

DON BOSCO WITH GOD

E. CERIA sc.

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION

To Very Reverend
FATHER PHILIP RINALDI
Third Successor of
BLESSED JOHN BOSCO
in the year of Beatification

TRANSLATOR'S DEDICATION

To the Novices of 1942 in the hope that this Treatise on our Father's Union With God
may be of use to them.
(H. McG, s.c.)

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INTRODUCTION

To simple-minded people a saint is a man of ecstasies, prophecies, and miracles. These, however, are charismatic gifts (not essential to sanctity) graciously bestowed by God from the beginning in order to be a lasting testimony of the Divine power of the Church and in order to awaken, reawaken, and keep awake the thoughts of things eternal in the minds of men. A saint is a man of God, wholly of God; a man who according to St Paul (Gal. 2:19) lives entirely unto God; a man therefore, who in God seeks the beginning and places the end of all his thoughts, his desires, his actions. Those who have been regenerated in the waters of Baptism have received the elements of this supernatural life in the grace bestowed upon them by God's infinite goodness; but practically there are very few Christians who by perfect correspondence to Divine inspiration and urgings have reached such a state as to apply to themselves in all its extension that saying of the same Apostle:—*I live, or rather not I, but it is Christ that lives in me.* (Gal. 2: 20.)

Now a saint is shown to us as one who does live the supernatural life to the full, in the measure, that is, possible for a human creature; so that habitually his *citizenship is in heaven*. His abode is on earth but he is a citizen of Heaven, with his heart ever turned there where he knows the source of all his good to be.

Herein we have the spirit of prayer understood chiefly as an ascension, an elevation, a loving dart of the soul towards God¹ so that nothing on earth is able to distract her from the supreme object of her love. It is the apprenticeship here below of the heavenly life which will be the direct, the loving, and the eternal vision of God. With this in mind it needs courage to confess that not all the biographies of the saints that appear nowadays on all sides of us really contain the lives of the saints. Certainly saints have accomplished missions also that must be placed within the framework of events contemporary to them. In the part they took in certain currents of thought the Catholic can see, so to speak, the hand of Divine Providence which raises up heroes at the opportune moment and in the right place fit to carry on missions of the greatest importance in the religious and civil spheres.

Under this aspect, modern hagiography, we shall not deny it, has swept away those inveterate prejudices that made the saints look somewhat like wandering moon-men having nothing to do with earth, if not monomaniacs whom people loved to call mystics., This was a nickname coined on account of the ignorance of mysticism and also scornfully applied to persons privileged with experiences of the highest spiritual order. Yes, it is a good thing to give honour to the disciples of the historical method, if the figures of the saints can in certain places be presented nowadays without resurrecting former antipathies. Yet, it is undeniable that in this way their true personality runs the risk of

¹In the general sense, Prayer is for St. John Damascene *Ascensus in Deum*; and for St. Augustine *Mentis ad Deum affectuosa intentio*.

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fading away, since the aureola that made them what they are and that ought to show them as they really were would be cast aside. The two aspects should be distinguishable without separating them.

How can we overlook sanctity when we study the saints? Sanctity is a reality over which positive science whether historical or psychological might pass lightly, but which is never neglected by men who are trained in the study of facts appertaining to a higher order where the human meets and becomes intimately united to the Divine. This is the reason the idea of a saint is falsified by those writers who think it a waste of time or an indifferent thing to look upon him as a man in union with God.

At this point we shall do well to add another observation. Often have we heard and read that Don Bosco is a modern saint. Such an assertion requires prudent treatment; it is to be understood with a grain of salt, or else the doubt may arise that sanctity like most human things must be modernized with the passage of time. Far from us be the idea that there exist two kinds of sanctity: the first, good for a past era; the second, especially made for our own days! The action of Divine grace that moulds saints changes not with the wandering years as do the myriad activities of man which need changing in order to be adaptable to time and circumstances; nor is there a difference between the co-operation a man gives to the sanctifying action of grace in these days and that given by a man long ago. The perfect love for love, the essential element in sanctity, is like to the sun in this that from the first day of creation it has delighted the world, always bathing it in the splendour of its light and heat in the same manner. We do not hereby say that the above assertion cannot be reasonably interpreted, provided that it is taken in the sense that a Saint is a man of his times and that thus while he fulfils a mission of doing good in a certain historical period he assumes certain accidental attitudes that in other times would be put down as anachronistic. Notwithstanding this, the method of procedure itself, if once we have established the identity of the guiding principle, the strengthening source, and the ideal of every holy undertaking, never clothes itself with the characteristics of such conspicuous fashions as to give rise to a saying such as this "So many generations, so many sanctities."

There is gross misunderstanding to be avoided in a particular manner when we proclaim Don Bosco as the modern saint. In these days of feverish activity such a sobriquet is displayed for the purpose of setting him up as the saint of action. It would seem from this that the Church from the time of St Paul right down to the present day never had such phenomena as Saints of action; and that a Saint of action in these days of ours must not and cannot be a man of prayer as well. There is no sanctity without the interior life and no interior life without the spirit of prayer. Such is genuine spirituality—yesterday, today, always—action and prayer, blended, saturated indivisible as on the day of Pentecost.

One² who has studied deeply and knows St Paul well gives a sketch of him describing him in the exercise of the Apostolate, which sketch seems to find its exact copy in Don Bosco.

"With a facility unequalled the Apostle combines the most sublime mysticism with the most practical ascetism; his eyes pierce the Heavens, yet his feet remain in contact with

²Prat: *Theologie de S. Paul*. Vol. II. I. VI, 3, 5. Beauchesne

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the earth. Nothing is above him, nothing below. He is declaring himself crucified to the world and living the life of Christ itself. Yet in that same moment he knows how to speak to his children words that ravish by their joy and grace, and how to particularize by prescribing details such as veils for women, orderly arrangement of meetings duty of manual labour, care of an ailing stomach. For this reason his spirituality offers an ever tasty food to the hearts of the lowly, and an inexhaustible mine of profound thoughts for elect souls.”

Passing from the dawn of Christianity into the Middle Ages we see confronting us a St Bonaventure whose recent biographer³ has this observation to make which also seems to have been written for Don Bosco: “Times of struggle need men of great heart who because they stand beyond party factions, can succeed in pacifying their fellowmen; men of clear vision who know their wants and who unswervingly make for their goal; men of prayer that their own souls may be at peace and that light and strength may drop into them from on high.”

You see then how the spirituality of the saints always old and always new never undergoes any change of nature in the passing, of years or in the changing of customs.

However, Apostolic men and Christians versed in the sacred sciences, when they have to give an opinion on spiritual things, are easily deceived into believing themselves to be that which they lecture on. But it is one thing to say, another to do: a man can very well expound the complexities of the spiritual life and yet not live spiritually.

In the pages that follow, priests devoted in a special way to the Sacred Ministry will find, please God, through the merit of Don Bosco, some light and urge that will help them to preserve the *facere et docere*, so that practice may precede, accompany, and follow theory. St Bernard⁴ would wish us to be not only canals but also reservoirs. The laity, then, who do not lose sight of the soul’s interests amid the turmoil of material cares, will read with profit the examples set by a tireless worker whose genius on this earth lay in his way of transforming manual work into prayer and thus carrying out with wonderful naturalness the Gospel’s command *semper orare et non deficere*. (Lk. 18:1).

We do not address ourselves to religious, for these with their knowledge of spiritual things can see in the little set out here much more than our poor eyes could do.

The spirit of prayer is the atmosphere in which a Christian lives. “I shall diffuse the spirit of grace and prayer over the house of David and the people of Jerusalem and they shall turn to me says the Lord.” (Zk 12:10).

The diffusion of this spirit begun in the great day of Pentecost, has continued, continues, and will continue ever fresh in the Church, essential to Christians as the air they breathe. The saints have always breathed it pure, uninterruptedly and deeply. By this salutary respiration they, quickened and *virtute corroborati in interiorem hominem* (Eph. 3:13) gradually cast aside the works of the body listed by St Paul in his epistle to the Galatians and instead begin to take up the fruits of the Holy spirit enumerated by the same Apostle: “*Caritas, gaudium, pax, patientia, benignitas, longanimitas, mansuetudo, fides, modestia, continentia,, castitas.*” (Gal 5:19-25). This is what he calls “living ac-

³Lemmens : Vita di S. Bonaventura P. XIV. Soc, " Vita e Pensiero " Milano (1921),

⁴In Cant. Ser PVIII. 3,

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ording to the spirit and walking in the spirit.” This is what he means when he says “filled with the fulness of God.” Would that we could understand well all these things cum omnibus Sanctis but here on earth with Don Bosco and at his school!

For the division of the matter we shall adopt the idea from a splendid Biblical image. “The way of the just” is likened by the Holy Spirit to the “light that begins to shine, that advances and increases until it attains full day.” (Prov. 4:18.). True sons of light, the saints are the lamps upon earth growing more and more in virtue up to perfection and in their ascension they attain to heights where they shine like the sun before the Lord. (Jn 12:36., Lk 16:8, Phil 2:15, 2 Cor 3:18., Mt 13:43).

We shall distinguish then in Don Bosco’s life three phases or periods which we can designate as the dawn, the noonday, and the glorious sunset or better the immediate beginning of the passage from the firmament of the Church militant to the *Caeli Caelorum*, to the highest heaven of the Church triumphant. (3 Kg 8:27).

In the meantime our hearts overflow with joy as we think that now our dearest Father seated in the company of the Blessed not only will enlighten with the light of his word and example the paths our exile feet must tread, but he will also make himself our potent advocate before God so that one day we too may reach the bliss of the Eternal Kingdom.

Part I.

AURORA CONSURGENS

Chapter 1 At Home

There are fleeting moments of grace in the spiritual life when the soul receives sudden, rapid, and salutary intuitions. These inspirations are sudden in regard to the act in itself of the knowing faculty. Although “the Spirit breathes where it will” yet, generally speaking, this perception (in things of such a nature) so sure and so immediate usually requires as a necessary condition an interior preparation. This preparation, more or less long and conscious, principally consists in faithful correspondence to supernatural gifts.

Little John Bosco, a child of eleven years, had one of these revealing flashes from on high. A mysterious inclination of his young heart made him very much attached to a worthy priest. Having placed himself with childlike confidence in such hands, he brought away a precious teaching from this school, so short in its duration. He began to understand that making a short daily meditation benefitted his soul, and in doing this he framed two fruitful mottoes; to taste what the spiritual life is; not to act any more like a machine “which does a thing without knowing the reason why.” He himself writes in such a strain in his unpublished Memoirs compiled at the command of Pius IX for the benefit of his sons: “At first I acted rather materially.” We cannot afford to pass over one particular word in this sentence which escaped from his pen. It is worth noting that “rather” weakens the meaning of the nearby adverb “materially”. Thus there was something in this first idea of spirituality, in the little boy, vague and undetermined as much as you will, yet distinct from what is merely material in activity. What actually astonishes us is to see in one of so tender an age that form of piety which was to become his own and that of his children, namely the harmony between “Ora et labora” or prayer the soul of action.

From the very beginning of his life he learnt from his mother the love of prayer. In those good old days of country life in Piedmont, despite foreign infiltrations, Christian customs and traditions were perpetuated peacefully from generation to generation. These hard working and honest folk, around the blazing country hearth, which witnessed the intimate joys of family life, would close the day with common prayer. They recited the rosary before an image of the Blessed Virgin, the Comforter of the afflicted. The home deserved the name of a homely shrine.

In such a healthy environment, a high-souled woman, as John’s mother was, was the incomparable mistress of religion. This was more so when, as in the case of John’s mother, the educative force of good example was supported by the efficacy of speech. From John’s infancy we know that that spontaneity proper to the speech of a mother instilled in him the living sentiment of God’s presence, a pure admiration of His works in creation, gratitude for His benefits, and together with conformity to His Will the fear of offending Him. Never before perhaps did the teaching of a mother meet with a more filial, docile nature in the reception of maternal advice. In this way the child from his

humble family home began to ascend to the house of the Lord and the childish accents of his little heart assumed the form of newer outbursts for heavenly things. The tracing out of Don Bosco's life will readily make us apply to him the words of Ecclesiasticus:

"When I was young, before I wandered about, I sought for wisdom openly in my prayer. I prayed for her in the temple and unto the very end will I seek after her as she flourished as a grape soon ripe."

On feast days he went with joy to the Divine services. As he assisted with great devotion this inspired him with such fervour that its sweet impression vibrated in his soul for the remainder of the week. There are abundant testimonies of persons who knew him as a child. Such testimonies declare that he would often burst into prayer as he did his tasks in the fields which he had already done since his tenderest years. With his silvery voice he would make the solitary hills re-echo with sacred hymns. He would (as other children do) erect little altars and adorn the image of his Madonna with flowers and green leaves. As other children seldom do, however, he would call to his little altar as many of his little friends as he could to pray, to sing, and even to repeat devoutly the ceremonies they had seen in the church.

The word of God attracted him. While listening to sermons or attending catechism class he never allowed a single syllable to go astray. Any occasion was good to gather people around him. Barefooted and ragged he would step upon a bench and redeliver with ease the curate's Sunday sermons word for word. Some times he would relate an edifying fact learned and particularly reserved for that moment. His programme was always interspersed with prayers and if it were the time the crowd of villagers was made to recite its evening devotions. Such zeal in doing good was enkindled and kept alive by the growing spirit of union with God.

The fathers of the spiritual life considered mortification (which means death to oneself in order to live the life of Jesus Christ and of God) as an efficacious means towards this union. Souls who are more magnetically drawn towards God give themselves to mortification as by an irresistible instinct of love. The world, ignorant as it is, when it looks upon saints rejoicing amidst voluntary privations and sufferings, astonishingly asks:

"*Ut quid perditio haec?* For what reason are so many comforts, so much good ruthlessly scattered?" The answer is as old as the question. St Paul gave it long ago: "And they that are Christ's have crucified their flesh."

Those who with Christ have risen to the life of the spirit sacrifice their flesh with joy in order to live a life according to the spirit. Experience teaches that so the spirit of prayer develops as from it proceeds the fruit of one's actions. Even before little John had encountered; the priest who taught him how to meditate he had spontaneously understood this great truth of Christian perfection. In his above-mentioned memories he writes: "Among other things he at once forbade me to carry out a penance which I was accustomed to do and which was not according to my age and condition."

His priestly benefactor encouraged him to frequent instead the Sacraments of penance and of the Eucharist.

