tells us, 'with a really fatherly concern, Fr Rua himself wanted to be involved in organising, as well as possible, a reception worthy of Leo XIII and of France. And on 17 September, the day the first train was expected, he made a point of questioning each one to whom he had entrusted the fulfilment of his orders, so as to satisfy himself that nothing had been left to chance. At last, towards two o'clock in the afternoon he went to Valsalice where he was pleased to see that even his least desires had been carried out to the letter. The pilgrims could come: everything was ready to give them a hearty welcome.'²

In fact, the 464 pilgrims on this first journey found everything organised to perfection: first of all at Porta Nuova station, then along the journey to Valsalice, to the moment of the musical welcome by delegations of the Turin workers who lined the way

¹ We are following here the full report given in the *Bollettino Salesiano* (ottobre 1891, 190-197) from which the quotations are taken.

² Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano*, ottobre 1892, 192.

under the portico of the house, to the singing of the Magnificat in the chapel...In the place where they dined, above the top table a great banner proclaimed: 'To the workers of France from the sons of Don Bosco. Greetings, recognition, respect.' The meal was naturally punctuated with various speeches. We have only a somewhat meagre summary of Fr Rua's intervention:

Recalling that work and workmen, from a Christian point of view, were always at the heart of Don Bosco's priestly concerns and became the main *raison d'être* of his religious family, Fr Rua rejoiced to see the cream of the French work force at the tomb of Don Bosco. The prayer of workers who have come from so far away will tie even tighter the bonds that unite France and Don Bosco and all the works that bear the mark of his faith. Fr Rua then asked the pilgrims to offer the Sovereign Pontiff the homage of deep veneration and limitless devotion of the Pious Salesian Society. Before all of them and their Italian brothers, he ended by claiming his title of honorary president of a section of the Catholic Circle of Turin, to wholeheartedly acclaim, *Three cheers for Leo XIII, the workers' Pope!*³

At five o'clock the whole group returned to the station. The band played as the pilgrims filed out, and received 'a real ovation' from the French guests.

Identical scenes were repeated for other trainloads of Catholic worker pilgrims bound for Rome, during the autumn of 1891. On 15 October, Léon Harmel was once again in Turin to thank the Salesians for their welcome of the workers' pilgrimages. The following day, *Il Corriere Nazionale* reported on Harmel's speech at the end of the dinner organized for the occasion in the mother house of the Salesians, in which he 'was pleased to recall how [the French workers] arrived in Rome full of enthusiastic gratitude remembering the affectionate and fraternal welcome at Valsalice'.⁴

The lessons of the Congress of Bologna (1895)

The encyclical *Rerum novarum* bore fruit at the first International Congress of the Salesian Cooperators held at Bologna in 1895.⁵ An entire chapter was dedicated to the question of the workers, considered from the point of view of the youngest workers, as might be expected in a Salesian environment. The analysis of the situation was presented in ten considerations and reflects the average Catholic social outlook of the time on the condition of children in working class families in a society which was still largely that of craftsmen, but one in which the great industries were beginning to establish themselves. In summary, it stated:

1) The first and most effective education of the young is assured by Christian mothers in upright and healthy families. 2) Now, particularly in the great cities, many dwellings do not present such assurance, neither from the hygienic nor from the moral point of view, they are vile and lethal for they kill the body and soul of the children. 3) Moreover, the demands of modern industry force working mothers to desert the house for whole days in order not to take time out from the factories, thus hindering them from carrying out their natural task of educating their children. 4) The workshops where young workers go to learn a trade, cannot contribute to their good education unless those who conduct them are 'imbued with the holy and refined sense of Christian morality'. 5) The Sunday day of rest is not just a duty, but a right of the workers. 6)

³ Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano*, ottobre 1892, 194.

⁴ Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano*, ottobre 1892, 196-197..

⁵ For this Congress, see chapter 19 above.

The young worker's attendance at catechetical instruction in his parish on Sundays is the 'surest means of strengthening the good education he received at home'. 7) It is now a well known fact that the greater part of youngsters of the working classes, even when they have Christian mothers, almost all abandon their religious practices after their first communion, either because they have been corrupted by bad companions or because of the scandals they witness. 8) These young men, and worse still those who had no mother who took care of them either because she was prevented by work or because lacking in Christian feelings, are left to their own devices or entrusted to employers who fail to respect them, and without sufficient religious instruction they forget what little they learnt as children; 'they grow up ignorant of God and their civic and Christians duties.' 9) In consequence, those who will form the future generation, will be Christians in name only, deprived of the light and hope of Christianity and destined, therefore, to despise the most holy and universal laws and to increase the ranks 'of those crowds who are a danger and a threat to civil society'. 10) Christian charity alone, animated by the spirit of sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, is able to deflect such a misfortune 'by means of its patient care and holy diligence'.⁶

Building on these observations, the Congress then formulated eleven motions marked by a certain paternalistic tone, natural enough at the time, and more or less based on the encyclical. They follow in their unabridged version:

The Congress puts forward the motions:

That the Salesian Cooperators join with all men of good heart and will to obtain, wherever possible, legislation to moderate the demands of the great industries, reconciling the true and lawful interests of the latter with their obligation to respect the sacred rights and duties of motherhood;

That they favour those associations for the improvement of working class housing;

That they use their influence in the placement of neglected or abandoned working class children in crèches or nurseries, preferably in those run by religious, when the first beneficial education by their mother in the home becomes impossible;

That they do their utmost to place workers in those factories where the rules of Christian faith and morality are respected;

That the Salesian Cooperators who are employers or heads of workshops take an interest in the young apprentices entrusted to them as though they were their own sons, and offer them the example of a truly Christian life;

That they take care, therefore, not only of their technical instruction but also of their religious and moral education and of bodily hygiene;

That they foster the observance of the rest and sanctification of Sundays and holy days, supporting as best they can the initiatives in this regard taken by others;

That they pay attention, therefore, that the young workers attend parish catechism sessions, the festive oratories and Catholic evening classes, taking care that they fulfil their religious duties;

That far from allowing them to be scandalised by foul language, blasphemy or carousing, by word and example they will inculcate in them respect for God and themselves, avoidance of idleness and love for work;

⁶*Atti del primo Congresso Internazionale dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1895, 186-187

That they will get them, right from their preadolescence, to enrol in Catholic mutual aid and insurance schemes and get them into the habit of saving so that they may not lack the necessities of life in case of illness, misfortunes and old age;

That, finally, in deciding the wages or salary for their workers, they will follow the principles solemnly proclaimed by the Supreme Pontiff, Leo XIII, in his admirable encyclical *Rerum novarum*.⁷

There is nothing revolutionary in these motions which are moralising in tone. The word 'justice' never appears; it is the sense of charity which predominates. There is not even any mention of the ban on employing children in the factories, nor the reduction of hours in the working day which at that time was generally ten and a half hours or even eleven and a half hours a day. Only the first motion leaves the door slightly ajar in this sense. This assembly was presided over by Fr Rua and was a sign of great good will towards young workers, too often neglected by the employers who had no interest in their education.

The National Society for the Protection and Mutual Aid of young female workers

It was during those years that Fr Rua, with the help of Cesarina Astesana (1858-1946) created a Society of Mutual Aid for Young Catholic Female Workers.⁸ Cesarina Astesana was unmarried, a convinced and enterprising Catholic, who had become troubled at the situation of the dressmakers and other women workers in Turin. The work schedules of the dressmakers were very flexible, depending on the orders and the deadlines for completing them. The work was often prolonged into the night hours and continued on Sundays, if the client demanded it. Their physical and moral condition worried her a lot. With the help of some generous people, Cesarina founded an Oratory, thus meeting one of their expressed requests. Fr Rua, to whom she turned for advice, was not satisfied with giving mere suggestions, he sent her priests for the celebration of Mass and for conferences. The most successful conference was one given by Fr Stephen Trione in the St. Barbara church, in fact, the church turned out to be too small for the throng that attended it. The preacher enchanted the public. It was thus that, there and then, a Society for the Mutual Aid of Young Catholic Female Workers was created. The following year Fr Rua succeeded in getting the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to make two of their houses available to the workers during the summer, at Giaveno in the foothills of the Alps, and at Varazze on the Riviera, so that for a few days the young women workers could breathe in the fresh mountain or sea air.

Cesarina extended her work beyond Turin. She sought support and Fr Rua helped her. 'As regards Miss Astesana,' he wrote in 1904 to the rector of the community in Florence, 'you can assure the Marchioness Alfieri that she is a person worthy of the utmost trust. She is working on a project worthy of great interest on the part of good

⁷*Atti del primo Congresso Internazionale dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1895, 187-188.

⁸ Uncertain information in Auffray, 252-257; more certain in Ceria, *Vita*, 437-438.

people, namely, that of protecting young women workers, making sure that they get their Sundays off work, and preventing them from being exploited by excessive working hours to the detriment of their physical and moral health, etc.’ With the encouragement of Cardinal Richelmy and the blessing of the Pope, the work spread and consolidated to the benefit of the young workers. In her difficulties, Cesarina Astesana had recourse to Fr Rua who never failed to advise and support her. In 1901 the National Society for the Protection and Mutual Aid of Young Female Workers was born. By 1906, it counted 1505 patronesses and 15,168 workers and in 1910, at the death of Fr Rua, the number had tripled.

The strike at the Anselmo Poma works

Nevertheless, the suggestions in the *Rerum novarum* were of slow implementation. The early years of the century were marked by disturbances in the industrialised regions. The socialists rightly demanded a reduction in the working hours in the factories. The Italian parliament debated the questions of women’s work and child labour. When they believed it necessary the workers went on strike. But the Christian trade union did not easily give into their force. In this regard, the troubles encountered in Turin in the Anselmo Poma textile mill between May and July 1906 are significant and from a certain point of view Fr Rua was also involved.⁹

Anselmo Poma was a great friend of Fr Rua. His cotton mill on the outskirts of Valdocco employed hundreds of workers, both men and women. At the beginning the question of working hours arose, then that of wages. In the Poma factory the working day was eleven and a half hours. In May 1906, with the support of the city’s Chamber of Industry and their trade unions, the workers asked for it to be reduced to ten hours, as in other factories. The industrialist accepted this cut in hours, but in his turn asked for a proportionate cut in the wages of his workers. After various fruitless attempts to keep them at their current level, the workers went on strike. Anselmo Poma, a lordly figure, held his authority very dear and absolutely refused to give way to force. The strikers resisted and opposed any return to work.

Fr Rua attempted to calm down the industrialist, urging him not to harden his position and pointing out the reasonableness of the workers demands. He suggested that, so as not to diminish his prestige, as a compromise solution, Poma should entrust the negotiations to his sons. According to Amadei, Fr Rua wrote to Poma on 29 May 1906:

Dear Mr. Poma,

I have very much at heart the matter which so concerns you at the moment, and I keep myself informed of what is happening. I hear that the bad feelings persist in the mass of the workers. Thursday last [24 May, feast of Mary Help of Christians] as I told you, I noticed that your health is suffering. Be patient; go away for a few days; get out of Turin. You have some highly intelligent and very affectionate sons who can represent you very well; give them whatever instructions you deem necessary: they will keep you informed of what happens. In the meantime, leave this hullabaloo behind. Please accept my respects and while I implore peace and tranquillity for you from the Lord, believe me your very affectionate and grateful servant and friend,

⁹The detailed and excessive account in Amadei III, 247-254, is perhaps, not entirely exact. Here we follow the clearer and more probable account in Ceria, *Vita*, 433-437.

Fr. Michael Rua.¹⁰

Fr Rua kept himself informed through Fr. Rinaldi, his Prefect General, who very tactfully served as an intermediary with the industrialist. Poma, however, did not believe he had to abide by Fr Rua's suggestions. It availed nothing repeating to the workers that the wages system would be settled once the indispensable administrative transactions were in place, they were having none of it. More or less violently, the strike continued. On 19 June a referendum among the workers approved it almost unanimously. Subversive elements had infiltrated the mass of the workers and blew on the fire. They rejected peaceful solutions and pushed for a collision course. The Chamber of Industry, dominated by socialists, backed them up. Tempers ran high in the meetings. The factory was literally under siege. Forceful individuals were ready to chase off with stones those who wanted to go back to work.

In the meantime, Fr Rua continued to hold conversations with Anselmo Poma. He persuaded the industrialist to launch an appeal to the women, with fair promises, if they returned to work. 650 agreed, encouraged and supported by Cesarina Astesana. 150 men also went back. Then, a real battle was engaged, day and night, between workers and strikers. The women not on strike set up camp inside the factory. Amadei describes the dangers of resistance. The Chamber of Industry financially assisted the strikers and urged them forward in the fight at any cost. On the other side, the employer would not give in and would send money to Fr Rua to support the women workers shut in the factory. On Sunday, 8 July, a priest from the parish celebrated Mass there in the presence of Mr. Poma.

While all this was happening, the workers in the city, in solidarity with their companions, threatened to organise a general strike. At this point the socialist leaders became concerned about the possible complications and declared themselves ready to request a return to work on condition that the decision would appear to come from the Chamber of Industry itself. So by mid-July there was stalemate, neither side having moved an inch. Thanks, however, to Fr Rua's mediation, a solution was finally on the horizon. On 17 July the right-wing paper *Il Momento*, published a letter from him, accompanied by a statement from Anselmo Poma.

The letter to the editor ran as follows: ' In the hope of bringing some calm back to spirits so long infuriated and to bring to an end a situation which is so damaging to the working class, I turned to Mr. Anselmo Poma asking him to explain his intentions regarding his female workers. He gave me the answer which I here communicate to you. I am sure that its publication will facilitate the solution, which we all desire, of this sad dispute. In the certainty that you will share with me this humanitarian sentiment, I have the honour ...etc.'

Anselmo Poma's letter: followed In getting back to work, given the dire state to which the factory has been reduced, the Firm cannot dispense itself from gradually choosing those workers it needs. The concessions it has made, to the complete satisfaction of those men and women who have been working there from 8 July onwards, can be extended to all those who wish to return. Such concessions obviously mean an increase on the past rates of about 5 per cent for the weavers, twisters and some winders'.

The next day Fr Rua addressed another letter to the editor of *Il Momento*, announcing

¹⁰Amadei, III, 249.

that the firm had agreed to reinstate all the workers, always bearing in mind the ethical norms required in taking men on. Some 200 looms with 100 weavers and 100 winders were inactive at the moment but it was hoped to get them working again very soon. Finally, depending on their good behaviour, none of the workers would be rejected for having taken part in the struggle. *Il Momento* added these reflections:

‘We who have always defended the cause of freedom and justice, openly combating all attempted abuse of power, cannot but take pleasure in a solution which restores harmony between a great industrialist and his workers, and which at the same time consecrates the fatherly work of that venerable priest, Fr Rua, and the defeat of the Chamber of Industry and its violent representatives.’¹¹

So it was that on 19 July Anselmo Poma was able to witness the procession of more than 900 female workers who returned to the factory after a pause of almost two months. By 21 July all the looms were working because all the workers had returned apart from those who had found work elsewhere.

In various circumstances during his term of office, Fr Rua sought to defend and honour the working class. His ideal was certainly a hierarchical society, as was expected at the time, but one which was united by the good understanding of everyone with everyone else. Human relationships had to be regulated by justice imbued always with charity.

¹¹ Cf. the manuscript copies of Fr Rua’s letters to the paper (16 and 17 July) in FdR 3926B3-4. The quotations are taken from Amadei III, 252-253.

29 – THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

Directing the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

Until 1906 the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, according to its Constitutions, was directly dependent ‘on the Superior General of the Society of St. Francis of Sales whom they call the Major Superior’ (chapter II, art. 1). The Institute was, of course, governed and directed by a Superior Chapter composed of the Superior General, her Vicar, the bursar and two assistants but ‘in dependence on the Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation’ (chapter VI, art.1).

Fr Rua was, therefore, the Superior General of the Institute and had to keep a watch on its good running both material and spiritual. Mother Catherine Daghero (1856-1924), the Superior General since the death of St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello, carried out her task very well. Under her wise government, the Institute had achieved a remarkable development. As she had done in the time of Don Bosco, the Mother General always turned to Fr Rua in moments of difficulty. She sought his advice on the opening of houses and missions; with his help she drew up agreements with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and with the various administrations.

This system respected the jurisdiction of the bishops and did not stand in its way. Fr Rua was always scrupulous on this point and proceeded with the utmost tact. Fr Ceria rightly gives as an example a letter Fr Rua sent in 1901 to the Provincial in Argentina, Fr Joseph Vespignani. Vespignani had asked him how he should conduct himself regarding the problems the Sisters had with the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and about the authorisations he should request. Fr Rua replied, ‘The *modus tenendi* that I suggest is to deal quite simply with the Rev. Archbishop, to obtain from him all those authorisations he is ready to give, to comply respectfully with his demands and to avoid all controversy. I’ve dealt with others in this same way. We are there to help the bishops, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are there to help us and to do for young girls what the Salesians do for young boys. Since the Sisters have to be formed in the spirit of their and our Founder and Father, I believe that the bishops will only be too ready to assist them and us in doing a little good to poor youth who are the main object of our care. So, do your best to go ahead with simplicity and prudence, with much deference towards the authority of the bishops, because I think this is the best way to act’.¹

The Institute thus continued to grow under the Salesian protection which shielded it from dangers, uncertainties, desertions and financial problems. It was written that this kindly and unfailing support effectively constituted its ‘pivot of its existence’.² The direction given by the Salesians had in no way impeded the free internal operation of the Institute. It had, rather, assisted in producing the best results. The statistics speak for themselves. When Mother Daghero became the superior in 1881, there were 202 professed members with 77 novices spread out in 32 centres. In 1906, the year that witnessed the separation of the two congregations, the number of professed had risen to

¹ M.Rua-G. Vespignani. Turin, 12 September 1901, in FdR 3945 B7-8.

² Ceria, *Vita*, p.405.

2354, there were 312 novices and 272 houses. As the Sisters' major superior, Fr Rua considered the spiritual welfare of the female branch of the Salesian Society as one of his main tasks. He encouraged the Sisters by his frequent visits to the mother house at Nizza Monferrato on special occasions such as the admission to the novitiate and professions. He would also be present during the retreats and preach at least the closing talk. During his journeys throughout Italy, Spain, France or Belgium he used to visit their festive oratories, schools and kindergartens. He included them with the Salesians in the annual ceremonies held in the church of Mary Help of Christians for the departure of the missionaries for America. His presence was also felt in his rich circular letters which, for those who came after, form the surest source of his teaching (the entries in the chronicles, especially those transmitted by Fr Amadei, are somewhat unreliable). These circulars show us Fr Rua's intentions, ideas and feelings in regard to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Fr Rua's circular letters to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

The 'Fondo Don Rua' in the Salesian Central Archive contains 35 circular letters addressed to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.³ They were largely written for special occasions. Reading them, one becomes aware of the Rector Major's concern to keep the Institute informed. On 24 August 1888, for example, Fr Rua presents the Sisters with the new prayer book; on 1 February 1890 he narrates his audience with Leo XIII on 2 January; on 6 June that same year he informs them of the opening of Don Bosco's process of beatification and suggests prayers to be recited morning and evening for a favourable outcome; on 29 June 1891 he thanks them for the wishes they sent on the Rector Major's feast day; on 21 November he explains how the jubilee of the Salesian work is to be celebrated on the following 8 December; on 19 March he tells them that their Third General Chapter will be held in August; on 25 March 1894 he signed the preface to the 'deliberations' emanating from their General Chapters. It is a documents, he wrote, that the local animators should study and comment on with the Sisters; on 16 July 1897 he dwells on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the birth of the Institute (1872); on 15 October he communicates the graces accorded by the Holy See on the various celebrations of that occasion; on 10 January 1898 he recalls the tenth anniversary of Don Bosco's death; on 31 January 1899 he informs them of the forthcoming opening of their Fourth General Chapter with the election of the Superior Chapter; on 21 November that same year he announces that their director general, Fr John Marengo, will take the place of the late Fr Caesar Cagliero, the Procurator General in Rome, while Fr Clement Bretto will take over as Director General of the Institute; on 22 February 1903 he speaks of the solemn coronation of the image of Mary Help of Christians in Turin the following May as a great event for the whole Salesian Family; on 22 January he announces the opening of the Fifth General Chapter in the summer; finally on 29 September he thanks them for their greetings and prayers on the feast of St. Michael. It is clear, then, that Fr Rua accompanied his Salesian Sisters in the significant events of their community life.

He took special care over the annual message (strenna) to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I have not found any documentation for the years 1889 and 1891. In 1890 there exists only a circular letter (6 January), four pages in length on good or bad

³ Cf. FdR 3987C8-3992B9.

reading, directed particularly to the teachers.⁴ From 1892 onwards, however, the Rector Major's yearly message became a regular feature. At first, from 1892 to 1901, it formed a preface to the annual directories which were published in January. Since, however, as a good spiritual guide, he felt the need to express himself at greater length, from 1902 till 1905 the messages were printed separately so as to be distributed at the beginning of the New Year. Each one had a central theme. Forgive us if we present them but they are an interesting document displaying Fr Rua's main concerns in relation to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

In 1892, the Rector Major spoke of the wonderful expansion of the Institute, a sign of God's protection. In 1893 he emphasised the need for charity within each community which was called to be a 'small family'. Then, in 1894 he underlined the vital union between superiors and Sisters. In 1895 he maintained that the 'festive oratories in the Institute should be considered one of the principal and most effective means of promoting good and practising charity towards one's neighbour'. His starting point in 1896 was the tragic railway accident in Brazil in which Bishop Lasagna, his secretary, Mother Teresa Rinaldi and her companions had died. This led him to urge, 'Be prepared; in fact, the Son of Man will come when you least expect it', and 'Let us do good while we have time'. 1897's letter was an exhortation to observe the Holy Rule and the Chapter deliberations well as 'a precious gift from the Lord ..., as your guide along the way of religious perfection ... the bond of union among you all'. In 1898 he revived a talk Don Bosco had given to the first Sisters in 1872 on detachment from their own will, openness with the superiors and religious modesty. 1899 was to see the publication of the first volume of the *Memorie biografiche* and so he invited the Sisters to become imbued with Don Bosco's 'pleasing, shining virtues'. For the Holy Year 1900 he urged them to purify and sanctify their own souls by avoiding all deliberate sin and carefully following the Holy Rule. In 1901 he presented a well thought out exhortation to live in holiness during the new century, filling one's heart with the love of Jesus Christ and the desire to imitate him. In 1902 Fr Rua dwelt on '*holy cheerfulness*' characteristic of Don Bosco's spirit, a joy which not only makes the Sisters happy but which also helps them in the service of God. In 1903 he encouraged the Sisters to imitate the virtues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who said of himself, 'I am gentle and humble of heart' (Mt. 11, 29). The theme in 1904 was the life of faith; in pages strewn with biblical quotations he exhorted the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to think of God throughout the day. Finally, in 1905, the message (strenna) was dedicated to patience, an often misunderstood virtue which must be nourished by charity. As the process of separation was underway in 1906, Fr Rua did not think it appropriate to write the customary message.

All these circular letters breathed fatherly affection. Fr Rua addressed them to his 'good', 'dear', 'dearest' and even 'most beloved' Daughters of Mary Help of Christians 'in Jesus Christ'. And he signed them, 'Yours most affectionately in Jesus Christ' (31 December 1903) and even, 'Your most affectionate father in Jesus Christ'. The tone was indeed that of a father speaking to the daughters he holds in his heart.

The content of these letters was very down-to-earth. It engaged the Sisters in their daily activities as teachers and educators of the youngest children, as infirmarians, cooks, laundry women and bursars in the nursery schools and boarding schools and

⁴ FdR 3987D3-5.

even in the distant missions of South America. The Sisters recognised themselves in Fr Rua's teaching on religious and community life with all its humble demands. The spiritual thrust of the circulars was decidedly eschatological. At the end of life either salvation or damnation awaits one:

'We know that this is the end for which we were created – to know God: *ut cognoscant Te* (Jn 17,3), to love him: *diligens Dominum Deum* (Dt. 6,5), and to serve him: *illi soli servies* (Mt. 3,10); that all the commandments are found in this: *hoc est maximum, et primum mandatum* (Mt. 22, 38); that we exist for no other reason and that should we aim at anything else we should be acting contrary to the will of God and to the very needs of our reasoning nature. We should get out whole life wrong and one day would have to exclaim: *ergo erravimus!* (Wisdom 5,6). We know that we could run the risk of tremendous divine punishments, *in ignem aeternum* (Mt. 25, 41) for all eternity if we opposed the will of God, so likewise if our life is spent willingly in the Lord's service, we are promised the supreme delights of heaven in the embrace of God: *ego...merces tua magna nimis* (Gen. 15, 1), where the troubles of this wretched world will no more distress our hearts: *neque luctus, neque clamor, neque dolor erit ultra* (Rev. 21,4). There, our spirit, rapt in loving ecstasy, will enjoy the ineffable sweetness of paradise: *mecum eris in paradise* (Lk. 23, 43), In contemplating God in himself: *facie ad faciem* (I Cor. 13, 12) and savouring his ineffable sweetness: *quoniam suavis est Dominus* (Ps. 33/34, 8) we shall be immersed and confirmed in the happiness of God who is happy in himself with and infinite happiness beyond our understanding.⁵

In the spiritual life of the religious, virtue is of prime importance. Whether it is a question of patience, self-denial, religion, faith or, above all, charity, it is through virtue that the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians makes progress in holiness and opens the gates to eternal life. On 24 August 1888, for example, when presenting the new prayer book to the Sisters, Fr Rua described religious virtue and its demands in a very effective manner:

Since I have this opportunity, I warmly encourage you, my dear children in Jesus Christ, to put into practice our divine Saviour's advice *to pray always and never lose heart* (Lk.18). But you will ask me: How can we pray all the time? I'll tell you what the sacred writers and spiritual masters say, namely, that there are three ways especially in which we can pray without ceasing. In the first place by acquiring the habit, that is the virtue and the spirit of prayer. Just, for example, we talk about a person being charitable when they have made a habit of it and developed a readiness to perform acts of charity, and does so whenever the occasion arises, so whoever has the virtue, that is, the disposition to pray every time that she has to or is able to, is rightly said to be always prayerful as the Lord wants because he counts our good will. The habit and the spirit of constant prayer is acquired by praying often, particularly when the Church and our Rule require it.

Similarly we fulfil the commandment to pray always by the frequent use of ejaculatory prayers which all the spiritual masters so warmly recommend. Through them we raise and minds and hearts to God and are united with him.

⁵ Letter 31 December 1903 in FdR 3987D6-8.

Finally, we observe the divine recommendation to pray always by performing all our works and actions diligently for the love of God as the apostle St. Paul encourages us (I Cor. 10,31). For this reason the Ven. Bede writes, *He prays always who always acts so as to please God*. St. Basil also says, *He who always acts well, prays always*; and we act well when we have the right intention of glorifying God.⁶

Fr Rua, therefore, could be gently demanding of his ‘dear daughters’. Perhaps a trifle too meticulous for our contemporary way of thinking as when in the conclusion to the message (strenna) of 1904 on the life of faith he invited the Sisters to live the entire day between heaven and earth. God had to be their first thought, the first hours of the day were to be consecrated to him. Not only that – in their daily occupations ‘the sweet name of Jesus and that of his Virgin Mother’ should often be heard and the Sisters should greet each other ‘invoking Jesus’ in their hearts, or when they heard the clock chime they should immediately call to mind ‘something from the life of Mary most holy and send a thought to Jesus’.

Such advice, of course, if followed to the letter by scrupulous souls could have led to artificial behaviours, foreign to Don Bosco’s spirit. In the same pages, though, Fr Rua showed his practical side, telling the Sisters that the religious images on the walls of their houses and the sacred pictures in their books were sufficient to lift their minds and hearts naturally to God. The very habit they wore was a reminder that they were separated from the world so as ‘to be all for Jesus’. The crucifix received at religious profession told them ‘what their life should be like’. He concluded, ‘How could I suppose that you do not have a continual thought of faith, if all that you see around you, all that you do and all that you are, speak of faith’.⁷

Fr Rua, then, was not satisfied by governing the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from a distance. He was careful to infuse into the Sisters a spirituality, ‘a characteristically Salesian asceticism’ as Sr. Maria Esther Posada remarked in a paper on ‘The Formation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from 1881-1922’ presented in Vienna during the European seminar in 2003. This typical asceticism was to leave its mark for a long time on the Institute.

The separation looms on the horizon

The day was approaching, though, when Fr Rua had to accept the painful separation. On 29 September 1906, he expressed his thanks quite simply for the wishes for the feast of St. Michael, to the ‘excellent’ Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The affectionate adjectives, *dear, dearest, beloved*, had all vanished.⁸ That year, in fact, he had had to renounce the title of Major Superior of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In conformity with the Roman instructions, the Institute was no longer part of the Salesian Society. From that moment onwards it was to be completely autonomous.

After the disappearance of the rector-confessors of their own communities, this was a second serious blow to Don Bosco’s legacy which Fr Rua had longed to pass on intact

⁶ FdR 3987C10-11.

⁷ Circular letter 31 December 1903, 35 in FdR 39990C1.

⁸ Cf. *Annali* III, 646-666; *Ceria, Vita*, 403-413.

to his successors.

As Fr Ceria pointed out, the Rector Major behaved differently in the two situations. In the matter of the rector-confessor as long as the debate was on-going he tried up to the last to restrict or attenuate the application of the Roman injunction, only to bow obediently in the end to the will of Rome, to the point of not tolerating any loophole. In the second case, he kept his distance, leaving the Sisters to act as they thought best. Naturally, as will become clear, the Salesians supported the Sisters. He undoubtedly suffered from the course taken by the application of the Roman regulation but he maintained his calm, inviting the Sisters to perfect religious submission.

There now follow the somewhat complex vicissitudes of the situation. No matter what may be stated nowadays, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians never took the initiative in the separation. Anything but! It came about through a precise option on the part of the Holy See. At the end of the nineteenth century, Rome tended to render female religious congregations independent of similar male congregations. The multiplication of female congregations of simple vows led the Holy See to adopt measures aimed at regulating them. On 28 June 1901, the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars promulgated a decree listing all the norms to which such congregations had to conform in order to obtain the approval of their constitutions. The document opened with the words *Normae secundum quas*. Article 202 established that a female congregation of simple vows could not be dependent on a male congregation of a similar nature. This was the case of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The Salesian Procurator in Rome took fright. He thought that the Sisters' vows were canonically invalid. The minutes of the Superior Chapter of 30 July 1901 noted, 'A letter received from Fr Marengo is read out; he had had an interview with Cardinal... and warns us that canonically our Sisters' vows are null and void and therefore, he explained, it is vital to have the Institute and its Rules approved by Rome, in such a way that the Sisters remain under our direction. There is even the danger that they may be detached from us'.⁹ So Fr Rua strove simply to regularise the existing situation. On 1 October 1901, the prefect general, Fr Philip Rinaldi, wrote a circular letter in the name of the Rector Major to the provincials and rectors communicating the directives regarding the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: their houses had to be completely separate from those of the Salesians; their confessor could in no way be the Rector of the Salesian house where they lived nor any one who had anything to do with the material running of the house; if the Sisters went to confession in a public church, their ordinary confessor had to be changed or confirmed after three years in agreement with the local bishop, and if he were a Salesian in agreement also with the Rector Major.¹⁰

Then the whole issue gathered momentum. In 1902, Cardinal Gotti, prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, asked Fr Rua for a detailed report on the situation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, that is, a copy of their Constitutions, the 'deliberations' of the General Chapters and the approval of the Ordinaries. He also requested information on its origin, the purpose of the Institute, personnel and their remuneration, the material and financial situation. Everything was duly done point by point. The Sisters also added a list of the activities carried out in

⁹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 30 July 1901 in FdR 4243C3.

¹⁰ Rinaldi circular letter 1 October 1901 in FdR 4070B3-4.

each community. In 1904, Cardinal Ferrata, the new prefect, repeated the same request. Then on 10 May 1905, in a letter to the procurator, Fr Marengo, the Institute was ordered in the name of the Pope, to modify the Constitutions bringing them into line with the decree *Normae secundum quas*.

On 14 May the Procurator transmitted the letter to Fr Rua. Ten days later, he was summoned by the Auditor of the Congregation who provided some information and then said he was charged to communicate that the merits of the Salesian towards the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were well recognised and also the validity of the benefits and excellent results that had been obtained. However, it was no longer possible to continue in the way the Institute had originated and still existed. He ended by giving the Procurator the official task on behalf of the Sacred Congregation of modifying the Constitutions of the Institute in the sense desired by the *Normae secundum quas*.¹¹

On 25 May, Fr Rua travelled to Rome, passing through Pisa and Leghorn. On the 28th he wanted to preside over the celebrations for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Salesian work in Rome itself; it was also the day on which the solemn feast of Mary Help of Christians was being held. According to Fr Amadei,¹² he took the opportunity to speak with Cardinal Ferrata about the possible separation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from the Salesian Society. On that occasion the cardinal did his best to allay his fears assuring him that it was basically a question of material separation.

On high alert - the summer of 1905

The weeks were passing and by then the practical application of the modified Constitutions was on the horizon. At the same time some problems emerged both for the Salesians and for the Sisters. The minutes of the meetings of the Salesian Superior Chapter allow for a detailed reconstruction of the issue. The problem was clearly outlined in the meeting of 21 August 1905, chaired by Fr Rua and attended by Fr Clement Bretto, the director general of the Institute:

Fr Bretto writes that a property must be quickly bought for the Sisters and desires the Superior Chapter to suggest what he must do. On this point several members of the Chapter observe that the matter is very serious; they note that of the houses in which the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians currently live, some belong exclusively to the Salesians and cannot or should not be handed over; some do belong to the Salesians but have been donated for the FMA or bought with money or partly with FMA money and these can or may be transferred; finally some are the exclusive property of the FMA. Fr Rinaldi was asked to prepare a detailed list and the opportunity was taken to affirm that the FMA Institute is an important part of the Work of Don Bosco and care should be taken not to distort its true nature when implementing the imposed reforms. First of all, every means should be sought to ensure that the purpose, nature and spirit infused into it by the Founder are preserved and this should appear clearly in these minutes, that the Salesians did not neglect a matter of such importance.

¹¹This paragraph refers to the report Fr Marengo gave to the Superior Chapter during the session on 2nd September 1905, in FdR 4245B7-8.

¹² Cf. Amadei III, 156-157.

Someone remarks that this falls within the competence of the Rector Major alone. Fr Rua adds, 'Well, I call you all aside and ask you to help me so that this issue may be resolved as well as possible'. The Chapter agrees and the prop-secretary is charged to prepare a copy of the Constitutions drawn up by Fr Marengo so that they can study them. Fr Rua would also like Fr Marengo to read out to the Chapter the letter authorising him to do that work.¹³

The problem of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians returned some days later. During the Council meeting of 2 September the procurator, Fr Marengo, outlined in accordance with the terms already described, the origin of the task entrusted to him by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars.

After that, the members of the Superior Chapter who had read the new Constitutions prepared by Fr Marengo, made some observations on various articles which could be eliminated or modified. The idea behind this was to avoid repeating in the Constitutions what was prescribed by the particular decrees and need not be inserted in the Constitutions. They then remarked that it should be noted that this congregation of the FMA:

In the *past*: it was the work of Don Bosco who by this means intended to do for girls and young women what the Salesians do for the boys and young men with the aim of forming an integrated and harmonious whole. That the Institute recognises Don Bosco as its Founder and Father. That when he was dying, Don Bosco recommended it to his successor who up till now has exercised a ministry of fatherly supervision without putting any obstacle in the way of the free operation of the internal personnel and that this has produced good results as can be seen from its marvellous development and from the various episcopal commendations and the Brief of Leo XIII.

In the *present*: several thousands of girls have consecrated themselves to God in the Institute with the conviction and trust of being assisted by the fatherly care of Don Bosco's successor. This care and support having become habitual, it is almost necessary to the life of the Institute, and without doubt a great number of the houses, especially on the missions, would cease to exist without this support. The spiritual direction generally imparted by Salesians has always been given in conformity with Canon law and in agreement with the bishops; any interruption could well turn out to the detriment of the good name of the two institutes.

For the *future*: although we are fully disposed to carry out whatever is prescribed by the Holy See, the desire is expressed that to preserve the peace of mind of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and to keep alive their spiritual and material well-being, the fatherly authority hitherto exercised by the successor of Don Bosco be retained, or a similar or even greater authority be accorded him as delegate of the Holy See.

In conclusion, that everything be simply set out at the next FMA General Chapter and that the Sisters do whatever they consider appropriate, mindful of what Bathandier, a man very well versed in such matters, has to say, namely that often the good outcome depends on making matters known as they really are and not as one thinks they are, and in knowing how to present them and acting

¹³Minutes of the Superior Chapter 21 August 1905 in FdR 4245B5.

within the terms permitted.¹⁴

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are informed

When rumours of an eventual separation from the Salesians began to circulate, the Sisters became extremely apprehensive. Fr Rua had decided not to speak about it until their Fifth General Chapter which was to be held in September at Nizza Monferrato.¹⁵ Foreseeing the reactions, he suggested to the general director, Fr Clement Bretto, that he gather the members of the General Chapter during the preparatory retreat and with utmost prudence, explain to them the new reality of the Institute. Fr Bretto did so on 4 September. The effect of the unexpected announcement may be gauged from a letter sent to Fr Rua the following day by the secretary general in the name of the Superior General, Mother Catherine Daghero and all the Chapter members. Among other things, it notes, 'Although the announcement of the possible withdrawal of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from dependence on the successor of Don Bosco was given with very kindly and prudent tact, it aroused unspeakable dismay in the whole assembly.' There followed a plea aimed at averting the break, summed up in the cry, 'Oh, dear Father, do not forsake us!' To give each one the possibility of expressing her own personal opinion, a secret ballot was held on the question of whether or not she wished the Institute to continue in obedience to Don Bosco and his lawful successors. The vote was unanimously in favour of remaining with Don Bosco and his successor.

On 8 September Fr Rua went to Nizza to open the Chapter and preside over it in accordance with the Constitutions of the Institute. In the course of the opening session he spoke about the letter and the ballot, declaring himself moved and comforted by both, but he added immediately, 'Nevertheless, we obey holy Mother Church! If Don Bosco were alive, he would want us to obey the Church, even when she asks something different from what he himself had established.' During the Chapter, the procurator presented the modified text of the Constitutions, inviting the Chapter members to express their views of the changes which had been introduced. The realisation that the separation was going ahead deeply saddened them. They said as much to the procurator.

On his return to Rome, Fr Marengo reported to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars the impression produced by the examination of his constitutional draft and the wishes that some of the Chapter members had expressed in writing. His report made such an impression that he was authorised to introduce into the text the desires expressed, adding the motivations on a separate sheet. The note concluded: 'In order to preserve in the Institute the union, uniformity and the spirit of the founder, the Rector Major of the Salesians, the successor of Don Bosco of holy memory, will continue to exercise towards the same Institute a fatherly direction and vigilance which will not in any way detract from the rights which, following the norms of the Sacred Canons, belong to the Ordinaries of the dioceses.'¹⁶

The Salesians, though, should not harbour any illusions. The simple separation of the material goods of the two congregations was not sufficient: a complete separation was demanded, as Cardinal Ferrata specified in a conversation with Fr Stephen Trione.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter* 2nd September 1905 in FdR 4245B7-8.

¹⁵ For this chapter, I am following Ceria, *Vita*, 407-413.

¹⁶ Ceria, *Vita*, 408. Cf. FrG Marengo's letter to Fr Rua, Rome, 18 September 1905 in FdR 4598D6-8.

Otherwise severe measures would be taken.¹⁷

The separation of the material goods of the two Institutes

In a circular letter of 25 November strictly reserved to the provincial, Fr Rua summarised the situation and recalled that the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars had ordered the Superior Chapter to proceed with the 'administrative and disciplinary separation of the two works'. He clarified that the total separation of goods would have entailed enormous expenditure if carried out immediately. So, in agreement with the Roman Congregation, it had been decided to proceed 'little by little'. Some nursery schools belonging to the Salesians had already been transferred to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He explained how to proceed in the 'Salesian houses' where the Sisters involved in the kitchen, laundry and sewing room, lived: either men would have to be employed or a residence for the Sisters would have to be found in the neighbourhood to enable them to continue their service without being lodged in the Salesian house. In that case, in order to effect the administrative separation, they should be suitably paid for their work.

To allow for the disciplinary separation, Fr Rua continued, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had organised their houses into various provinces governed by their own Provincials. Consequently, even the local superiors who to some extent depended on the Salesians, had to turn directly to their respective provincials and, through them, to their own Superior Chapter. If other problems arose, they would have to await the opinion of the Roman Congregation because, 'we do not mean to stray, even in the slightest, from the sacred prescriptions.'¹⁸

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have recourse to Rome

On the advice of the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians attempted to intervene themselves. On 4 December Fr Rua read out to the Chapter a letter of Mother General which, in the name of the Council and the entire Institute, clearly begged in a formal manner that the conditions of their foundation by Don Bosco should remain unchanged, implying that they should not be abandoned. They did not ask to depend on a male congregation, specifically the Salesians, but solely on the successor of Don Bosco. It was suggested that they go to Rome to consult a lawyer and explain their intentions and follow his advice.¹⁹

They did not need to be told twice, A few days later on 13 December, the Chapter learnt that the Mother General had arrived in Rome to try to convince the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars of the necessity of remaining in dependence on the Rector Major.²⁰ To tell the truth, Mother Daghero, the secretary Sr. Vaschetti and Sr. Marina Coppa, one of the councillors, had given themselves three tasks to fulfil in Rome: to undertake a meticulous revision of the new Constitutions; to prepare a long petition to

¹⁷ According to a memo attached to the acts of the Superior Chapter held between 2 and 10 October in FdR 4245C5.

¹⁸ Circular letter to the provincial, Turin, 25 November 1905 in FdR 3975D7-10. This circular is not found in L.C.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter* 4 December 1905 in FdR 4245D4.

²⁰ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter* 13 December 1905 in FdR 4245D7

be handed over to the cardinals of the said Congregation together with a printed copy of the Constitutions and to visit the cardinals and other prelates involved in the matter to explain the actual conditions of the Institute. In the petition the intended to illustrate and motivate those desires which we already know.

On 15 December the assistant, Sr. Marina Coppa, wrote to Fr Rua about the outcome of an interview they had just had with Cardinal Vivés, a member of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. ‘Don Bosco founded you; this is your strength; but today the Church applies other criteria for the government of female congregations... It is a fact that you do much good, you are apostles throughout the world and if you had not been well directed you would not have had such a prodigious expansion.’ The cardinal ended the interview, adding with a smile, ‘But Don Bosco will continue to help you from heaven: they say that the founders see from heaven as though in a mirror what happens down here in their congregations; therefore he will see o it that everything is in conformity with the will of God and for the best.’²¹

Since the three superiors felt on their own and the Procurator, Fr Marengo, had a lot to do, on 18 December Fr Rua decided as a matter of urgency to send Fr Bertello to help them.²² They were consoled by the news. On the 19th the secretary, Sr. Luisa Vaschetti, wrote to the Director General, Fr Clement Bretto, ‘I have heard that tomorrow Rev. Fr Bertello will arrive, *Deo gratias!* How firmly we feel that we have superiors who do indeed love us! For my part, every time I think about it, I feel a rebirth of my vocation to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians in the Institute founded by Don Bosco, in which I hope to persevere until my dying day.’²³

The Sisters then attempted to obtain the support of Pius X himself. On the morning of 7 January 1906, the Pope received Mother Daghero and her assistants in a private audience. The Holy Father’s extreme amiability encouraged the Superior to open her heart to him and she manifested all the fears shared by the Sisters. He listened with a great deal of attention, expressed his satisfaction with her explanations and repeated four or five times for them to be at peace. Since some of his expressions seemed to indicate that they would have been able to continue to have their Salesian superior, one of them asked if she might communicate this news to the Sisters in Turin as it would comfort them in their great affliction. ‘No’, replied the pontiff, ‘don’t say anything; pray and remain at peace.’ They then handed the Pope the petition drawn up in September by the General Chapter. As they were leaving, they noticed him glancing through the document.²⁴ The new Constitutions were consigned to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars on 12 January. The Sisters could only wait for the verdict.

In the meantime, on 1 April during a papal audience, the Scholastic Councillor, Fr Francis Cerruti, who was also in Rome on business with the Italian Ministry of Public Instruction, did his best to uphold the position of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and was well received. In the end, though, all these steps taken to alleviate the situation counted for nothing. The Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were corrected to bring them closely in line with the decree *Normae*

²¹ Letter of Marina Coppa to Michael Rua, Rome, 15 december 1905 in FdR 4591B1-8.

²² *Minutes of the Superior Chapter* 18 December 1905 in FdR 4245D8.

²³ *Annali* III, 615

²⁴ According to the report of the secretary Sr. Luisa Vaschetti in *Annali* III, 615.

secundum quas. On 26 June, the Congregation gave the order to communicate the latest modifications to the Salesian Superior General and to give him and the Archbishop of Turin the new Constitutions corrected on the order of the Pope. The letter to Fr Rua, dated 17 July, ran as follows:

Very Rev. Father,

Enclosed with this letter are the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, corrected on the order of the Holy Father, by this Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. It is the wish of His Holiness that such Constitutions be observed exactly by the said Institute, considering abrogated all former Constitutions and Chapter deliberations, in that they do not accord with the new ones. A further copy of the Constitutions has already been sent to his Grace the Archbishop of Turin with the mandate to inform the Moderator of the said Institute of the relative instructions of the Holy Father. The undersigned Cardinal is happy to be able to assure your Reverence of the Holy Father's special benevolence towards the well deserving Salesian Congregation of Don Bosco. With the utmost esteem,

D. Card. Ferrata,

Prefect.²⁵

The Sisters could do nothing but submit in tears. On 20 August the Mother General had to write to Fr Rinaldi on an administrative affair. She took the opportunity to give relief to her feelings, 'Up till now we have lived as daughters fulfilling the wishes of our revered Superiors and enjoying their fatherly affection and kindly forbearance as often as we needed it, but now...Now the trial is upon us; precisely, though, in the harshness of this trial we have seen that the heart of our Superiors has not changed, if anything it has increased in tenderness and compassion towards these poor daughters of Our Lady and Don Bosco. This consoles us; it is balm for our spirit which may be resigned but is deeply upset.'²⁶

The actual separation

Since July Fr Rua had withdrawn from the direction of the Institute. On 29 September he availed of the feast of St. Michael the Archangel to announce the new statute to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. To sweeten the pill, he chose to express himself with a certain good natured and relaxed style.

Turin, Feast of St. Michael the Archangel

29 September 1906

Excellent Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

I am truly grateful for the wishes you have sent me on various occasions during the year and especially for your prayers and the Communion you offer the Lord for me. On this my name day, I also want to give you a gift with the joyful announcement that you will shortly receive from your V. Rev. Superior General, the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians founded by Don Bosco. They

²⁵*Annali* III, 618-619.

²⁶*Annali*, III, 618-619.

were revised during your Fifth General Chapter last year and modified by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in conformity with the norms issued by the same Congregation on 28 June 1901.

As the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians has grown so remarkably, the Holy See has shown its benevolent consideration to it as it does to those which are soon to receive pontifical approval and which depend directly on the same Holy See.

So, receive the new Constitutions with the utmost veneration and as a proof of the concern that the Vicar of Jesus Christ has for you. Study them and, above all, practise them in order to become good religious according to the holy designs of the Church. Thus you will keep yourselves in the spirit of our Father, Don Bosco, who was so respectful, obedient and affectionate towards the Holy Father and to the other pastors, as you can easily gather from his writings and examples. And you will be even more worthy daughters if, in his imitation, you will add cordial observance, ardent charity and lively zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Together with the other Salesian Superiors, I am always ready to help you in whatever you may need by way of support and advice and I implore from the Lord the most abundant blessings on your Institute and on each one of you.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,
Fr Michael Rua.²⁷

A few days later, during the session of 3 October, the Salesian Superior Chapter dealt with the question of the separation. Detailed instructions would be sent to the houses. Moreover, according to the minutes, it would be explained to the Mother General that the Rector Major, following the wishes of the Holy See, would appreciate the withdrawal of the Sisters from all those houses where there was insufficient separation from the Salesians, or, at least that the Superior should obtain directly from Rome the requisite authorisations or some postponement so as to be able to abide by the norms. Fr Rua then sent a note to Cardinal Ferrata, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, stating his complete submission. The letter is a fine example of his epistolary rapport with ecclesiastical dignitaries:

Your Eminence,

With the letter N. 17358/15 of Your Eminence, dated 17 July, but delivered to me later, I received the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, corrected by order of the Holy Father. I then heard from the Rev. Superior General of the said Institute that on 22 September last that His Eminence, the Cardinal-archbishop of Turin gave her another copy of the same Constitutions, as Your Eminence had indicated.

I think it goes without saying that the sons of Don Bosco will carry out to the letter and very willingly not only what the Holy Father wishes but also whatever he should appear to desire.

In the meantime, I avail of the present occasion to renew my profound esteem for Your Eminence and while in spirit I kiss the sacred purple, I have the honour

²⁷Circular letter to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Turin, 29 September 1906 in FdR 3991A8-9.

to profess myself

Your Eminence's most humble and obedient servant,

Michael Rua

Rector Major of the Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales.²⁸

From Nizza Monferrato on 15 October 1906, Mother Daghero presented the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians with the new rules in a small book purposely entitled *Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians founded by Don Bosco*. By now this was the only memory of their origin which related them to the Salesians. The Mother General did not mention it explicitly but it was borne out in the document itself, that Fr Rua was no longer their Superior General.²⁹

On 21 November Fr Rua addressed the Provincials and Rectors, giving them clear instructions, restating the separation between Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Following a short introduction, the Rector Major condensed the norms into eight points, all duly numbered, as was his wont:

1. As with other female congregations, they must not be dependent on any Congregation of men but rather on their Superior General and their own Council, under the direct supervision of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars and of the local bishops, in accordance with the new Constitutions and the Sacred Canons.
2. They must have completely separate and distinct administration and book-keeping. Moreover, where they work in the kitchen, laundry and linen rooms, they must be paid like members of any other congregation who would work for us in that way.
3. Where, because of such work, Salesians and Sisters have adjacent houses, the Sisters must have a separate entrance and no other communicating doors between the dwellings. In fact, in case of doubt of some irregularity, the provincial will request the local Ordinary to check it and if necessary to suggest what has to be done.
4. They must consider themselves as owners of the houses they live in; therefore, they must pay for all rates and taxes, repairs etc. In regard to the legal transfer, this will go ahead as soon as convenient, since we cannot do everything at once, given the enormous cost involved in the transfer. For any new houses that may be needed in the future, the Sisters will purchase them in their own name.
5. Nevertheless, as the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians share the same spirit and Founder, between them and us there will be great charity, gratitude and respect, but without any right of superiority on one side or duty of subservience on the other.
6. In spiritual matters they depend on their respective bishops whose duty it is to appoint confessors, directors etc. Salesians may take on their direction only

²⁸*Annali*, III, 619-620.

²⁹Mother Catherine Daghero, circular letter of 15 October 1906 in FdR 4610A8-9.

when entrusted or authorised by the Ordinary of the diocese where they live. What is said of the spiritual direction of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians holds good for any other female congregation.

7. As other female religious may avail themselves of the work of the Salesians, carried out with due authorisation, so also the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians may avail of it especially to be helped to persevere in the spirit of our common Father, Don Bosco. When the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians choose to avail of the assistance of the Salesians, it is better that they themselves make the request to the Ordinary.

8. By their example and their words, the Salesian Superiors should instil in their subjects the duty of only going to female religious communities under obedience and with due permission; they should not stay longer than necessary and must behave at all time in a most edifying manner.

I am sure that if we practise these norms, God will be ever more glorified and there will be advantage to souls which our venerated Father taught us to seek in every situation and in all our actions.

May the Virgin Mary, whose Presentation in the Temple we are celebrating today, make us always more worthy to present ourselves and to serve in the house of God by means of our fervour in piety and the purity of our souls.

Please pray to her for

Yours aff.ly in Jesus and Mary
Fr Michael Rua.³⁰

Paragraphs 5, 6 and 7 regulated the new relations between the male and female Salesians, the latter now being dependent on the local hierarchy. It is clear, though, that Fr Rua had a strong desire for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to continue to cherish their most precious gift: the original spirit, the spirit of Don Bosco.

For the time being the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had been unable to obtain anything more. The fatherly guidance of Don Bosco's successor which they so longed to retain had been denied them. But they were tenacious and Fr Rua did not forget them in their many trials. Let the events of September and October 1907 suffice as illustration. In September 1907 the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians held their first Chapter after the separation at Nizza. The Bishop of Acqui presided. They elected the Superiors, then requested the participation of the Salesians. Fr Marengo arrived on 18 and Fr Rua on 26 for the closing. His talk developed the prayer, 'O Lord, teach me goodness, discipline and knowledge'. The Chapter members signed a declaration of filial devotion to Don Bosco and Fr Rua in the name of the whole Institute.³¹ A month later, on 24 October, in the church of Mary Help of Christians he addressed words of encouragement to a group of Salesian Sisters preparing to leave for the missions, 'Go to work in your field of apostolate but only for the glory of God and the good of souls' was the gist of his exhortation. Two days later, some thirty Daughters of Mary Help of Christians joined fifty Salesian missionaries for the traditional farewell ceremony in the

³⁰L.C., 357-359.

³¹ Cf. Amadei III, 342-343; Ceria, *Vita*, 412.

same church. Finally, on 27 Fr Rua gave a special conference to the Salesian Sisters in Turin, 'Work for the greater glory of God'.³²

On 19 June 1917, eleven years after the separation, the Sisters obtained a decree from the Holy See appointing the Rector Major of the Salesians as apostolic delegate for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The Institute's administration would remain autonomous and the rights of the bishops would be safeguarded but every two years the Rector Major or his delegate would have to visit the communities of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians *paterno consilio*. Mother Daghero was still in office. In the course of an audience granted her on 14 January 1919, Benedict XV asked her what she thought of the decree. 'Holy Father, you have answered my deepest desire' she replied.³³ In fact, it fulfilled to the letter the desire for the fatherly guidance which the Chapter members had hoped for in 1905. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would relive, in no matter how restricted a way, the happy times in which Fr Rua followed and advised them in their wonderful expansion.

³² Cf. Amadei III, 351-352.

³³M. Wirth, *Don Bosco et la Famille salésienne*, 404.

30 – SALESIAN EXPANSION AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

In Tunisia

Fr Rua was not satisfied with expanding the Salesian presence on the American continent; he dared to open new works in Africa as well, and even in Asia.

The Salesians had arrived in Algeria in 1891. At that time Cardinal Lavigerie had lamented that Fr Rua had preferred Oran to Carthage in spite of a promise that Don Bosco had made him in Paris in 1883. In 1894, his successor Clément Combes (Lavigerie had died in 1892) had no problem in obtaining a Salesian presence in La Marsa (1895) near Tunis and then in Tunis itself (1896).

The negotiations were settled very quickly. On 11 August 1894, the Superior Chapter accepted the offer of the new archbishop.¹ An agreement drawn up on the following 7 December between the Archbishop of Carthage and Fr Rua which in its first article set out that ‘The Archbishop of Carthage entrusts to the Salesians of Don Bosco the direction of the agricultural orphanage currently situated at La Marsa, Tunisia’.² The Perret Institute, named after its founder, Perret from Lyons, was a narrow house only able to accommodate some ten orphans but it had a large amount of land. The archbishop asked for a priest and two collaborators, clerics or laymen, whom he promised to pay from diocesan funds. He would also give an annual contribution of four hundred francs for each orphan ‘sent by the diocese’ (art.3). On 31 December, the appointed Rector Anthony Josephidis (1861-1919), accompanied by Brother Serafino Proverbio, set sail from Sicily bound for Tunis and La Marsa. The Rector was an enterprising man. He soon welcomed another twenty or so young people and obtained permission from the Superior Chapter to erect more spacious buildings. The day was not far off when Archbishop Combes agreed to Fr Rua’s proposal to open a secondary school at La Marsa. Thus was born a work which would nurture some fine Salesian vocations, outstanding among them Louis Mathias, the future Archbishop of Madras (1887-1965).

Following a further agreement between the archbishop and Fr Rua (4 March 1896), the Salesians settled in Tunis itself where they were entrusted with the St. Lucy chapel, the launching pad for the Rosary parish with its flourishing oratories.³ The Salesian Sisters, instead, took over the direction of a work for girls and young women at La Manouba not far from La Marsa.

In the course of a successful journey in Tunisia between 23 and 30 March 1900, Fr Rua could take pleasure in the outcome of these recent foundations.⁴

The Italian National Association at Alexandria

If we pass from Tunisia to Egypt, we are faced with an institution present throughout

¹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 11 August 1894, in FdR 4241E11.

² The agreement is reproduced in FdR 3497A3-5.

³ f. Agreement project in FdR 3497A1-2.

⁴ e. This journey cf. Fr. Rinetti’s letters to Fr. Belmonte, 23, 25, 29 March and 1 April in FdR 3008D7-E8

the Near East in which Fr Rua placed much confidence with the risk of openly Italianising the Salesian work in the region. The secretary of *The National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries* – such was its official title – was a learned Egyptologist called Ernest Schiaparelli. The National Association, created by persons who were avowedly Catholic, enjoyed the favour of the Italian government and had been recognised as a non-profit agency by royal decree on 12 November 1891. This recognition gave it freedom of action in the political sphere.