Just one year before he met this worthy priest, he had made his first Holy Communion. He was then ten years old. To the rigid custom of not permitting children under twelve

or fourteen years to Communion this was a violence. But here the communicant stood at the Holy Table so well prepared that the Parish priest resolutely closed an eye, *non obstantibus quibuscumque*. Don Bosco writes:

“There seems to have been some improvement in my life from that day.”

Unfortunately, however, the time so fruitfully spent with this good minister of God who introduced him so gently into piety and knowledge was shattered by death. Difficult trials then awaited Margaret’s little son. In the end he had to abandon his maternal home and place himself under a master to work as a farm-hand. Cleverly talented and still more with a tenacious memory. John was constrained to waste his promising qualities in crude peasant work. God wished it. He wanted to erect an edifice of solid virtue on the firm foundation of humility. Prayer was the food and comfort of John. To prayer there is to be added something. Every Saturday evening he would ask his master’s leave to betake himself the following morning to a village an hour’s distance away. There he would hear a very early Mass. But why such hurry when he could have easily heard a later one together with other functions? He went there so early in order to make his confession and to receive Holy Communion. He persevered in this practice for two entire years. In the days of rigid Jansenism this was a great thing! Greater still was it for a child so far away from home and in such conditions of life, where he was not animated by the example and encouragement of others.

Such great love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is a clear sign or an uncommon advancement in the spirit of prayer. The spirit of prayer excites in a soul internal dispositions which easily reveal themselves in his external conduct, his deportment, and conversation. In the process of Don Bosco’s Beatification and Canonisation the proofs proffered by the surviving members of the family with which John Bosco served his time as a farmhand leave little doubt in this regard. They never had seen or did they imagine a servant boy so obedient so hardworking, so exemplary. At home the duties of a good Christian were carried out with that characteristic regularity of deep-rooted domestic customs which are ever tenacious in country families and which were in those days of wholesome country life very tenacious. Therefore, John the servant boy prayed on his knees, prayed more often than others, and prayed for a long time. Outside the house while looking after the cows in the meadow he was often found either in prayer or reading his catechism which was his book of meditation. The old master of the house was returning one day tired from the fields. He found John peacefully saying the Angelus. He was offended and complained of John as if he were neglecting his work in order to think (as he put it) of heaven. John finished his prayer and respectfully approached the master.

“You know perfectly if I spare myself or not. Anyhow more is gained by prayer than by work. With prayer four ears of corn will grow from two grains: with work two ears are got from four gains.”

If John was penetrated with such sentiments, what wonder is there if eye-witnesses tell us that in him they found calmness of manner and equalness of humour, that they observed in him good judgment, reserve in his dealings with others, quiet behaviour, and absolute abhorrence not only of what blemishes the candour of the soul but also anything that might be unbecoming to a sincere Christian youth. While he was there

at the Moglia farm he never neglected his work for the children. He amused them with games and other past times. He taught them catechism and induced them to pray. The priest to whom he confessed on a Sunday wept with consolation at seeing the piety of the children, the elect of his flock, flourishing. This was entirely due to John the farmer's boy and the fact remains that long after he had departed the good pastor had only to continue the children's gatherings in order to create a useful festive oratory.

John went away from there, as the continual thought of his studies troubled him. The *Via Crucis* was still long and sorrowful. In discouragements, intermingled with hope and delusion, he experienced more than ever the efficacy of St Bernard's words:

"Be devout to Mary."

Gradually as he delved deep into the knowledge of Divine things he felt how sweet this devotion was when comprising complete confidence and filial love: a devotion so widely preached and practised by the saints and cherished so much by pious hearts.

On the hill overlooking Castelnuovo there is a solitary little church dedicated to our Lady. For John it became the goal of frequent visits. He went there either alone or more often in the company of his companions. The remembrance of these pilgrimages made in his youth to this sanctuary of Mary was so indelibly impressed on Don Bosco's memory that in his declining years the very thought of them was enough to move him to tears.

It seems opportune to open a brief parenthesis here before proceeding deeper into the study of Don Bosco, a parenthesis that will fix clearly the fundamental concept of prayer. In the Christian life prayer is extremely important. No one will reasonably doubt that St. Paul writing to Timothy recommended it before everything else:

"Primum omnium."

Prayer then is a state and an act. As a state it is continuous as the same apostle wished when he said:

"Sine intermissione orate."

No one can remain fixed in God but one can always remain in the disposition of prayer through habitual charity. The soul of the just since it possesses sanctifying grace has in itself the required conditions in order that it may verify the words of our Lord:

"We shall come to him and make our abode in him."

The soul of the just thus receives from the Blessed Trinity the communication of its life, so that there is prayer without interruption. Besides the ordinary and common state of prayer so understood there are other states most elevated and mystical, the pure privilege of a few. Prayer, as an act, has four forms pointed out by St. Paul when he teaches Timothy:

"Obsecrationes, orationes, postulationes, gratiarum actiones" that is, supplications for ourselves, prayers of adoration, petitions on behalf of others, and thanksgiving for benefits received. In substance this is the theology of prayer. To come in contact with it, as the saints have lived it, is a spectacle that edifies and enraptures.

Chapter 2 At School

The life of John Bosco underwent an abrupt change when forced to leave his native fields he went to Chieri: from a country boy he became a student and a town-boy all of a sudden. Chieri was not Turin but everything is relative in this world. There were the usual dangerous novelties that accompany a more refined ambient: there was freedom there was youth. Suppose we take a countryman's son. Always has he been under the gaze of his parents and has never been far from his nest; unskilled he is save in farm work and rustic pleasures, never has he moved in society beyond that of humble folk. This boy thrown suddenly into a so called civilized and populous centre, into habits and customs. Then would we have all the requirements of a "Hercules' Choice." Let us suppose that he has reached the fullness of his boyhood, has a rare intellect and a lively spirit. This boy arrives fresh from the fields in order to plunge into an unbridled gang of pupils in the school.

John was fortunate for he was forewarned against such perils because of his holy intention and humble poverty and an enlighten piety which acts as a shield whereon enemy attacks are broken. This piety "profitable in all things" since it shows everything in its true light, that is in the Divine light, guided his first steps which usually are the most critical, and led him to make his first acquaintances and watched over him in his dealings with companions. He himself lets us know how.

"The first person I knew was a priest dear to and honoured by me. He gave me good advice on how to hold myself far from dangers. He used to invite me to serve his Mass which invitations gave him a good opportunity for saying a good word to me. He introduced me to the head of the school and to the other teachers. In my mind I had divided companions into three lists: viz.; good, indifferent, and bad. These last I avoided absolutely and always as soon as I came to know them; the indifferent boys were to be treated courteously and only when necessity wanted; the good I would be friendly with, though familiar with the best, when they proved themselves so. This was my firm resolution. Nevertheless, I had to struggle not a little with those I did not know very well. I freed myself from the company of the wicked by fleeing from the least contact with them whenever I succeeded in discovering them."

When he had thus found his standpoint in these most indispensable relations his piety well directed him in his search for things he most desired. In fact, he writes:

"My greatest fortune was the choice of a fixed confessor who was a canon of a collegiate church. He welcomed me always with great kindness every time I went to visit him: nay, he encouraged me to go to Confession and Communion more frequently. It was a very rare thing in those days to find anyone encouraging frequency of the sacraments. He who would go often, that is more than once a month, would be considered very virtuous: many confessors did not allow it. On my part I felt myself indebted to this my confessor

that I was not dragged by my companions to certain disorders which inexperienced boys have much to grieve for during their time at big schools.”

Not only did companions not drag him into disorders, but he attracted and preserved many of them on the right path. A pious youth who is first in his class is frank and does not make show of his knowledge, easily gains the heart of his school-fellows. So, John gained in a short time such an esteem and affection among his companions at Chieri that he succeeded in founding a club under the title “The Mirth Club.” The rules of this club were two only: first, to avoid any word or action which is unbecoming to a Christian; second, to accomplish faithfully the duties of their religion and school. Every member was obliged to look for and initiate games that would keep their companions cheerful, everything that would cause melancholy especially if it were forbidden by the law of God, was taboo’d. Every feast the members of the club used to go to catechism class in the Jesuit church. During the week they would gather in the house of one or other of them without barring anyone who wished from taking part. Here they would pass their time in pleasant recreation, in good conferences, in reading, in prayer, in giving one another good advice, and in pointing out personal defects which they had observed or heard of. Besides these friendly gatherings (writes Don Bosco) they used to go for Confession and Communion, and to hear sermons. Thus, did they all seek cheerfulness as a means for serving the Lord. (Ps. 99:1).

It is not our task to be rhetorical, as our aim above all is edification: but facts generate admiration. Thanks be to God, there are many pious lads; but it is difficult to find some of such an active piety that, not satisfied with keeping beside God (Gen. 5:24), they feel a goading to carry Him into the souls of others in order that they may be led nearer Him. John Bosco had in him a piety like unto goodness which is said to be diffusive by its own nature. To see a person and to think at once of rendering him a service or making him better in the Christian sense of the word had to be the programme of his Sacerdotal life one day. We have seen him among his contemporaries and school-fellows, yet if we were to give a more detailed study of him we would be obliged to repeat ourselves too frequently. Since however this is not a biography we feel it convenient to set forth in relief a foreshadowing of what would be the characteristic of his spirituality.

At this point some diffident reader, perhaps, may note that John Bosco had an inclination to show himself in public and may call to mind his reputed skill in games and in acrobatic feats and may be tempted to pass remarks on the moving force of these external signs. Would this reader come to the conclusion that his vampings of popularity and theatrical tastes are too incompatible with demands of the interior life, with the dislike of noise, the desire of being unknown, which are the tenets of the ascetical code? To dispel such doubts we must weigh the purposes, the circumstances, the means, and the effects. Let us pass over this and come rather to another fact. When he treats with persons of various ranks his encouraging spirit is always the same; it is the zeal of a pious soul that is always preoccupied about the spiritual welfare of others. The son of the mistress of the house was a first-class scamp, the despair of all. John affectionately gained him, slowly attracted him to religious practices; he made of him an excellent boy instead. While he frequented the cathedral he made friends with the sacristan, a man advanced in age, of little learning, slow in intelligence, taken up with his duties, and yet

a man who was desirous of becoming a priest. John without expecting any reward and with heroic charity offered himself to teach him every day. This lasted for two years until he had prepared him for his clerical clothing. John became the friend of a Jew, a boy of eighteen: he led him to desire Baptism, privately did he instruct him, gradually he overcame the opposition of the boy's people and co-religionists, and finally had the happiness of seeing him washed at the Holy Font.

The proverb:

"Tell me your friends and I shall tell you who you are" helps our argument, if we apply it to the friendship John had with a holy student. Such was the fame that had preceded Louis Comollo to Chieri. Hardly had John got to know of it than he desired to get acquainted with Comollo: when he knew him then did he want him as his friend: he succeeded in this and found that the actuality far surpassed all expectation. We glean the following from his *Memoirs*.

"He was always my dear friend. I fully confided in him and he in me. I let him guide me where and how he wished. We used to go together to Confession, Communion, to make our meditation, spiritual reading, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, to serve Holy Mass."

This hint about meditation assures us that he never omitted to refresh and enrich daily his interior life with this very helpful exercise. And what about their conversation? "From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

They used to talk about spiritual things. Don Bosco writes:

"It was always a great comfort for him to treat of and speak about this subject. He talked with fervour of the immense love of God in giving Himself as food to us in Holy Communion. When he spoke of our Lady he was full of tenderness, and after he had narrated or heard narrated anything, for example an external favour bestowed by Mary, his face would light up and would soon be bathed in tears.

"If Mary, (he would exclaim) bestows such a great favour on this miserable body what will she not pour on the soul of him who invokes her? Oh, if all men were really devoted to Mary, what happiness would we experience in the world!"

In saying this Don Bosco makes himself out to be a hearer, yet he was not always a dumb hearer. Anyhow, outbursts of this nature are practically impossible, especially since they must last a long time, unless there is a mutual understanding and appreciation.

The four years of his high school were crowned with great success. Splendid were the results of the examinations, great the esteem shown by the teachers, hearty the admiration of his companions, and general his popularity among the townsfolk. There were present in him all the signs of the dawn that foretells a fine day. But how many anxieties, difficulties, dangers, privations had he to undergo! His courage did not fail him and this because through prayer he found refuge in the God of all consolations. Providence so disposed things that he was able to comfort those in sorrow.

He was ever calm and never perturbed "by the dry wind that evaporates sad want": but in the second year he was troubled by the lowering of a cloud. We shall call it, in this age of boyhood crises, the crisis of vocation.

That John desired to become a priest right from his young days is a fact incontestable; so attracted was he to it that it seemed he was born for nothing else.. In the second year

before the end of school two fears raised, their ugly heads and caused him the more to be perplexed the more he advanced to the decisive moment. On the one hand he better understood the sublimity of the priestly state, yet felt too unworthy of it on account of his meagre virtue; on the other hand, he was not ignorant of the rocks that strew the world and feared he would shipwreck were he to be a cleric in the world. This spiritual battle that racked his soul appears in his "Memoirs" written years afterwards:

"Oh, if at that time I had had a guide, one who would have looked after my soul, I certainly would have been favoured indeed: unfortunately this treasure was denied me."

His confessor, even, who took such great care to make him a good Catholic refrained from touching the vital point of vocation. Constrained to decide for himself he consulted books that treated about career. It seemed that a ray of light fell upon his soul.

"If I remain a cleric in the world," he said to himself, "my vocation will be in danger. I shall embrace the ecclesiastical state, renounce the world, enter the cloister, and there employ my time in studying and meditating. Thus in solitude I shall easily combat my passions, especially pride which is deeply rooted in my heart."

He therefore asked to be admitted among the Franciscans who accepted him the more willingly the more they came to know his talents and piety. But his mind was not at peace. His difficulties increased when some kind and grave persons to whom he had opened his heart endeavoured by all means to turn him away from his resolution of becoming a friar, arid warmly exhorted him to enter the seminary. So his anxieties grew. It was in the way of providence that he was led at length to consult Blessed Joseph Cafasso who was then a young priest but who had already a reputation for possessing in great measure the gift of counsel. Father Cafasso listened attentively to him and told him to go on with his studies and to enter the seminary. During all these interior anxieties his exterior life went on as if nothing was happening: he carried on his studies, pious exercises, works of zeal, and manual labour in order to gain his livelihood. And no one saw the disturbed depths below this superficial calm.