At least since 1887 there had been talk of sending the Salesians to Egypt. A letter of the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*. John Simeoni, dated 26 February 1887, bears this out.⁵ In Alexandria there was a large community of Italians and Maltese. The early corruption of many young people saddened those more sensitively aware of it, above all the Franciscans, who hoped for the establishment of a Salesian trade school for the human and Christian formation of the youth. Ernest Schiaparelli was among the group. In 1890 he wrote to Fr Durando, ‘In Alexandria there are now hundreds of abandoned boys of every nationality and religion, especially Italians and Maltese. Learning a trade and receiving some education would mean salvation for them both in this world and the next.’⁶ He assured the Salesians of the support of the National Association.

In 1895, when Fr Anthony Belloni was passing through Italy, Fr Rua asked him to find a suitable piece of land in Alexandria for the proposed Salesian trade school. Fr. Belloni settled on a plot with building potential in the Bab-Sidra district. The matter was complicated by French competition from the De La Salle school. The Salesians were supported, though, by Archbishop Guido Corbelli, the Apostolic Delegate for Egypt and Arabia, and through him, by the Holy See. Finally an agreement was signed in Turin which deserves to be reported in full, given that by Italianising the Salesian works – there was a tactical reason, because by so doing, it would spare them any dependence on the French – it would in some respects condition their future in the entire Near East. The document entitled *Agreement between the Reverend Superior General of the Salesian Congregation and the National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries*, established that:

Today, 1 March 1897, between V. Rev. Fr Michael Rua, Superior General of the Salesian Congregation and the under signed Prof. Ernest Schiaparelli, Secretary General and representative of the National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries, the following was agreed:

The National Association undertakes to pay the rent on the premises of the technical Institute of arts and crafts and all the expenses incurred in the setting up and maintenance of the above mentioned Institute. On his part, the V. Rev. Superior of the Salesian Congregation ensures the provision of suitable personnel for the said Institute which the National Association intends to establish at Alexandria in Egypt.

- 1) In the aforementioned Institute the study of the Italian language will be compulsory for all students.
- 2) Boys of all nationalities and religion will be admitted as external students.

⁵dR 3165E8-9, For general information on the foundation and beginning of the Salesian work in Alexandria cf. FdR3165-3167E12 and the narration in the *Annali* II, 316-323.

⁶etter of E. Schiaparelli to C. Durando, Florence, 3rd June 1890, in FdR 3169D2-3; cf. *Annali* II, 316.

3) The following anniversaries will be commemorated: the birthdays of their Majesties the King and Queen of Italy and the Day of the Constitution.

In everything else the Institute will be completely autonomous.

This present agreement is valid for one year, starting from today and may be renewed indefinitely year by year, unless revoked by one of the parties, not less than three months prior to its annual expiry date.

In confirmation of the above:

The Superior of the Salesian Congregation

Rev. Michael Rua

The Representative of the Association

E. Schiaparelli .⁷

In 1943 Fr Ceria would comment on the advantages (at least temporary) of this solution which placed the Salesian Institute under the control of the Italian National Association. 'In the institutes which are administered by the Association, the religious assigned to them do not appear as missionaries but simply as teachers, and the Association represents the schools in dealings with ecclesiastical authorities, local governments and Italian consular officials. The religious, therefore, are autonomous in regard to all the consular authorities, their only duty as good citizens being to pay their respects to the Italian consulate'.⁸

The historian, however, did not foresee that the moment in which the Salesians would no longer be just Italians, was so close, nor, above all that the whole region would have claimed its political and cultural autonomy.

Constantinople and Smyrna

Some years later, Fr Rua came to an agreement with the National Association to create two foundations simultaneously in Turkey, one at Constantinople and one at Smyrna. The contract for Constantinople was signed jointly by Fr Rua and Professor Schiaparelli on 20 July 1903. Fr Rua committed himself to opening a primary school for boys in Constantinople in September that year. A section for vocational training would be added the following year and gradually other classes too, as the need arose. Before 15 September the Association would pay 7000 Italian lire in compensation for the initial expenses, provide scholastic materials and have ensured material and moral support.⁹

On the previous 26 June, by means of Schiaparelli, the National Association had offered Fr Rua two boys' schools for the following October. They had been opened at Smyrna by the Italian government in 1878 but were falling into rack and ruin, 'because Christian education was not fostered there'. The Association would take responsibility for them in terms similar to those adopted for the schools in Egypt and Tripoli.¹⁰ Fr Rua

⁷ Preserved in FdR 3170A8-9; Cf. *Annali* II, 321.

⁸ *Annali*, II, 322.

⁹ Cf. *Annali*, III, 414-421.

¹⁰ Cf. Letter of E. Schiaparelli to M. Rua, Truin, 26 June 1903 in FdR 3486B3-5.

and his Chapter hastened to give secretary Schiaparelli a positive answer, so much so that the minutes of the meeting of the Superior Chapter of 21 August 1903 noted, 'The Salesians will leave by September and will take over the schools at Smyrna'.¹¹

Things did not go too well in Turkey. On 21 August 1905, the Superior Chapter took notice of a complaint that the Italian consul had sent to Schiaparelli. He declared himself somewhat dissatisfied with the Salesians' work at Smyrna; they expected more. As the lessons were due to recommence on 5 September, a telegram was sent to Alexandria telling Fr. Cardano to go to Smyrna for two or three weeks to start off the classes and workshops. The Chapter was also invited to consider which Rector should be put in charge of the work.¹²

The National Association, too, was struggling to honour its financial obligations for the Smyrna schools, as the documentation of the following years bears witness, particularly the unsigned *Memorandum regarding the house at Smyrna*, dated 17 February 1906. Its tone is somewhat vexed; the liabilities of the work amounted to 35-40,000 Italian lire; as a consequence, the closure, at least temporary, of the commercial course was necessary as it was the most expensive one, assuming that the Association would continue its annual cheque of six thousands francs which were barely sufficient (perhaps not even) to support the Punta Popular School. This measure should not appear unjust; according to the *Memorandum* it is not, because, in the first place, the National Association did not respect the agreement since it neglected the article on scholastic materials and suppressed the expenses for water, gas and heating oil.¹³

The National Association and the Salesian works in Palestine

In the meantime, Prof. Schiaparelli and the Rector Major were turning their attention to the Salesian works in Palestine, the only ones in the Near East not yet involved with the National Association. The political circumstances at the beginning of the century favoured a change in the protectorate system. With no regrets, the anti-clerical French government was abandoning its former protectorate over the Catholics and Catholic missions of the region. It would suffice, therefore, to transfer the houses of Bethlehem, Beitgema, Cremisan and Nazareth to the Italian protectorate in order to draw up a contract joining them to the beneficiaries of the National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries. The matter was considered at Constantinople and at Rome.¹⁴ Italy would have come to an agreement with France through the auspices of their respective ambassadors. Since the consent of the Holy See was necessary and Italy did not have any diplomatic representatives there, the Association took charge of the procedures. On 9 September 1904, then, Fr Rua, together with Schiaparelli, signed an agreement which merits being quoted for its future repercussions on Arab Salesian personnel in Palestine.

¹¹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 21 August 1903 in FdR 4244A3.

¹² *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 21 August 1903 in FdR 4245B6

¹³ This memorandum is found in FdR 3486C8-D1. In general for Smyrna (Izmir) at the time of Fr Rua cf. FdR 3484E10-3487C6.

¹⁴ Cf. *Annali* III, 536-537.

Foreword: 1) As it appears from the documents registered with the Royal Italian Consulate in Jerusalem, the real estate of Bethlehem, Cremisan, Beigemal and Nazareth and all contained therein, formerly the property of the late lamented Canon Belloni, an Italian subject, has passed, excepting the rights of Propaganda, into the estates of various private individuals, all of whom are Italian subjects. 2) Owing to these circumstances, the real estate itself and the institutes settled thereon, must fall politically under the natural and direct Protectorate of the Royal Italian Consul; between the V. Rev. Michael Rua, superior of the Salesians, representing the community itself, and Prof. Ernest Schiaparelli, secretary of the National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries, representing the same, the following agreement has been drawn up:

Art. 1. The V. Rev. Michael Rua places all the Salesian Institutes in Palestine under the exclusive Protectorate of the Royal Italian Consuls.

Art. 2 The said Fr Rua undertakes: a) to add a technical-commercial course to the institute at Bethlehem; b) to accept as compulsory the teaching of the Italian language which, with the local language, will be the official language of the Institutes and will be adopted by the pupils in conversation and by the teachers in all their class teaching; c) to raise the national flag in all the said institutes in a central and honoured place on all public holidays and on the birthdays of their Royal Majesties, the King and Queen of Italy.

Art. 3 To the Rectors of the said Institutes is reserved full autonomy in religious, moral, educational, disciplinary and didactic policies. They will, however, consider themselves highly honoured by the visits of the Delegates of the Association to ascertain the good results of the teaching and by the visits and interventions of the Royal Consuls, notably on solemn occasions.

Art. 4 For its part, by way of encouragement, the Association undertakes a) to grant to the said Institutes taken together, an annual sum of 12,000 Italian lire, payable in three monthly instalments of 3,000 lire; b) to provide the Italian scholastic materials absolutely necessary for the institutions themselves.

Art. 5 The present agreement will take effect from 15 September 1904 and will be renewed annually for an indefinite period unless revoked on one of the parties, three months prior to the usual expiry date.

The present agreement has been drawn up on 9 September 1904 in two original exemplars, signed by both parties.

Rev. Michael Rua, Rector Major of the Pious Society of St Francis of Sales

Ernesto Schiaparelli, Secretary General of the National Association.¹⁵

A lot of resistance could be foreseen in the varied ethnic environment of Palestine, especially to the points referring to the Italian property rights over the Salesian houses in Palestine and to the compulsory use of Italian in conversation and teaching. But Turin refused to listen. For the time being, in 1904 when the change in the protectorate was

¹⁵ The original text is found in F. Desramaut *L'Orphelinat Jésus Adolescent*, 290-291.

announced, Fr. Carlo Gatti resigned.¹⁶ He did not appreciate the change of Protectorate and was on good terms with the French consulate. As for the Rector of Nazareth, Athanase Prun (1861-1917), a Frenchman with a certain attitude, he refused any dependence on Italy and tried to re-enter the French protectorate, causing Schiaparelli to cut the annual aid to the houses of Palestine by a quarter.¹⁷ Some years later, during Fr. Albera's time as Rector Major, tensions would mount in the wake of the Arab movement. Fr. Belloni's Arab disciples were to remind the Superiors that they were not Italians and would refuse to teach catechism to their small compatriots in a language that they barely understood, if at all. The culmination was reached in 1917-1918, during the time in office of the provincial Fr. Louis Sutera (1869-1948) who did not like them. While the war waged between Turkey and Italy, they took over the reins in Bethlehem. The Italian Salesians in Beitgema and Bethlehem would then have much to suffer and in some cases were even reported by their own confreres. The Arab rebellion would be severely crushed at the end of the war in 1919 by the visiting Superior, Fr. Peter Ricaldone and would lead to the incardination of some of the Arab Salesian priests into the Latin Patriarchate.

Unconsciously, Fr Rua, was offering a service to the cause of Italian consciousness, destined later to be proudly developed by Mussolini in the inter-war period. And the Salesians who had shot themselves in the foot with the 1904 agreement with the Italian National Association would fail in their much hoped for inculturation in the Near East.¹⁸

The Salesians in China

During the early years of the twentieth century Fr Rua also sent the Salesians to the Far East, to the Portuguese enclave of Macau in China, and to Mylapore, near Madras (Chennai), in India.

In Salesian circles in the 1890s there was a widespread conviction that in October 1886, when he was speaking about the missions in China with Fr Arthur Conelli (1864-1924), Don Bosco had planned to send him there one day.¹⁹ The priest concerned had spoken about it to a Jesuit friend at the *Civiltà Cattolica*, Fr. Francis Xavier Rondina, who suggested that he prepare minds and hearts for the arrival of the Salesians by sending some literature on Don Bosco and his work to Macau and Hong Kong. The local press would then have published some articles.²⁰ Fr Rua encouraged Fr Conelli to do so.²¹ So he sent Fr Rondina the biographies of Don Bosco written by Charles d'Espiney and Albert du Boys, a publication by Bishop Spinola and some circulars of Fr Rua.

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 15 October 1904, in FdR 4244B12.

¹⁷ Schiaparelli's complaints about Nazareth were minuted by the Superior Chapter in the meetings of 10 April, 7 and 8 August and 18 November 1905, in FdR 4244E10, 4245B1-2.

¹⁸ On the issue of the protectorates and its consequences for the Salesians during the First world War, cf. F. Desramaut, *L'Orphelinat Jésus Adolescent*, 49-63, 127-139.

¹⁹ Regarding the foundation at Macau, cf. *Annali* III, 596-605.

²⁰ Cf. Ten letters of F. Rondina to A. Conelli during 1890 in FdR 3281B4-C12.

²¹ Cf. for example M. Rua's letter to A. Conelli, Antwerp, 14 May 1890 in FdR 3888A5.

The seedling took root.. Nine years later the Apostolic Nuncio at Lisbon, Andrea Ajuti, titular Archbishop of Damietta, sent Fr Rua the following request from the Bishop of Macau, Bishop José Manuel de Carvalho, dated 2 April 1899: 'I need a boys' orphanage where they teach trades, to see if, by that means, poor boys may be attracted and having been educated there, may have the grace of conversion to our Holy Religion. With this in view, I have thought of Don Bosco's Institute. I come, therefore, to seek your Grace's help and protection in this undertaking, asking you the special favour of obtaining from the Superior General of the Institute two or three brothers to begin with, because our means are limited. And when Your Grace authorises me to do so, I shall contact him so that we may reach an agreement on the conditions they may wish to place for coming here'.²²

It was impossible to contemplate a Salesian work reduced to two or three lay brothers alone. The Constitutions did not allow it, as Fr Rua remarked; at least one priest would have to be present. He was in agreement, though, with the principle On 20 June 1899, the Nuncio replied that Bishop de Carvalho, probably in transit at Lisbon, agreed to including at least one priest and some seminarians²³ with the lay brothers for the orphanage. Fr Conelli by now seemed appointed to lead the Chinese expedition. Fr Rua sent him a message on 4 December, 'If you think fit, between the serious and the jovial, let His Eminence Cardinal Vanutelli know of Don Bosco's appointment of you for the first Salesian house in China and the current negotiations for Macau'.²⁴ But Bishop de Carvalho died (1904).

His successor, Bishop João Paulino Azevedo, who had admired the Salesian workshops in Lisbon, was informed of the steps taken by Bishop de Carvalho. From Macau on 17 April 1904 he wrote to Fr Rua in Portuguese, 'I fully accept the plan agreed upon by the V. Rev. Superior General and my predecessor. I thank your Reverence for bringing it to my attention on the occasion of your recent visit to Lisbon.

The work will consist of Chinese orphans destined to learn a trade. There will be a hostel annexed to it for the sons of Europeans or the Portuguese of Macau who are generally more concerned with business and commerce. They will receive education and instruction in the hostel and will then go, accompanied by an assistant, to the Seminary for the school and commercial courses ... In order for the hostel and workshops to begin operating under the direction of the Salesians, I think we need at least a Rector, three assistants and three master craftsmen: tailoring, shoe-making, printing. I think this personnel is indispensable ...'. The bishop also expressed the wish that one of the assistants would be able to teach music and conduct a brass-band.²⁵

Fr Rua prepared everything but waited for a formal document before allowing his missionaries to leave for China. At last, on 29 December 1905 in Macau, Bishop de Azevedo drew up a draft agreement in twelve points, valid for seven years. Fr Rua was to send as minimum, a Rector, an assistant and four Brothers for the direction and administration of an orphanage (art. 1). Teaching would take place both in the schools and in the workshops (art. 3). The Rector chosen by Fr Rua would have complete

²² Letter of A. Ajuti to M. Rua 25 May 1899 in FdR 3281A6-7.

²³ Letter of A Ajuti to M Rua 2 June 1899 in FdR 3281A9-10

²⁴ Letter of M Rua to A Conelli, Turin, 4 December 1899 in FdR 3888B5.

²⁵ Letter of J P de Azevedo to M Rua, Macau, 17 April 1904 in FdR 3282A11.

freedom in the internal discipline of the institute (art. 4). The bishop would be responsible for the expenses (art. 6). He would obtain free tickets for travel from the government (art. 9).²⁶ The expedition was by now organised and was to be led by Fr Conelli who had been waiting for this moment for twenty years. Unfortunately, he fell ill at the beginning of January and was obliged to remain in Italy. So, on 17 January 1906 the missionaries chosen for Macau set sail from Genoa under the leadership of Fr Louis Versiglia (1873-1930).

On their arrival, Versiglia's first task, as Fr Rua's representative, was that of finalising the agreement. He approved the twelve articles and signed them together with the bishop on 20 February 1906.²⁷

Fr Versiglia, unfortunately, would soon be forced to renounce some of his hopes probably because of the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Portugal, of which Macau was a colony. In fact, on the pretext of subduing the unrest caused by the Republicans under the discredited regime of King Carlos I (1889-1908), between 1906 and 1908 the country was subjected to the dictatorship of João Franco II. On 1 February 1908, Carlos I and the heir to the throne were assassinated; the second in line, Manuel II, came to the throne, aged sixteen. The political and nationalistic tensions aroused by these events in the small Chinese colony can easily be imagined. Here it is "Everything for Portugal" Fr. Versiglia would write on 22 November 1908 in a report to Fr Rua to which we shall refer.

They had begun well. On 6 May 1906, in a letter to Fr Rua, Fr. Versiglia showed pleasure in the opening of a 'festive oratory'.²⁸ 'Our work is prospering', the Bishop of Macau had announced to Fr Rua on 16 November.²⁹ After the euphoria of the beginnings, though, the situation of the Salesians at Macau had deteriorated. The bishop had introduced into the orphanage a committee that depended on the government, as Fr Versiglia explained in 1908. Contrary to the agreement, the Salesians were no longer free. Fr. Versiglia suggested modifying the agreement and undertaking a real mission in the region. As he told Fr Rua, to do this he would need seminarians who could learn Chinese and be assigned to a mission properly so-called in China itself. For this project, the support of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide and the National Association for the Assistance of Italian Catholic Missionaries would be required. He suspected, moreover, that the bishop was only waiting for the expiry of the seven year contract to dismiss the Italian Salesians. It was better to get out in time from that blind alley in which, by mistake, they found themselves.³⁰

Political events precipitated the matter. In Portugal, King Manuel II who had renounced a dictatorial regime, was soon overthrown in a military coup. On 5 October 1910 the revolutionaries proclaimed the Republic. A Constitution dissolved religious congregations, broke off the understanding between Church and State, announced a

²⁶ The projected agreement is preserved in FdR 3281D7-9.

²⁷ The document is found in in FdR 3282A12-B2.

²⁸ Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano*, agosto 1906, 231-232.

²⁹ Letter of J P deAzevedo to M Rua, Macau, 16 November 1906, in FdR 3282B3-C5; cf. *Annali* III, 605.

³⁰ Letter of L Versiglia to M Rua, Macau, 22nd November 1908 in FdR 3281A12-B3. The *Annali* are unaware of this document.

compulsory secular education in the schools and sanctioned the right to strike. As a result, both in the capital and in the colonies, religious began to be expelled from their convents. When the Salesians were expelled from Macau in 1911, they headed for Hong Kong. Providence, however, was watching over them. Thanks to this misfortune, Fr Versiglia's missionary dream could finally become a reality. The Salesians established themselves on Chinese soil, in the Heung-Shan district between Macau and Canton. At last the true missionary work of the Salesians in China could begin.

The Salesian Work in India

The entry of the Salesians into India, and specifically to Mylapore, was the outcome of a long series of negotiations between the local bishop and Fr Rua.³¹

On 6 December 1898, the Bishop of Mylapore, Anthony José de Souza Barroso wrote a long letter in French to Fr Rua, requesting the Salesians for his diocese. He was very clever in the way he went about it, recalling Don Bosco's intentions towards India. 'I know the Salesian Fathers and have had occasion to appreciate their works. Don Bosco ardently desired to open a house in India ... I, therefore, take the liberty, Rev. And dear Father, of inviting you to open an orphanage at Bandel, on the banks of the Hoogly river. There I have a beautiful church and a very large, ancient monastery with grounds that I put completely at your disposal. I have the impression that Bandel will wonderfully answer the needs of your institute for young local boys, as in Beitgemal in Palestine. Secondly, I have a college attended by three hundred students of all religions, and alongside of it, there is a seminary for the formation of young Europeans and above all of local youngsters destined for the local diocesan clergy. I offer you its direction as well.'³²

From an annotation of Fr Rua on the letter, we learn that he replied on 6 February 1899, 'Allow us a year's respite and then we shall willingly negotiate' On 11 April, just as he received the reply, Bishop de Barroso announced to Fr Rua that he had been transferred to the diocese of Porto in Portugal but would hand on the promise to his successor, Theotónio Manuel Ribeiro Vieira de Castro. The new bishop had a personal reason for turning to the Salesians: 'Don Bosco's apostolic soul does indeed want one or more foundations in India. In August 1885, when I had finished my studies in Rome, I passed through Turin and went to one of your houses in the countryside to receive the blessing of your holy Founder. Placing his hand on my head, he told me that he blessed my works. And which work would he more bless than one which is so necessary and opportune for co-operating in the eternal salvation of 300 millions of non-believers in India?'³³

To set in motion the necessary negotiations for the foundation of a Salesian orphanage in his diocese, Bishop Ribeiro began by sending on of his priests, Fr. L.X. Fernandez to Fr Rua. He presented himself to the Rector Major on 3 April 1901 with a memo written in Latin.³⁴ With his usual prudence, Fr Rua replied in four points in the same language: 1) '*Scribat nobis Episcopus*' [let the bishop write to us]; 2) That a four year respite be allowed for the Salesians to prepare the personnel; 3) That a journey of six persons to Mylapore be provided and at least one return journey; 4) That in addition to the dwellings for the Salesians and their pupils, whatever is necessary for them be

³¹ On the Salesian foundation in the diocese of Mylapore (or Meliapore) cf. FdR 3515B11-

provided for a period of five years.³⁵ Fr Rua did not want to send his missionaries on an adventure with no way out. His reply to the bishop, however, was lost and the negotiations dragged on for a long time. So it was that the following year, Bishop Ribeiro asked the ‘patriarch’ of Goa, Anthony Sebastian Valente, who would be passing through Rome, to intervene with the procurator general, Fr Marengo, who reported to Fr Rua on 8 April 1902.³⁶ Unperturbed, on 30 April, Fr Rua repeated his conditions, thus persuading the bishop of Mylapore to write a long letter on Christmas Day reiterating his proposal of an orphanage. He specified, ‘Having considered all the circumstances, among the missions of my diocese I have chosen Tanjore for the site of our Salesian orphanage. Nevertheless, when the sons of Don Bosco arrive in India, if they think another place in my diocese more suitable, I shall have no objection.’ He then went on to present the advantages of the city of Tanjore.³⁷

An exchange of letters followed between the bishop who was keen to achieve his goal and Fr Rua who was determined not to send his missionaries to India before 1905. At the end, on 19 December 1904, the agreement was signed in Turin by both parties, the Rector Major and Bishop Ribeiro who was in Italy for the *ad limina* visit. One perceives the concern to protect the Salesians as much as possible from being dismissed without any income of their own and left to their own devices in far-off Asia. If they were well assisted, however, they would be free to get on with their work. Let us now read the interesting text of the *Agreement*:

It is agreed that:

- 1) The Superior of the Salesians will send at least six persons to the diocese of Mylapore to direct and administer an orphanage for boys with the attached school of arts and crafts.
- 2) The bishop will provide a free outward journey (1st or 2nd class) for six persons and at least one return journey each and for those changes which, during the first five years, may have to be made for health or other reasonable motives.
- 3) During the first five years the bishop will provide not only the house, food and clothing for the Salesians and their pupils but will also cover all the necessary expenses of the Institute.
- 4) Although this Institute will be under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop, nevertheless, the Rector appointed by the Superior will have full freedom of direction, administration and internal discipline in the Institute.
- 5) The admission of pupils belongs both to the bishop and to the Rector, taking care that the boys be healthy, vaccinated, not younger than eight years and not older than fifteen.

3516D10 and the narrative in *Annali* III, 606-613, which forms the basis of my account.

³² Letter of A de Barroso to M Rua, 6 December 1898 in FdR 3515C3-6.

³³ *Annali* III, 607.

³⁴ Cf. the document in FdR 3515C10.

³⁵ Draft of the letter of M Rua to T M Ribeiro Vieira de Castro in FdR3515C11-12.

³⁶ Letter of G Marengo to M Rua, 8 April 1902 in FdR 35d15D3.

³⁷ Letter of T M Ribeiro Vieira de Castro to M Rua 25 December 1902, in *Annali* III, 569.

- 6) The Rector, however, may dismiss those residents whom he considers unfit for the orphanage but he will inform the bishop.
- 7) The Salesians will endeavour to learn Tamil and English which are the main languages used in the diocese.
- 8) The Rector and the bishop will always strive to agree in everything, for the edification of the priests and local people and for the good of souls and advantage of the Institute.
- 9) Both parties will reserve the right to introduce those modifications which, after a two year trial period, they deem to be opportune.

Turin, Salesian Oratory

19 December 1904

Signed:

Theotonio Bishop of Mylapore

Rev. Michael Rua Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco.³⁸

The missionary expedition was composed of three priests, a seminarian, a professed lay brother and an aspirant; Fr. George Tomatis (1865-1925) was their leader. They set sail from Genoa on 18 December 1904. Fr Rua had implored a special blessing for them from the Pope. Pius X replied through his Secretary of State, Merry del Val: 'The Holy Father sends a special blessing to Fr. George Tomatis and companions who are about to leave for India, and prays that God will not only favour them in their long journey but will also render their fatigues fruitful, so that the new mission may make the sons of Don Bosco ever more deserving of the Church.'³⁹ They landed at Bombay on 6 January 1905 and arrived at Tanjore on 14.

Thus was born a missionary work in India destined, over the years, to achieve an extraordinary expansion. It was the second successful implantation in the Far East for which Fr Rua was responsible. In terms of the worldwide development of his Congregation, his term as Rector Major was as decisive for Asia as Don Bosco's had been for South America.

³⁸ The Agreement is reproduced in FdR 3516C8-12; cf. *Annali* III, 570, note.

³⁹ *Annali* III, 571.

31 - THE YEAR 1907

Don Bosco's cause of beatification

1907 was a year of great joy for Fr Rua, a joy that was, at the same time upset by a terrible trial.

Don Bosco's cause of beatification, which he had so much at heart, reached a decisive stage. The reader will allow us to go back to 1888 in order to understand the affair more deeply. The process of beatification and canonisation is, in fact, quite complicated, almost like an obstacle course. Assisted in Rome by the Cardinal Protector and the Salesian Procurators, Fr Rua had got through the first phase. In 1907 he would be able to announce to the Congregation that 'Don Bosco is Venerable'. But he had suffered for nineteen years to reach that first significant result.¹

At the beginning he had to obtain the approval of the Archbishop of Turin for the opening of the diocesan process of beatification and canonisation, which would set the procedure in motion. On 16 July 1889, Fr Rua began by sending a circular letter to the bishops of Piedmont and Liguria on the reputation for holiness and the miracles of Don Bosco.² By way of encouragement, on 16 August he sent them a second letter documenting several healings obtained through Don Bosco's intercession which defied a human explanation.³ Some bishops replied with expressions of praise and commendation. So it was that on 6 September he was able to have the forty nine members of the General Chapter, gathered at Valsalice, sign a highly documented request to Cardinal Alimonda for the speedy opening of the process. He attached the bishops' letters to the appeal. The petition of the Chapter members began, 'We trust that Your Eminence will look kindly on our request. Our hope is enlivened by seeing that the Rev. bishops of Piedmont and Liguria, who were able to know the outstanding virtues and great works of the Servant of God, also agree with us and cherish the same desire, as Your Eminence will realise from the letters that we present.' The petition, together with a letter from Fr Rua, was only handed to the Cardinal of Turin on 31 January 1890, probably to give time to collect a greater number of letters from the bishops.⁴ The cardinal responded favourably on 8 February but asked for a little delay, fearing perhaps opposition from some of the bishops. On 8 May, though, everything was smoothed out when in a general assembly of the bishops of the provinces of Turin and Vercelli, he himself referred to the problem. The Salesians' petition was unanimously approved. In fact, a couple of bishops (Manacorda and Richelmy) stood out for their enthusiasm on the score of Don Bosco. The same day Cardinal Alimonda decided to open the informative process.