When the thought of God dominates a man's mind it makes him master of himself and helps him to remain habitually calm in his exterior life in spite of an interior racked by trouble. The authority of Fr Cafasso cleared his doubts for the moment, but later on while reading new books on the choice of a state of life he was again plunged into his former sadness. He would have returned to the Franciscans had not something unknown happened and brought him to his final decision: he tells us that since the obstacles were increasing he decided to put the whole affair before Comollo. It seems a strange thing the length of time he took to decide to allow his friend to play a role in this his interior drama. But intimate friendship is not a guarantee of capacity in dealing with such delicate matters. John on the other hand, enriched as he was with ideas and the ease of communicating them, was anything but talkative. Both the friends prayed and received the Sacraments together; both wrote to consult a zealous priest, Comollo's uncle. This priest just on the last day of the novena to our Blessed Lady replied to his nephew:

"I have meditated well on the points you wrote about and I would advise your friend to put off his entrance into an Order. Let him take the clerical habit and while he is carrying on his studies he will come to know the way the Lord had ordained for him. Let him not have fear of losing his vocation, for prayer and devout exercises will overcome

all obstacles.”

Study, prayer, piety: were not these already the components of his life in Chieri? Like Fr Cafasso, the parish priest too counselled him to enter the Seminary and set aside the resolution of entering a religious community until a later date.

“I seriously gave myself up to things,” he writes when the horizon was brightening, “that were a preparation for my clerical clothing.”

John did not look upon this reception of the cassock as a mere ceremony. He had well prepared his soul for it and understood its sacredness, on account of that recollection and prayer he knew so thoroughly. There was no need for him to isolate himself from men in order to practice his contemplative life: in fact, he would not have been able to be alone, for he was a born leader of a gang of fifty boys who loved and obeyed him like a father. The expressions we find in his “Memoirs” are those his heart felt during the ceremony.

“When the celebrating priest told me to remove my secular clothes with the words: *‘Exuat to Dominus veterem hominem cum actibus suis’* I said in my heart.

‘Oh, what old rags I need to cast away! My God, destroy all evil habits in me!’

When he gave me the Roman collar and said:

‘Induat te Dominus novum hominem qui secundum Deum creatus est in justitia et sanctitate veritatis’

I felt so moved that I said to myself: ‘Yes, O my God, grant that from this moment I may begin a new life totally based on Thy Divine desires and that justice and sanctity may be the constant object of my thoughts, words, deeds. Amen. O Mary, be thou my salvation!’

As a crowning point he wrote and rewrote a cleric’s rule of life with seven articles. The sixth was thus worded:

“Besides the ordinary practices of piety I shall never omit a daily meditation and spiritual reading.”

He did not want this rule to be a dead letter, so with great solemnity did he kneel before an image of the Madonna and read the seven articles. He prayed fervently and made a formal promise to the heavenly Queen to observe this rule no matter the cost.

The reader can easily note that the spirit of prayer and piety alternated in such a way that they seemed but one thing. For the clarification of ideas it would be well to observe that the spirit of prayer is usually explained in the complexity of acts which honour God and which go by the general name of piety: thus, the former comes to mean the same thing as the latter or if we do wish to perceive any differences we can say that the spirit of prayer is deep, habitual and conscious piety. Let us add a farther useful observation, since we are on this argument. Since we direct our devotion to one fixed point more than another, so too will our piety be designated by different qualifications. It is under this aspect that we can classify the religious orders; for example, the Benedictine piety is called liturgical, that of the Franciscans affectionate, that of the Dominicans dogmatic, that of the Redemptorists the piety of the Eternal Truths. With this criterion before us how can we, after the journey we have so far taken, describe the future Salesian piety? Does it not seem that the first tricklings are seen to arise from a piety that would later

be called Sacramental, on account of the sovereign part confession and Communion took in it?

Thanks to these two Sacraments which he received regularly, the founder of the Salesians poured upon his undertakings the cataract of grace.

Chapter 3 At the Seminary

The seminary of the archdiocese of Turin was then at Chieri and Don Bosco went there on 30th October 1835 when he was twenty years old. As he was a ready and keen observer the young cleric very soon had an exact idea of his duties. The practices of piety were always his earnest inquiry. Here every arrangement was all right for daily Mass, meditation, and rosary, and even for weekly confession. But however arrangements were not quite satisfactory for Communion which could only be received on Sundays and special feast days. To go at any other time during the week one had to commit an act of disobedience. During the breakfast hour cleric Bosco had to make his way to a nearby church and when his thanksgiving was over, there was just sufficient time left to join his companions in going to study and class. On these occasions therefore he had to remain fasting until dinner time. The infraction of the rule could have been justly prohibited. The superiors however gave their tacit consent. They knew very well that such a thing was going on and very often they saw him, but they said nothing. In this way he was able to frequent the Holy Communion whenever he liked and this, he declared, was the ; most efficacious instrument for his vocation.

Nourished by this Bread of Angels John's ecclesiastical spirit was formed under the sweet influence of his devotion to the Blessed Virgin. The last words of his mother before he had entered the seminary were deeply etched in his mind and heart. Although she was an illiterate woman she possessed in an eminent degree that "sensus Christi" which wisdom infused from above, and that aptitude for discerning divine things which is found in simple souls. This may be surprising to profane minds but not so to those who know what the gifts of the Holy Ghost are. John received from his mother this great admonition:

"When you were born I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies I recommended you devotion to Mary our heavenly Mother. Now I beg you to be totally hers, love your fellow students who are devout to her and if you ever become a priest, spread around you devotion to Mary."

He never forgot this fond advice: he always endeavoured to associate with companions who were clients of Mary and lovers of study and piety. Several of his companions who survived him on this earth attest to his irresistible invitations to follow him to church in order to recite there the Vespers of the Madonna or other prayers in her honour; some of these friends testify to his fervour in translating and exemplifying the liturgical hymns of our Lady and to the amiable manner of his singing her glories and relating edifying stories during the hours of recreation. Whilst still a student of Philosophy he esteemed it a privilege to mount the pulpit and give a sermon on our Lady of the Rosary. This was the beginning of these numerous Marian discourses which were his delight right up to his death.

Many times after this John Bosco, as a simple cleric, went into the pulpit. Seeing his absolute frankness people used to come to him in times of need and during the summer vacation. It was never necessary to petition him: he was never put out on these occasions. An old saying has it:

"Every man is eloquent in the things he knows."

But this *pectus disertus facit* has no relation with another aphorism no less ancient than the preceding:

"True eloquence comes from the heart."

Both are right and in fact both were complementary in the young cleric John Bosco. Among the resolutions taken on his clothing day there was one which ran:

"As in the past I have served the world with profane literature, so in the future I will strive to serve God by devoting myself to the reading of religious books." During his later years of school life he read with avidity the Italian and Latin classics for the embellishment of his profane or literary culture. This culture was directed from that high sense whence is inspired an intelligence such as his towards everything ideally beautiful and great. In the seminary however he employed his time in reading large volumes on ecclesiastical history, catechism, or apologetics. With his tenacious memory it was enough for him to read anything once to retain it. So much reading not only helped him to procure a solid and firm education but it helped him also to serve God. His soul was a furnace of divine love and the things he read and brought in contact with it were converted into the life-giving heat of faith and zeal. Whence the science of religion and that of holiness drew in him double advantages from such benefits. This is why when the occasion presented itself he was never at a loss to be able to stand up and deliver the sermon. A few moments of recollection and prayer were enough to make him really prepared. John Bosco was continually preaching. Is not every sower of good words a preacher (if we abstract from the solemn meaning that we have of the verb "to preach" that is, a public gathering round the chair of truth, and confine ourselves to the essential element in its meaning, that is, to announce the word of God)? In the sense here the cleric Bosco in the seminary of Chieri was a capable and an untiring preacher. Let us observe this in him: on Thursday many young men of the town would come to visit him. As usual he would be merry with them. He would speak to them of class, study, and the Sacraments. He would not allow them to leave without first bringing them to the church to pray. To those companions who saw this and one day would recall it he used to say:

"We must also introduce into our conversation some thought of supernatural things. It is a seed that in time will bear fruit. With thoughts of this kind he would mix other thoughts on vocation to the ecclesiastical state. To teach catechism to children was his passion. He never let slip an opportunity" of doing so. In fact, he endeavoured to make as much use of these occasions as he could.

In the seminary itself he was a sower of the good word. During the longer recreations the clerics of better conduct held scholastic circles. This custom pleased him very much because besides being a help to study it was also, as he experienced it, a much greater help to piety. He gathered round him a group of intimate friends who stood firm in the observation of the rules and in serious application to their books, and who filled one another with fervour in the spiritual life. Even apart from these meetings his conversations

always ended on his favourite topic.

"Let your speech be always in grace, seasoned with salt." One of the students bears witness that John Bosco spoke willingly of spiritual matters. Then he had an inexhaustible fount of stories which charmed his hearers. A grey-headed friend attests:

"He never once failed during those five years when we were fellow students to fulfil a resolution he took of narrating every day an example culled from church history, from the lives of the saints, or from the glories of Mary."

This resolution was part of the programme of his clerical life, as we have seen. To speak constantly of God in such a way, the heart must indeed be filled with Him.

Among those who visited the cleric Bosco in the first year of seminary life the most constant and most desired was Aloysius Comollo who was then in his final year of Humanities. They were both worthy of each other: between them no secret existed. Loving God, as they did, they communicated to each other, their own plans for a life entirely consecrated to the salvation of souls. It is easy to picture what good company they were when they were both at the seminary and information on this point is not wanting. Thus we can keep close to our two mends and can thus inquire into the life of John Bosco at the seminary. The regular uniformity of such a life makes one day resemble another very much: individual tendencies are therefore more clearly noticed. If we take into consideration what one of his old teachers said the cleric Bosco made notable progress in study and piety without appearing to do so on account of that mirth which was the characteristic of his life. Because of this his life at the seminary was appreciated by many. Later developments were necessary in order that they, in recalling to mind remote happenings, would understand what they had not understood before and would say, as one of John's professors did say of him:

"I remember when he was my pupil ... he was pious, diligent, and exemplary. Certainly no one would have thought that he would become what he has become. Yet, I must say, that his dignified behaviour, the exactitude with which he fulfilled his religious and scholastic duties were exemplary."

Time that waits for no man has either lessened the number of precious testimonies or has weakened the memory of those days. We are fortunate however in having one reliable source (of which we will take full advantage) which is concerning the friendship between him and Comollo.

These two clerics agreed perfectly in all things appertaining to study, piety, school and religion. In youths of sterling qualities, piety is threatened in three ways by their love of study.

(1) Mental activity domineers the spirit, peoples it with ideas whose association leads to distraction during the practices of piety.

(2) Good results in examinations promote youthful vanity which if left unhindered undermines little by little the unction of grace.

(3) Those who have a passion for study easily yield to the temptation of cutting short the time set apart for prayer: they seek whenever possible pretenses to be excused. They think that time not employed in study is time lost.

In religious congregations clerics pass to study after a period of sound spiritual preparation which teaches them to put piety at the head of all. Seminarians however the very

day after their donning the ecclesiastical habit carry on the life of a student. If they are absorbed by books and professors they have hardly place in their mind for the church and practices of piety. The cleric Bosco had greater mental vigour than his friend, Comollo. There was a mutual understanding in their desire for study and piety. They regarded study as a duty not forgetting however that among all duties that to God comes first. They understood that for ecclesiastics study was a means and not an end, a very secondary means at that! Sanctity of life had to take precedence. In consequence of this they were very very far from subordinating the spirit of prayer to the love of knowledge; they assisted each other to make progress in the interior life.

"I was always intimate with him," writes Don Bosco "as long as God kept him in life. I looked upon him as a saint. I loved him for his rare virtue and whenever I was with him I was constrained to imitate him in something: he loved me for the help I gave him, in studies."

In one single instance, immaterial and yet enlightening, John Bosco kept to his own way of thinking. Comollo was very devout to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and as he approached the Holy Table he would break into sighs of emotion. When he returned he seemed to be out of himself and prayed while he sobbed and cried aloud. He did not recover from these transports until the Mass was over. John would have preferred Comollo to control himself in order to avoid drawing attention: but Comollo told him that he would probably have suffocated if he had not found a vent for the expression of his affections. John while he respected this ardent devotion had an aversion for everything that was singular or that would attract attention. His own piety which was none the less ardent had an entirely different aspect. There was nothing exceptional in the manner in which he approached the Holy Table. During his thanksgiving he was motionless, with body erect, head slightly bent, his hands joined on his breast. There was no sign of emotion. Now and again his lips trembled as he whispered some silent ejaculation. However his whole countenance revealed the depth of his Faith.

While at home during the holidays the two friends corresponded with each other and paid visits to each other. The subject of their letters and talks was spiritual. A biography of Comollo (who died young, during his second year of theology) is perhaps the most important thing in revealing their holy relations Don Bosco who wrote it hid himself under the title of "An Intimate Friend". The author therefore will be very reserved in speaking about the intimate friend but will shed the full glory on Comollo. John Bosco and Comollo were bosom friends, that is a certainty their souls were knit into one. *Pare cum paribus*.

A little above we mentioned holidays. Concerning them Don Bosco writes:

"Holidays are always a danger to clerics particularly in those times when they lasted for four and a half months." However he made up his mind to sanctify them and to try to keep intact the fervour of seminary life. His first-year holidays were spent with the Jesuits at Montaldo where he taught some lessons of Greek and was an assistant in one of the dormitories. In other years, according to testimony and authentic writings, the way he spent his vacation could be summed up in one sentence: "I will shun all idleness and attend to my religious duties." In order not to be idle he divided his time between study and manual labour according as his bodily health allowed him. At every hour of

the day students came from all around to ask help in revising their lessons and preparing themselves for another year's work. Gladly did he work for them, and one who later on became a professor has left us this testimony:

"The first lesson he taught was love of God and obedience to His commandments. He would never end his class without exhorting us to prayer, to the fear of God, to the avoidance of sin and its occasions. There was nothing extraordinary in his practices of piety. He was faithful in those particular to clerics, namely, meditation, spiritual reading, rosary, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, daily Mass, frequent Confession and Communion. He was ever ready to take part in any sacred function. On Sundays he taught catechism to the boys of the parish and was ever present at parochial sermons. Whenever he heard the tinkle of the bell announcing Viaticum he would go and take a surplice and an umbrella and accompany the Holy Eucharist. He was well aware that to do good he must give good example. Consequently, his conduct at all times and with everybody was so irreproachable that those around him held him in great esteem."

There are many characteristic episodes which adorn his biography that illustrate the strengthening of his ecclesiastical spirit or his interior and exterior sanctity of life. It would be out of place to refer to them here in detail. Let us examine instead the dispositions with which he received Holy Orders.