The business proceeded rapidly. On 2 June, Fr Rua appointed Fr Bonetti as

¹ Here I base myself mainly on the highly documented study of P. Stella, *Don Boco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol.III: *La canonizzazione*, Roma, LAS, 1988, 61-148.

² Cf. MB XIX, 35-36.

³ Cf. M.B. XIX, 36.

⁴ Cf. M.B. XIX, 38-41.

Postulator of the cause and on the following day Bonetti presented his postulation to the archbishop. The tribunal had to be set up. The archbishop had been considering it for some time and established it immediately.⁵ Fr Rua could be very pleased with it. The task of promoter of the faith (the general advocate, commonly known as the devil's advocate) had been assigned to Canon Michael Sorasio who was kindly disposed towards the Salesians, rather than to Canon Emanuele Colomiatti, well known for his fierce opposition to Don Bosco's canonisation. He would have to be satisfied with acting behind the scenes, writing to Cardinal Caprara in Rome. On 6 June Fr Rua, who was quite moved and clearly worried, wrote a long circular letter to the Salesians about the opening of the Founder's process of beatification. He begged the confreres and pupils to implore the light of the Holy Spirit and the protection of Mary Help of Christians each day, both in public and in private, for his Eminence the Archbishop of Turin, for the members of the tribunal he had chosen, for the Postulator of the cause and for all those called to give witness. They were to pray that with guidance from above, those involved should neither say nor do anything, nor omit anything contrary to the decrees of the Church regarding this sort of matter.⁶ The pitfalls in the procedure distressed him.

The first two sessions of the process were held on the mornings of 4 and 27 June. During the second session, Fr Bonetti presented the tribunal with a series of points or articles. It may be helpful to know something about their origin as they were to give direction to the depositions of the witnesses.

Already, at the time of Don Bosco's death, Fr Rua had asked Fr Bonetti to make a summary of the life and virtues of the Founder, in view of a possible canonisation. With the successful assistance of the archivist, Joachim Berto, Bonetti had produced four notebooks with more than eight hundred articles (or paragraphs). Following the advice of the Salesian Procurator in Rome, Caesar Cagliero, Bonetti submitted them to the Roman lawyer, Hilario Alibrandi. In 1890 the long text was suitably shortened and the articles reduced to 406. The first part of these recounted the life of Don Bosco and the fame of holiness surrounding him. The second presented, with documentary evidence, the heroism with which he had practised the three theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance), the virtues proper to the religious state (poverty, chastity and obedience) and also the principal moral virtues, above all, piety and humility (this last was added on the advice of Alibrandi). The articles tended to show the presence of these virtues in the life of Don Bosco particularly when, in the course of his hard life, he had to face family and social difficulties, physical illnesses, diabolic temptations and torments, and misunderstandings on the part of relatives and collaborators, superiors and civil and religious authorities. The articles ended with a statement that everything about Don Bosco demonstrated his perfect correspondence with grace, constancy in doing good and the heroism of his 'virtue' in the widest sense of the word. Reading these articles must have pleased Fr Rua immensely; he was ready to participate as a witness himself in the process.

⁵ Cf. M.B. XIX 42, 398.

⁶ L.C., 45-48.

The depositions during the informative process

The twenty eight witnesses gathered by Fr Bonetti appeared before the tribunal in the chapel of the archdiocesan seminary during the third session (23 July 1890).⁷ There was a bishop (Bishop Bertagna), eight diocesan priests with various titles, nine Salesian priests (with Fr Rua in first place), two lay-brothers and eight laymen (business men, farmers and a brick-layer). By the end of the hearings, the number of witnesses would have risen to forty-five, six of whom were chosen *ex officio*, and another, the diocesan priest, John Turchi, was persuaded by the Salesians to take part as they were concerned at the turn taken by the affair of the anti-Gastaldi pamphlets attributed to Don Bosco.⁸

Fr Rua was called as a witness only at the outset of the five long years taken up by the informative process. In the meantime, the Postulator John Bonetti had died (5 June 1891) and had been replaced by the Prefect General, Dominic Belmonte (1843-1901). The tribunal heard Fr Rua speak at thirty eight sessions, staggered between 29 April and 10 July 1895.⁹ He replied in detail to the questions on Don Bosco's early pastoral ministry, on the foundation of the Salesian Society and its expansion, and especially on the South American missions. These were all situations of which he had direct personal knowledge and in which he himself had often been involved. It is clear right from the beginning that on the twenty-first and twenty-second questions, he lost no time in showing the heroic degree of the theological virtues in the life of the Founder. Did he have faith? 'During the thirty six years I lived alongside Don Bosco, I always observed in him the greatest exactitude and sensitiveness in observing the commandments of God and of the Church' (*Positio*, 436). What about hope? 'His trust in God was evident whenever he had to undertake difficult or imposing works' (*Positio*, 478). And his love of God? 'The Servant of God was outstanding in all the virtues, but it can well be said that charity shone out in him in a special way' (*Positio*, 503). How was his love of neighbour? 'Inspired as he was by the love of God, he could not be otherwise than on fire with charity towards his neighbours. I mentioned that he was the guardian angel of his companions [...] Once he was ordained, his life became a continual web of works of charity' (*Positio*, 555).

On the issue of Don Bosco's prudence, Fr Rua answered, 'I wish to add something about the Servant of God's heroic prudence. No matter what class of persons he dealt with, rich or poor, his kindness was always the same and he made a great effort not to send anyone away upset' (*Positio*, 595). In reply to the questions on the virtue of justice, he asserted, 'He also manifested respect for the civil authorities and government, nor was he lacking in the respect due to the head of State' (*Positio*, 630). Regarding his moral strength, he declared, 'Don Bosco's fortitude in curbing his passions, enduring fatigue, inconveniences and tribulations was admirable and heroic, as also when he was engaged in and sustaining the most arduous undertakings. Fr Rua followed this up with numerous examples by way of proof' (*Positio*, 667). According to the Rector Major, Don Bosco's temperance was related to his love of purity (*Positio*,

⁷ Cf. the list of witnesses in P. Stella, *La canonizzazione...*, 75.

⁸ the definitive list of the witnesses actually questioned in *Taurinen. Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Ioannis Bosco Sacerdotis Fondatoris Piae Societatis Salesianae. Positio super Introductione Causae. Summarium et Litterae Postulatoriae*, Roma, Schola Typ. Salesiana, 1907, 1-22 (quoted as *Positio*). For greater details: cf. P. Stella, *La canonizzazione...*, 117-124.

⁹ r Rua's contributions to the depositions are found in FdR 2405D12-2414D3

716-723). As regards humility he affirmed, ‘ With great humility he would receive suggestions from his pupils and accepted their observations with good grace; I would go so far as to say, he would even thus accept corrections. I recall...’ (*Positio*, 759-765). Having recounted the life of the Founder, Fr Rua added, ‘In expounding the virtues that the Servant of God practised in the course of his life, I have often hinted that I marvelled at the heroic manner in which he exercised them. However, I think it fitting that I add how constant I saw him in their practice, so much so that he grew in perfection as the years passed, rather than flag in fervour’ (*Positio*, 369).

After Fr Rua, between 7 and 23 October Fr John Turchi gave evidence. The Salesians and Fr Rua, above all, were to discover just how decisive his testimony about the anti-Gastaldi pamphlets was to be. In fact, even without a formal acknowledgement, whoever reads the deposition, can understand that Fr Turchi was the author of the wretched booklets which Canon Colmiatti persisted in attributing to Don Bosco.¹⁰

Although very moderate in tone, Fr Rua’s deposition was one of the most substantial of the process and takes up 273 pages in the public edition. It is surpassed only by those of Joachim Berto (337 pages) and Giulio Barberis (283 pages) whose styles are both more prolix.¹¹

On 1 April 1897, the Archbishop of Turin, David Riccardi, presided over the closing session of the informative process. It had lasted seven years due to interruptions caused by several deaths and the subsequent necessary replacements. In the 6 August 1907 circular letter, Fr Rua wrote, ‘The judges showed their great knowledge in collecting the depositions of numerous witnesses. It is noteworthy that far from being bored by the length and seriousness of the work, they seemed to grow more enthusiastic by the day’.¹² In April, Fr Belmonte was able to deliver all the bulky documentation of the Turin process to the Congregation of Rites in Rome.

At Rome, the process followed its course. On 30 August 1897, Fr Rua appointed as postulator Fr Caesar Cagliero who was also his Procurator with the Holy See. The Congregation of Rites decided on 25 October 1898 to order all Don Bosco’s writings to be handed over. The directive was repeated in Turin by Archbishop Riccardi and by Fr Rua himself in a letter to the Salesians on 8 December.¹³ The examinations of the writings took from 1902 until 1904 under the patronage of the learned Cardinal Louis Tripepi, who was very favourable to the cause. The designated censor found nothing to object to even in the anti-Gastaldi defence which had been so disputed by Canon Colmiatti in his *Esposizione agli Eminentissimi Cardinali* (1881); it was concluded that Don Bosco had done nothing but defend himself, albeit in a somewhat harsh tone.¹⁴

On 18 November 1901, Fr Rua was the first witness called to swear to the absence of any cult paid to Don Bosco (*Super cultum numquam praestito*).¹⁵ There was no

¹⁰ Cf. P. Stella, *La canonizzazione...*, 88.

¹¹ Cf. P. Stella, *La canonizzazione...*, 83.

¹² L.C., 518-519.

¹³ L.C., 186-187.

¹⁴ *Positio super revisione scriptorum*, Romae, typis Vaticanis, 1906. P. Stella, *La canonizzazione...*, 127-130.

¹⁵ The documentation for this stage of the process is found in FdB 2435A7-2439A4. Fr Rua’s testimony is in FdR 2435E7-2436A11.

difficulty in recognising how great his reputation for holiness had been even in his earthly life. This is what had drawn him the veneration of the crowds, especially in his last great journeys. But there had never been any public cult either in the funeral chamber or at his tomb in Valsalice. Fr Rua was not even aware of any form of public cult surrounding Don Bosco's portraits wherever they were displayed.

Oppositions and replies. Don Bosco is Venerable.

The crucial stage of the process was reached in 1907. Bishop Alexander Verde, the promoter of the faith (or popularly, the devil's advocate) had distinguished himself in 1905 and 1906 for the effective toughness of his observations on the causes of Anna Maria Taigi and the Friar Minor, Bernard Clausi. Having been appointed to examine the cause of Don Bosco, in 1907 he presented his *Animadversiones* (Observations), aimed at raising objections to the furtherance of the project of beatification.¹⁶ Basically, Bishop Verde denounced a certain duplicity in Don Bosco, beginning from the statement of Fr Cafasso that was reported in the preface of the biography written by Dr D'Espiney. His arguments were condensed in the aphorism, 'Don Bosco is a mystery', attributed to Fr Cafasso. Unfortunately for Bishop Verde (and for the memory of Don Bosco) the whole extract was the fruit of a rhetorical construction by Louis Cartier, the real author of the preface. Probably the only authentic expression of Cafasso was the other one quoted by Cartier, 'Let him get on with it!'¹⁷ However, Bishop Verde ran through the life of Don Bosco which everybody considered upheld by divine grace to show that the reputation of holiness was founded of dreams and prophecies which were cunningly presented. In reality, his habitual behaviour was not what one would expect from a saint. He appeared more like a man looking for success and moved by a subtle pride. The Salesians had gone out of their way to glorify him and orchestrate his pretended holiness.¹⁸

Providentially for the Salesians, the customary response was entrusted to a brilliant young priest, Fr Charles Salotti (born in 1870), a great admirer of the Salesian style of education which he had personally experienced. According to him, the whole argumentation of the *Animadversiones* tended to misrepresent the facts by omitting significant circumstances, giving too much credence to doubtful witnesses and exaggerating their importance and impact. Right from the little acrobat's childhood, he had given evidence of a sense of prayer and zealous charity towards his companions. His dreams, starting from the one when he was nine years old, were heavenly revelations. His extreme caution in narrating them was a proof of his prudence even from an early age. No idle talk in him but a conscious insistence that his successes were the fruit of faith and the intercession of Mary. No ostentatious corporal penances but a joyful self-offering in the never ending confessions of the young and in all the fund raising in towns and cities in Piedmont, in Italy and in Europe, during exhausting journeys with no tourist attractions in view. It was, therefore, fitting to present him as a shining example for the whole Christian society, and first of all, for priests. As a young priest he had been presented as an apostle of Turin by the Ven. Joseph Cafasso; later he

¹⁶ The 25 pages of these *Animadversiones*, dated 26 March 1907, are found in the appendix of *Positio super Introductione Causae*, 1907.

¹⁷ I have been able to take apart this construction in the last part of my study on the biography of Don Bosco by Jacques-Melchior Villefranche, RSS 9 (1990) 85-89.

¹⁸ Cf. P. Stella's analysis in *La canonizzazione...*, 131-136.

gave abundant proof of his apostolic zeal among all sorts of people, and with his confreres he devoted himself unreservedly to the sound formation of the young.¹⁹

The contest was taking an ever more favourable turn. Cardinal Louis Tripepi having died on 29 December 1906, the Salesian Postulator, Fr Marengo, searched in vain for a substitute among the Cardinals, Rampolla, Gatti and Cretoni. At last, as he informed Fr Rua on 7 January 1907, he lighted on the Capuchin, José Calasanz Vivés y Tuto, a cardinal ready to oblige and even enthusiastic about the role.²⁰ He was appointed *Ponente* (responsible) on 23 February 1907 and set to work immediately as the *Animadversiones* and the *Responsio* of March and April show. ‘Cardinal Vivés y Tuto is so involved,’ Fr Marengo wrote to Fr Rua. ‘I don’t think we have ever had a *Ponente* so well disposed and committed’.²¹ Finally, a conclusion was reached by the Congregation of Rites on 23 July. In response to the question on the appropriateness of introducing the cause of beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco, the vote of the cardinals and their consultants was affirmative. The following day Pius X signed the document, which was dated 28 July 1907. An exultant Fr Marengo wrote to Fr Rua on the day the Pope signed, ‘Now you can beat the drums and ring the bells!’²²

The decree *Supremus humanae familiae* ratifying the introduction of the cause ‘for the beatification and canonisation of the Ven. Servant of God, John Bosco, priest and founder of the Pious Salesian Society’ signed by the Cardinal Prefect, Serafino Cretoni, situated his life and work in the wake of the holy priest educators of modern times:

As in former times, so in our own day, God the supreme author of the human family, watches over Christian society with particular care, coming to its aid with opportune help and remedies, in the persons of outstanding men, illustrious for resplendent and practical virtues. During their lives they seemed to communicate to all, their own spirit and their own life-giving fervour. Among those, in the last century, divine Providence sent as an ornament and defence of his Church the priest John Bosco who, following in the footsteps of holy men such as Joseph Calasanz, Vincent de Paul, John Baptist de la Salle and other similar saints, together with the Pious Salesian Society which he founded and with other works, consecrated himself entirely to the salvation of souls and especially to the education of the young in piety, humanities and trades, becoming all things to all men, so as to lead all to salvation.²³

There was no reference in this document to Don Bosco’s miraculous gifts either during his life or after his death. His whole life and works were simply to be considered as a sort of ‘theophany’, reserved to the Church in difficult times, as Peter Stella writes with insight and critical acumen.²⁴

Fr Marengo lost no time in telegraphing the news on 24 July, he then went to Turin to give the document personally to Fr Rua. The Rector Major was jubilant. The document sanctioned the ‘Venerability’ of Don Bosco. Overflowing with joy, on 6

¹⁹ Carlo Salotti’s long defence (81 pages), called the *Responsio*, dated 10 April 1907, appears as an appendix to the *Positio super Introductione Causae*, 1907.

²⁰ Letter of G Marengo to M Rua, Rome, 7 January 1907, in FdR 3830D3-4.

²¹ Letter of G Marengo to M Rua, Rome, 10 April 1907, in FdR 3830D12-E3.

²² Letter of G Marengo to M Rua, Rome, 24 July 1907, in FdR 3831A1-4.

²³ This long Latin decree with a translation beside it was published in the September 1907 issue of the *Bollettino Salesiano*, 260-265.

²⁴ *La canonizzazione...*, 147.

August he circulated among the Salesians a letter completely dedicated to the event.

Don Bosco is Venerable! When, with a trembling hand, it fell to me to notify the whole Salesian Family of the death of Don Bosco, I wrote that that news was the most sorrowful that I had ever had to impart or that I could ever have to during my life. Now, instead, the news of the Venerability of Don Bosco is the sweetest I could ever give you before I am laid in the grave. At this news my heart breaks forth in a hymn of joy and thanksgiving. If for so many years, we saw our good Father weighed down by so many unspeakable troubles, sacrifices and persecutions, how consoling it now is to see the Catholic Church ready to work for his glorification before the whole world! If ever we had had even the slightest doubt that our Pious Society was the work of God, now we can be tranquil, since through its infallible magisterium, the Church calls our Founder Venerable. How grateful we must be to the Sovereign Pontiff, Pius X, who deigned to propose the cause of Don Bosco for study by the Sacred Congregation much sooner than is customary even for persons who died in the odour of sanctity! Cardinal Vivés y Tuto, the *Ponente* of Don Bosco's cause, when offering his congratulations to the Pious Salesian Society on Don Bosco's Venerability, spoke of him in such terms as to bring tears of joy to our eyes and to make us value our being called to be his sons as a very special favour of divine Providence.²⁵

The Varazze Affair

Anyone reading the 6 August circular letter can clearly see his effort to remain calm. It is quite extraordinary if one considers his moral sufferings at the end of July brought about by the Varazze affair. Unfortunately, that was not the first scandal denounced by the press. On 21 May 1906, during a meeting of the Superior Chapter, Fr Baratta suddenly broke into the room with the news that the Director of Education had ordered the evacuation of all the students in the house at Intra within forty eight hours.²⁶ It was the reaction to a story of paedophilia publicised in the press. The case brought against the seminarian S. O. would come to trial on 25 May 1908, with the defendant being sentenced to eleven months in prison.

The Varazze affair, instead, was based on false testimonies and assumed entirely different dimensions.²⁷ Fr Ceria speaks of it as a real and true diabolical business, aimed at destroying the Salesian Congregation. I base myself on his account, aware that certain marginal details, for example, the titles of newspapers or the actual wording of questions in the examinations could be the fruit of the fertile spirit of Fr Amadei. The structure of the whole, though, which we find in the memorandum of the charge of libel and the interventions of the lawyers are certainly exact. Let us recount the events of the first few days which will inform us of the origins of this particularly sordid story.

On 29 July 1907, the day after the end of the school year, towards 7 a.m., some

²⁵ L.C., 516-521.

²⁶ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 21 May 1906, in FdR 4246A2.

²⁷ Cf. *I fatti e gli scandali di Varazze (luglio 1907). Memoriale-denunzia per calunna dei Salesiani del Collegio Civico*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1908, pp. 62; *I Fatti e gli scandali di Varazze (luglio 1907). Rilievi dei querelanti*, Torino, Tip. S.A.I.D. Buona Steampa, 1909, pp4; Corte di Appello, Genova, *Le origini della calunnia contro i R.R. Salesiani a Varazze (luglio 1907-ottobre)*, Torino, Tip. Baravalle e Falconieri, 1910, pp.44. Ceria dedicates and entire chapter to the 'Varazze affair' in the *Annali* III, 672-702.

twenty or so pupils who were waiting for the moment to return to their families, were in the chapel of the *Collegio Civico* in Varazze, run by the Salesians, reciting the prayers and assisting at Mass. Suddenly a group of officials and policemen emerged from the sacristy, entered the church and went up as far as the altar rails, and, paying no respect to the sacred nature of the ceremonies, ordered the public to cease their prayers and leave immediately. The boarders were separated from the Salesians and led away by the police into the refectory, while the Salesians were gathered in a classroom. The Rector, Fr. Charles Viglietti, was curious to know what all the unusual movement was about. He hurried along, bumping into the sub-Prefect of Savona who said to him, ‘A serious business, Father, a serious business. Incredible wickedness goes on here.’²⁸ After breakfast the pupils were taken in groups to the barracks of the *carabinieri* to be interrogated in the presence of a woman and a boy, of who we shall speak. The poor children really did not know what to answer.

In the late afternoon, in the same barracks, where the Salesians had been taken, Fr Viglietti was questioned by the Director of Education of Genoa and finally discovered what it was all about. He immediately took notes, thus assuring us of relative objectivity. He asked the nature of the accusations against the Salesians. ‘The black mass, of course, the black mass!’, the Director replied. ‘The black mass!? I don’t know what you mean by the black mass.’ ‘Don’t play the innocent! Speak up, is it true or not that black masses were held in the College?’ ‘But may I ask you to explain what you are talking about?’ The deputy Director was called; he entered, somewhat aggravated, and read half a page of obscenities from a small notebook. Then, interrupting himself, he shouted, ‘I shan’t give him any satisfaction; I’m not reading anything more. The black mass, you know what it is, so don’t act the simpleton, it means that at night all of you in the house, superiors and young people would dance naked with the Sisters. As for the rest, you know very well about the rest. And then processions of children, boarders and day students, all naked, with the nuns and friars, inside and outside the house, burning portraits of Victor Emanuel II and Garibaldi. You know about the violence used against the youngsters by your priests – enough said!’ Having said all that, he stormed out, slamming the door. ‘Well, now,’ the Director resumed, ‘do you confess now?’ ‘I am obliged by truth’, Viglietti replied, ‘to deny everything. We do not know any Sisters; no Sister ever set foot in our house. These are inconceivably evil deeds. Nothing similar, you may be certain, nothing, nothing has ever taken place in the College.’ ‘But what about in the past...in the past...’ ‘I have been here at Varazze only since October and nothing of all this has ever occurred. Even so, I do not believe anything of this nature took place in the past. And as for the violence against the boys, I know my personnel and respond for all the Salesians. I do not think that anyone is capable of such acts- no one. Bring me even one young man who accuses a Salesian of these things.’ ‘Not even Calvi? Not even Disperati and Crosio?’ ‘Not even.’ ‘But be careful, complaints have been lodged...be careful, this evening you will be arrested.’ ‘I don’t know what to say, Director, I deny everything.’ ‘Alright, go by all means, I abandon you to your fate.’²⁹

The following day, 30 July, the Salesians were left in peace. The searches and interrogations, though, spread to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the

²⁸ *Annali*, III, 685.

²⁹ *Annali* III, 686-687.

Little Sisters of the Immaculate, the Sisters of the Snow, the Capuchins, the archpriest and others as well. All had been denounced as having taken part in the orgies of the black masses celebrated for nine months in the College, from November to July. The St. Catherine Institute run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was visited one morning by the police who gathered in the parlour the Sisters and twenty nine pupils who had not yet left for the holidays. Four Sisters and one pupil were identified by a boy brought in by the police (the boy about whom we shall speak) as having taken part in the black mass on 23 April, towards nine o' clock. They believed at first, like several children, that that 'black mass' meant a requiem Mass which at that time was celebrated with black vestments and so, naturally, they admitted to knowing what it was about. Then a policeman crudely explained. Horrified, the Sisters immediately presented their alibis. The girl, instead, an older adolescent, answered the policemen with a certain arrogance.

In the meantime, Fr Viglietti received the latest issue of the anti-clerical newspaper of Savona, *Il Cittadino*, carrying headlines and sub-headings such as 'Obscene discoveries in the Salesian College at Varazze'; 'Monks and nuns compromised'; 'Serious scandals'; 'Closure of the College'. The paper commented on the police investigation, 'It appears that unbelievable, terrible, monstrous things unheard of in the annals of colleges directed by monks and nuns have taken place.'³⁰ It was but the beginning of a defamatory campaign.

An older woman, Vincenzina Besson, widow of a consul, and a fifteen year old boy, Charles Marlario, a foundling whom Vincenzina led people to believe was her son, Alexander, had hatched the intrigue in the background. Charles Marlario was a day student at the *Istituto Civico*. One day, acting through a third party, Vincenzina Besson gave the authorities a notebook of mysterious provenance, attributed to the boy. It was the one with the extract which Viglietti had been forced to listen to during his interrogation. The notebook contained a story devised by the widow Besson. They boy apparently would have discovered shameful acts of every kind being committed in the College. Instead of withdrawing him, the alleged mother, wanted him to continue attending the school, to assist at the obscenities and write them down one after the other in his notebook. When the school year was about to end, the notebook went to Rome. There a copy was made which is now in Varazze. Fr Ceria maintained that its pages presumed a pornographic culture and a knowledge of medical terminology highly unlikely in a fifteen year old boy. Nevertheless, on the evening of 30 July, the confrontation with the Rector, Viglietti, before the royal procurator and an investigating magistrate from the tribunal in Savona was amazing. Viglietti notes in his diary, 'Right from the outset I had the impression that the boy was reciting a lesson he had studied, and I said so. But later my impression was that this poor unfortunate boy was possessed by the devil'. In effect, he heard him speak with precision about places, name people, reply to objections, describe the black masses with such an abundance of details as to remain absolutely bewildered.³¹ The libel case in which the Salesians would denounce the calumny, would often come back to the quality of the very lengthy deposition of the boy. 'It is a marvel of clarity and precision. Never a slip. No peculiarities of language,

³⁰ *Annali*, III, 688-689.

³¹ *Annali* III, 690.

never a blank in his memory, never any inconsistencies in his delivery'.³² If Charles Marlario had learnt a lesson, he had learnt it to perfection.

The news was dynamite and soon reached all regions of Italy. The principal newspapers printed several editions. Public curiosity grew day by day. The headlines were framed to excite attention: 'Unheard of filth at Varazze. A pig-sty at Varazze. Unheard of wickedness in the Salesian College at Varazze. Black scandals. The black mass or the joys of paradise. The ugly scandals at Varazze. Revelations of priestly obscenities. Black worship'.³³ Had that sort of information been subjected to a minimum of critical judgement, it would have been clearly inconsistent. As it was, it provoked violent demonstrations, even savage ones in various towns and cities. In La Spezia, for example, the mob went through the streets shouting and hooting against priests, taking out their fury on the churches, clashing with police, so much so that a state of emergency was declared. At Sampierdarena, Alassio, Savona, Faenza, Florence and elsewhere, Salesian colleges were targeted by the fanatics. The disorders spread to towns where there were no Salesian schools such as Leghorn and Mantua.³⁴ The rumour circulated that the police had arrested and imprisoned a seminarian and an elderly lay-brother from Varazze. In parliament the anti-clericals called for the abolition of institutes run by religious.

On 2 August a decree from the Prefecture ordered the temporary closure of the Varazze college. On 3 August a similar decree was issued for the St. Catherine Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Although the Salesians were initially stunned by the avalanche of slander, they clearly began to react as best they could. Encouraged by their friends, past-pupils and Co-operators, they decided in their turn to denounce the defamation and demand justice. The population of Varazze supported them and let fly against the widow Bresson. On 3 August, helped by lawyers from the courts in Turin, the Salesians brought a lawsuit for libel and defamation. And the tide began to turn.

Judicial procedures, though, take time. The decree of the Ministry of Grace and Justice which authorised the re-opening of the College at Varazze only arrived on 26 November. Then in June 1908 the court in Savona recognised the total fabrication of the accusations made against the Salesians. Another two years passed and only on 2 August 1910 the same law court judged in the Salesians' favour in the libel suit for public defamation. The Salesians believed that the Freemasons had manipulated the two accusers, in particular a certain doctor in Varazze who, according to the widow Besson, had suggested that she make Charles Marlario write a memorial about all the indecencies at which he had assisted or of which he had heard from his companions.³⁵ But the supplementary investigation ran aground in 1912.

A storm-tossed Fr Rua

We now return to Turin to concentrate on Fr Rua. At the end of July 1907, when

³² *Memorandum – denunciation for calumny.*

³³ *Annali*, III, 690.

³⁴ *Annali*, III, 690.

³⁵ On the role of this doctor, cf. *I fatti e gli scandali di Varazze (luglio 1907)*, 34-36.

news of the scandal broke, he was ill.³⁶ His visitors informed him of what was happening. Despite his immense sorrow, he maintained a heroic calm and serenity. He prayed and got others to pray. He would sometimes ask for the hostile newspapers and would listen unmoved to an extract and limit himself to exclaiming, ‘Look what they have the courage to write!’ He would say that he was sure the castle of preposterous nonsense would soon crumble. He would recollect himself, ‘We must pray’.³⁷

Around him, however, the past-pupils were mobilising. On the evening of 2 August, the Don Bosco Association of Turin voted for a forceful protest against the evil campaign orchestrated to damage the Salesians and against the non-intervention of the forces of law and order. The following day when the president of the Association showed the text to Fr Rua, the Rector Major thanked him, but added, ‘Isn’t it too strong?’ He believed that the officials thought they were doing their duty and should not, then, be judged. The president was astonished and had to endure a lovely sermon on charity and the evangelical precept of loving one’s neighbour as oneself (James 2, 8). But the telegram had already been sent...³⁸

The same day, another past-pupil, John Possetto, hurried to Turin to speak to Fr Rua. He had not read in the papers of the Salesians offering any form of defence and was afraid that nothing was being done. He left a finely detailed report of his meeting with Fr Rua, the tone of which and some points from it, will now be recalled.³⁹ Possetto found Fr Rua seated near his writing desk which was covered in papers and letters. His leg was bandaged and stretched out on a chair beside him. He was pale, deathly pale, ashen, emaciated, with swollen reddened eyes that held back a tear in each corner, ready to fall. The liveliness had disappeared from his eyes and from his whole ascetical countenance. ‘Poor Fr Rua, we had never, never seen him so downcast and sorrowful.’ He said he felt incapable of standing up to the torrent of slander cascading down upon the Salesian Society. This, moreover, was his punishment, a debt he had to pay for having dared to accept the office which he now held. Whatever happens to us, for good or evil, is always the will of God. He sought refuge in prayer and tears, begging God to unload the weight of the trial on him alone. Only a miracle could get to the bottom of the calumnies which were undermining his Society. Possetto did his best to comfort him. The authorities needed shaking up. The whole Salesian institution was under attack. The calumnies wounded his honour. God helps those who help themselves. Of course, one had to trust in God’s assistance but one had to get moving at once with a vibrant protest to the Director, then ask for an inquiry in all the Salesian houses. Poor Fr Rua raised objection after objection; he spoke of being resigned and said he did not want to further provoke their enemies by such an inquiry. The meeting lasted a long time. At the end Fr Rua allowed himself to be persuaded, ‘No, no’, he exclaimed, ‘*portae inferi non praevalent*’ [the gates of hell shall not prevail].

Today we cannot imagine the magnitude of the scandal unleashed at Varazze and its repercussion as far as Sicily and the confines of the country, not only, but throughout the world. We read what Fr Rua wrote to the Cooperators in the *Bollettino Salesiano* of January 1908: ‘You, too, are aware of the disgraceful slanders that were heaped upon the name of the sons of Don Bosco last summer, slanders which found a lightning echo

³⁶ At this point I follow Ceria, *Vita*, 466-467.

³⁷ Testimonies of Giuseppe Balestra and Fr. Luigi Terreno in the apostolic process in *Positio* 1947,

throughout the world, causing great scandal to souls'.⁴⁰

At this point we insert a protest which, according to Angelo Amadei, Fr Rua telegraphed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs about the disorders at La Spezia. No draft of the document remains. Our Historian, who failed to consult the Italian government archives, freely reconstructed it as follows:

To His Excellency the Minister for Internal Affairs, Rome.

I have received news from La Spezia which causes me great concern for the personal safety of the Superiors and pupils of the Salesian Institute there, threatened by a savage mob. It is sad that a charitable institute, situated almost in the centre of a great town, an institute in which many sons of the people are sheltered, has to spend days in anxiety, owing to the actions of hoodlums, while the authorities fail to offer the necessary defence. I call upon Your Excellency's readiness to remedy this state of affairs and I call for the protection to which every citizen has a right.

Rev. Michael Rua.⁴¹

At all events, beginning from 5 August Fr Rua began to recover. The minutes of the meeting of the Superior Chapter bear this out, not, though, in the form of outraged protests as one might imagine. He adopted a somewhat subdued tone, similar to that of his meeting with Possetto. He understood only too well the inevitable weaknesses of his sons. The minutes reveal his true feelings in those tormented days. On 5 August Fr Rua reminded the members of the critical juncture in which they found themselves, perhaps the most critical ever encountered by the Congregation, even apart from the wickedness of men. He added that one could see in it a heavenly warning from Don Bosco and he would like to profit from this moment to better purify the houses, eliminating those persons who were unworthy and removing any offence against God which was the real purpose of Don Bosco's work. Fr Rua proposed, first of all, that they should proceed slowly and with great caution in accepting men for the novitiate, profession and ordination.⁴²

In order to know the personnel in the houses better, it would be advisable to set in motion a general inspection. According to the minutes, four decisions were taken:

1. Remove from contact with the young all those (be they priests, seminarians, lay-brothers, professed, aspirants or servants) who are seriously compromised in matters of morality or ill-treatment.
2. Change the Rectors who are incapable of fulfilling their office, particularly in the direction of the confreres and in the supervision of the young.
3. Reduce the number of Provincials so as to meet the need of a greater number of good rectors and confessors.

Summarium, 504 and 541.

³⁸ Ceria, *Vita*, 466-467.

³⁹ 'Per la storia e biografia di D. Rua', torino, aprile 1920 in FdR 2855D5-E1; taken up by Amadei, III, 328-332.

⁴⁰ *Bollettino Salesiano*, gennaio 1908, 3.

⁴¹ Cf. Amadei III, 327-328; the text is taken up by Ceria, *Vita*, 466.

⁴² *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 5 August 1907, in FdR 4247A11.

4. Within the year 1907-1908 organise more or less simultaneously a general visitation of all the houses of the Congregation for the purpose of having before us the true moral, disciplinary and economic state of the whole Congregation ... Fr Rua added that in the case of accusations of immorality, the local superiors must get to the bottom of the seriousness of the failing and refer it immediately, so that suitable measures may be taken, including laying aside clerical dress for a seminarian not yet in holy orders.⁴³

The Superior Chapter followed this up with three sessions devoted to the problem on 8 and 9 August. One set of minutes was produced for the three sessions:

In these three meetings the Chapter members were mainly concerned with naming those subjects whom in their judgement should be excluded from Salesian houses and in drawing to the attention of the Provincials those confreres who should be removed from contact with the young or who needed special surveillance. They also indicated those rectors of the Italian houses who should be replaced another year because incapable of carrying out their responsibility, particularly regarding the direction of the confreres and the supervision of the young. Some norms for the Provincials were traced out, things already mentioned in the letter of Fr Albera, dated 12 August, and reserved to them. The Provincials in Italy were invited to come to Turin not later than the 22nd to be brought more fully up to date by the Chapter. The others were urged to express in writing their ideas and plans for the good running of the houses in their respective provinces.⁴⁴

In fact, on 22 and 23 August each met one by one with the Superior Chapter.

On 29 September, the feast of St. Michael, a magnificent celebration was held in honour of the Venerable Don Bosco near his tomb in Valsalice. An autograph message from Pius X addressed to 'the beloved Fr Rua, Superior General' consoled him once and for all for the abuse he had undergone in the terrible weeks of July-August.⁴⁵ The Cooperators from Sicily had a three page address printed, purposely dated 29 September 1907: *To Fr Michael Rua – a tribute of esteem and veneration, and a protest against the insults hurled at the Salesian Congregation* (Turin, Tip. Salesiana, 1907).⁴⁶ Fr Rua also asked to insert in the October issue of the *Bollettino Salesiano* an 'important declaration' in which it was basically stated that the *Istituto Civico* in Varazze, directed by the Salesians, and the *Istituto Santa Caterina*, run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, were absolutely innocent of the defamatory accusations contained in a boy's notorious diary. The statement concluded: 'And since : 1. the charge is false that unbelievable wickedness, called the black masses, were committed there; 2. the accusation that one of the teachers took class indecently dressed is false; 3. the charge that images of the Sovereign and General Garibaldi were defaced is also false, those⁴⁷ two institutes were obliged to safeguard their own good name by initiating a lawsuit for defamation and libel against the accusers.' The wave of anti-Salesian slander ebbed even further.

⁴³ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 5 August 1907, in FdR 4247A12-B1.

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 8-9 August 1907, in FdR 4247A12-B1.

⁴⁵ The message of Pius X is found in FdR 3833A5. A description of the celebration is in Amadei III, 347-349.

⁴⁶ This address is found in FdR 2764A12-B2.

⁴⁷ *Bollettino Salesiano*, September 1907, 281.

The Condemnation of Modernism

There do not seem to have been any repercussions on the Salesian Society from the anti-modernist repression that culminated in 1907 with the decree *Lamentabili sine exitu* of 17 July in which 65 propositions of biblical and theological modernism were condemned, and with the encyclical *Pascendi* of 10 September which attempted to synthesise the orientations of doctrinal and reformist modernism. The leaders of the Congregation and its teachers were too loyal to the Holy See to allow themselves to be tempted by doctrinal modernism developed in France and Italy at the beginning of the century. Don Bosco's *Storia sacra* and *Storia ecclesiastica* were still in use. Nevertheless, on 1 November 1906, in a circular letter, Fr Rua asked the Provincials and Rectors to be vigilant and fight against any modernist tendencies.⁴⁸ In the course, though, of the decisive second semester 1907, the circulars of Fr Rua and the Prefect General, Fr. Rinaldi, writing in the name of his superior, abound with practical advice of every kind (on the confreres' holidays outside Salesian houses; on the unauthorised Christmas and summer holidays of the pupils; on individual house archives; on the regulations for the festive oratories; on the retreat etc.), but completely pass over the term and tendencies of modernism. From the documentation which is available it appears that there was only one directive emanating from the Superior Chapter on 16 September, following *Pascendi*. We read in the minutes, 'It is decided to print the Latin and Italian texts of the 65 condemned propositions on Modernism preceded by a letter from Fr Rua and send a copy to all the priests and theology students of the Congregation'.⁴⁹ The Salesian Society's submission to the Roman instructions had to be exemplary in everything. A few months later, the Scholastic Councillor, Fr Cerruti, echoed that directive asking the Provincials and Rectors to study and circulate Jean-Baptiste Lemius's *Catechismo sul modernismo*, a small work which was particularly severe on this new 'heresy'.⁵⁰

In the meantime, perhaps as a result of a vow made during the tempest at Varazze,⁵¹ Fr Rua began to plan a long pilgrimage to the land of Jesus. From the day he took charge of the Congregation, 1907 had been for him the most glorious and the most painful year of all. By obtaining the title of Venerable for the Founder, he had crowned an undertaking begun shortly after Don Bosco's death and pursued with tenacity for nineteen years. The great conspiracy of July-August had not succeeded in throwing mud on the institutions for which he was responsible, the Salesian Congregation and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians which he held very dear. The plot had been foiled. He therefore felt the duty of thanking divine Providence who had allowed him to overcome extremely arduous moments both for his body and for his soul. At the same time, the pilgrimage would have allowed him to participate personally in the necessary general inspection of the Salesian houses spread out on several

⁴⁸ L.C., 352-353.

⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 16 September 1907, in FdR 4247B8.

⁵⁰ Circular letter to the Provincials and rectors, 24 March 1908, in F. Cerruti, *Lettere circolari e programme di insegnamento*, a cura di José Manuel Pallezo, Roma, LAS, 2006, 303; J-B Lemius *Catechismo sul modernism second l'enciclica 'Pascendi Dominici Gregis' di Sua Santità Pio X*, Roma, Tipografia Vaticana, 1908.

⁵¹ According to Francesia, 188; but nothing Fr Rua himself said seems to confirm this.

continents.

32 – SEVEN MONTHS OF PAIN AND JOY

The extraordinary visitation to the Houses of the Congregation

The early months of 1908 were full of emotion for Fr Rua. Three events marked them out: organising an extraordinary visitation to the Salesian houses, a trip to the Orient and the diocesan information process for Dominic Savio.

The idea of an extraordinary visitation of all the houses of the Congregation came to Fr Rua amidst the furore around the events at Varazze, as a result of the Superior Chapter meeting on the 5 August 1907. The plan matured and took shape at the beginning of the following year.

Wisely, Fr Rua explained himself in a circular to Salesians dated 18 January 1908, completely dedicated to the extraordinary visitation. He needed to avoid alarming the Salesians. So he took refuge behind what is said in the Rule. The Constitutions asked him to visit all the houses in the Congregation once a year either in person or through a delegate. Up until that moment he had travelled a lot and all the provincials had correctly compensated. But nothing could take the place of an extraordinary visitor, free of ties of affection or interests concerning the work or the confreres, someone who inspired the complete trust of everyone. He would be in the best situation to take note of everything and make a report. The Rector Major wanted to explain carefully that this was not any kind of police inquiry. On the contrary, he said that he was persuaded that when visitors he had delegated came across some unfortunate situations – since "we are all sons of Adam" – they had also had the consolation of seeing the great good being accomplished in the houses, thanks to the zeal and activities of the confreres who were running them .¹

He needed to create the appropriate instrument for the visitation and then give it appropriate solemnity. During the Chapter sessions on 13, 14 and 15 January, it was decided that the visitations would begin the following March. The Chapter drew up instruction for the Visitors. The provinces were divided into ten groups (which became eleven) and the respective Visitors were appointed. Called to Turin (with the exception of the American Visitors), they took oaths before the Rector Major, while those unable to be there were represented by a delegate. The Superior Chapter noted Fr Rua's letter dated 18 January and the questionnaire that the Visitors had to have filled in.²

The missioning ceremony took place before the members of the Superior Chapter on 30 January, at ten in the morning, in Don Bosco's small chapel in the Oratory. Fr Rua presided in surplice and stole. Seven of the appointed Visitors were present; four confreres representing the four absent Visitors accompanied them. They sang the *Ave Maris Stella* and the *Veni Creator*. Fr Rua spoke about the circular of 18 January. The pro-secretary of the Chapter read out the letter of appointment and presented each Visitor. After fatherly advice from the Rector Major, the Visitors and Delegates took their oaths in Latin: "I call on God as my witness, that I will faithfully carry out the charge that has been given me and I will maintain secrecy". It all concluded around 11

¹ L.C., 378-381.

² FdR 4247C12-D1.

with the ritual prayer of the *Agimus*.³ Fr Rua thus opened one of the most important acts in his time as Rector Major. It was his hope that the Congregation would come out of the extraordinary visitation purified of the blemishes that had disfigured it, and which he was very concerned about. He was convinced that it would all contribute to "the greater glory of God and the good of souls", the essential aim of the Congregation which was entrusted to his responsibility.

With these sentiments he wrote a long circular dated 31 January 1908, entitled *Vigilance*. Certainly the torrent of notoriety poured out on the Congregation by the Press during those terrible weeks of July and August, came from the devil. Nothing, absolutely nothing justified it. But one could also draw a salutary warning from it: "The things that happened in the past year are also warnings the Lord is sending us to be more attentive to the dangers to be found in our delicate and not always easy mission as educators of the young". He then recommended that partiality, particular friendships, caresses, should be avoided, even when inspired by balanced affection. And he told the incredible story of two brothers sent to a Salesian college by their father expressly to tempt the teachers. Fortunately they came across the best kind of teachers, approached the sacraments and were transformed in the space of just a few weeks. When the time for holidays arrived, as they were leaving, the elder of the two went to find the Superior to thank him and, weeping, and confessed the unworthy father's plot, ("a man without religion or morality"), that would have dragged the Salesians before justice, and put the religious and priests under a process to obtain a nice sum of money by way of compensation. An educator can never be prudent enough.⁴

Fr Rua on a trip to the Orient

Fr Rua then arranged to leave for a long trip to the Orient. On the 20 January 1908 he was given his passport for Europe, Turkey and Egypt.⁵ He planned to go across Central Europe as far as Asia Minor and on to Palestine and return through Egypt and Southern Italy. The Economist General, Clement Bretto (1855-1919), Extraordinary Visitor for the Orient, went with him and therefore carried out his own particular mission. In the Rector Major's thinking the trip, which would take from 3 February until 20 May, had two main objectives: above all a greater knowledge of the Salesian situation, and then direct contact with the holy places. It should be, as he made it known in his conclusive circular letter, the chance for a careful visitation of the Salesian houses and a pious pilgrimage to the Orient.⁶

Let's follow him along his more directly Salesian itinerary.⁷ He left Turin on 3rd

³ The names and titles of the Visitors and Delegates, as also the designation of the precise territories to be visited, appeared in the detailed minutes of the Superior Chapter session on the 30 January 1908, FdR 4247D2-3.

⁴ L.C., 382-395.

⁵ His passport is preserved in FdR 2752E4-6.

⁶ Edifying letter no. 11, 24 June 1908, in L.C., 522-533.

⁷ The essential source of our information on the voyage in 1908 is the handwritten report of 164 pages sent by Fr Bretto to Fr Rinaldi, found in FdR 3013E12-3016D9 (here quoted as: *Relazione*). It was strongly adapted, lengthened and arbitrarily divided into 12 parts in the *Bollettino Salesiano*; its adaptation has it appear as letters dated and sent from Costantinopole, Smyrna, Nazareth respectively (two "letters"), Bethlehem (three "letters"), Port-Said, Alexandria in Egypt, Catania, Bari and Parma (cf. *Bollettino Salesiano*, 1908, 134-140, 164-170, 197-206). Cf. also I. Grego, *Sulle orme di Cristo. Il Beato*

February and, going by way of Venice, stopped for more or less lengthy stays, all worthy of interest, in the various Salesian houses spread across the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially in Slovenia (Ljubana and Radna). With his travelling companion he crossed Serbia and Bulgaria by rail on the Orient Express and reached Constantinople on Sunday 16 February. During the journey, Fr Rua suffered considerably in the closely-confined compartment, because he could not stretch his swollen legs.

Constantinople, Smyrna, Nazareth

They were now in the Ottoman Empire and Fr Bretto found himself in the Orient Province area which was his responsibility as Visitor. Each stop along the way was extended by common factors in each case: speeches and applause, greetings to religious authorities as well as Italian consular authorities, visits to benefactors and the houses of various Religious Orders and Congregations, but especially by the attention they paid to the new Salesian centres in the region. So in Constantinople, where they stayed from 16 to 24 February, Fr Rua as guest of the Salesian house busied himself with visiting the Apostolic Delegate, the Italian Ambassador and seven Religious Institutes: Dominicans, Vincentians, Christian Brothers, Jesuits, Franciscan Conventuals, Capuchins, the Daughters of Charity. Along the way they were also careful to make contact with local Churches.

We are focusing here on Salesian houses and the most important memories of Fr Rua's; the reader will forgive us if we ignore details about the many intermediate stopovers. On the evening of 24 February, the two travellers left Constantinople by boat for Smyrna, where as we know the Salesians were running two works: a business school and a school for ordinary people with an attached Oratory. They stayed there from 25 February until 6 March, and allowed themselves a visit to Ephesus, where Fr Rua wanted to venerate the memory of the Ecumenical Council of 431. He wrote: "Amongst the ruins of the temple where Nestorius was condemned and Mary was solemnly proclaimed as the Mother of God, my eyes filled with tears, and I prayed with all the fervour I could muster, that our heavenly Mother continue to protect us with her mantle and grant all Salesians the grace to zealously promote devotion to her and spread her glories".⁸

On 3 March, Shrove Tuesday, the Oratory boys at Smyrna organised a very enjoyable afternoon for the visitors with a fun parade and a comedy full of laughs. On 6 March, via Beirut and Damascus, they left Smyrna for Tiberias, first by steamer, then by train and finally in horse and carriage. They crossed the lake in a fishing boat. Fr Rua would later tell the confreres: "I was lucky enough to plough through the waves of the Lake of Gennasaret on a boat. The Lord Jesus had walked it with dry feet, calmed the tempest with his all-powerful word, and crossed it many a time in Peter's boat. I felt like I was part of the miraculous draught of fish. When I set foot on land, I also imagined I was looking at a shore crowded with people avidly listening to the Divine Master's words as he spoke from the boat. And very much moved by this, I turned my thoughts to all my dear sons and prayed ardently that they may all remain firmly attached to the

Michele Rua, Primo Successore di Don Bosco, pellegrino in Terra Santa, Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 1973, 33-63, seriously documented, but in parts critically dependent on the *Bollettino Salesiano*.

⁸ Circular Letter, 24 June 1908, in L.C., 527.

barque of Peter, since only with him can we safely arrive at the port of salvation.⁹

So on Saturday 14 March Fr Rua and Fr Bretto arrived in Nazareth, where they remained for a week. Initially, the Jesus the Adolescent Orphanage in Nazareth (1899) had been set up in an inconvenient location on the heights overlooking the city. The Salesians had a large property there. The Rector, Athanasius Prun, had immediately set about building a large house, which was fully ready for occupation in October 1905. The beautiful Basilica of Jesus the Adolescent was to be built next to it. The foundation stone was only recently blessed, on 20 September 1907.

Fr Rua did not lose a minute in Nazareth, as we learn from Fr Bretto's report. The first day he dedicated to a thorough visit of the recently built orphanage, examined the works on the church which were going ahead rapidly, and took a look also at the old site. The students had prepared a reception, and he thanked them in Italian. Nobody understood a word. So for the Good Night he had recourse to a translator. The other days were spent especially in visiting the clergy and religious. Fr Rua wanted to go to the *Caimakam* (Governor) of the city who, though he belonged to the Orthodox Faith, asked Fr Rua to bless his house and family. Then the Governor quickly reciprocated the visit by going to the orphanage along with the main local authorities and the military commander from Jaffa who was visiting Nazareth. The boys felt very honoured and performed their best of their musical repertoire. They chatted until sunset, at which point the Muslims then withdrew for a moment under the arcades for their ritual prayers. The military commander could not disguise his admiration for Fr Rua: "He really is a Saint!", he observed.¹⁰ Fr Rua's emotions were of a religious kind. He confessed: "I cannot stop talking about how in those days spent at our orphanage in Nazareth, every time I found myself in the midst of those dear children who took my hand with such affection, kissed it, raised it to their foreheads, I seemed to be looking at Jesus when he was the same age. I have often thanked him in my heart for having called us to some good for his fellow citizens."¹¹

Nazareth was the first stage of the pilgrimage through the Holy Land. The Rector Major did not want to overlook anything, especially the city. He went several times to the Shrine of the Annunciation and celebrated Mass there. He venerated the ruins of a basilica built in the past on what was believed to be the home belonging to the Holy Family. Then he visited the ruins where "tradition" suggests St Joseph's workshop was located, "Our Lady's Fountain" where Mary drew water for the house, the ruins of an old synagogue, the chapel of the *Trembling*, at the place where Mary is supposed to have run when she heard that they were about to throw Jesus off the brow of the hill, and also the *Mensa Christi*, a huge block of stone where once again Tradition has it that Jesus dined with the apostles after the Resurrection.

Not far from Nazareth we find Mount Tabor, where one tradition says that the Transfiguration of the Lord took place. On the afternoon of 16 March Fr Rua and Fr Bretto, along with the Rector, Fr Rosin, and the Provincial, Peter Cardano, went to the foot of the mountain. From there they led him to the house looked after by the Franciscans where they spent the night. They were received with much attention. On the following morning, after celebrating Mass, the pilgrims climbed to the peak of the

⁹ L.C., 528.

¹⁰ *Report*, 79.

¹¹ L.C., 528-529.

mountain. A Franciscan was their guide. There were pack-animals available but Fr Rua wanted to do the climb on foot. When the ascent became very steep, he merely accepted sitting precariously astride a donkey.¹² The group arrived at the top, the presumed site of the Transfiguration, and saw the ruins of the ancient basilica destroyed during events from past centuries. An altar was placed in their midst in a flat area where it was said that during the great pilgrimages Mass was often celebrated. The pilgrims could not get enough of the magnificent panorama extending beneath their eyes. They were amazed: the large and smaller Mount Hermon, the mountains of Gilboa, the plain of Esdrelon behind which they could glimpse the mountains of Samaria. Admiring this scene reminded them of some of the biblical accounts like the resurrection of the widow of Naim's son and the Witch of Endor, or historical events like the Crusades, Saladin and Napoleon. Ordinarily Fr Rua would not be so enthusiastic. But Fr Bretto assures us that this time he exclaimed: "To come to Nazareth and not climb Tabor would be a sin".¹³

At Nazareth, Fr Rua prepared them all for the Feast of St Joseph, which would be celebrated on 19 March. He had Fr Prun tell them how ten years before, when the orphanage began, St Joseph gave them a great gift. On 3 March that year they were about to send the students away for lack of funds. The Rector had sent the youngsters to pray to St Joseph. A registered letter arrived a few days later, dated 3 March, offering ten thousand francs to pay the debts and five thousand to keep the work going.¹⁴ St Joseph's Feast day was celebrated very intensely and intimately.

Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Cremisan, Beitgemal, Haifa

The following day, 20 May, the pilgrims left directly for Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It was a picturesque but rough journey, initially begun on horseback. Because of the lack of experience of the riders, it was impossible to avoid some falls. Fr Rosin who went with them, said: "Fr Rua, encouraged to mount his horse, since there was no other means of transport, only gave up after a long while, and only to please us". Ill luck would have it that the horse stumbled and threw its poor rider, much to our alarm. He hit his head on the ground and bruised his forehead. He got up immediately, laughing, and saying that he was unhurt, but he didn't want to climb back in the saddle again".¹⁵

Slowly they got as far as Naplusa, stayed over night there in the parish belonging to the Latin Patriarchate, and the following day, 22 March, they hired a carriage with which they jolted along the badly maintained road to finally arrive in Jerusalem. They were being awaited at the Italian School, where they spent just one night.

On 23 March the Salesian Orphanage at Bethlehem had a sensational welcoming party ready. An archway of triumph had been erected across the road leading to the institute. A large crowd of locals and pupils welcomed Don Bosco's successor. The church filled up in the blink of an eyelid. Fr Rua thanked the crowd and gave them the blessing with the Monstrance. Bethlehem was where he stayed for the next four weeks as he went around the region.

So as not to get lost in little details which would be boring for anyone not familiar

¹² A second report by Fr Rosin, taken up in Amadei III, 383-384.

¹³ *Report*, 82.

¹⁴ *Report*, 84.

¹⁵ Amadei III, 385-386.

with the places, we cite only some of the details which concerned Fr Rua. "On 24 March", he wrote in a letter to Salesians on 24 June, "thanks to the kindness of the Franciscan Fathers, I had the good fortune to celebrate Mass in Bethlehem at the Grotto of the Nativity, and I can assure you that praying in that place not only inflames the heart with love for the God who lowered himself to becoming man for our salvation, but one feels a strong impulse to imitate him in humility and poverty".¹⁶

Let us continue with a "miracle" that has become part of the "golden legends" of our hero, and devotedly handed down to us by the Salesian Sisters. On 28 March Fr Rua celebrated Mass in Jerusalem in the Salesian Sisters' chapel. Amadei tells the story as witnessed by Sr Felicina Vaccarone - and we will let her take up responsibility for it.

Knowing that he deigned to visit our institute, all the girls from the school, and the little children from the kindergarten were gathered along the long corridor near the entrance. As soon as he was amongst us, the girls read out a beautiful address of welcome. The good Father encouraged them and congratulated them for their beautiful pronunciation of Italian, and gave them some wonderful advice, urging them to be good. Then he turned to the Rev. Fr Bretto and said: "Now we need something to give to these good girls". Fr Bretto smiled, then put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small paper bag with about thirty mints in it, and gave it to Fr Rua. The venerable Father, seeing that there was so little for so many, and with great humility and confidence in God, said: "Well then, let's start to distribute them and Providence....will come to our aid". What can we say? With the girls and the children from the kindergarten there were around 200 of them and there were enough mints for everyone, giving them 5 or 6 each. Once he had finished with the school children, the good Father said: "I would also like to give some to the Sisters..."; and so he did: he gave us all some and there were twelve of us, and there were enough. I remember very well that the last one, Sr Agatha Tomaselli, received her mints and the paper bag. And thus came to an end the miraculous distribution, which everyone saw. The Sisters and the girls who were there are the witnesses. Then the unforgettable Fr Bretto turned to us Sisters and said: "It's a real miracle. There's nothing to laugh about!".¹⁷

Fr Rua was very careful not to overlook the main reason for his pilgrimage to the Holy Land: "Finally, on 30 March, trembling with emotion, I celebrated Mass at the Holy Sepulchre. It was then that I thanked the Lord for allowing our Pious Society to triumph over the calumnies of our enemies and for having gained great advantage for our works from them. In that august temple, I renewed the consecration of our Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and prayed at length that all our members persevere in their vocation and that not even one be lost".¹⁸

Fr Rua spent the last days of March and the first days of April visiting the Salesian Houses of Cremisan and Beitgemal with their ample paddocks available for cultivation. As was his habit when inspecting the works in Italy, he left a series of numbered items to be attended to, witnessing to his main concerns, both spiritual and material.¹⁹

¹⁶ L.C., 529.

¹⁷ Amadei III, 389-390. I. Grego (*Sulle orme di Cristo*, 4) explains that Srs Maria Cattani and Emilia Ayub, and also past pupil Latife Shaer – this last one from Fr Laconi – spoke personally of the event to him.

¹⁸ L.C., 529.

¹⁹ We read these in Amadei III, 390-393. Their authenticity seem guaranteed by the fact that they are written in the usual numbered style of Fr Rua's.