Towards the end of his life Don Bosco said something about that decisive step in the life of a priest; ordination to the subdiaconate. In the words he used he revealed his soul in such a way that we scarcely can know what to admire in him, whether his extreme delicacy of conscience or his deep esteem for the ecclesiastical state.

"Now that I know the necessary virtues that this important step requires I am convinced that I was unprepared. I had no one to take direct care of my vocation. I went to Fr Cafasso for advice and he told me to go ahead and have confidence. During the ten days' retreat which I spent in 'Casa della Missione' in Turin, I made a general confession in order that I did not want to take a definite resolution without having the opportunity of someone to advise me. I wanted indeed to complete my studies, but I trembled at the thought of binding myself for the rest of my life. It was for this that I did not want to take a definite resolution. Without having the full consent of my confessor. From then onwards I did my best to carry out what Fr. Borel told me:

"A vocation is kept and perfected by frequent Communion and retirement!"

This was the answer that this good Turin priest gave to the question of the cleric Bosco during one of the spiritual retreats he preached in the seminary.

Facts, for which we must thank an intimate friend of our saint and who later on became his confessor until his death, run along side by side with the above expressions. This intimate friend says with regard to the retreat made by the deacon Bosco in preparation for the priesthood:

"The way in which he made this retreat was edifying. He understood the word of God that came to him through sermons and understood particularly those expressions which pointed out the sublime dignity so soon to be conferred on him. As an everlasting souvenir of that retreat he wrote down in a notebook nine resolutions. The second last of these resolutions was:

"I will make a daily meditation and spiritual reading. During the day I will make a

short visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or at least a prayer. I will employ at least a quarter of an hour for and another quarter in thanksgiving after Holy Mass.”

There is no essential difference between this second programme of his life and the first which we have already cited. It merely introduced certain modifications brought about by circumstances. Don Bosco was not now groping about like one in darkness, not even in the early days of life. If we are allowed to indulge in a little humour so much appreciated by Don Bosco, we would declare that his wisdom-tooth was not long in appearing. In fact, from the moment the light of his reason shone forth he saw what was the right path for him to take and went straight along it. And in doing so he used ways and means which his own natural judgement, strengthened by Divine grace, told him were best. Both programmes had four supports upon which would be raised Don Bosco’s sanctity; namely, work, prayer, internal and external mortification, and that to which he would afterwards modestly refer to as the beautiful virtue. In his new programme he particularly outlined the part given to action. Tenacious to his resolutions Father John Bosco will never go for a walk except for a grave reason or to visit the sick. He will rigorously employ his time. He will suffer, do, humiliate himself in, everything in order to save a soul. His rest at night will never be more than five hours. During the day, especially after dinner, he will not lie down except in the case of illness. Work will never be unaccompanied by prayer. Meditation, as always, will have its place in the day’s time-table. From daily meditation the priest in the midst of occupations will draw that spirit of recollection and prayer which are necessary to keep his faith alive, to keep him ever united to the High Priest Jesus Christ of Whom he is the minister, and to receive abundant graces in the exercise of his Sacred Ministry. In the priestly life of Saint John Bosco, Martha was never without Mary: Martha now at prayer, Mary now at work: Martha at prayer as long as the activity of life remains, and towards the end of that life Mary in action.

Part II.

SOL IN MERIDIE

CHAPTER I In the beginning of his mission

Astronomers use a wonderful method when they wish to find out the constitution of a star. They allow the rays of light from the star to pass through a prism; the band of rays is thus broken up into a line of colours, a spectrum, that falls on a white screen behind. Through the analysis of spectra scientists can examine stars even at large distances. In Don Bosco, a soul full of God, the spirit of prayer had no manifestations such as gave immediate insight of his nature and intensity: to know his character therefore and to measure his rank we must of necessity scrutinize the acts of his ordinary life. Few men have been so extraordinary under so ordinary an appearance. In great things as in small there was always that same naturalness that showed him from the first more than a good priest.

In the beginning only he who took it upon himself in his leisure time to observe Don Bosco's command of himself at all times—in company, in trial, in any undertaking—and who had a keen eye for discerning the efficiency of his actions, only he who possessed the difficult genius that readily distinguishes man from man—as, for example, our venerated Pontiff Pius XI—could think of Don Bosco in terms of the honour he deserved. What wonder, then, if some people did not understand him at once and if others even misunderstood him or understood the opposite of what was? These last were few and within the passing of time they have been less, until recently their number was nil; yet there used to be some such.

And in order to keep to our task we shall say that when he was at the zenith of his activities not everyone saw what a man of prayer Don Bosco was; nay, we dare to add that not even his biographers were able at times to penetrate to the depths of his inmost spirit of prayer so preoccupied were they in narrating his great deeds. However, the biographical material passed on to us is an excellent mine for the exploration of him who sets about observing his interior life. It is the attempt in which we shall modestly insist in these pages. As soon as Don Bosco was ordained a priest the first supernatural overflow of his soul was seen in the festive Oratory. He did not create the thing entirely, he did not coin the word at a stroke. There were Sunday catechism classes to boys in every parish; there existed oratories of St. Phillip Neri and St. Charles Borromeo. It was the condition of the times, when so many boys had forgotten long ago what parish they belonged to, that made Don Bosco organize interparochial oratories for these wandering sheep. For such Sunday School gatherings he arranged a programme that spread over the whole day of the Lord. Because of his great love for God Don Bosco felt within him a lively feeling for the *sinite parvulos* of the Gospel, so much so that he saw snares of every kind at every nook and corner lying in wait for youths. "My delight," he wrote

concerning his first years as a priest “was to teach boys their catechism, to talk to them and to be with them.” It seemed too that the youngsters instinctively felt the fascination of his salutary love, for he tells us that when he was living in Turin “crowds of boys would readily follow me through the streets and squares.” Thus it was less fatiguing for him to gather them together than find a shelter for them.

His zeal strove for only one end—to unite them to God by obedience to the Divine Commands and to the laws of the Church. Hence he made it a point first of all to have them fulfilling the precept of hearing Mass on Sundays and Holidays; of teaching them to say morning and night prayers; of preparing them lastly to confess their sins well and to receive Jesus in Holy Communion. Meanwhile he gave them gradually religious instruction by means of Catechism classes and of sermons adapted to their capacities. Alongside of all this he invented a myriad of games which were intended to attract more and more boys and to keep them near him; and yet the centre of all the attractions was certainly he himself with his boundless goodness. So the holiday could in all truthfulness be called a holy day, *dies sanctificatus*. (2 Ex 8:9.) These gatherings on feast days he christened with the name of Oratory, the name he preferred before many others because of its nearness to his ideal. The term, now very popular in Italy, awaits a place in the dictionary for its new meaning besides its venerable ancestor—a small building destined for prayer. Small building! The oratory of Don Bosco is *domus spiritualis* on *viventibus saxis* (1 Peter 2:5.)—hundreds of boys, youths, and young men who flock where there is someone to call them together on the day of the Lord to adore God and to learn how to adore him for all their lives.

How the piety of Don Bosco permeated the entire oratory! He began on December 8th 1841 with just one boy. And before the lesson started—the first lesson of Catechism—he fell to his knees and recited a Hail Mary to Our Lady in order that she might help him to save the soul of that poor lad. Surely, that was a prayer heartfelt and fruitful! On December 8th 1885 as he spoke to his Cooperators on what had then been done and on the conditions of the work forty-five years previously, he declared that it was all the work of Mary Help of Christians on account of that Hail Mary “said with fervour and earnestness.” The first effects of it were not long in manifesting themselves.

The following Sunday Don Bosco’s lone pupil returned but not alone, for he brought with him a crowd of pals, poor street-urchins like himself, who were received and treated by Don Bosco in his enchanting manner. As Sunday followed Sunday the number of boys grew and with the number grew goodness and mirth too. At Christmas a few of them were able to make their First Communion. On the two feasts of our Lady that next came round the Purification and the Annunciation, the praises of the august Mother of God were sung by youthful voices trained by the able Don Bosco into choirs; and besides, scores of the more instructed boys approached the sacraments. Don Bosco was thoroughly happy.

These boisterous gatherings were held in a place of quiet, if not cloistral, at least, broken only at stated times and with moderation. That place of quiet was the Ecclesiastical College of Turin where the finishing touches of sacerdotal formation were put to the newly-ordained Piedmontese priests, by means of a deeper study of moral and pastoral theology and by exercising the sacred ministry under the guidance of capable men — Fr

Joseph Cafasso among them. The zealous apostle of youth could have found no better place for preparing himself for his mission. The three years spent there helped immensely to form his spirit in a very definite manner. The grace which Divine Providence bestowed on him by placing him alongside that holy moulder of priestly souls did not remain fruitless. At the School of Blessed Cafasso Don Bosco avidly imbibed that piety, which by supernatural intuition he had already foretasted in spite of the customs of the day, that piety that meant “unlimited trust in God’s goodness and love for us.” He learned, too, from the holy man’s theological conferences and spiritual direction how to hear confessions “our saint heard insistently repeated that the pulpit was not a stage for showing off one’s talents, but rather for telling the world ‘there is a Heaven; observe the Commandments: pray; be devout to Mary; frequent the Sacraments; flee from idleness, bad company, and dangerous occasions; love your neighbour; be patient in affliction’”, and that no sermon should end without referring to the Eternal Maxims. Don Bosco used to go with him as assistant chaplain of the prisoners: often, too, he was his fellow-preacher in Spiritual Retreats—these were precious opportunities to enkindle his piety more and more. In daily conversations also Don Bosco took for himself titbits of wisdom on “the manner of living in society, of dealing with the world without becoming its slave, of becoming true priests equipped with the necessary virtues, ministers able to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

But Caesar’s wants must not be satisfied by subtracting from God’s. The perpetual being on the move to do good can in the long run be fatal by leading one to suppose that prodigies of charity may dispense with diligent and interior converse with God. It is about this time that Don Bosco added a codicil (let us call it this) to the programme of his priestly life, which was probably dictated to him by that master of wisdom—for those who know how to understand it—namely, experience. We transcribe it such as it is in one of his manuscripts:

“Breviary and confession. I shall strive to recite the Breviary devoutly and in church if possible, so that it may also serve as a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Every week I shall go to confession and I shall do my best to put into practice the resolutions I take there. When I am earnestly begged to hear confession of someone I shall interrupt the Office and even shorten the thanksgiving after Mass in order to exercise this sacred ministry.”

The spirit of prayer when it has become a habit gives a man an atmosphere of calm composure and a delicate sense of right discernment which readily strike the eye of not too casual observers. At the College could often be seen businessmen, politicians, noblemen, big men of the world, who used to come to Blessed Cafasso for spiritual direction. Yet men of this type, not at all inexperienced men, were attracted by Don Bosco and even at that time they knew him as a “man totally God’s” whom they held “in great veneration” as his biographer reports from some of these same gentlemen.

CHAPTER 2 The second stage of his mission

In his seminary days John Bosco had struck up a friendship that was to give good fruit in after years. Fr Borel, a Turin priest, had come to the seminary to preach a spiritual retreat.

“He came into the sacristy,” writes Don Bosco “with cheerful words and merry disposition, but always flavoured with moral thoughts.”

It is said that the first impression is true: this however does not hold in every case, since often an impression has too much of what is subjective in it; but that of our saint was the best and truest. For so it turned out. The priest is seen as a priest in those things that appertain to God; therein he is known whether he is a man of piety or a man of routine. The cleric Bosco, when he had seen Fr. Borel’s “preparation for and thanksgiving after Mass, his comportment, his fervour in celebrating” he at once felt “there was a worthy minister of God.” Note the “at once”: it reminds us of a word to the wise. In what appertained to piety John Bosco had quick insight for apprehending and comprehending in no time. When he heard Fr. Borel preach he immediately put him down as “a saint”; consequently he wished to have a talk with him “about the things of the soul.”

Willingly he wanted to introduce himself, not only to make his confession as was his wont, but also to talk, to hold important tete-a-tete about the soul’s needs that is, about the needs of the spiritual life. The memory of that retreat remained deeply etched in the heart of Don Bosco and so in his three years at the Ecclesiastical College he thought it a golden opportunity whenever he could have a word with the exemplary priest. Fr. Borel knew Don Bosco well and would often invite him to serve in the sacred functions, to hear confessions, and to preach with him. It was there that frequent invitations added to the proverbial activity of his zeal, which gained for him so many laurels, did so much to earn for him among his colleagues the sobriquet of “champion of Holy Church.”

Here were two souls born to understand each other.

Don Bosco was already on intimate terms with Fr Borel and the latter’s home when it was suggested that the young priest should take up his abode with the older. This suggestion was brought forth at the end of the three years passed in the College. The originator of the idea or better the inspiration was the holy priest Fr Joseph Cafasso whose sole desire then was to keep Don Bosco in Turin. Fr Borel lived at the so-called “Refuge”—a name used in order to convey to the people a group of buildings founded by the benevolent Marchioness Barolo for the welfare of poor women and girls. Fr Borel was its rector and spiritual director.

With the holy docility of a son to the guide of his soul Don Bosco followed Fr Cafasso’s

advice as the will of God in his regard and went to the Refuge. He had put aside all other offers and posts and together with his little Oratory (a capital from now on) he continued his work in these new headquarters. The word headquarters would have been a misnomer had it been applied to the narrow apartments allotted to him, but not so when we remember that for three years therein was the chief command of a grand army of boys. To carry on the military metaphor we shall say also that its general staff was founded on charity around which blossomed the crown of virtues spoken of by St Paul in his famous thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians.

More often than all else there kept creeping up before his path occasions that forced him to remember "charity is patient". His three hundred or so little street-arabs frayed the matron's nerves so much so that one fine day she lost her patience and turning them out closed the door on them. Don Bosco lost his work too through his unwillingness to leave the boys alone. New meeting-places were found for the gang but since the boys disturbed the peace or ran foul of exaggerated pretensions those places endured for a short time. The civil and political authorities grew so suspicious of the central figure of it all, Don Bosco, that police eyes followed him from place to place as though he were a hardened criminal, a menace to social order. Old fashioned parochial customs suffered a blow by Don Bosco's boys and speculations on the consequences of this novelty were the order of the day. Finally, because he and his boys were a check to evil-minded men who desired to hinder him, Don Bosco was forced to hold his meetings in a field on the outskirts of the city.