At Cremisan he was able to see the inconveniences of being obliged to use Italian in the daily life of the houses in Palestine which, we remind ourselves, he himself had asked for. So, at the request of the Visitor, Fr Bretto, he wrote up a list of things to be attended to:

1. Morning prayers in Arabic.
2. Conference for the youngsters in Arabic at the exercise for a happy death.
3. Priests to gain experience in preaching every second Sunday (in Arabic).
4. Set up the novitiate there for the Brothers and choose a good novice master.
5. Send the students of Latin who had a vocation to Cremisan, from all the houses of the Middle East.
6. Look after the wine and grappa and increase production.
7. Plant trees over much of the property.
8. Promote the growing of grain, fruit and vegetables.
- 9° Aim to rely on their own products with comestibles and combustibles, except for lighting and, thanks to the wine, all other expenses .
10. The province should see to all the proper registers for the property, taking special care of accounting and administration.

In fact the Cremisan wine would soon be famous throughout Palestine and later in Israel.

Frs Rua and Bretto stayed at Beitgemal from 1 to 5 April. The spiritual and material list of items (which according to Amadei were given to the provincial, Fr Cardano a month later at Alexandria) were very detailed: twenty one concerned material things and, I suppose, were put together by Fr Bretto; eleven were of a spiritual and administrative nature, meant for the Rector and the Prefect. These reflect the concerns of Fr Rua about the government of Salesian houses and the idea he had of the Salesian Rector's duties.

For Beitgemal, for the Rector and the Prefect.

1. The Rector is reminded that his role is more spiritual than temporal, therefore let him be careful not be let himself be taken up by material matters to the detriment of the spiritual.
2. See to two sermons every Sunday, one in the morning, the other in the evening.

3. Give the confreres two conference each month and receive their monthly friendly talk.

Provide a monthly conference also for the Sisters at the exercise for a happy death.

5. See if and what might be the repairs needed for the Sisters' dwelling.

6. Provide theology classes for NN. at least three times a week.

7. Encourage the brothers and the families with your good words and fatherly familiarity, letting them know what they have to do and giving them a chance to explain their activities.

8. The Prefect should look after all the accounting and registers, but in current circumstances, since he often has to be out, he might share this important role with the Rector.

9. Just the same he should not spend all his time with material matters; he should be present for the community practices of piety, and set aside at least some time for some sacred studies.

10. In material management let him get as much help as he can for a trustworthy and capable brother.

11. See that the repressive system is not adopted, and speak with whoever takes that approach.

Again we see hints of Fr Rua the Visitor to the Piedmontese houses during 1872-1876

I cite a significant text which the *Bollettino Salesiano* left out, perhaps at Fr Rua's request. On 11 April, the decree of Don Bosco's Venerability was solemnly celebrated at Jaffa, the house entrusted to the Salesians by the National Association for aid to Italian missionaries. The solemn mass, which Fr Rua presided at, was immediately followed by a reception. The Vice Consul Allonso wanted to deliver a speech in Arabic. The Inspector of the Turkish schools, much impressed, praised the Salesian work and at the end Fr Rua thanked those who were there so simply that on leaving, according to Bretto who wrote up the event, his attitude seemed "so salutary that the people left saying ' We have witnessed a Saint and we have heard things we never expected to hear' ".²⁰

Holy Week arrived (12-19 April). Fr Rua followed all the functions at Bethlehem or Jerusalem. He himself wanted to preside at the "washing of the feet" of thirteen boys from the Bethlehem orphanage. On Good Friday he took part in Jerusalem in the *Via Crucis* organised by the Franciscans along the Via Dolorosa. Obligated to remain on his feet for long hours, amongst the inevitable crowds, his swollen legs were very painful. We learn this from the detailed account by Fr Bretto.

²⁰ *Report*, 119, in FdR 3015E12.

It made a grand spectacle: thousands and thousands of Christian pilgrims, not all Catholics, devoutly followed the Franciscan Father who gave a brief moving comment at each Station, then recited the usual prayer.

Unfortunately, however, the function was usually disturbed by the Turkish soldiers who passed through the crowd of devout Christians several times, to emphasise on their control over these places. This year in fact we were still gathered on the road in front of the Turkish courtyard at the first Station when a parade of soldiers with flags and Turkish music forced us to flatten ourselves against the walls. On and on they came, carrying their loaded muskets, on horseback with rifles held half at the ready, others with lances resting on their feet. There were many kinds of uniform and their skin was brown to dark black. Behind them came the head of their religion, resident in Jerusalem, on horseback.

Once that parade had passed, the procession began, but a few Stations on, moving from one to another with difficulty because of the great crowd, while Father was speaking we heard the trumpets announcing a large patrol of soldiers coming by. The priest asked everyone to make room without giving any sign of impatience; they passed by and then we started back on our way along the *Via Dolorosa*.

Poor Fr Rua was surrounded by us as we defended him from the pushing and shoving from everywhere; but the poor man must have been very tired, because by evening we saw that he could barely stay on his feet. At one point along the *Via Crucis*, where the streets were narrow and the procession had to double back on itself, we heard an unusual rumpus and people shouting, which made us afraid we had run into some sort of riot, but the energetic approach of some of the Franciscan Friars and some guards restored calm and we went on to Calvary, where there were some Stations, all in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

Entry at this point became still more difficult. The huge crowd all funnelled in at this point and we had to struggle to keep Fr Rua close enough to the priest who was preaching, to be able to hear him well. We were keen both for him and ourselves, so we pushed ourselves up onto the steps which went up steeply to the place of Calvary. Then with the same effort and being very careful, we came back down in a hurry to get to the place of the last Station at the Holy Sepulchre.²¹

The ceremony that Good Friday was an authentic *Via Crucis* for Fr Rua. It certainly lifted his spirits, devout as he was. On Easter Sunday 19 April, celebrated at Bethlehem, the pilgrimage of the holy places, properly so-called, concluded. The following day the trip back to Italy began, by sea. We will summarise this, since the report, especially in its larger version offered by the *Bollettino* (concerned with satisfying and mentioning all the works and people met), is quite abundant.

On 20 April, Frs Rua and Bretto embarked at Haifa for Alexandria in Egypt, where the Salesians ran a flourishing Italian school. Between 21 and 30 April they made a minute visitation of the work. Meanwhile, on 24 April, the Prefect General Fr Rinaldi sent the Provincials and Rectors a long circular letter from Turin on the voyage of the Rector Major to the Middle East, Asia Minor and the Holy Land.²² This way the entire

²¹ *Report*, 124-126, in FdR3016A5-7.

²² This circular, the result of the letters written between Fr Bretto and Fr Rinaldi during the trip, is kept in FdR 4074E7-12.

Congregation was able to accompany their Rector Major.

On 30 April the steamer *Orione* left Alexandria bound for Messina in Sicily. They disembarked on 4 May, after a rough crossing because of a storm. Fr Rua visited the Salesian houses on the island. On 5 May he was at Syracuse, then embarked from here for Malta and La Valletta, where he opened a new Salesian Institute (Sliema), an occasion for various festivities. On 8 May we find him in Sicily and on Tuesday 12 back on the continent in Calabria. He then went on to Bari, Foggia, Macerata (17 May), then to Loreto, Bologna (19 May), and finally to Alessandria (20 May). That day he visited the Salesian Sisters in the city, who sadly saw how extremely tired he was: "His lips were dry, he looked like a man crucified". That evening he re-entered the Oratory in Turin where, after the functions for the month of Mary, he gave the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament and intoned the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving to the Lord for having brought his journey to an end, the longest journey in his whole life. On 24 May, in a circular to the Provincials and Rectors, the Prefect general, Fr Rinaldi, could say that the Rector Major, "returned from his long voyage to visit our houses in the Middle East", thanked "the dear confreres warmly for the prayers which accompanied him over these months" and hoped that they would "spend the coming month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in a holy way".²³

Impressions of the journey

Fr Rua dedicated his circular letter on 24 June to his voyage to the Middle East. He expressed contentment, indeed that he was super content (if I may take the risk of using this modern adjective). Not only had the pilgrimage to the Holy Places satisfied him, as we have just seen, but it had given him a way of seeing everywhere that the calumnies aimed at destroying the Congregation in the preceding months had left no trace. Everywhere he found praise, no shadow of reserve anywhere. Before going on to the impressions he had of the holy places, he insisted at length on his satisfaction at the work of his sons in those distant parts.

First of all this voyage allows me to write of the result of the visit which I made to many of our houses during my journey. In each of them I tried to stay as long as possible in order to gain an accurate idea of the works which our confreres are running, the difficulties they encounter in their not always easy apostolate, and the results they gain from their efforts. From what I have now seen with my own eyes, heard with my ears and, might I say, touched with my own hands, I draw great comfort from being able to conclude that the Lord continues to bless our Pious Society, and that he does not cease to us it as an instrument for the good of many souls.

Praise was abundant everywhere: in Austria-Hungary, in Asia Minor, in the Holy Land, in Egypt, Malta, Sicily, and throughout the Italian Peninsula. "The calumnies and persecutions of nasty individuals against their former superiors and teachers, far from alienating our past pupils from us, indicate a consoling re-awakening of affection and recognition and have urged them to band together and show themselves ever more faithful to the teaching they have received". We note that the Salesian Past Pupils Association, came into being precisely in 1908.

But he hastened to add that all the praise should be addressed to Don Bosco:

²³ FdR 4075A1-3.

I confess that for my part I would have loved it if they had left out some of the regard for my poor self, and spoke only of what is for the greater glory of God and the good of souls. But nobody is more convinced than I am that whatever is done in honour of Fr Rua, is but a reflection of the affection and veneration they have for Don Bosco; so I did not believe that I should prevent such indications. Indeed, regarding especially this last voyage of mine it seems to me that I have a duty to approve of them and allow these demonstrations of esteem to be brought to the knowledge of our Cooperators [an allusion to the articles to follow in the *Bollettino*], so they can know even better how much together with Don Bosco his principal work, even in far away regions, is appreciated; that is, our Pious Society. ...I had evident proof, in these recent journeys, of the esteem in which the Salesian Congregation is held by ecclesiastical and civil authorities, Religious Orders, by the most respected citizens. ... In the person of the Rector Major in every place everyone wanted to honour our Pious Society; with ovations, compliments, academies they put on for me, besides veneration for Don Bosco they were expressing the gratitude they felt for all Salesians. And this is why that at that moment my own humble person disappeared, and our Congregation was exulted and our Venerable Founder acclaimed.²⁴

A century later, maybe these pious and affectionate contortions are not convincing for us. In fact, wherever he went it was Don Bosco's saintly successor they wanted to see and hear. This was just so evident. and the readers of the *Bollettino* in 1908 knew it, despite the line it took when recounting the voyage.

The process of Beatification and Canonisation of Dominic Savio

On 4 April 1908, while the pilgrimage in Palestine was still under way, the information process in Turin for the Beatification and Canonisation of Dominic Savio opened. Fr Rua was quoted as one of the privileged witnesses,²⁵ along with five others: Canons John Baptist Anfossi and Giacinto Ballesio, Salesians Cagliero and Cerruti, and the layman Charles Savio, a farmer from Mondonio. Four other official witnesses were then added: Salesian Fr Francesca, and parish priests Frs Piano, Pastrone and Vaschetti.

Amongst the group of witnesses, Fr Rua was, without doubt, the most informed. He intervened during six sessions, between 23 June and 20 July 1908. We find his responses in the *Summarium* with 243 pages as part of the collection entitled *Positio super introductione causae beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Dominici Savio*.²⁶ Fr Rua was not sparing in his praise for his former companion at the Oratory. he had been close to him from the time he came to the Oratory in Valdocco, in October 1854, until he finally left, on the vigil of his death in March 1857. After fifty years, the virtues of his fellow disciple, which he was questioned about, continued to arouse fervent admiration in him. The boy's faith was one of extreme "simplicity". "The Servant of God was guided in every action by the hope of eternal reward". "I am persuaded that the Servant of God never committed a mortal sin nor, I would say, any deliberate venial sin". "He often went into ecstasy before the Blessed Sacrament or Our Lady's altar. His zeal for the salvation of souls bordered on the heroic. He was heroic in his practice of justice, prudence, fortitude, temperance, chastity, humility and obedience. He truly was a Saint. Besides, after his death, his companions immediately began to pray to him

²⁴ L.C., 522-527.

²⁵ P. Stella, *La canonizzazione*, 152.

²⁶ Asten. et Taurinen. *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Dominici Savio adolescentis laici alumni Oratorii Salesiani. Summarium super dubio*, Rome, Istituto Pio IX, 1913.

asking for his intercession, and eminent ecclesiastics looked forward to his canonisation". Fr Rua also cited two healings granted thanks to him: "I have heard about many graces obtained through the intercession of the Servant of God; some of these I myself have written down as dictated by those so graced, and they can be found in the appendix to the Life written by the Ven. Fr John Bosco, and amongst these graces obtained through the intercession of the Servant of God, some seem to be miraculous".²⁷

Those long sessions before the diocesan tribunal, which had the task of preparing the Cause for Beatification of Dominic Savio were, along with his announcement of the extraordinary visitation and the trip to the Orient, the third event in 1908 that made those seven painful but consoling months memorable for Fr Rua. The extraordinary visitation to the Salesian houses, announced in January, produced reassuring results. The long journey through Central Europe, Asia Minor, Palestine, Egypt and Southern Italy had comforted his heart. Now the process for Dominic Savio's Cause allowed him to relive some of the privileged moments of his youth.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 179.

33 – THE CONSECRATION OF THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA LIBERATRICE

The Church of Santa Maria Liberatrice in Rome

Like Don Bosco twenty one years earlier Fr Rua too, before dying, went to Rome for the last time for the consecration of a church entrusted to the Salesians. In May 1887, Don Bosco had taken part in the opening of *Sacro Cuore* (the Church of the Sacred Heart), whose construction had caused him much suffering. In November 1908, Fr Rua took part in the consecration of the Church of *Santa Maria Liberatrice*, in a problematic suburb of the city.¹

From October 1904, Pius X had shown evident signs of appreciation for the Salesians, firstly with a shower of partial or plenary indulgences granted to the Cooperators,² then (January 1905) handing them, *gratis*, the Church of *San John della Pigna*, destined to become the operational centre for the Salesian General Missions Office.³ The same year, almost by way of 'compensation', the Pope entrusted the Congregation with completing the construction of another church in Rome. In the new outlying suburb of Testaccio, in an area under the control of the city's underworld ("Roman China" they used call it), the Salesians had opened a school and a festive Oratory which began to show results,⁴ but the population felt neglected in a religious sense: no place of worship for adults, no visible presence of the Church. There was a need to create a parish. Leo XIII had set up a fund to begin construction. "They began to lay the foundations around twenty years ago", Fr Rua explained to the Cooperators in a letter in January 1906. But the project had been left high and dry. Pius X had a radical solution. He took the construction away from the Vicariate of Rome and entrusted it to the Salesians. In 1905, the Cardinal Vicar received orders to take up matters with Fr Rua. The work began immediately "following the plans of architect Mario Ceradini", wrote Fr Rua. He was sure that the Cooperators would help with the task.⁵ The parish would be dedicated to *Maria Liberatrice* (Mary the Liberator). This was to revive the name of an ancient religious building long disappeared which had been located in the Roman Forum.

The work did not take long. Towards the end of 1907, the bricklayers had already got as far as the eaves. This offered an occasion then to serve as stimulus for the generosity of the Cooperators: in September 1907 festivities began for Pius X's jubilee of priestly ordination. Fr Rua asked for the work to be sped up so he could offer the church as a gift to the Pope for his fiftieth anniversary of ordination. "But to complete the church as proposed, it is absolutely essential for everyone to come to my aid immediately", he wrote to the Cooperators in January 1908.⁶

¹ Here I am faithfully following Ceria, Vita, 494-509.

² Cf. *Summary of Indulgences, Privileges and Indults granted to the Cooperators of the Salesian Society approved by the Holy Father, Pius X, at an audience on the 13 July 1904*, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1905. 8-10.

³ Explanations in the circular by Fr Rua dated the 19 February 1905, in L.C., 324-325.

⁴ Circular of 31 January 1909, in L.C., 401.

⁵ *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1906, 13.

⁶ *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1908, 6.

Personal support for the Pope would have been very special to him. On 25 September 1907, he wrote to Pius X: "The Pious Salesian Society and the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, wanting to be part of the solemn manifestations of filial devotion that the Catholic world is preparing to celebrate for Your long-awaited priestly Jubilee, would like to offer Your Holiness the Church of *Santa Maria Liberatrice*, completely finished and open for worship. It is being built at Testaccio in Rome, and will be ready before the close of the jubilee year. There is still much to be done, it is true, to fulfil this ardent desire, but I am certain that it will be brought to a happy conclusion if Your Holiness deigns to impart your Apostolic Blessing on all the Salesian Cooperators who are hastening to complete this most important church". The Pope willingly imparted his blessing on all the Cooperators, along with heartfelt thanks for their contribution.⁷

Fr Rua's wish had been granted. The work was hurried up. In May 1908, the walls of the church and the presbytery were completed. The central Committee for the jubilee festivities had established 16 November, the day of Joseph Sarto's twenty fourth anniversary of episcopal ordination as the high point for the Roman celebrations. So it was the hoped-for date for having everything ready. It was decided that the consecration ceremony for the church of *Santa Maria Liberatrice* would be 15 November. Fr Rua intended to go down to Rome some days earlier.

The youngsters at the Oratory, encouraged by their Superiors, were praying and offering communions for their father's safe journey and return. Everyone knew in fact how precarious Fr Rua's health had become. Between July and September, he had wanted to take an active part in a series of retreats for the Salesians: Valsalice, Sampierdarena, Nizza Monferrato, again at Valsalice, Foglizzo and a third time at Valsalice, then Ivrea, Lanzo and finally at Lombriasco. By now his legs, covered in sores, were giving him tremendous pain.

In September it would not have taken much to cancel the trip to Rome, following an incident that occurred during the Retreat at Lanzo. On that occasion Fr Rua wanted to see the Shrine of St Ignatius again, on the heights of nearby Mount Bastia, where Don Bosco had taken him many times during his youth. The elderly love this kind of return to the past. He wanted to go up on foot. Up there he prayed, spoke to the clerics of the Consolata Missionaries who were on holidays in the house, recalling memories of the past. Then he began the descent. A good priest from the place was with him, and took him by the arm, but along the short-cut suddenly lost his balance and his hob-nailed boots struck Fr Rua's tibia. He was on the point of losing consciousness, but he came to and, hiding the atrocious pain, started out down again. During the evening, at the college, taking off his shoes, he saw that he had lost a quantity of blood. He looked after himself for a month until Fr Rinaldi convinced him to go to a doctor to have it checked. The doctor ordered immediate rest, otherwise no trip to Rome. On 1 October Fr Rua presided at a meeting of the Superior Chapter in his room.⁸ He received visitors in the office, seated on the divan, his leg up. All the Oratory knew about his illness. On 9 November, on the vigil of his departure, he was present for the distribution of prizes to the working boys, and was greeted with sustained clapping, as the local chronicle says.⁹

⁷ Note sent to the *Circolo* Don Bosco, addressed to "Our beloved Fr Rua, Superior General", 24 September 1907, in FdR 3833A5.

⁸ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 1 October 1908, in FdR 4248A8.

⁹ Amadei III, 451.

On the way to Rome

Finally, on 10 November, Fr Rua was able to leave for Rome, in brief stages, accompanied by Fr Francesia. They stopped at Sampierdarena, then Livorno, and at Colle Salvetti. They arrived in Rome on Saturday 14. During the various stopovers, Fr Francesia would have preferred that he be left in peace, but without success. Fr Rua never spared himself. The audiences came one after the other. "Fr Rua is worn out" his companion wrote from Livorno, the day after their departure, "and he cannot disguise the fact; but thanks be to God he is calmly handling the fatigue from these visits and conferences".¹⁰ In fact wherever he went, Fr Rua wanted to speak with the confreres. And never just briefly.

It is said that at Livorno he predicted the future of two children. They had gone to visit the family of Cooperator Richard De Ghantuz Cubbe who presented their two children to him, one called John, five years old, and the other Raphael, four. The older boy was so interested in religious ceremonies that his parents had made him a small altar at which he used to play priest. His mother had made him vestments to fit him. The father and mother saw clear signs of a vocation to the priesthood in him. They told Fr Rua this, who said, pointing at John: "This one here, no", and then to Raphael: "This one, yes!" The father kept a notebook of little family events, and noted for 11 November 1908: "Fr Rua does not know how lively Raphael is". Over time John's liturgical interests disappeared, while Raphael in 1921 entered the Jesuit novitiate and was ordained priest on 26 July 1934.¹¹ Fr Rua had been right.

At Colle Salvetti, the students organised a small academy in his honour, and Fr Rua gave them the Good Night.

The consecration of the Church

In Rome, the two travellers stayed at the Salesian Mission Office at *San John della Pigna*. The following morning, Fr Francesia surprised Fr Rua serving the Mass of the Procurator in the nearby church. That day, 15 November, was a Sunday. The Rector Major hurried off to visit the church of *Santa Maria Liberatrice*. The workers had got down to business but had not been able to finish. It was impossible, partly because part the main altar, from Milan, had not yet arrived. Nobody even knew where it was. The consecration was then set for later on 29 November, the first Sunday of Advent.

Let's not think that Fr Rua took advantage of the delay to rest. On 16 he took part in the Jubilee ceremonies in St Peter's. The procurator had reserved a good place for him with the canons, next to the papal altar. The ceremony lasted three hours. Fr Francesia thought that Pius X had recognised Fr Rua and turned towards him at a significant moment. Maybe. At any rate the Rector Major was in pain. "I am worried about his eyes", wrote Fr Francesia, "since he is looking more bleary-eyed, and he can't hide the fact that they are troubling him, since he keeps them closed often and has to keep rubbing them".¹² Highly-placed visitors came in to see him at the Mission Office, since Pius X's Jubilee had drawn many people to Rome.

In order to get him to rest a bit, it was proposed to Fr Rua that he should visit the

¹⁰ Letter of G.B. Francesia to F. Rinaldi, Livorno, 11 November 1908, in FdR 3016D12.

¹¹ Ceria, *Vita*, 498-499.

¹² Cited by Ceria, *Vita*, 500.

Roman hills where the Salesians had some houses. He arrived at Genzano in the evening, and the novices surprised him with a torch-light welcome at the entrance to the city. Fr Rua gave the Good Night. The secretary Francesia was amazed to see him still "as fresh as a rose". The Rector was even more amazed. We read what Fr Andrew Gennaro said at the canonisation process: "On 18 November 1908 at Genzano in Rome, Fr Rua called me to his room after evening prayers. I went; when I came in he was sitting and he asked me to take off his shoes and socks, because he could not do it by himself. I got down almost on my knees more out of veneration than necessity to do the job. With the shoes off I pulled off the first sock. At the sight of his black, deadened leg, I was moved and cried: "Oh! Fr Rua, look at these legs! – But Fr Rua had me quickly take off the other sock, and kindly saying good night to me, let me go. I had the impression that the varicose veins which he suffered from had affected the legs so badly."¹³

Although the building was not fully ready, the consecration ceremony for the large, beautiful Church of *Santa Maria Liberatrice* took place on 29 November. Fr Rua wrote in his circular for 31 January following: "I would not know how to express in words the pure joy that I felt on Sunday 29 November last, taking part in the consecration of the new church, conducted by His Eminence Cardinal Resphigi, Vicar of His Holiness. Looking around, and seeing the people of Testaccio coming to their new church I took great pleasure in saying that by our sacrifices we have contributed to giving them the means of living as good Christians".¹⁴ And he illustrated his thoughts by quoting a lengthy passage from the *Civiltà Cattolica*, including a critical comment on socialism, rare in his writings, where he carefully avoided any political allusions:

The glorious title of the ancient church, which recalled Mary's triumph over bygone paganism in the Roman Forum, was now restored in Testaccio by the Supreme Pontiff's express wish. Thus *Maria Liberatrice* is now reigning over the Aventine, in the new populous suburb growing around it, proclaiming her maternal sovereignty over the modern paganism of socialist naturalism, the movement that sought and seeks still to centre its efforts amongst the working people here. In her shadow the good and effective work of the sons of Don Bosco will develop, supported by Christian charity, with oratories, groups, schools and other similar institutions appropriate to time and place. Thus also in the shadow of *Maria Liberatrice*, the working folk of Testaccio will increase, freed from unbelief and vice. And they will always be better educated in support of their struggle in honesty and faith against the poor misguided types who hasten to de-Christianise and barbarise the outskirts of the city of Rome through disorder, anarchy, ungodliness.¹⁵

He also noted that in the papal audience on 10 December, Pius X showed interest in all the Salesians, and was happy with the Congregation for having brought the construction of the large church at Testaccio to a successful conclusion. He expressed his best wishes for the Salesian apostolate for that part of his flock and encouraged the

¹³ Deposition from Fr Andrea Gennaro at the Apostolic Process, in *Positio* 1947, 901. This scrupulous testimony, however, risked confusing socks with legs, and added: "But because I was upset, I couldn't check whether the socks he took off were worn over other elastic stockings". He made a mistake, since anyone who wears elastic stockings knows how difficult they are to take off. Fr Rua would certainly have had someone take them off. Gennaro then had really seen the legs all covered in blood.

¹⁴ Here I follow up with the circular dated 31 January 1909, in L.C., 400-402.

¹⁵ L.C., 401-402, where *Civiltà Cattolica* is quoted, book 1404.

priest who would be the parish priest there. At the end of the audience, the devoted Rector Major brought away a very special blessing which the Pope had written in his own hand: "*Deus omnipotens adimpleat omnem benedictionem suam in vobis*" [May Almighty God fill you with all his blessings]. In his enthusiasm, Fr Rua said that by this gesture the Pope "not only sought abundant blessings on all our humble Society, but added his own prayer that it would be complete and effective".

He lost no time over those days. After Rome, he went south to the Salesian houses at Caserta, Castellamare, Naples and Portici. Brief though they were, his visits aroused enthusiasm amongst the crowds and the young. Fr Francesia, who accompanied him, risked this observation: "Today Fr Rua drew the kind of enthusiasm Don Bosco did, and the veneration for him is the kind given to a man of extraordinary virtue". Like Don Bosco, he even multiplied hosts, if we want to believe the deposition of the Salesian Bishop Federico Amanuel at the apostolic process for his canonisation:

I was the Rector of the Salesian College at Caserta in 1909, in December when he visited my house. The pupils came up for communion at the Mass which Fr Rua was celebrating. The catechist or spiritual director had forgotten to consecrate the hosts. When he brought out the ciborium at communion time he found only a few hosts there. He was confused and humiliated but Fr Rua told him: "Don't worry" and began distributing Communion. Two hundred and thirty pupils went to Communion. I don't know how many hosts remained afterwards, but there were some. When Mass was finished, he forbade the catechist, Fr Peter Squarzon, to speak about the fact with anyone in any way whatsoever. But the catechist told me about it and told me to keep it a secret. I also did not speak about it to anybody.¹⁶

The Messina disaster

1908, so full of happy events, concluded tragically for his Sicilian sons.¹⁷ On the evening of 22 December, Fr Rua returned quietly to Turin. On the morning of 28 December, a violent earthquake followed by a powerful tsunami, struck the coasts of Sicily and Calabria. In a few seconds, the cities of Messina and Reggio, and also a number of villages around them, were raised to the ground with a total of two hundred thousand victims. All communications were interrupted, and the first news of any length did not represent the reality and spread through Italy and the world only on the morning of the 29th. Fr Rua, as had Don Bosco for the earthquake in Liguria, immediately telegraphed the Archbishop of Messina, the Cardinal Archbishop of Catania, and also the Prefects of the two devastated cities.

Fearful of the lot that has befallen my confreres and pupils from Calabria and Sicily, I ask God to be good to them, and I will open the doors of my institutes to young people orphaned by the earthquake. I have telegraphed the Provincial in Catania, Fr Bartholomew Fascie, and asked him to be at your Eminence's and the Prefect's disposition to provide for the most urgent needs of young people who are suffering, knowing that it will be a work of faith and patriotism.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Positio* 1947, 472-473.

¹⁷ I refer here to the account in Amadei III, 474-478; Amadei was a direct witness, so a credible one; he was appointed by Fr Rua as the Editor of the *Bollettino Salesiano* that year, 1908.

¹⁸ Amadei III, 475.

On 30 December no precise news had yet reached Turin. Fr Rua, forced to remain in his room because of the problem with his legs, could not go in person to the places which had suffered this disaster. He sent Fr Bertello, former Provincial of Sicily, with Fr Calogero Gusmano and Brother Tagliaferri. Finally, on 31st evening a telegram arrived, sent from Catania on the 29th, which provided an account of the many victims at the Salesian College in Messina. It was the evening when the Strenna for the New Year was traditionally communicated. Despite his poor state of health, Fr Rua wanted to come down to the theatre to speak to his confreres and announce the Strenna and the brief prayer that went with it. Fr Amadei, who was there, recalls that when commenting on the Strenna, he seemed like a victim ready for any tribulation that Divine Providence might want or permit. Then with great emotion he went on to read the telegram. His tone of voice, trembling hands, his whole being, the real sadness he felt deep down in his heart, made a sorrowful impression on everyone there. They went off to bed praying for him.