Anxious but not depressed, hurt but immovable, he always met daily troubles with that heroic fortitude of soul which is a gift of the Holy Ghost. Fortitude from such a source makes a man ready for anything, intrepid in the face of all, scornful of every ostentation, just as we note in Don Bosco. Indeed, there was certainly no enjoyment, humanly speaking, in passing whole Sundays among coarse, noisy, quarrelsome, unmannerly, and rough boys; no delight either in teaching, as Don Bosco did, dull, stubborn, or easy-going youths. Today boys from very poor families present themselves on festive days so neat and tidy that they look like little lords; but in those days what an unlettered and unkempt youth roamed the highways and bye ways of Turin! Don Bosco should have been praised, or helped, or at least left in peace among his ragamuffins whose leader he styled himself; but the works of God sprout and grow under taunts from friend and foe. He bore it all calmly with his eyes raised up to Heaven whence alone he expected comfort and help, and he found easy and sweet to him what was most strenuous and repugnant to nature. The fortitude of the Saints far surpasses that hard and obstinate fortitude of the Stoics; for they steadfast in the supernatural union of grace pray, bear, and conquer. Philosophic fortitude ends in the egotistical satisfaction of self-love from which it takes its rise and guidance: Christian fortitude ever sharpens the wits to devise new, humble, and sometimes humiliating means for the sole purpose of reaching its desired end, without any ambition save the glory of God and the good of souls.

The first Oratory boys never grew tired of Don Bosco but always lived with him or near him. They kept in their hearts the memory of those heroic days with the vivid picture of a lather good and dear to them, dear because of his goodness, but good with the same goodness the young man read in Jesus' face when he asked:

“Good Master, what shall I do that I may receive life-everlasting?”

In a man so complex and complete as Don Bosco goodness had nothing of that sensibility that easily degenerates into weakness. The goodness of Don Bosco, illumined by intellect and faith and enkindled by his habitual union with God, led up to a supernatural goodness, one with all, inspiring for all. Here then is the reason why in the midst of fluctuating fortune (whose sorrowful blows to his heart were seen almost at once, though later on understood well, by his first pupils) he was. always calm and serene; he was preparing himself to be all to all in the expansion of a love so operative and spiritual.

He so won the hearts of boys that wherever he went to hear confessions the youngsters wanted him and him alone. They crowded round him happy and confident. And that is why when he had no place but a meadow to gather them in they followed him faithfully and stayed with him till sunset, eating the slice of bread each had brought with him in his pocket, not caring for the chill winds of Winter. When the first Oratorians grew to manhood they could only exclaim as the memory of those days was recalled:

“There was an angel among us!”

This opinion carries us back to the protomartyr St Stephen who in spite of the accusations heaped on him, held himself with such calm dignity, the external sign of a soul filled with grace and strength, that those around saw his face as though it “were the face of an angel”. The admirable demeanour of Don Bosco among armies of tribulations had no other origin. The churches of Our Lady on the outskirts of the city of Turin knew him, for thither did he often head in pilgrimage crowds of boys that they might go to the Sacraments and pray for the blessings of God; the church of La Consolata knew him for he and his boys received frequently heavenly help before the miraculous picture there; Fr Borel and other worthy priests knew him for they were witness of the religious fervour dropped by this zealous apostle into the restless hearts of the young; certain boys knew him for he saw their leaning to greater holiness and so treated them apart, kept them united to him in prayer, and guided them along the road to higher perfection. These are facts we want to recall if we are to understand fully those words of his memoirs:

“It was surprising thing how this crowd of boys so little known to me allowed itself to be led, a crowd to whom I could truthfully apply the words ‘like a horse and mule without intellect’. I must add that in spite of such great ignorance I always had to admire a great respect for the things pertaining to the church and priests, and an enthusiasm to learn the dogmas and precepts of the Faith.”

After all it was not so bad for such “horses and mules”. The tamer or master had within him enough of intelligence which, lacking in them before, he gradually put into them. Now we can explain more easily why Blessed Cafasso, opposing all accusations which were being piled high on the head of Don Bosco, always wound up by saying:

“Leave him to do what he wants.”

Sunday however was one day in the week: what about the other six? Let it not be believed that the true festive Oratory has only Sunday to attend to. As Don Bosco had conceived it the Oratory is the seat of a paternal authority that captivates the hearts of boys and follows them everywhere—at home, in the workshop, on the street—where it can exercise a salutary influence on their conduct. And then besides the Refuge Don Bosco had religious institutions, colleges, public and private schools, reformatories, hospitals,

evening schools, sermons, studies, books—a field of labour that knew no bounds. Such activity naturally brought him into contact with people of every kind, many of whom in need of his work and word would hunt him whenever he went to say mass. Apropos of this we find the following resolution written by him in 1845; we mention it here, not as if we wish to pose as his biographer, but because it helps towards our object.

“Since on reaching the sacristy I am generally asked to hear confessions or give some advice, I shall try before leaving my room to make a brief preparation for Holy Mass.”

A very significant and precious document that shows how Don Bosco, without any scruples of conscience as is evidenced by that word “brief”, preferred to anticipate the preparation required, rather than to screen himself off by the leaving God for God.

To this time belongs certain strips of paper which he used as bookmarks for forty years in his breviary; he had written on them thoughts he wished to know by heart. Eleven biblical quotations put before his mind:

- the providence of God,
- flight from evil occasions,
- detachment from the goods of earth,
- the joy of a clean conscience,
- the liberality of God with the kind-hearted,
- the duty of reflecting before speaking,
- the Divine Tribunal,
- the love of the poor,
- honour due to superiors,
- forgetting offences,
- trust in God.

Five maxims from the Fathers helped him to remember frequent examen of conscience,

- humble and complete acquiescence in the teachings of the Church,
- strict guard over secrets,
- the efficacy of good example,
- zeal for one’s soul and the souls of others.
- three thoughts of Dante taken from the end of each canto raised his mind to higher things.

Lastly, come four lines from Silvio Pellico that are worthy of citation not because they are rare but because they seem to reveal to us what politics this man of God had to have in a period red hot with public disturbances: the politics, that is, of an Italy one in faith, hope, and charity.

In virtue great	Ad ogni alta virtu
may Italy believe,	Italo creda,
And from her God may hope all grace;	Ogni grazia da Dio lo Stato spera,
In faith and hope may love and walk,	E credendo e sperando ami e proceda
God's truths resplendent in her face.	Alla conquista degli eterni veri.

Pellico and Don Bosco were close friends. The poet who had written at Don Bosco's request the beautiful little hymn "Angioletto del mio Dio", was greatly attached to him. Since he was the secretary of the Marchioness Barolo, Pellico came to know about the letter the good lady had written to the Rector of the Refuge concerning Don Bosco with its plain and simple aut...aut—either leave the Refuge or leave the boys. This long letter that bears the signature of the noble lady but the amiable style of her secretary is dear to our hearts on account of these few lines, the brilliant point in it:

"Don Bosco pleased me from the first moment and I have found in him that atmosphere of recollection and simplicity common to holy souls."

Pellico neatly worded what others thought and what we think.

CHAPTER 3 In his fixed home

To say the word Oratory nowadays is to name an institution so common in Italy that it seems as if it had always been so, and no need is felt of trying to find out whom we must thank; but the name of Don Bosco is ever coupled with one Oratory, the Oratory par excellence, the Oratory at Valdocco. Not without the mysterious designs of God has it come about that the throbbing centre of Don Bosco's work should be called a name that custom is wont to apply to a place of prayer. We name a place by what it is there for; so if a place of so much activity is called a place of prayer this goes to tell us that in Don Bosco's works, the first place is for prayer, the second for action. Don Bosco's own words confirm this. From the very first there were well-intentioned people who found fault with the frequent sacred services and devotions as often as these were introduced: but Don Bosco stopped all objections by merely saying:

"I gave the name of Oratory to this house to show clearly that prayer is the only strength on which we must place our work."

And piety is breathed like air in the Oratory; it is seen in the boys' faces; it lives in all.

The above, however, does not come into our plan: we merely cite it to point out that there was the reflection of the priestly soul of Don Bosco. A priest with a great spirit of initiative but without a like spirit of prayer would be able to do much in organizing from the dust of the earth, but not much in instilling the breath of life; which organization, if not remedied by others, would wither away. For Don Bosco God was the beginning and end of all. The multitude of labours left him few long hours to dedicate to prayer; yet his mother whose bedroom was next to her son's tells us that from certain indications he spent the best part of the night in prayer. At the entrance to his room a piece of cardboard invited him

"Praise be to Jesus Christ." Inside, another card reminded him:

"One thing is necessary, save your soul."

And still another brought back to him the motto beloved of St. Francis de Sales, adopted afterwards by our Saint:

"Give me souls, take away the rest."

He was familiar with these aspirations—expressions of the desire of his own salvation, omens of the salvation of others. And what shall we say of those frequent manifestations of an intimately deep piety which showed his respect, love and esteem for every expression of worship, every devotion encouraged, approved, and recommended by the Church? Such as, for example, the use of sacramentals, assisting at church services, saying the rosary in common, the Angelus, saying grace at meals, sodalities, the way of the Cross.

How great was his devotion to the mysteries of Christ's passion and death! He meditated on them with such heartfelt sorrow that those listening to him could not restrain

their tears, while he himself could hardly say what he wanted to say so full of emotion was he. With regard to sodalities we have to say that within a short time of his settling in Valdocco he was enrolled a member of the third order of St. Francis with novitiate and profession. For the rest, namely, that he was a priest of exemplary piety any observer could easily have seen how wrapped up he was in spiritual things whenever he prayed even audible in his characteristically clear and harmonious voice. So, the humble poet who wrote a poem in honour of Don Bosco's return from a long convalescence clothed in verse what was the unanimous opinion :

“A man of wisdom and sanctity With virtues gaily adorn'd.”

And to this hymn of praise are joined the voices of present-day millions who, although they have never seen the Saint, base themselves on trustworthy witnesses.

Troublesome years followed on for Don Bosco—to make the Oratory of one hundred boys progress, to erect and direct two new ones in Turin, to establish and set on foot a hospice, to find place in the already crowded house for clerics expelled from their seminaries by the government, to answer the question of daily bread, to work out the foundation of the future congregation, to share the sorrows of his sorely-tried Bishop throughout the public upheavals that grieved the heart of the Church authorities —troubles so tiresome that we would be led to suppose that from morning to night he was always feverishly at work and capable of thinking of nothing else beside. But this is far from the truth. A venerable priest who spent years beside the Saint tells us that his face was a clear sign of his union with God and that anyone observing him recalled at once those words of the Apostle:

“Our conversation is in heaven.”

Everywhere even in the refectory and in his room one could see the calmness of his actions, recollection in his eyes, a slight bending of his head like someone who was in the presence of some great personage or of the Blessed Sacrament. Through the thoroughfares of the town he used to go wrapped in thought, but, it was easily seen to be the thought of God. At times, too, someone would ask him for spiritual advice when he was busy with other duties and yet he always answered in the words of one totally immersed in contemplation. One who had lived in the Oratory in the first years watching him during the prayers in common tells us that Don Bosco said the words “Our Father Who art in Heaven” with exquisite relish and that his voice was distinguishable above all others by an indescribable timbre that moved those who heard him. Although there was nothing extraordinary in his demeanour, yet a watcher could not help but notice that Don Bosco in the sacristy or in the church never had the custom of leaning his elbows on the prie-dieu or bench; instead he would rest his wrists on the edge and keep his hands joined unless he was holding a book. Even the celebrated moralist, Mgr. Bertagna, could never forget the appearance of him at prayer; and, asked to portray Don Bosco in a few words, he said that he “prayed like an angel”.

Let us not leave this point of Don Bosco's exterior aspect without adding some observation that will help us to gain a more complete understanding of his spirit of prayer. Writers and painters amuse themselves too much at times over the childishness of the exterior figure of God's servants; there are some who want Don Bosco to be, let us say, sugar-coated. We who have seen him will never admit a conventional Don Bosco, much

less shall we find him in truth under such appearances. A great man who may be also a great saint knows how to smile, not however that fixed and insignificant or merely instinctive smile, but a smile expressive of the mind, directed to an end and withdrawn after its object is attained. In the saint sweet and amiable kindness is not separated from calm and serene dignity. This kindness and dignity make up a double element that is as a sign, nearly like a seal, of the Creator on the creature. Hence, his look when he is in the act of inspiring trust raises to the heights and makes one meditate.⁵

Regarding Don Bosco some talk of good-heartedness, but never of weakness: but since the latter is the brother of the former, we must conclude, that the good-heartedness of Don Bosco needs explanation without referring to the dictionary. Let us call it evangelical simplicity, the simplicity of the “yes, yes!” and “no, no!” founded on kindness, and breathing strength. This is it. The man who communes interiorly with God imprints a peaceful seriousness on his features and figure. This appears in Don Bosco to those who study him through the genuine expressions of his personality.

His speech was like his deportment. He spoke calmly and slowly; he disliked profane subjects, manners that were too lively, resentful and angry expressions. He measured every word. Here are the words of one who lived long in the family and familiarity of Don Bosco, Fr John Francesia:

“Often we would say among our groups: ‘How pleasant it is to go near Don Bosco. If you talk to him for even a minute you feel within yourself a wave of fervour’.”

But we have another witness of greater value, namely, Fr. Rua when he spoke in the process for the Beatification and Canonization. “I have lived” he said “for thirty-seven years beside Don Bosco and the impression I received as I observed his every action, even the smallest, was more than as if I had read or meditated on a devotional book.”

We beg the readers to be patient for another digression which we think reasonable to make. We wish to mention a quotation that gives us to understand how legitimate and sure is the method of judging his interior by observing his exterior. Besides if there were another way for Don Bosco we would certainly follow it. Here are the words of St. Vincent de Paul when he spoke to his missionaries in one of his admirable sermons:

“Even if you say no words you will touch hearts by your presence alone, provided you are united with God. Servants of God are easily distinguishable from men of the world; a certain external attitude humble, meditative, and devout penetrates the soul of him who watches. There are some people so full of God that I cannot look at them without being impressed. Those who draw pictures of the saints always represent them surrounded by rays of light: and in fact the just, those who live holily here on earth, radiate from themselves a light all their own.”

The celebrated biographer of St. Bonaventure, Lemmens, after noting that there “were no documents by which we could know his progress in prayer and the sublime gift of contemplation” passes on to the consideration of “the fruits of his interior life and of his

⁵We agree that the mystics do not laugh. The impression they get in their intimacies with God is not taken away from their spirit but rather it binds them to the thought of the Divine Presence. So when they smile to their neighbours, that smile spoiled by no guffaws changes not a line of their face set there by habitual recollection. Fr Francesia writes:—“Don Bosco infused cheerfulness into others, but he himself was wont to carry on his face the air of a sad person.”

continuous union with God”, and here he says:

“He had imprinted on his countenance that ineffable peace and holy grace that thrilled those who saw him.”