The Valdocco pupils asked Fr Rua to celebrate a solemn Mass for their schoolmates in Messina. The circular of 2 January 1909 to the Cooperators in Turin spoke of this initiative, adding: "The Salesians too, to assuage their sorrow, would like to do similarly in suffrage for their confreres and the Cooperators. The second funeral memorial will take place on Tuesday morning the 5th of this month, at 10, in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians. I hope I am doing the right thing by sending this announcement to your V. inviting you to take part, to ask for eternal repose for those who have died and will never be forgotten."¹⁹

A letter from Fr Bertello, sent by express mail, arrived during these days, explaining the terrible circumstances at the Messina college, which had been earlier considered able to stand up to earthquakes: "Dead and still buried under the building are priest conferes: Pasquali Joseph, Pirrello Vincent, Claris Darius, Urso Anthony, Lo Faro Archangel, Rapisarda Mauro; clerics Manzini Mario, Venia Joseph and Brother Longo Joseph. 38 students also died along with domestic workers Marotta Anthony, Marotta Salvatore, Pirrello Francis, Zuccarello Alfio. Many have been injured, but nobody seriously".

On 4 and 5 January, the ceremonies which had been announced took place in the Shrine, all draped in black. Fr Rua's ill-health prevented him from singing the solemn Mass as he would have wanted to. Throughout the entire rite he remained kneeling near the bier, his body and face clearly marked by sorrow. Poor Fr Rua. In 1907 a barrage of calumnies had fallen on him, and in 1908 a natural catastrophe brought the year, a year which had finally managed to calm him down, *in extremis*. Exhausted, worn out by illness as he approached seventy two years of age, the same as Don Bosco when he left this world, he was calmly preparing to follow him. He sensed that the end was near, while meanwhile preparations were under-way for his priestly jubilee in the summer of 1910.

¹⁹ FdR 4001D2-3.

34 - FR RUA'S FINAL YEAR

Preparing himself for death

On the evening of 19 January 1909, Fr Louis Rocca, the Economer General of the Salesian Society, was called to the bedside of a sick person in Corso Regina Margherita, not far from the Oratory. After administering the sacraments to the lady, he was seen leaving from there a little unsteady on his feet. So the family went to the window to follow him as he went along the street. They did not see him appear. They opened the door and found him on the floor, still clinging to the railings of the stairway. He had had a stroke. He was brought to the Oratory and died soon afterwards.

Fr Rua could not help but conclude his letter of 31 January, focused on the church of Mary Help of Christians, with a series of reflections on the Exercise for a Happy Death. Death had suddenly come to pupils and confreres in Sicily, and now, just as suddenly, it had taken Fr Louis Rocca, at just 55 years of age. He knew that his religious were always ready for the major step to eternity. But in his opinion these were proof of the need to make the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death regularly and well. Don Bosco was very keen on it: "The Venerable Don Bosco, from the beginnings of the Oratory, introduced the custom of the Exercise for a Happy Death every month. When a priest marvelled at the good conduct of so many youngsters living at the Oratory, Don Bosco said: they are good because they make the Exercise for a Happy Death every month. This practice sustains our house. We recall how he announced it in a Good Night some days beforehand, always with a certain solemnity; we can still see him kneeling at the steps at the altar, reciting those tender prayers with us, asking for the grace to die well". After recalling an article of the Constitutions and something from the Regulations, he concluded seriously: "So we cannot call ourselves truly Salesian if we overlook such an effective means for obtaining our salvation".¹

The prospect of death was by now hovering over Fr Rua himself. He was getting weaker, and began to think of the heritage he would hand on to his successor. The infirmarian, Joseph Balestra, attests that his suffering was getting worse, his legs were terribly swollen, covered in ulcers and he found it difficult to walk. "To help him, Ballestra applied some hot compresses on several of the sores. This remedy had little effect. He needed to stay in bed or on the sofa with his legs stretched out, and he did this reluctantly when he simply could not do anything else. Whether standing or sitting, the swelling got worse".²

Nevertheless he still found the strength to write a long letter to confreres for the anniversary of Don Bosco's death on 31 January 1909. He noted in it how the work of the Venerable Founder had survived and developed despite the prophets of doom and the manoeuvres of enemies who had promised to reduce it to a "heap of ruins". Just the same he added clearly: "It is also true that we have not always corresponded well with the graces received; unfortunately many serious defects reproach us". Who knows how often we have deserved God turning his gaze elsewhere and seeking other and better instruments to obtain his glory; but he is infinitely rich in mercy, in view of the merits of our Venerable Father, and has continued to bless, sustain and console us. Every day

¹L.C., 404-405.

² Amadei III, 482.

we see Don Bosco's predictions come true about the number of his sons and their efforts".³

On balance, Fr Rua, approaching the age when Don Bosco had left this world, was ready to depart with his soul at peace.

The confreres around him were getting ready for solemn celebrations for his priestly jubilee. He was ordained priest on 29 July 1860, so the jubilee was to be celebrated on 29 July 1910. It was planned to have the festivities spread over the second semester of 1910. The members of the central commission responsible for the organisation were officially appointed. The entire Congregation was involved.⁴ The feast had begun at Valdocco on 29 July 1909: Mass for Fr Rua at the altar of Mary Help of Christians; banquet in the theatre, Good Night from the Rector Major to the whole community at Valdocco.⁵ A holy picture with a picture of Fr Rua on it was printed as a "a reminder of the propitious 29th July 1909, on the 50th anniversary of the priestly ordination of Very Rev Fr Michael Rua, when superiors and students at the Oratory at Valdocco, prostrating themselves before the feet of the Virgin Help of Christians, rejoiced with him around the altar, wishing him well for his golden jubilee".⁶ On 30 August 1909, he attended the Fifth General Assembly of diocesan directors of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators at Valsalice, about which we will speak next.⁷

The daily existence of a sickly Fr Rua

It would be a gross mistake to imagine that Fr Rua remained inactive because of the pains tormenting him. The long letter to the Cooperators was issued punctually in January 1909. In it he reassured his readers that the Lord continued to bless the Salesian work, as demonstrated by the new works opened in the Old and the New Continents. He exhorted his Cooperators to support the Salesian missions which were in constant growth.⁸ In previous years the annual letter also provided information on the works of the Salesian Sisters. Now, despite the separation, Fr Rua did not want to forget them. After the letter to the Cooperators, he had an article inserted into the *Bollettino Salesiano* of January 1909 with the title "The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1908". The article, certainly desired and perhaps even written by Fr Rua, said that despite the official separation, the Institute continued to be the privileged branch of the Salesian family.

Besides the circular letters to Cooperators and Salesians, always well substantiated, faithful to his usual custom Fr Rua wrote many individual letters. Only a small number of them have been consigned to the Archives in Rome, but amongst the letters from 1909 we find five addressed to Fr Evasio Rabagliati, Provincial, Columbia, eight to Fr Joseph Vespignani, Provincial, Argentina, ten to Fr Arthur Conelli, Provincial, Central Italy, eight to Fr Peter Cardano, Provincial, Middle East, five to Fr Joseph Gamba,

³ L.C., 397-398.

⁴ Circular letter of the Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi, to the Salesians, 6 February 1909, in FdR 2753A7-9.

⁵ Amadei III, 510.

⁶ FdR 2754B1-2.

⁷ *Bollettino Salesiano*, October 1909, 291-294.

⁸ *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1909, 1-8.

Provincial, Uruguay-Paraguay. His long letters to Fr Isaac Giannini, Rector at the agricultural school in Palestine, Beitgemal, dated 25 January and 7 July 1909, reflect the exceptional interest that Fr Rua had for the work, which he had visited the previous year.⁹ In July and August he sent three long letters to Fr Anthony Malan, Provincial, Mato Grosso, at the heart of Brazil, on how to deal with the indigenous people, get them ready for Baptism, etc.¹⁰

Despite his physical pain, Fr Rua still moved about. From 16 to 18 March he preached the Triduum for the Feast of St Joseph to the Josephite Sisters in Turin. The topics were simple and practical: 1st day: *Work*, doing one's duty following the example of St. Joseph; 2nd day: *Prayer*, we need to pray always, following Mary's example; 3rd day: *Sacrifice*, knowing how to submit to the superior. *Models*: Joseph, Mary and Jesus.¹¹ On 20 March at Nizza Monferrato he celebrated the end of the Retreat for the Salesian Sisters. He focused his talk on three letters "P.U.O (può)", *Piety*, *Humility* (*umiltà*), *Obedience*: the mnemonic device was something he was familiar with.¹² On 21 March there was an academy "in honour of Don Bosco and his worthy successor". The long speech for the occasion has been preserved¹³ A characteristic reflection by Fr Rua concluded the feast: "I don't deserve so many praises but I accept them because they were followed by a promise to pray for me and I have much need of this. I would like to be a perfect copy of Don Bosco, and while I am reading his life and comparing it with my own, I find myself humbled and have to say that I am a very rough copy of Don Bosco. I do not say this out of humility, but because it is true; so pray for me so that I may become a true copy!"¹⁴

Fr Rua wanted to take part in the ceremonies for Holy Week at the Oratory. On Holy Thursday, 8 April, despite his illnesses, he personally washed the feet of twelve boys and then invited them to his table. From 15 to 24 May he took part in the Novena in preparation for the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, but left the honour of presiding and preaching to various cardinals and bishops. The traditional "thanksgiving feast" for 23 and 24 June, while it took place as usual, was more solemn than usual in its tone. Baron Anthony Manno announced that a committee had been put together for Fr Rua's Jubilee and had Cardinal Richelmy as its president. The jubilee festivities properly so called were being prepared for 24 June 1910. They were not going to wait for 29 July, the anniversary of his ordination. It seems that Fr Rua had said: "You can have your feast, but without the saint!"¹⁵ On 25 June, a letter sent to Salesians by the central committee, and signed by the Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi, explained the jubilee events in detail: exhibits, contests, Fr Rua's letters, photos etc.¹⁶

Following established practice, on the 24th of the month, Fr Rinaldi sent the Rector Major's instructions and those of individual members of the Superior Chapter to Provincials and Rectors. The fact that these circulars are all accurately numbered, in Fr

⁹ Letter of M. Rua to I. Giannini, 25 January and 7 July 1909, in FdR 3904D2-6.

¹⁰ Letter of M. Rua to A. Malan, Turin, 3 July, 16 July and 19 August 1909, in FdR 3915 D1-7.

¹¹ According to the local chronicle, taken up by Amadei III, 486-488.

¹² Cf Amadei III, 489-492.

¹³ FdR 2765A8-12.

¹⁴ According to the local chronicle, in Amadei III, 493.

¹⁵ Amadei III, 506.

¹⁶ FdR 2753B10-12.

Rua's style, guarantees their authenticity, along with the administrative and especially religious concerns of their author. Permit me to summarise, by way of example, those from January to July 1909. They show how the Rector Major, now almost an invalid, stayed close to his sons throughout the world. We should note in particular his concern for, one might almost say obsession with, the Salesian Cooperators.

On 24 January Fr Rinaldi writes that the Rector Major: 1) announces that after the huge disaster in Messina, another unfortunate event has happened to the Congregation with the death by apoplexy of the Economer General, Fr Louis Rocca; 2) he recommends great care for the Brother confreres, and to accept good domestic workers who might have the necessary qualities to become excellent Brothers; 3) he suggests to Provincials and Rectors that they re-read and put into practice the decisions of the General Chapters relating to Salesian Brothers; 4) he invites Provincials and Rectors to respond to each of the members of the Superior Chapter who write in the monthly circular.

On 24 February, Fr Rua: 1) announces the appointment of Fr Joseph Bertello as Economer General; 2) communicates that the ordinary diocesan process for the Cause of Beatification of Dominic Savio has concluded in Turin; 3) urges the houses in America to respond to his circular of 27 December 1908 on the question of their belonging to *Italica Gens* for looking after Italian migrants; 4) recommends that the non-Italian houses, especially novitiates, study Italian; 5) asks the Provincials to take account of regular conferences for the Salesian Cooperators; 6) invites the Rectors who did not have the required forms to ask their Provincials for them; 7) praises the Rectors who not only read the circular letters publicly but make them a topic for their community conferences.

On 24 March: 1) wishes the Salesians and their pupils a Happy Easter; 2) recommends the care of clerics in Practical Training to their Rectors; 3) asks that priests and clerics prepare short sermonettes in honour of Our Lady during the month of May.

On 24 April, the Rector Major: 1) exhorts Salesians to see to the month of May and implant devotion to the Help of Christians in the hearts of the pupils; 2) invites the Rectors to re-read the monthly circular for January 1904, regarding the privileges relating to the Feast of Mary Help of Christians; 3) reminds them of the conference to Cooperators usually offered on this occasion.

On 24 May, Fr Rua: 1) recommends that the month of the Sacred Heart be spent with the attitude of *Ad Jesum per Mariam*; 2) reminds people of notices from previous years regarding the wash-room areas, following the recommendations of Don Bosco; 3) argues against the widespread idea that assistance is something just for the clerics, while priests should devote themselves to sacred ministries instead: "it would be fatal to the spirit of our Pious Society and the good results of the preventive system"; 4) invites people to avoid visiting shows exhibiting pictures which offend against morality; 5) announces that the apostolic process regarding Don Bosco will open in Turin.

On 24 June: 1) thanks people for the good wishes received for the Feast of St John the Baptist, the day when Don Bosco celebrated his name day and when the Rector Major's feast day was held; 2) recommends strengthening the activities of the festive Oratories during the holidays; 3) announces that Salesian efforts for the victims of the earthquake in Messina had raised L. 21,466.17; 4) exhorts negligent Provincials to send in their reports on the Provincial visitations; 5) invites Provincials to note the circular of

the 3rd July 1906 on personnel of the houses.

On 24 July, Fr Rua: 1) again invites Provincials to hand in their accounts of their visits to the houses; 2) exhorts Provincials and Rectors to send young people and the domestic personnel who show signs of a vocation to the Retreats; 3) wishes everyone happy holidays and a fruitful Retreat for the temporal and spiritual good of the Society.¹⁷

Finally Fr Rinaldi, on 24 August 1909 writes a letter to Salesians to remind them of the recommendations of Fr Rua on silence and recollection during the Retreats that they would be making in their holidays.¹⁸ As you can see, our good Rector Major did not cease watching over the good spiritual welfare of his men.

Fr Rua's depositions at Don Bosco's apostolic process

Fr Rua was the first of the witnesses cited at Don Bosco's apostolic process, which opened in Turin on 26 May 1909. His depositions, always carefully and strongly argued, were spread over the period from 11 June (session 4) to 20 November (35th session) in 31 sessions in all, suspended for a holiday period between 17 July (19th session) and the 4 October (20th session).¹⁹

From the 4th to the 12th session, as he had done during the informative process, he went minutely through Don Bosco's very full life, since he had known him since he was eight years old and was by his side until he died in 1888, except for a few years from 1863-1865 when he had been appointed Rector at Mirabello. He spoke of Don Bosco's education, blocked by his step-brother Anthony, his studies at the public school and the seminary in Chieri, the period spent at the *Ecclesiastical Institute* in Turin. He said that the Servant of God had always been zealous, especially in regard to his friends as a child and the youngsters he met up with. He spoke about his visits to the prisons and hearing confessions there.

During the 7th to the 10th sessions he provided a detailed account of the history of the group of clerics and lay people who were destined, over time, to become the Congregation of St. Francis of Sales, the birth of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, a work supported by Pope Pius IX. Fr Rua did not forget the Work of the Sons of Mary for late vocations. During the 11th and 12th sessions he recalled how Don Bosco set about defending the Pope when he was under attack, and for this had to suffer persecution and even aggression; in 1867 he advised the Pope of threats from Garibaldi; he defended Papal infallibility from the moment it was promulgated at Vatican I. He then recalled that already in his youth, the Venerable had thought of proclaiming the Gospel to non-believers in person, but not being able to realise this dream, beginning from 1875 he decided to send his missionaries to South America; in his zeal, he also wanted to send them to the United States, Africa and India.

From the 13th to the 19th session Fr Rua testified to the heroic nature of Don Bosco's theological and moral virtues; his constant union with God; his special Eucharistic

¹⁷ These circulars of Rinaldi are kept in FdR 4075C6-E10.

¹⁸ FdR 2753C1-4.

¹⁹ For the first stage of Don Bosco's apostolic process, cf. FdB 2439A5-2482C1. Fr Rua's depositions are found in FdR 2444C10-2449E6.

devotion; his veneration for the Word of God; his devotion to Mary, and his practice of the virtues inherent to the ecclesiastical state, trust in Divine Providence, despite the constant obstacles he had to overcome. Finally he spoke of his constant conformity to God's will until his final illness and death. He added that he always entrusted himself to the Lord's will before taking serious decisions; that his life was a continuous work of spiritual and material mercy and that he could not be accused of any kind of attachment to money.

After the holiday interruption, the 20th to the 23rd sessions were dedicated to the cardinal virtues. Fr Rua testified that Don Bosco was naturally zealous, decisively inclined to love of neighbour. But his spiritual strength was heroic: he showed this in the tenacious pursuit of his own vocation. At every moment of his life, in the midst of contradictions of every kind, he showed deep humility and true and proper love for poverty and chastity. With the 24th session, the inquiry focused on his supernatural gifts. The topic continued in the 25th and 26th sessions He spoke of his gift of tears, prophecy, understanding of souls, visions and persons healed while he was still alive. The 27th session was dedicated to a quick investigation of the works Don Bosco had published and concluded by recalling his death. In the 28th session he spoke of the funeral and the reputation he had as a saint and even a wonder-worker, a widespread reputation not only in Turin and Italy, but elsewhere in the world, while he was still alive. The 29th session touched on topics which contrasted with the general admiration in which Don Bosco was held; they dealt with the interpretation of adversaries, in fact, who maintained that he had lost his head and accused him of appropriating legacies... Fr Rua showed that the main attacks he was subject to were brought about by his zeal in defence of the Pope and the Church, not through defects in his behaviour or that of his followers. He then went on to questions relating to miracles attributed to Don Bosco following his death. Time was spent on these during the 30th to the 32nd sessions. Fr Rua listed the names of those for whom miracles had been worked and described in precise detail the illnesses they were suffering from. It remained only for him to confirm and sign his depositions, which took place during the 33rd and 34th sessions.

The substantiated depositions of Fr Rua's are very important for the historian. He had an excellent memory in fact. Needless to say, he could also make mistakes, as in the case of the claimed temporary resurrection of young "Charles", which Fr Rua attributed to Don Bosco when it was really a case of a story told by the priest from Valdocco drawn from the life of St Philip Neri.²⁰ Fr Rua was reflecting common opinion, alert to the miraculous. When it came to narratives about healing. But these are trifling errors when compared to such a solid and well-founded testimony, and one to be admired in such an elderly and infirm individual as he was.

²⁰ FdR 2449 C1. The correction is documented in F. Desramaut, «Autour de six loggia attribués à Don Bosco dans les *Memorie Biografiche*», in RSS 10 (1991), 38-52.

35 – THE TWILIGHT PERIOD

The difficult summer of 1909

Between the various sessions of Don Bosco's apostolic process, Fr Rua did what he could. On 30 July at Valsalice he brought the Retreat for clerics and young people to a close; on 13 August he went to celebrate for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Valsalice.¹ On 16 August he was with the new aspirants at Valsalice. His address there employed an acronym, BOSCO, meaning, in Italian *Bontà* (Kindness), *Orazione* (Prayer), *Studio* (Study), *Castità* (Chastity) and *Obbedienza* (Obedience).² On 21 August he went to Nizza Monferrato to the Salesian Sisters where he celebrated Mass and gave them some words of encouragement, but he refused absolutely to give them directives so they would understand that he in no way wanted to take "any steps that might seem to be in contrast with what higher Church authority had indicated" concerning the separation of their Institute and the Salesian Society. While showing a degree of readiness, he gave no support to the regular attempts by the Superior General, Mother Daghero "to have a Salesian Councillor in every Province" belonging to the Sisters.³

On 30 August Fr Rua visited Don Bosco's casket at Valsalice for the Fifth General Assembly of diocesan directors of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators. He had been encouraged to organise this by a letter from Pius X, *Diletto figlio*, the previous 25 August.⁴ It was a most important assembly on needed modernisation of the Salesian Oratory, a topic very dear to the Rector Major. Society had changed by comparison with the beginnings of the Oratory. The cards had been altered by anti-religious socialism. The Oratory could no longer be reduced to just a recreational and religious function. The assembly expressed the desire that the activities of the Oratories be integrated "with works of social and economic import, responding effectively to the needs of the young so they will find in the Oratory the social education and moral and material help that is otherwise being offered them by anti-Christian groups and institutions". The final motion listed, somewhat ambitiously, some possible groups: "1) cultural groups; 2) social discussion groups 3) technical schools; 4) job counselling; 5) the enrolment bureau for the National Social Security Bank; 6) workers' insurance groups; 7) the conference for professional hygiene; 8) instructions concerning work legislation; 9) setting up St. Vincent de Paul Conferences; 10) preparing for military service; 11) young immigrant worker assistance under the Kolping scheme". The motion wisely pointed out: "seeing at the same time that recreational and educational aspects are complemented by all the attractions of modern-day didactics, (e.g. film, projections etc.)".⁵ In Fr Rua's thinking, the Oratory was a true and proper centre of formation for the young.⁶

¹ Amadei III, 517.

² Amadei III, 518.

³ Amadei III, 519.

⁴ This document is reproduced in FdR 3833A9.

⁵ *Bollettino Salesiano*, October 1909, 292.

⁶ Concerning this problem cf. the documented article by P. Braidò, «L'Oratorio Salesiano in Italia, "luogo" propizio alla catechesi nella stagione dei Congressi (1888-1915)», in RSS 24 (2005) 7-88

On 9 September, Fr Rua closed the Retreat for the Salesians at Lanzo. On the 15th he was in Foglizzo, where he spoke to the theology students and the newly professed. On 24 September he spoke to the priests at Ivrea. On 28 October, at the Church of Mary Help of Christians, during the farewell ceremony to forty new missionaries presided over by Cardinal Richelmy, Fr Rua was able to offer his customary embrace to the departing missionaries. Witnesses confirm that one almost did not notice that his legs were giving him terrible pain.⁷

From September to November, the many meetings of the Superior Chapter took place with Fr Rua presiding, but in his room. His health problems were getting worse.

The decline

Midway through November at San Benigno where members of the Superior Chapter were gathered to examine reports from the Extraordinary Visitors and remotely prepare for the General Chapter in 1910, Fr Rua got much worse. On Wednesday the 23rd he was unable to celebrate Mass in the chapel. He had to go to the infirmary. This did not stop him from giving a class in spirituality to the novice who was helping him, beginning with the life of St Clement of Rome, whose liturgical memory it was that day.⁸ On 24 November, the chronicle tells us how those of the community were closely following what was happening with the Rector Major: "Today Fr Rua turns 72, five months and 15 days, the same age as Don Bosco [when he died]. The young men greeted him with applause before lunch. They read out some words of welcome. Don Rua thanked them and asked them to pray not that his life be lengthened, but that he may spend the days that remained to him in a holy way".⁹

He was worn out and the same day had to go back to Turin. He left the house holding onto Fr Albera's arm. The youngsters greeted him by lining up in silence, kneeling. He farewelled them from the carriage. Once back at the Oratory, he was forced to remain in his room and spend his days with his leg up on the old sofa, but always dressed in his cassock. By now his swollen legs prevented him from wearing shoes or even slippers.¹⁰

The conclusions of the Extraordinary Visitations

He kept active just the same. The written conclusions to the Extraordinary Visitation of all Salesian houses, which he had ordered in 1908, were presented to the Superior Chapter on 22 January 1910. They were severe: lack of personnel, especially qualified personnel; lack of good Rectors; scarcity of good confessors; gaps in the formation of personnel, especially of the Brothers; some unworthy elements which were a danger to the confreres; the need to change Provincials and Rectors who were unsuitable, etc.¹¹

Some weeks before, on 1 December, Fr Rua had signed an important circular to Provincials and Rectors with his personal observations after reading some of the

(especially 83).

⁷ Amadei III, 523-527, *passim*.

⁸ Amadei III, 540.

⁹ FdR 4249A11.

¹⁰ Amadei III, 541-542.

¹¹ *Minutes of the Superior Chapter*, 22 January 1910, in FdR 4249B5.

documentation.¹² At first sight the letter seemed to be reassuring. According to Fr Rua, the Visitors' reports once again demonstrated that the "humble Salesian Congregation" (he liked this adjective), blessed by the Lord, supported by the Help of Christians, and developing through the prayers and merits of its venerable Founder, was continuing to achieve great good around the world. The calumnies of Varazze and Marsala, persecutions following the revolutions in Barcelona and Colombia, only proved that the enemy, defeated on one side, tried new assaults from an other. "Who knows what he is planning against us today? But we have nothing to fear; God is with us". That said, Fr Rua offered a general observation, one that inspired what followed in his document: we see that in houses governed by a superior gifted with the necessary qualities for his role, filled with true and burning zeal, a faithful imitator of his Venerable Founder Don Bosco, piety flourishes, pure habits reign, there is admiration and constant progress in studies, one breathes an atmosphere imbued with the most outstanding virtues. Unfortunately the Visitation reports indicated that such pearls were somewhat rare. This sad acknowledgement urged Fr Rua to draw up a list of advice and exhortations aimed especially at those principally responsible for the houses.

1) Fr Rua urged them to compare their own conduct with the text of the Constitutions. "The most appropriate moment for this examen" is the Exercise for a Happy Death. The Visitors' reports reveal that some Rectors of houses easily dispense themselves from the practices of piety imposed by the Rule, especially meditation and spiritual reading. Others not only "neglect the monthly solution of moral cases, but despite frequent recommendation do not provide the two monthly conferences so necessary to keep the spirit of Don Bosco alive in their confreres". How then can "those Rectors who do not have the friendly talk with their dependants maintain a calm conscience?" This deplorable disorder is perhaps at the basis of the loss of so many vocations, while such Rectors are wasting their time reading newspapers, too easily accepting commitments outside the house or making frequent unnecessary visits overseas. "At least this reminder sent them by their poor Rector Major from his bed where he has been confined for a week by illness, might help them to correct their negligence".¹³

2) It is not enough for Rectors to observe the Constitutions; they have to also see that their dependants observe them. "Woe upon the negligent superior! St. Bonaventura never ceased claiming that the one who misuses his power sins against God, against the confreres he abandons to their dissipated behaviour, and against his own conscience which is responsible for his subjects' faults as well as his own". Fr Rua dwelt especially on the practice of the vow of poverty, to which he had already dedicated a substantial circular on 31 January 1907.¹⁴ "How sad it is that certain Rectors are not more diligent and courageous in practising poverty. Confreres are firmly forbidden to have money and spend it on small pleasures.... It is sad to see confreres, when they change houses, dragging along with them a chest of books and objects they call *their own*". The favourable acceptance of the 1907 letter had made him think that such abuses had been put an end to. Alas! The Visitation reports were piercingly clear: "But I take consolation from the hope that you will take greater care to see that my wishes are fully satisfied".

¹² L.C., 407-418.

¹³ L.C., 412.

¹⁴ L.C., 360-377.

3) Fr Rua speaks out against another abuse that might sound strange to us today: "It is said that some individuals have entered our Pious Society with no other intention than to gain material advantage for their families". They do not have the interests of the Congregation at heart, but seek ever more consistent financial support from the superiors for their families. He therefore invited Provincials to investigate "whether the postulants or novices are entering the Congregation for the singular purpose of saving their souls, rather than to procure a comfortable existence and help their families. Be informed also about the state of the postulant's family, and when you find that it is in need of the young man's support, urge him to take another path instead and not become a Salesian. Watch out especially not to have priests ordained who *quaerunt quae sua sunt, non quae Jesu Christi* [seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ]".

4) He then dwelt at length on the nonchalance of certain priests in celebrating Mass: "Allow me to remind the Provincials and Rectors that you have a strict obligation to correct your subjects who celebrate badly or with undue haste or who do not make the proper preparation and thanksgiving". He continues by recalling some of the considerations of St. Francis of Sales, who wrote in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is at the core of the Christian Religion, at the heart of devotion, the soul of piety, an ineffable mystery that reveals the depths of divine charity, in which God unites himself truly with us, and generously communicates his graces and favours".

5) He recommends that article 780 of the Regulations be observed: "our pupils are forbidden to lay hands on one another, hold each other's hand or go walking arm in arm". But this is not enough. Provincials and Rectors should see that no Salesian allows himself familiarity of the kind with his pupils. "In conferences occasionally take up the need for us Salesians to mortify our sense of touch". Forbid everyone to caress the children, shake their hands, walk hand in hand with them, squeeze their cheeks or chin and especially have them sit on their knee". Gestures like this "could lead to serious disorders against morality, and give pretext to our enemies to calumniate us and attribute intentions to us that we do not have. The Venerable Don Bosco, who also loved youngsters with such affection, never considered it correct to attract them to himself with such means and zealously reproached whoever acted otherwise".

6) Fr Rua concluded the circular by urging Salesians not to behave as "children" but as mature individuals, as "strong workers in the Lord's vineyard". Each one should carry out his duties with the greatest diligence, "as if the entire honour of the Congregation depended on him alone". Each one should be able to "work very well, especially on behalf of the young", treasuring "every means to progress in knowledge and virtue". Nobody should resign himself to his own defects. "everyone in speech, work and attitude should show that we are worthy of the name Salesian and son of Don Bosco". Provincials and Rectors should give their communities "an essential seriousness", "kindly but firmly seeing that they observe the Constitutions and Regulations", in reading at table, leaving the house, in regularity at practices of piety, including during holidays etc.

In an appendix to the circular, Fr Rua congratulates those in Salesian houses who foster good press.

Perhaps Fr Rua was aware that this letter would become his spiritual testament. It was based on the reports from the Extraordinary Visitation in 1908, which allowed him

to gain an overall picture of the real situation of Salesian houses around the world. He had compared these with the Regulations drawn up by the Provincial Chapters and with the ideal of a Religious that he had nurtured within himself. In isolation in his room, his legs swollen, Fr Rua still sought to reach out personally to all his sons and beg them to show themselves to be worthy disciples of Don Bosco. This had been the purpose of his time as Rector Major from the outset.

Fr Rua's final weeks

Fr Rua's annual letter to the Cooperators came out punctually on 1 January 1910.¹⁵ On 4 January Fr Rua agreed to go down under the arcade at Valdocco to be photographed wearing his biretta and with a cape on his shoulders.¹⁶ "If you look closely at him", Fr Ceria observed, "you can see an uncharacteristic defeated look in his exhausted and emaciated face; his eyes, while still showing the strength of his soul, seemed to have a subtle listlessness about them; his lips want to shape their usual smile, but you can just see the muscles contract, while the liveliness that should control them is missing".¹⁷

By now Fr Rua could no longer go down for Mass at the Church of Mary Help of Christians, but celebrated in Don Bosco's small chapel, near his office. Celebrating Mass tired him out, which is why – most unusually for such a devout person as himself – he was forced to make his thanksgiving seated in an armchair in front of the altar. One morning, at the end of Mass, he called the faithful infirmarian Balestra and told him: "I feel dizzy. Could you help me back to my room". On 14 February Doctor Battistini, the usual doctor at the Oratory, discovered an alarming cardiac weakness and advised him to abstain from celebrating Mass and rest for four or five days. The following day however, he wanted to say Mass. This would be the Last time. On Wednesday 16th, from his bed, he assisted at Mass celebrated by Fr Francesia in the small chapel. He got up at midday, but an hour later he had to go back to bed. He was exhausted and he said to Balestra: "Take the mail and bring it to Fr Rinaldi, and tell him to deal with it, because I am no longer able to". Just the same, lying back on his pillows, he still saw those he wanted to come and see him. At set hours he made his meditation and spiritual reading, with Balestra reading the same texts that were being used in the community.

Doctors diagnosed "senile myocarditis", which saw his body reduced to complete exhaustion. But his spirit remained alert and welcoming to anyone who visited him. Over these days in fact his bedside saw a constant stream of cardinals, and well-known ecclesiastics and lay people, members of noble families and ordinary people. Those who knew of his virtues, saw him lifted up to an extraordinary spiritual level.¹⁸ On 14 March, sensing that the end was near, he asked that the contents of his shelves and desk drawers be listed. The following day he called Balestra and gave him a daily programme to be followed. Here it is:

¹⁵ *Bollettino Salesiano*, January 1910, 2-8.

¹⁶ See this full page photo in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 131.

¹⁷ Ceria, *Vita*, 574. For the account of Fr Rua's final weeks, I am following, Ceria, *Vita* 575-584, more or less, but take account of circulars and telegrams from Fr Rinaldi to the Salesians, and also the substantial chronicle in two of its places: "The final days" and "His death", in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 133-149, 150-161.

¹⁸ Fr Rinaldi's monthly letter to Provincials and Rectors, N. 61, 24 March 1910, in FdR 4076C1-2.

Timetable 'ad experimentum'

5: Rising

5.20: Mass, Communion, thanksgiving

6.15: Meditation

6.45: Rest – From 8 to 9 doctors' visits and breakfast with some interviews

9: Remedies [medicines] – Some interviews with outsiders, according to convenience and possibilities, then rest

12: Lunch and a chat

14: Rest

15.30: Prayer, reading, some distraction

16: Treatment

18: Rest and some distraction

20: Supper, prayer and get ready for the night.¹⁹

Already before establishing this regime, his days had begun with a clear programme. At 5 am, Balestra knocked lightly on the door and said *Benedicamus Domino*, to which Fr Rua responded *Deo gratias*. Then he had to get ready for Mass. He washed and put on his cassock, putting a white sheet over his bed. When it was no longer possible for him to get dressed, he covered himself with a black shawl in order to receive Communion worthily and see visitors. At the end he had to be content with a large scarf. He was very keen on decorum. When he opened the missal, and when the bell rang announcing the beginning of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, he made the sign of the Cross and answered the celebrant along with the server, paying close attention to the rite.

On 20 March the Church began Holy week. Fr Rua's face and hands began to swell up. He was aware of it, since on the Wednesday of Holy week (23 March) he asked for Viaticum the following day. The Eucharist was brought to him on the following day by Fr Rinaldi, with the confreres of the Oratory in procession holding lighted candles. Before receiving the host, Fr Rua made a sign that he wanted to speak. They raised him up on his pillows and he spoke in a fairly strong voice that could be heard in the nearby rooms. What he said has been reconstructed:

¹⁹ This document is reproduced in FdR 2779C9-10.

In this situation I feel the duty to address some words to you. The first is to thank you for your prayers: thank you very much, and the Lord will reward you also for what you continue to do.

Another thing I would like to say, since I do not know if I will have another opportunity to speak to all of you gathered together, and I would like you to tell those who cannot be present as well. I will always pray to Jesus for you. I hope the Lord will listen to the request I make on behalf of everyone in the house now and in the future. It is very important to me that we all are and try to be worthy sons of Don Bosco. Don Bosco on his death bed set an appointment for us all: See you again in Paradise! This is the reminder he left for us.

Don Bosco loved all of his sons; so I recommend three things to you:

- 1) A great love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament;
- 2) Devotion to Mary Most Holy the Help of Christians;
- 3) Great respect, obedience and affection for the Pastors of the Church and especially for the Supreme Pontiff.

This is the reminder that I too would like to leave with you. Try to be worthy sons of Don Bosco.

I will never omit praying for you. If the Lord welcomes me into Paradise with Don Bosco, as I hope, I will pray for everyone in the different houses and especially this one.²⁰

Out of a desire for completeness we note how later, on 1 April, Fr Rua expressly asked Fr Rinaldi to add an observation to his recommendations of 24 March, which he considered as his spiritual testament, which is significant hearing it from his lips: "Recommend to confreres what I said on the day I received Holy Viaticum and remind them that it will be our good fortune to have been faithful in keeping the traditions of Don Bosco and to have avoided novelty".²¹ Commenting on his words, Cardinal Maffi would say in his homily of commemoration: "These are brief words, but they reveal the mystery and world of a soul, words which express a secret programme, a truly sincere one which he followed, and here in true and full light, the light shining through his agony, these words throw light on what for Fr Rua was a constant effort and desire".²²

No outsider was allowed to be at the ceremony, except for devout professor Rudolph Bettazzi, zealous defender of Catholic Action and apostle of moral behaviour. He asked this as a great favour. Then he signed the guest book and wrote: "I am happy to have been present at the Viaticum of a Saint". A nephew came from Rome and other nephews living in Turin who had visited him many times, but they did not dare to disturb him. Fr Rua had them brought in and one after another gave them some kind word and said that he would meet them in Paradise!

Fr Rua's death.

On 27 March, Easter Sunday, towards 9.30 pm, there were slight symptoms of an embolism. Fr Rua lost consciousness. The doctor assured the Superiors, who were

²⁰ Fr Rinaldi's monthly letter to Provincials and Rectors, N. 62, 21 April 1910, in FdR 4076C5.

²¹ *Ibid*, FdR 4076C6.

²² Ceria, *Vita*, 580-581.

alarmed, that these were passing symptoms, and in fact the patient regained consciousness and the ability to speak. But he was consistently weaker. Fr Rinaldi then proposed that he receive the Anointing of the Sick. He immediately answered: "Willingly, willingly!" He gave him his small Ritual and asked him to read the whole rite to him along with the prayers prescribed for the administration of the Sacrament. On the following day Fr Albera gave him the anointing, in the presence of all the members of the Superior Chapter. As it was with Don Bosco, the effect on him was a physical improvement that is often noted after the sacrament has been administered: the patient experienced a reprieve, which seemed like a general improvement.

We read in the daily programme dictated to Balestra, the word "remedy". Fr Ceria maintains that it refers to the treatment for his legs which were all covered in sores. God knows how he was able to put up with it. Nevertheless, during his illness, he was never heard to utter a complaint. If anyone asked him if he was in much pain, he usually replied with great calm: "No, no!", and sometimes: "A little!"

The doctor's diagnosis became more disturbing as the days wore on. His myocarditis worsened. He could not feed himself anymore, so on Saturday 2 April Fr Rinaldi announced to everyone in the house that the end was approaching.²³ In the antechamber there were people still wanting to see him. But they were kept at bay by the energetic Fr Stephen Pagliere. Sometimes Fr Rua made a sign to let someone in. It seems that this was the case with John Possetto, the friend who came to see him when the Varazze scandal broke out. Fr Rua shook his hand gently: "I've always owed you something", he told him in a voice that was barely a whisper, "do you recall? It was here in this very room; I have always prayed for you and your family and now that I am definitely about to go I want to tell you that when I am up there united with our good Father I will always invoke a heavenly blessing on you. Goodbye, good and faithful friend".²⁴

On 1 April, in the Church of Mary Help of Christians, a triduum of prayer for Fr Rua began, before the Blessed Sacrament exposed. On the evening of the final day, before Benediction, it seems that Francesia turned to the boys and others present and said: "Oh Jesus, give us our father, our friend, our benefactor. Such a grace, Holy Virgin, would be the most beautiful pearl in your crown!" On the evening of 4 April, Fr Rua called his confessor, who immediately came to him: "Take the Ritual and read the prayers for the recommendation of the soul". The Superiors, informed, interrupted their meeting and came immediately. Kneeling at the foot of the bed, they responded to the litanies. Fr Rua, for his part, followed calmly.

Shortly after this, his calm fled him and he went into a spiritual agitation that reminded Fr Piscetta, who was there, of Jesus in Gethsemane: "Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me". Fr Rua asked those present to pray to the Lord to remove his death from him or make it less fearful. "Because", he said "I am afraid to present myself for God's judgement, I am afraid I cannot bear this agony". Naturally Fr Albera tried to reassure him and comfort him. And the crisis passed.

On the morning of Tuesday 5 April, in the chapel next to his room, eight priests celebrated Mass one after the other. They added a prayer at the Collect for the dying man. Fr Rua followed the second of these Masses closely. It was celebrated by his confessor, Fr Francesia. The devotion with which he received communion, the last of

²³ FdR 2778C7-8.

²⁴ According to the Possetto report, reproduced in FdR 2855D12.

his life, impressed whoever was there. Towards 10 am, he asked for the meditation to be read to him. They answered that he should not exert himself, but accept God's will. He only partly resigned himself to that. After reciting the *Veni sancte Spiritus*, he wanted at least the headings for the different points for the day's mediation read out, along with the final resolutions. Then he recollected himself for about ten minutes.

He was lucid, and praying, but drifted in and out of consciousness. Towards evening he found it difficult to recognise people. Once night came he lost his sight entirely. It seems that the final agony began towards 10 pm. Occasionally he asked if the moment of his death had come. Towards midnight he fell asleep.

On 6 April, at one thirty in the morning, he began shaking. Fr Francesca suggested some brief prayers to him which seemed to revive him. When he heard what Don Bosco had taught him as a boy: "Sweet Heart of Mary, help me to save my soul", he whispered: "Yes, save our soul ... that's everything ... everything ... saving our soul". From that moment on he uttered no other word. He slowly went into a coma. After the community had woken, the boys of the Oratory began to file past his bed and kissed his hand. The Salesian Sisters also came. This lasted more than an hour. It finished at 9.37 am. Then without complaint, or movement, without bystanders even noticing it, his heart stopped beating and his poor body remained lifeless. Those around him fell to their knees, while the priest, following the ritual, called on the saints and angels to welcome him, take his soul and present it to the throne of the Most High.

Fr Rua's funeral

He was a saint! Everyone in the Oratory was moved to tears. It was natural. But soon sorrow was replaced by the certainty of having gained another protector in paradise, a true saint, a great saint. The news went from mouth to mouth, inside and beyond the house. The people began to arrive to pay homage to the body, laid out in the church of St. Francis of Sales. His body, dressed in cassock, surplice and stole, was laid out on a small catafalque holding a crucifix in his hands. The first to arrive were naturally those from Turin.²⁵

Admiration and reverence was evident amongst everyone.²⁶ They wanted to see and touch him as a sign of reverence. This pious pilgrimage assumed extraordinary proportions the following day, 7 April, after the Press had published news of Fr Rua's death. In Mary Help of Christian's Square there was a coming and going of gigs and "automobiles", while a sea of people moved towards the Oratory and the church of St. Francis of Sales. "Everyone wanted to press rosaries, medals, bracelets, books, holy pictures, handkerchiefs to his body, and many women gave the clerics and priests their rings, the men their watches and University students their signed certificates".²⁷ On 8 April came the moment to place him in the casket. Then the casket was transferred to the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians. The people continued filing past.

On the morning of 9 April, the church all decked out in mourning, the funeral rites began with Mass in plain chant (Gregorian), celebrated by Salesian Bishop John Marengo, accompanied by Archbishop Pasquale Morganti from Ravenna, a great friend

²⁵ I draw from Ceria for Fr Rua's funeral, *Vita*, 585-588, and the substantial description in the article "La Morte", in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 150-161.

²⁶ "La morte" in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 151.

²⁷ "La morte", in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 151-152.

of Fr Rua's, and the Dominican Bishop Angelo Francis Scapardini, Bishop of Nusco. Fr Rua had always loved Gregorian chant. The catafalque was modest, without flowers, just six candles, but the ceremony was grandiose and most recollected. The various Associations tied to the Salesians wanted to be there with their respective standards. The Royal family was represented by Princess Leticia Bonaparte. "You have never seen such a crowd and such recollection". When the ceremony finished, not only the Shrine, but also the inner courtyards of the Oratory and the vast church square "presented an aspect of extraordinary festivity". In the afternoon an endless crowd followed or preceded the Fr Rua's casket around the streets of Valdocco. It is calculated that a hundred thousand people stood along the footpaths for the final journey of Fr Rua's through the city where he was born and where he had spent himself without reserve, admired by all. The newspaper *Il Momento*, in its Saturday 9 April edition, wrote:

Around the Casket of the humble priest were all the official representatives of the highest civil authorities, but behind the military cordons trying their best to manage the people in the church, square, streets, was such a huge crowd of people that [Turin] had not seen the equal of for a long time. The most moving significance of the function was those thousands and thousands of people who bore tribute to him through memory, recognition, affection, admiration, veneration. Being successor to Don Bosco was no easy task, and to still maintain, after a quarter century, the intense sympathy that Don Bosco's name irresistibly brings with it, could be none other than the victory of the great and humble person this priest has been. Yesterday, Turin's spontaneous acknowledgement of Fr Rua, was the most noble, eloquent, moving demonstration one could imagine. The bells that rang out at his burial, sang the hymn of his triumph.²⁸

On 9 April a hearse carried the coffin from the church of St Francis of Sales to the Foreign Missions Seminary at Valsalice, the Salesian house where Don Bosco's body had lain for twenty two years. After a final burial blessing, Fr Ru's casket was located in a burial niche, beside Don Bosco's.

The Rector at the Oratory, Fr Secondo Marchisio, gave the last farewell to the deceased Rector Major: "In the name of all your sons at the Oratory, and all of them around the world, I place, O venerable Father, our last loving salute on your casket. Today, over your grave, we make a solemn commitment to always remain faithful to the great teachings left you and us by Venerable Don Bosco and summed up in the motto *prayer and work!* This is the flower which your sons place on their Father's grave".²⁹

²⁸ «La morte», in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 153-154.

²⁹ «La morte», in *Bollettino Salesiano*, May 1910, 156.

EPILOGUE

Towards Beatification

At Fr Michael Rua's death, as we have seen, those who had known him or simply approached him, Salesian or not, described him as a saint, and were convinced of his holiness, as if the Church had already declared it. Peter Fedele, historian of the University of Turin, told his successor Paul Albera that had it been the Middle Ages, Valdocco would not have celebrated a *Requiem* mass, but would have immediately sung the Mass in honour of St Michael Rua, canonised by popular acclaim.¹ But the Church of the 20th Century, at least until the advent of John Paul II, moved with lead feet in the question of beatification and canonisation.

The idea of introducing his Cause of Beatification, already aired in 1910, did not have long to wait. On 2 May 1922, Cardinal Augustine Richelmy set up the ecclesiastical tribunal in Turin for the ordinary and information process. Twenty direct testimonies were called and two official ones. 226 sessions followed, until 20 November 1928.² In 1931 Cardinal Joseph Gamba began the process of examining Fr Rua's writings, an easy task, given that he had published hardly anything. In 1936 his successor, Maurilio Fossati, set up a special process (*de non cultu*) to ensure that no public worship was given to poor Fr Rua.³ The "Decree to introduce the Cause of Beatification and Canonisation of the Servant of God Fr Michael Rua, priest of the Pious Society of St Francis of Sales", faithful disciple of Don Bosco, whose spirit "rested on him like Elijah's on Elisha", was signed in Rome on 15 January 1936.⁴ It announced the imminent opening of the process, which began on 10 November 1936 with twenty four testimonies, four of which were official, and concluded on 4 May 1938, after 174 sessions.⁵ Then war broke out and slowed everything down. Fr Rua's heroic virtues, so evident to readers of the documents during the process, were recognised by decree of the Congregation of Rites only on 21 April 1953.⁶ The question of miracles attributed to his intercession then needed to be dealt with: only the guarantee of their authenticity would allow him to be proclaimed Blessed. A further seventeen years went by to finally obtain the "decree on miracles" (19 November 1970).⁷ This was at the time of Paul VI, who certainly looked kindly on the Salesians. Fr Rua's Beatification was celebrated in Rome on 29 October 1972, fifty years after the opening of the information process in Turin.⁸

Don Bosco's faithful disciple

From the superabundance of testimonies on the life, virtues and holy death of Fr Rua, a clear picture emerges. Michael Rua was truly the faithful disciple of Don Bosco that

¹ Ceria, *Vita*, 591.

² All the minutes reproduced in FdR 4255C9-4276E10.

³ This process reproduced in FdR 4326A7-4329A6.

⁴ Cf. decree reproduced in FdR 4255A4-7.

⁵ The "public copy" of the ordinary and apostolic process is reproduced in FdR 4329A7-4423D5.

⁶ Typewritten copy in FdR 4255B1-3.

⁷ This document is reproduced in FdR 4255B4-5.

he had sought to be since his adolescence.⁹

From a physical point of view, the difference between Don Bosco and him was total: Fr Rua was striking for his slender, tall figure, by comparison with the standards of the time (given that we read in his passport from 1908, he was one metre sixty eight centimetres tall). The rigorous asceticism of his lifestyle had strongly influenced his bony appearance. The Cure of d'Ars, St John Maria Vianney, came to mind looking at him. But when he spoke, a kindly smile full of warmth lit up his features and made him attractive. His poor eyes, red from lack of sleep, shone like a child's and their gaze penetrated hearts. There was nothing affected or artificial about him, neither in attitude nor words. He demonstrated the simplicity typical of those for whom being, not appearances, was important.

He possessed a superior, extremely lively intelligence. He understood everything in a flash. His solid, broad culture, assisted by an excellent memory, was prodigious if one thinks of all his activities. In his youth, several thought he would be a university professor. He was not lacking in finesse and he could easily insert a humorous tone in his conversation. On the other hand he was not imaginative, a little staid, yet his behaviour was impressive for its stability of spirit and humour. His spoken and written language – as we see from his circulars – was clear, polished, at times ardent, but not lyrical.

He was gifted with extreme sensitivity and a very affectionate heart. But he was always reserved, modest in his feelings. The lessons from the de La Salle Brothers had profoundly affected him since his adolescence. He showed himself to be polite at all times, secure in himself and distinguished. A child of the common people, he mixed easily with the great. More notable still was his strength of will and self-control in managing his life, time, his day, his calm and persevering grasp of the goals he had set himself.

And in particular Fr Rua appeared highly prudent. His great prudence was especially emphasised in the decree on the heroic nature of his virtues (1953). As St Laurence of Brindisi taught, the rapporteur wrote, there are three essential attitudes for the prudent person: "Above all, having an aim and knowing how to select the most useful ways required to achieve this aim easily and quickly; a prudent person does not go ahead blindly or precipitately, but advisedly, and reflects on how to keep to the best approach. Secondly, knowing how to direct the means sought and found to the required end; therefore a prudent person proceeds carefully and diligently, acting neither carelessly nor inconsistently. Thirdly, being careful and wise in preventing and avoiding danger, reasonable surprises, by being ever cautious. All this – the rapporteur continued – the Servant of God practised perfectly and thus with God's help helped spread the Salesian Society everywhere, fostered piety and zeal for souls amongst its members, increased the number of missionary expeditions, wholeheartedly supported confreres who wanted to dedicate themselves to helping lepers, conscientiously saw that in hostels and colleges piety, study and discipline were encouraged, and firmly but kindly saw that nothing was overlooked, following the teachings of the Founder, that might redound to

⁸ Cf. the reproduction of the Pontifical brief of Fr Rua's Beatification (Rome, 29 October 1972), in FdR 4255B6-12.

⁹ Here I draw freely from the summarised pages of the two beatification processes; the chapters by Auffray (*L'homme et le saint*) and Ceria (*Don Rua e Don Bosco*); and, especially a wonderful text by J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, SDB, 1996, 124-129.

the greater glory of God".¹⁰

Under his wise government the number of professed Salesians went from 773, spread over 58 houses in 1888, to 4001, in 387 houses in 1910.

Trials did not discourage him. At most, during his time as Rector Major, he suffered some very difficult days when the Varazze issue broke at the end of July 1907.

He was an incomparable man of action, a leader who earned the trust and full cooperation of everyone.

As the rapporteur noted regarding the heroic nature of his virtues, Fr Rua put every quality he had at the service of the Kingdom of God. This way he also carried out his providential calling as the faithful continuer of Don Bosco who had left his sons with: "Work and temperance", which for him meant "putting yourself at the service of others, intense apostolic activity made possible by refusing to seek one's own personal interests in every area". Fr Rua held faithfully to that programme with precision and extraordinary completeness. He was, in the true sense of the term, a "workaholic". Every day was full, not a moment of rest, as if he had vowed not to waste a moment. He never took a holiday. "Arriving in paradise", said one of his sons the day after his death, "after he had greeted Don Bosco affectionately, he would have been able to ask him: 'have you got some work for me up here?', and 'What time is meditation?'"

Temperance, another strong point of Don Bosco's programme, was expressed in him through "worship of the Rule". The story of his life has amply demonstrated this. It was also his unremitting vigilance over himself only to give into nature when strictly necessary. It is said that Don Bosco had said: "Fr Rua is the living Rule".

He would never put off his weekly confession not even by twenty four hours, even at the cost of going to confession to a travelling companion, stunned by the request. He never took a siesta. Every day after lunch, he took recreation with the confreres as indicated in the Rule. After evening prayers he observed and saw to the observation of the great religious silence. He respected and ensured respect for the most minute liturgical details.

He was temperate in eating. You never saw him eating outside of meals, despite being the Superior General, and he never tolerated any privileges in his own menu. He was temperate also in sleeping: after a tiring day, he did not lay down on his bed, but on his couch, which was prepared each evening, and he permitted himself no more than five or six hours of sleep. In short, he had learned from his youth not to be worried about himself, not because he had a taste for mortification, but to make his flesh more flexible in serving the spirit of love. In fact he liked to live in charity, like his spiritual Master.

True love is humble and detached. The two evangelical virtues of humility and poverty shone out in Fr Rua with singular splendour. Humility was his favourite virtue: when he was with Don Bosco, we have noted, he worked hard but kept in his shadow, never coming to the fore. Once he became Rector Major, a task he considered himself unworthy of and ill-equipped for, his only concern was never to behave like the main actor, but only in the name of Don Bosco, want and do what he wanted to do. During his journeys, when he saw the crowds coming to him and showing him esteem and profound veneration in a thousand ways he exclaimed: "See how they love Don Bosco!", or: "But I am not Don Bosco!". We note that a number of people were healed

¹⁰ FdR 4255B2.

through his intercession, but he would always say: "See how powerful Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco are!". On his visiting card you only read: "Fr. Michael Rua", followed by the address.

And as for poverty he made it his beloved companion, showing himself a true son of Don Bosco in this too. He only had two cassocks: one for summer one for winter, both worn out, but always kept very clean. His office showed the same simplicity, as we have said. When he took Don Bosco's place, he wanted absolutely nothing altered in that room where he had lived for twenty two years. He kept it as it was, poor and without ornament. He regularly travelled third class and never took advantage of tourist side trips. His most inspired circular was probably the one of 31 January 1907, already alluded to, dealing with poverty and placed under the banner of "poor Don Bosco".

"Everything for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls". But if we are not careful, we end up seeing only austerity and hard work in Fr Rua. At a distance of a hundred years from his death, we know that this is a false image. As Joseph Aubry had noted, we would understand nothing of his prodigious capacity for work and his ascetic poverty if we overlooked the divine intimacy of their spirit. He had a priestly, constantly tranquil appearance, a man burning with passion like Don Bosco: the passion of God's love and for the salvation of souls. If he appeared tough on the outside, in reality he was full of tenderness, filled with the joy God knows how to grant those who love him.

His fatherly kindness for every confrere was recognised by everyone. Each one in fact, from the largest to the smallest, found an understanding heart in him, one concerned with their abilities, maturity and future, marvellously exercising the art of correction, translating his esteem and affection into delicate gestures of patience and exquisite attentiveness. He answered the letters he received and often signed them with: "Your most affectionate friend".

But we need to insist on his piety and inner life, something we know more by intuition than otherwise, since he would never talk about it. His piety was very simple; there were no ecstasies, and it was a piety shared with his confreres in daily community practices: vocal prayer, meditation, Mass. He made an impression nevertheless, since his lively faith made true prayer of it (not just a formula or a ritual), meaning a true encounter with God, the filial adoration with his whole being, visible adoration in his recollection and sometimes visibly transforming his features. To judge his capacity for recollection in prayer it was enough to see him during his thanksgiving after Mass, kneeling in the sacristy, with his face between his bony hands, while he was speaking with his God. Prayer totally filled his days. The spirit of prayer kept him united with God everywhere, in work, at meetings, on a journey. When he was at Valdocco the last act of the day was a visit to the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians at the dead of night: he went into the choir loft where he could stare at the tabernacle and the picture of the Virgin.

In short, despite the difference in character, Fr Rua was a faithful disciple and worthy continuer of Don Bosco. When Paul VI in 1972 proclaimed him Blessed in St Peter's Basilica, he celebrated him under this precise title: "Why is Fr Rua beatified, meaning glorified? He has been beatified and glorified precisely because he is a successor, meaning a continuation of Don Bosco: a son, disciple, imitator; he did this with others, we well know, but especially amongst them. Of the Saint's example he made a School, of his personal work an extended institution, we could say, around the world; of his life,

a history, of his rule a spirit, of his holiness a type, a method. Of a spring welling up he made a river... The prodigious fruitfulness of the Salesian Family, one of the greatest and most significant phenomena in the perennial vitality of the Church throughout the last century and in our own, had its origins in Don Bosco, and its continuation in Fr Rua. He was his faithful follower who, since the humble beginnings in Valdocco served the Salesian work during its incredible expansion, understood the worth of the formula, developed it with textual consistency, but always with a astute inventiveness. Fr Rua was the most faithful, and therefore the most humble and worthy of the sons of Don Bosco... He began a tradition ... He teaches the Salesians to remain Salesians, ever faithful sons of their Founder”.¹¹

¹¹ The complete text of Paul VI's homily was published in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, December 1972, 10-13.