In confirmation of this he brings forth the testimony of a contemporary who in describing the Council of Lyons where the saint sent out the last rays of his seraphic light wrote:

“The Lord gave him this grace that all may admire him and become attached to him.”

Change the name and you have Don Bosco.

The saint of Retreats for priests and ecclesiastical students is a reminder to us how greatly Don Bosco esteemed the excellent Ignatian practice. Don Bosco loved retreats; he loved them for himself, he loved them for others. A precursor too in this he began in 1847 closed retreats for young workers. He introduced too into Salesian schools the custom of making an Easter Retreat—well-prepared, carried on excellently, and ended in holy cheerfulness. In his own congregation he was not far behind other founders. He was a keen advocate of retreats but at the same time he made them for his own good. He used to go yearly to the little sanctuary of St. Ignatius outside the city in order that he might pray and meditate on the eternal truths in the peace and quiet of the hills undisturbed by the worries of daily life.

On a sheet of paper carefully preserved by him we read with a feeling of emotion the resolutions taken in a retreat of 1847.

“Every day, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

Every week, a mortification; confession.

Every month, to read the prayers for the exercise for a happy death. Lord, give me what thou commandest and command what Thou wilt. The priest is the thurible of the Divinity. (Theodotus) The soldier of Christ. (St. John Chrysostom)

Prayer to a priest is like water to a fish, air to a bird, fountains to a deer.

He who prays is like one who stands before his king.”

We have twice already quoted resolutions of Don Bosco that refer to the life of prayer without, however, forgetting that between the word and the act lies a chasm. We must then view the character of Don Bosco. Don Bosco was not a day dreamer neither was he emotional but he was a man of will content with clear ideas and pure affections. Such characters are firm and persevering; when they wish, they will. Not so are speculative men whose resolutions are easily blown away by the breeze. Not so are passionate men who resolve and resolve, but get no further, because impressions are as lasting in them as a flake of snow. Don Bosco had a will of iron.

A problem of another nature rather springs up here. If we admit that self-control is proper to strong wills, how can you explain why Don Bosco was sometimes seen to weep? He would weep while celebrating Mass, distributing Holy Communion, merely blessing the congregation after the Divine Sacrifice, speaking to his boys after night prayers, giving a conference to his Salesians, proposing the memento of the Retreats, touching on sin, scandal, or immodesty in sermons, or on the ingratitude of men towards the love of Jesus for us, or expressing fear for the uncertainty of someone’s eternal salvation. A witness thus writes about the Carnival-time pleasures:

“By way of reparation for so many disorders he would beg us to receive Holy Communion and to pass an hour before the tabernacle. And while he spoke he would weep and make us weep on account of the insults flung at our Lord especially in those days.”

A witness of the first class, Cardinal Cagliero, thus writes:

“While Don Bosco was speaking on the love of God, the loss of souls, the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday, on the Holy Eucharist, a happy death, and the hope of Heaven, I often saw him and even my companions, saw him shed tears of love, or sorrow, or joy, and of holy ecstasy when he spoke of the Blessed virgin, of her Goodness and immaculate purity.”

The same thing would happen in public churches. In the church of the Consolata he was seen to burst into tears while preaching on the General Judgment and describing the separation of the good and the bad. Another witness observed him often so weeping especially when treating of everlasting life that even obstinate sinners were moved to go to confession to him after the sermon. Finally the conscientious biographer of the Saint, Fr. Lemoyne, S.C., (Vol. IV. 367—8) writes:

“We who write these pages have been testimony with many others of the Divine gift given to Don Bosco, even before his founding the Oratory, up to his death.”

The question could form itself around this, namely, whether we here really deal with a mystic gift, and, if so, whether we have any right to assert that Don Bosco had the grace of passive prayer. We shall return to this argument later on; in the meantime let us limit ourselves noticing that in the circumstances cited above the tears of Don Bosco were proof of his great union with God: and since union with God is prayer we see that in the growing intensity of his work a sublime spirit of prayer must have animated him.

In the asceticism of Don Bosco a major part was given to the Blessed Sacrament, his life-long love, his unceasing priestly campaign. Thus he experienced indescribable joy when the King of Heaven took up lodgings in the Oratory after the erection of the Church of St. Francis de Sales, 1852. From that day this church became the object of his affections No pen can describe his happiness when he broke the news to his boys. Here, too, he would adore our Divine Lord whenever he needed some respite; the face of him was more seraphic than human. Whatsoever regarded sacred worship that he held always in the greatest importance; ever solicitous in exacting neatness and order in the sacred vessels and vestments; ever attentive to the continuous burning of the Sanctuary lamp; ever ready to recommend to all how well they should genuflect before Him Who came to dwell in the tabernacle; ever ready to dust the altars, free the church from cobwebs, sweep the floor, and wash the predella. Nothing that was necessary for the decorum of the services escaped him, on the major feasts he disliked profane musicians because being accustomed to conduct themselves in church they would lose their respect for the Real Presence of Jesus. The best of authority, his biographer, Fr. Lemoyne, tells us that in church his faith and love for the Real Presence shone in his face.

Such was he as a common worshipper what must be have been as the celebrating priest? He said his Mass calmly, devoutly, exactly, recollectedly; he pronounced the words with clearness and relish; he loved to distribute the Sacred Species, with his face showing that he was not able to hide the fervour of his soul. No affectation was there; but unhurriedly and not too slowly he accomplished the service with calmness and naturalness in every

movement from beginning to end. Those people who had never seen him before were deeply impressed; others when they knew where he was to say Mass flocked to assist at it; families privileged with a domestic altar always disputed to see who would get him to say Mass. How often would he repair to the Church of his First Mass, St. Francis of Assisi beside the Ecclesiastical College, and on bended knee renew the resolutions taken then! We still preserve his book of the Mass Rubrics which he always carried with him and which became worn by use. Often he would beg his friends to observe him saying Mass and to see if he committed any mistake. In the morning while going from his room to the church arm anyone met him, greeted him, or kissed his hand, he smiled but spoke not; so absorbed was he in the thought of his Mass. On journeys he would never miss celebrating the Sacred Mysteries but would rather cut short his rest and celebrate them very early or put himself to such inconvenience to celebrate them very late. This is how the first Salesians had seen him, this is the way the late-comers saw him.

The heart of Don Bosco formed as it was in the spiritual life by a strong and constant love for the Eucharist was naturally fit or rather providently prepared to beat in the breast of the apostle of frequent Communion. How brilliantly did his seraphic soul shine forth in this holy mission! Jansenism still blackened Piedmont. The Ecclesiastical College taught some moral doctrines destined to hunt out the erroneous clouds from the minds of men: but the sadness caused by the zealous heretic would have gone on creeping over the land had not the powerful example of Don Bosco come to pull it away. He preferred to act and not launch himself into discussions.

By himself he had long ago solved the question of frequent Communion; hence he faced the priesthood with clear and ordered ideas on the subject. In these days we are impressed when we read again this extract from his "Memoirs":

"At the beginning of my second year of philosophy I went to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. As I had no book I took the Imitation of Christ and read a few chapters on the Eucharist."

He who expounded the great truths with sublimity of thought and a method clear, orderly, and eloquent, found so much delight in the golden book that he had made it one of his favourites. Now, reading and rereading the part devoted entirely to "the Sacrament of the Altar" his attention must have been arrested at the second versicle of chapter ten where the pious writer observes how the devil, knowing full well the great and excellent fruits resulting from Holy Communion strives his utmost to prevent faithful and devout souls from receiving It, not only simple souls but also pious souls consecrated to God.

"An old scourge in the Church!" the thoughtful reader will exclaim to himself, "An old plague this insinuation of Satan!"

Much more zealously must Don Bosco have drunk the sweet nectar of this wonderful book and changed it to sap and blood, as he longed for the day when he would become the herald of Holy Communion among the boys of the world. Yes, among the boys of the world for in order not to build hastily on sandy ground he had to take boys and lead them soon to the Eucharistic Table, lead them in flocks, lead them over and over again, lead them that men's eyes grow accustomed to such sights.

Thus, he did.

Here and there he received observations but lost no time in discussions. He would

prepare groups of boys for their First Communion, would multiply general Communions, would establish clubs and sodalities with the intention of accustoming their members to frequent and daily Communion, would remain for hours in the confessional hearing the confessions of those who would want to go to Communion. God alone knows what sacrifices Don Bosco imposed on himself in order to promote frequent Communion among the boys; but neighbours beheld in his face the sincere joy he felt in his soul while watching lines and lines of boys approaching the Holy Table. What better thing could be desired whose soul was ever turned to Jesus in the Eucharist?

We cannot end this chapter without referring to the way, Don Bosco made use of confession during these years. In the spiritual life the choice of a good director is an ordinary condition for making true progress. St Bernard alludes to it with that famous saying:

“He who makes himself his own teacher, has a fool for a pupil.” This was written by the holy Doctor not for a novice in life but for an experienced priest; and in the same letter he confirms his teaching with a proof of his own.

“I don’t know,” he says, “what others think of themselves on this point: I speak from experience and say that as for me I find it easier and better to command others than guide myself.”

Don Bosco, as soon as he went to Turin, chose Blessed Cafasso as his spiritual director to whom he opened his conscience every week. He found him in the Church of St. Francis d’Assisi in his confessional with crowds of penitents awaiting their turn to confess. Don Bosco would kneel down near a pillar to prepare himself; the confessor seeing him would beckon him to come, so as not to have him lose much time. Don Bosco would approach very devoutly, kneel on a prie-dieu that in those days in Turin was at the door of the confessional and make his confession to the edification of all present. A holy pupil, a holy master!

CHAPTER 4 The time of his great foundations

During this period of his life Don Bosco gradually filled the whole world with his name. Newspapers of every kind, illustrated pamphlets, photographs distributed widely, lectures—everything, in fine, that would spread the news of his work was used. No Apostle had ever at his service so many means of publicity. Fortunate success that crowned his arduous undertaking helped to convince some people that he was a great saint, others that he was a great man. It must be said that he himself in making a universal appeal for charity broadcast his mission to the four corners of the globe, writing polylingual letters to men of every rank and station. A hidden modesty rejoiced in these methods. Certainly some people were scandalized, but it was with a mean scandal; often even his censors followed his example. The Blessed Cafasso in 1853 gave an opinion of Don Bosco that straightens out matters for talented ecclesiastics who murmur a little at Don Bosco: It is an opinion that far surpasses the petty circumstances in which it was said. Here are the words of Don Bosco's spiritual director:

“Do you know well who Don Bosco is? As for me the more I study him the less I understand him! I see him simple and extraordinary, humble and great, poor and busy with vast schemes which appear unattainable and yet which, in spite of opposition and lack of means, have come out triumphantly in his hands. For me Don Bosco is a mystery! I am certain, however, he works for God's glory, that God alone is his guide, and that God only is the end of all his actions.”

The Blessed Cafasso's prudent reserve was easily understood then; but when people looked upon Don Bosco as a saint there was no more barrier to hide it. But while it echoes afar fame is not always admired at home in the little every day things. A proverb says on this point:

Familiarity breeds contempt, or as the French picturesquely say:

Pas de grand homme pour son valet de chambre.

But notice the peculiarity in Don Bosco's case: everyone who was familiar with him testifies that the more he knew him the more he was convinced Don Bosco was a saint. And those who were in his company for years and had every opportunity of scrutinizing his daily life felt an extraordinary veneration for him. This familiarity, far from melting the charm of the unknown by reducing the voice of universal fame to more modest proportions, only served to amplify it. Now, anyone who has something to do with the spiritual life knows two things: namely, an opinion of holiness cannot be formed and cannot endure if no spirit of prayer is seen in the supposed saint; and to deprecate holiness in such a person all that is needed is for him to make the sign of the cross badly.

Don Bosco lived all his life under the gaze of many people so much so that his actions

could easily be criticized by discreet and indiscreet onlookers: and then his true piety was well known within the precincts of the Oratory. To Don Bosco the spirit of prayer was what the spirit of marching men is to a good officer, the spirit of observation to an artist or scientist: an habitual disposition of soul characterized by ease, constancy, and visible delight.

Among those who had grown up at the school of Don Bosco special mention must be made of those who, formed slowly by his hands, became subsequently the foundations of the Salesian Society. We have known those men so different in ability and culture, so unequal in disposition: but in all there were certain common traits that seemed to belong to a common source. Calm serenity in act and word; a fatherly way of manners and expressions; but especially a piety that, they were convinced, was to be the *ubi consistam*, the pivot of the Salesian life. They prayed much, they prayed well; they could not say four words publicly or privately, it seemed, without touching on the subject of prayer. And yet, not even excepting Fr Michael Rua whose ascetical and, at times, mystical aspect attracted men's attention, those men did not show any external manifestation of internal extraordinary grace of prayerfulness; in fact, we see them carrying on with a wonderful simplicity nothing more than the practices demanded by our customs. But how diligent was their way of treating with God! How naturally they would introduce into profane subjects thoughts of faith! They had lived a long time with Don Bosco and this had left in them indelible marks. With benefit could we quote that which St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:2). Those who want to know the Spirit of prayer of Don Bosco have only to look at his disciples; an authentic document (so to speak) wherein he himself speaks.

The absence of great external signs, then, that generally are common in the prayers of the saints, is no ground for letting pass by unnoticed Don Bosco's spirit of prayer even in the years most laborious in his life when troubles of all kinds sought his time and thought and when his indefatigable energy was at its zenith. Deeply etched in his soul was the thought of the presence of God, so much so that crowding affairs could not hinder his internal and perpetual union with Him; nay, the feeling of God's presence while keeping him watchful and attentive to his only end of serving Him alone, was also an everlasting spring of mirth in the sea of his occupations: in everything he sought naught else beyond the perfect accomplishment of the Divine Will. For this reason when he wrote to a virtuous priest asking him to come and help in the discipline and running of his already overcrowded institute he used a witty turn of thought, conformed however to the style of the saints:

"Come and help me to say my breviary." To pass from occupation to occupation was for Don Bosco the passing from the singing of one psalm to the singing of another, since in all that he did he gave praise to God. The book that the priest handles daily for his prayer tells him that he must also carry out his daily occupations in the presence of God. A similar exhortation in the writings of St. Augustine (in Ps 146:2) is found where he, desiring the Christian to convert his whole life into one long hymn of praise, thinks of David's lyre and says:

"Don't sing to the Lord with your tongue only but also take up the psalter of good works."

This point had I reached in the chapter when His Holiness the Pope spoke on 19th March for the decree of Don Bosco's miracles. In the Pope's speech there is a personal note that just fits in here. His Holiness said that while spending a few days with Don Bosco under the same roof and at the same table and enjoying the pleasure of being with a saint although he was busy, he had noted one of his most impressive characteristics:

"A great calmness, a master of time, in listening to all those who came to him with such tranquillity that it seemed he had nothing else to do."

A large book would barely suffice wherein to keep record of facts and testimonies that second the justice of this observation. It is applicable not only to his control of time but also to his control of unexpected happenings: for this same calm and serenity were invariable with him in meeting obstacles, in difficulties, in misfortunes which, no matter their gravity, never upset him. Still fresh in our memories is a saying often told us by Don Bosco's first successor, Fr Rua, that whenever our father appeared gayer and more contented than usual, his Salesians falling back on experience would whisper to one another:

"Don Bosco is suffering something great today, for he looks merrier than usual!"

"In these circumstances," the same Fr Rua said in the Process of Don Bosco's Beatification and Canonization, "prayer was his strength."

Surely, even if we overlook so authentic a source as this, nothing else would explain the fact. The pious writer of the Imitation (III. 34.) makes it a point to give perfect peace and serenity of the spirit one sole origin, namely, abandonment in God, the life spent in close union with Him.

"You," the soul speaks to her Beloved, "make my heart tranquil and bestow upon it great peace and festive joy."

To speak with ease and with sentiment of God is a good proof of habitual union with Him. Don Bosco's sons knew well how easily he punctuated his talks with favourite expressions like the following:

"How good is the Lord and what care He takes of us!"

"God is a good Father Who does not permit us to be tempted above our strength."

"God is a good Master Who will reward even a glass of water given for His love."

"Let us love God! Let us love Him! Do you not see how good He has been to us? He created everything for us; He instituted the Eucharist that He might remain always with us; every moment He showers down blessings."

"When it is a question of serving this kind Master we must be ready for any sacrifice."

"Remember that faith without good works is dead."

"Let us do all we can for the greater glory of God."

"All for the Lord, all for His glory!"

Even the most material occupations did not remove this facility.

"Sometimes," Fr Rua says, "when we were retiring at a late hour he would stop to gaze at the starry heavens and in spite of his fatigue would speak to us of the immensity, omnipotence, and wisdom of God. At other times when in the country, he would praise the beauty of the fields and meadows, the abundance and wealth of fruits, and so led the conversation around to the goodness and providence of God, in such a way that his

companions would often exclaim with the disciples of Emmaus: — ‘Was not our heart burning within us while he spoke on the way?’”

A similar easiness he showed with strangers at home or outside, whether they were poor or rich people, clergy or laity. At Marseilles in the house of a great friend he plucked a heartsease and turning to the friend said :

“Look, I give you a remembrance, the remembrance of Eternity.” With or without flowers he never forgot to leave good thoughts for those near him. One of his favourites was:

“The priest should never deal with anyone without leaving some good thought.”

A still more lustrous proof of habitual union with God is the ease to speak with feeling of Heaven.

“Don Bosco,” Cardinal Cagliero affirms “spoke of Paradise with such feeling, delight, and eloquence that he thrilled those who heard him. He spoke of it as a son speaks of his father’s house: the desire to possess God burned in him more than the reward He promised.”

If he heard any of his Salesians lamenting over trials, work, or duties, he would encourage them thus:

“Remember that you suffer or work for a kind Master, God. Work and suffer for the love of Jesus Who worked and suffered so much for you. A piece of heaven puts everything right.”

To those who reported difficulties or unpleasant acts he would say:

“There are none of these things in heaven! The sufferings of this life are momentary, the joys of Paradise eternal.”

To a very wealthy and incredulous man who was charmed by the saint’s words and who went to him for curiosity’s sake he said:

“Look, you with your wealth and I with my poverty can be together in heaven.”

When he heard anyone mention the autumn holidays he was wont to say:

“We’ll have our holidays in heaven.”

Often he returned to the Oratory very tired and on being asked to rest a little before sitting down at his desk or going into the confessional he would say with sweetness:

“I’ll rest in heaven.”

He usually concluded long discussions with the words:

“There’ll be none of these disputes in heaven; all of us will be of one mind.”

A few of his most frequent exclamations were:

“What joy we’ll find when we’re in heaven! Only be good and fear not.”

“What do you think God has created heaven for? To leave it empty? But remember that it costs sacrifices.”

A well-to-do priest, though somewhat stingy, heard Don Bosco speaking of heaven with such emotion that he ran to his desk, took as many golden coins as his two hands could hold, and gave them to the saint gracefully and courteously.

One day he was dining with some priests. The conversation turned on the beauty and goodness of the fruits on the table; Don Bosco maneuvered it so as to speak about heaven, the which he did with so much force that the others left off eating and listened to the words that fell from his lips.

“If anyone,” says a friend of our saint, “had asked him on the spur of the moment where he was going, he would have answered ‘To heaven’.”

According to St. Augustine (Ep. CXXX. 19.) the continuous desire for heaven is continuous prayer.

Again, the ease of always being able to say a good word is a potent proof of one’s habitual union with God. His second successor used to say that whether taken unawares or immersed in work Don Bosco seemed to interrupt his talks with God in order to listen to those who came to him and from his Lord he drew those inspired thoughts and encouragement that filled his conversation. Many are the examples that show forth this his facility of talking about God at any time; but leaving them to larger books we shall merely quote one of the most familiar. Often priests of the Oratory particularly superiors would go for confession to him just when he was given over to answering his thousands of letters and to treating of temporal things. Yet, he spoke to the penitent with such thought and feeling that it looked as if he had just that moment returned from the altar.

His acts were like his words. The latter were vibrant with the tone of a man accustomed to be with God; the former had the mark of a zealous priest. Zeal means fervour of soul; in the language of the Christian, St. Ambrose thus translates it *fidei vapor* and *devotionis fervor*. Zeal then is an external radiation of an internal faith; it is the outburst of piety towards God which not being able to control itself boils over, as it were, in heat and growing energy. Zeal is not therefore an enthusiastic moment, an extraordinary exultation that soon fades away; zeal, guided from above, goes with continuous and progressive steps in spite of opposition from man or thing. The zeal of Don Bosco was modelled on that of Jesus—a burning love for the glory of God by means of the salvation of souls and war on sin, and a gracefulness of manners to gain the hearts of small and great. The Oratory boys were attracted to him; they used to use a phrase that also revealed the faith and piety of the place, for it was:

“Don Bosco looks like our Lord.”

We read here how Don Bosco went and came with his feet on earth and hands at work but with his eyes sparkling with the light that comes from above, that illumines the mind of man, and that lights up his path. He who wants to find Don Bosco, must first go to his institutions.

St Bonaventure distinguishes three kinds of prayer, namely, common, private, and continuous, and he recommends this last to superiors who are much occupied. It exacts three things, namely,

1. the thought must be turned to God in every action;
2. the soul must seek the honour of God always;
3. the will must from time to time secretly recollect itself in prayer.

In this sense, from the sign of the cross to the holy Mass, from the familiar text to the sermon, from the small things to the great, Don Bosco’s actions were filled with prayer: in the greatest undertakings this spirit compelled him to be a brave knight seeking to promote the glory of God. Before he took up any activity whatsoever, even if this were

the totting up of accounts to see whether there were sufficient material means or not, he would view the problem from a viewpoint unknown to purely human prudence.

“I hold this norm,” he said “in all I undertake. I first find out whether the work will be for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls: if so, I carry on with surety for the Lord will not forget to help me; if it is not what I imagine or, better, what I believe, it may go up in smoke for I am equally contented.”

When he had put into effect a plan of his he tells us how he considered it (if we wish to know) by the answer he gave to Fr Felix Giordano of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who was rather curious to know how the saint could carry on his works colossal as they were.

“You know,” Don Bosco said, “that I have nothing to do with it at all. Our Lord does everything: when He wants a work to be done, He makes use of the most inadequate instrument. This is my case. If He had found a priest poorer and more wretched than me, He would have used that priest as the one to do His work and would have left aside poor Don Bosco to follow his natural vocation, a country parish priest.”

The world spoke of his activities; he spoke of them to the world. He let people have their say.

“We are now dealing,” he would say, “with God’s glory, not man’s. How many more marvels would He have done, had Don Bosco proved himself to have more faith.”

Whenever, the activities he did were spoken about, he would naturally attribute the glory to Him, even through new methods of publicity: in this he followed a practical criterion.

“It is but just that those who give alms should know where that charity goes to. We live in such material times that the world wants to see and to touch with its hand: so it is more than ever necessary that our good works be known that God may be glorified.”

In the apostolic process, many and upright witnesses who had heard him speak of his own affairs had all one common point; namely, they said that Don Bosco looked beyond his own self by far when on this topic. The utter conviction that he was Providence’s humble tool upheld him in moments of great trouble: for God had said that men do not always judge well at first sight things done. The supreme authority itself in the diocese who recognizing the saint’s good work too late, had even been convinced that it was honouring God by attacking it with an enduring zeal that was worthy of a better cause. What a bitter chalice Don Bosco, had to drink? And yet the only lamentation that fell from his lips or from his pen during that heart-rending trial was that such annoyance and obstacles made him lose so much time in which he could have done more for God’s glory. This was always the final object of this saint. Some day the amount of his correspondence will prove beyond doubt his great eagerness in promoting the glory of God and in enkindling it in the secular and regular clergy alike with whom he corresponded by letter and in enkindling it especially in his sons. These latter hold in high esteem this particular advice from among the many zealously and piously guarded by them.

“If you speak of spiritual things let the topics be always developed in such a way as to redound to God’s greater glory. Promises, whims, revenge, self-love, reasons, ideals, and even honour must be sacrificed in this case.”

Here is the language of a man among men whose mind was ever fixed on God!

The Apostle (1 Cor 10:31) imposes it as a duty on all Christians to seek the glory of God each according to his own state and therefore the priest, the minister of God, cannot be distinct from the mission of Christ Himself, that is, the salvation of souls.

“For the Son of man came to seek and save that which was lost.”

Don Bosco from the day of his holy ordination wanted nothing else than to be a priest, than to do only those works proper to the priest: he wished for no title to his name save that of the priest, no decoration on his person save those of the priest. He thought of no other way of giving glory to God outside the priesthood, that way which Pseudodionisius places first among the works that go to glorify God, "the most divine among Divine things", namely "co-operating with God in saving souls". On this the Salesians retain a masterful word of Don Bosco himself that is now part of their traditional inheritance.

“A priest,” says he, “is always a priest and such he ought to show himself in his every word. Now to be a priest means to have the continuous duty of striving for the interests of God, that is, the salvation of souls. A priest should never allow anyone to approach him without letting fall from his priestly lips a word that manifests his desire for the eternal salvation of souls.”

Hence, he prefaced his great foundations, beginning with his first, by setting up this scope for all to see:

“Remember that the Oratory was founded by our Blessed Lady for one end only, to save souls.”

That is why the Salesian coat-of-arms bears the words:

“Give me souls ... words that formed the motto of his life. It would not be possible to follow him step by step along this long road but for the instruction and edification of his fellow priests others will glean the vast field of his life and will narrate the work done by him, will describe the troubles he encountered will enumerate his heroic sacrifices, will reverently collect together his tears, his sighs, his prayers. His prayers especially, without which he would never have had the strength to sow in tears or the comfort to reap abundant fruit. In fact, one of the most recent theologians, Tanqueray, writes:

“Where the interior is wanting the exterior act has poor results because the grace of God flows not to the minister who has almost no place for prayer: hence, the necessity of vivifying external works with the spirit of prayer.”

Sin is the great enemy of God that drives away souls and the great enemy of souls that pushes them to hell: Don Bosco; throughout his whole life was at war with it. One night he could not sleep because he knew that one of his boys had committed a sin; next night when he said a few words to the boys for the Goodnight, he looked the picture of misery. At the thought of mortal sin in his Salesians his very spirit stirred within him, he became grieved like the apostle of the Gentiles who saw the Athenians adoring idols. When he preached on the gravity of mortal sin the sorrow he felt almost choked him and sometimes the words died on his lips and he perforce had to interrupt his sermon. Even when he was conversing the mere mention of offences against God would make his face grow serious; the tone of his voice and often his silence sufficiently expressed his sorrow. He also suffered physically when he saw sinful acts or when he had to hear the confession of very grave sins: thus, on hearing a blasphemy he would feel like fainting,

and on listening to boys confessing things impure he would feel like vomiting or would sense unbearable smells or would suffer the beginnings of asphyxia. One day the revered Fr Francesia saw his eyes very red as though from some illness or other and with filial confidence asked him if he had worked too much the previous night. The good Father told him that he had gone to hear confessions in the jails and since he could not give much penance he had offered to do it in place of the penitents. Sinful actions caused him a real martyrdom that could hardly be imagined; but in the meantime his daring was increased a hundredfold, so much so, that if had an army opposed him, it would never have covered him. Whenever he read of a sin committed, especially if it were one of scandal he would shiver and exclaim:

“What a dreadful misfortune! What a dreadful misfortune!” The very thought of sin upset him and made him predict that his Oratory and all his houses would fall into ruins and into nothingness if they did not correspond to their duty of preventing sin. One of the few declarations with regard to himself was this:

“Don Bosco is the best of men. Jump about, play, shout as much as you like Don Bosco will know how to sympathise, because you are boys; but don’t give scandal, don’t ruin souls, your own or of anyone else’s by sin, for then Don Bosco will become inexorable.”

The man of prayer has his own sudden ways of stopping offences to God which other people would little dream of using opportunely. Once in the house of a certain family a little boy of five years accidentally overturned his toy cart and in a fit of anger let fall the Name of our Lord disrespectfully. At once Don Bosco called the boy and very kindly asked:

“Why did you say our Lord’s Name so badly?”

“Because my cart is no good.”

“But don’t you know that you must never say God’s Holy Name without respect and love? Now, do you know the Commandments?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then, let’s have them.”

The boy began to sing off the Ten Commandments: but Don Bosco stopped him at the second and asked: —

“Do you know it means to take the Name of God in vain? It means, my child, that we shouldn’t call on God Who is so good to us, without sufficient reason and respect: otherwise we commit a sin, we displease God, especially when we are angry, just as you were a moment ago.”

“But papa does the same always,” said the little one.

“Well, from now onwards he won’t do it.” interposed the father not a little mortified.

Another time Don Bosco as he was awaiting the departure of the train heard the little son of the refreshment-room proprietor lisp at intervals:

“Kist! Kist!” He called the child to him and said: —

“Would you like me to teach you how to pronounce your words well? Now, stand straight, raise your cap, and say Christ not Kist. That is the way it must be done, look! In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen ... Jesus Christ be praised! Be careful, not Kist but Christ.”

In the May of 1860 he had the unpleasant surprise of a personal search. Whilst Don Bosco was opening a door one of the officials laughingly read the words written above it; namely, praised forever be the names of Jesus and Mary. Don Bosco at once turned and said:

“Praised forever be the Holy Name—Gentlemen, raise your hats!”

Not one obeyed. He continued:

“You have begun this business in a most rude manner; but you will end it with necessary respect. I command you to remove your hats!” The tone of the saintly man was not to be mistaken. Each obeyed. And Don Bosco concluded :

“—the Holy Name of Jesus the Word Incarnate.”

These are words and deeds that explain many other things: for example, the long weary hours spent in clearing away sins; images of Dominic Savio with the legend DEATH RATHER THAN SIN; the educative method directed to the prevention of sin. They explain, too, how a holy dread of sin venial as well as mortal dominated everybody; how there existed the spirit of reparation that moved so many of the boys to make amends for the sins of others, not by prayer alone but also self-sacrifice; how, above all, there was always a keen watchfulness in the best boys that made them stand on the alert to prevent the entrance of sin or its nesting among their companions. It must have been a sure thing indeed that brought to the fore in the canonical processes the unanimity with which those ecclesiastics and laymen who had already lived in that atmosphere described this branch of Don Bosco’s activity, not with the tongue of one delving into past memories but with the enthusiasm of one profoundly and lovingly impressed.

St. Thomas has a beautiful passage that comes like a lucent beam.

“The love of friendship is precisely this that it seeks the good of the one beloved. For this reason itself ardent love moves him who is enkindled with it to oppose all that stands in the way of the friend’s good; in this sense anyone is called a zealous lover when he strives to prevent in word and indeed whatever may be harmful to the interests of his friend. Equally is he called a zealot of God who gives himself to opposing to his utmost anything contrary to the honour or the will of God; we say he is eaten up with holy zeal who does his best to remedy evil committed or to tolerate it with tears if nothing else can be done.”

This then is the reason why Don Bosco was so much hurt at sin; he burned with Divine love and in each sin he felt the insult that was hurled at his God. Often was he heard giving vent to his thoughts in words like these:

“How is it possible that any sensible person who believes in God can let himself offend Him? Why does he treat our Lord so badly? And look how good God is! He showers His blessings on us day by day. How can we ever hurt Him? Certainly, we must say that he who offends God is beside himself.”

Such like expressions often were on his lips; but who can describe for us the expression of his soul so seraphically enraptured with love for God?

At Becchi beside the home of Don Bosco’s birth a little chapel is built. It is a symbol. The good Father had it put up in 1848 for the convenience of himself and his boys when, alone or accompanied by some of the Oratorians, he would go there to repose a little in his native air. The chapel is in the same state as it was then. Beside the right hand

wall as you enter there is an old armchair where he used to sit and hear confessions: in the centre of the altar stands a tabernacle undecorated but solid wherein the Blessed Sacrament is kept: overhead hangs a picture of our Lady. Here we have the greatest means of sanctification Don Bosco ever used, applied to his sons, and proposed to them. Namely, frequent confession, frequent Communion, devotion to Mary, Mary most holy who calls to Jesus by means of the sacrament of pardon and reconciliation. In a letter to Pius IX dated 13th February 1863, Don Bosco wrote:

“Your Holiness may put into effect the sublime thought with which the Lord has inspired your heart, by promulgating wherever it is possible veneration for the Blessed Sacrament and devotion to our Lady, the two pillars of salvation for poor humanity.”

During the years of his greater foundations he sought to instil into those around him and to spread to the furthestmost parts of the earth the loving devotion to the Blessed Virgin, yet all he did would have had no sufficient reason had he not had within him a burning love for the Mother of God: in fact, it was this love that contributed in great part to the spiritual formation and the development of his interior life.

He whom the Church holds as the master of masters in the devotion to Mary thus exhorts us:

“Think of Mary ! Invoke Mary !”

The thought of Mary, the invoking of Mary was never silent in the heart and on the lips of Don Bosco; in the which his piety was bound to the uninterrupted thread of genuine Catholic tradition in spite of the age-old Jansenistic vestiges still existing in his days. He frequently spoke of our Lady’s glories ancient and modern in his endeavours to imbue others with that filial confidence his own heartfelt towards her; continuously his lips uttered childlike invocations to this heavenly guide; often did he promote public acts of thanksgiving in recognition of the greatness of her help.

“How good Mary is!” he exclaimed tenderly many times. When people praised him for the works he had done he suffered indeed and quickly rectified the wrong opinion:

“These good people don’t know Don Bosco at all; it is Mary Help of Christians who does everything.”

When he preached of Mary’s greatness he would become moved almost to tears. He insisted that he had taken no step without having had recourse to Mary. For guidance in decisive moments he would pilgrimage at least three times to the famous shrine of Oropa at Biella. In his letters we find frequently appearing phrases like this:

“May Mary the holy Virgin watch over your dear ones always.” After relating a sweet little story from some author we do not know he wrote with his own hand on the press proofs (that are still preserved) this ardent exhortation which flowed more from the depths of his heart than from his pen:

“Reader, wherever you are, whatever you do you can have recourse to Mary with a prayer. But invoke her with faith for she is a merciful mother who desires and can benefit her children. Pray to her with your heart, pray to her with perseverance, and rest assured she will be for you a real providence, a prompt aid in all your needs spiritual and temporal.”

Elsewhere he described the apparition of Mary to St. Stanislaus Kostka when the holy youth received the command of entering into the Society of Jesus; on the press proofs

Don Bosco wrote:

“Christians, you who like to be dear to Mary, pray to her with your whole heart that she obtain for you the beautiful grace of consecrating yourselves wholly to God. Tell her to remove you from the great dangers of the world: to command you as she did St. Stanislaus—She who can do all things— and you will be most ready to obey her. The venerable Fr Hyacinth from his boyhood asked Mary for the grace of being called to the religious life and he obtained it.”

Here are two expressions that flow directly from his lively love for our Lady.

We have no scruple in prolonging this sweet theme. As the heart of Don Bosco was dilated with the thought of Mary, so our soul rejoices to gather together the effusions of it: and this the more zealously in proportion to the dislike he felt in admitting others to partake of his interior movements. But there are times when emotion breaks through even characters much reserved. There is a letter of Don Bosco, dated August 6th 1863, from Oropa addressed to my dearest student-sons which truly has something lyrical about it. The good Father calls them all to share in spirit the blissful ecstasies in which his soul is enwrapped in that Marian atmosphere, in that palatial dwelling of the holy Mother of God.

The grand devotion of the place enters into his meditative soul, the joy caused by that sight of so much piety towards the heavenly Queen so inundates him that on taking up his pen he feels first of all the need of making this same emotion vibrate in his sons.

“If you, my dear children, were to find yourselves upon this mountain you certainly would feel moved in your soul. A large building in the centre of which is a devotional church forms what is commonly called the Sanctuary of Oropa. Many many people continuously come here; some thank our Lady for favours received from her, others pray that she free them from a temporal or spiritual evil, others beg her to give them the gift of persevering in good, others request her to obtain a happy death for them. Young and old, rich and poor, nobles and peasants, knights, counts, marquises, labourers, merchants, men, women, shepherds, and students of every description continually come here and approach the Sacraments of Penance and Communion and then go to the foot of Mary’s wonderful statue to implore her heavenly aid.”

But his joy is soon turned to sadness for he sees that he is not surrounded by his sons as in the Oratory that he might lead them to give loving homage to this blessed Mother.

“But amidst so many people I feel an ache at my heart. Why? Because I do not see my dear pupils. Ah, yes! Because I cannot have my children here to bring them to Mary’s feet, to offer them to her, to put them under her powerful protection, and to make them like Dominic Savio or St. Aloysius.”

For this displeasure, however, which he felt in not being able to honour Mary in the most solemn way with the participation of his boys, he finds comfort in a promise and in a prayer.

“In order to give consolation to my poor heart I went before the wonderful altar and I promised this good Mother that when I return to Turin I shall do my best to foster devotion to her in your hearts. And recommending myself to her I have asked those special graces for you. Mary, I said, bless all our house, drive far from the heart of our boys even the shadow of sin; be the guide of the students, be the seat of wisdom for

them. May they all be yours, completely yours, look upon them always as your children and keep them among your devoted servants forever! I believe that Mary will hear me and I hope that you will stand to the fore in order that all of us may correspond to her voice, to the grace of our Lord.”

Finally, Don Bosco’s heart is at peace and resting in a feeling of firm hope as though he saw our Lady having given ear to his prayers bending from the lovely hills of Oropa and raising her right hand in benediction over his dear Oratory at Valdocco with her mantle of protection spread over all its inmates.

“May our Lady bless me, bless all the priests, clerics, and all those working in our house; may she bless you all. May she bless us from her throne in Heaven. And we, let us exert ourselves to the utmost to merit her holy protection in life and in death. Amen.”

When he left the sacred spot Don Bosco must have murmured with his lips tenderly and trustfully, as his mind was piercing the future:

“I have raised my eyes unto the mountains whence will come HELP to me.”

It was just at that time when he was proposing to build a church to Mary Help of Christians. For this same church Don Bosco had worked out a prodigious picture in his mind. In the centre raised on high our Lady was to stand surrounded by angels; near and around her were to be the Apostles, then martyrs, prophets, virgins, confessors; below emblems of her victories, and the people of the earth in supplication. So eloquently did he describe his idea with words and particulars that it seemed to portray a scene really seen by him. Truly, the painter explained the rules of art to the saint and showed him the impossibility of grouping so many figures in so limited a space: yet the magnificent idea of Don Bosco and his way of expressing it were a fit subject for meditation that should become familiar to Mary’s clients and a promoter of her glories.

CHAPTER 5 In life's troubles

“All who are pleasing to the Lord will pass through many tribulations, keeping them faithful.” Looking from a distance would not anyone have believed that Don Bosco trod onwards on a path of roses? Yet his life was from first to last strewn with sharp thorns. Thorns in the family circle: poverty and contrarieties that lay around his early years pursued him and made rough the road of his priesthood obliging him to undergo hard and humiliating labours. Thorns in founding the Oratory: on all sides private people, priests, municipal authorities, men of politics, men of the schools, all spoke ill of him. Thorns and worse things on account of protestants; his monthly issue of the *Catholic Readings* always touched them to the quick, hence their anger. Thorns by the score because of lack of funds; he had so many boys and so many works and the duty of caring for them day by day. Thorns from his own self; sacrifices made for his personal formation; painful desertions. Thorns and trials from the diocesan authority; misunderstandings, oppositions, annoyance without end. The foundation of the Salesian Congregation was a calvary indeed. Don Bosco wrote at the end:

“The work is done; but how many difficulties met with! How many troubles borne! If I had to begin the same road again, I do not know if I would have sufficient courage to accept.”

A prolonged martyrdom were those physical sufferings. To sustain oneself among such an array of trials and to reach the goal with calm security are things possible to those alone who (according to St Paul's teaching Heb. 12:2) have their eyes fixed on the Author and Finisher of faith, Jesus, and who aiming at happiness bear their cross in spite of tribulations. Herein in fact, we see how these are triumphs reserved for interior souls.

Let us stay near Don Bosco to observe him in some very critical moments of his life. St Augustine after saying that the psalmist betook himself to prayer in the midst of sorrows caused by bad men, *orat multa patiens*, exhorts us too to pray like him when we find ourselves surrounded by trials, *ut communicata tribulatione conjungamus orationem*. This is the great lesson the saints give us, and they are the only true masters (after Jesus) in the art of suffering well.

Although Huysmans in his fine but short *Sketch of Don Bosco* found it necessary to omit very many, things, yet he did not seem to think it superfluous to set apart one full page for the description of Palm Sunday 1846. A day it was of real agony for Don Bosco! Hunted and chased away from every part of the city but followed faithfully by his ever growing flock Don Bosco was reduced to carry out the programme he had hitherto done in the churches. Even there the hour of dispersion had sounded! No concession of time was given him; no glimmer of hope; no realization of his searches. The rumours that spread about concerning him made people close their doors in his face wherever he went.

His heart was broken. He heard the confessions of his ragamuffins on the edge of the meadow; then he led them in pilgrimage to the chapel of our Lady of the Field one and one-quarter miles away. How fervent were the hymns, the prayers, the Holy Communion. The celebration of Holy Mass strengthened him; but there gnawed at his heart the grief of seeing the simple faith of his boys, near as they were to dispersion in spite of the numberless sacrifices he had made to gather and keep them close to him. In his little talk he likened them to birds whose nest was cast to the ground: he begged them to pray, to pray much to the Madonna that she have prepared for them another more secure and better. In the afternoon, recreation was going on apace in the meadow; but Don Bosco was filled with sorrow. Evening came and nothing had turned up: the boys sought to draw him out of his gloom but in vain. Then nature had to have her rights—Don Bosco felt a strong movement to weep. Oppressed by affliction he withdrew to a place apart and with eyes brimming with tears he sent his prayer on high. The biggest boys who knew his ways were not satisfied at all at seeing him so sad: they followed him and heard him murmuring his prayer of sorrow and of hope:

“My God, my God, Thy will be done: let not these little ones stand in need of a home.”

That prayer was not said in vain, in fact it seemed to have an immediate answer. The next Sunday they celebrated Easter with joy.

Among the brave lads who stood by Don Bosco in the hour of his desolation there was one who in the history of the Oratory has left his name for a kind remembrance, Joseph Brosio, right hand man for the good Father on many occasions. In his simple style he leaves us the following account. One Sunday when service was over Don Bosco was not found in the playground among the boys. This unusual absence was not passed unnoticed. The affectionate Brosio set out to seek him and found him in his room very sad and almost in tears. To the boy’s insistent questions Don Bosco who liked Brosio very much answered that one of the Oratorians had offended him so much as to cause him great displeasure.

“For myself,” he added, “I don’t care; but I am sorry that the ungrateful boy is on the way to perdition.”

Brosio’s blood boiled within him and he could hardly control himself with the anger of an enraged mob he wanted to go out and give that companion a lesson to be remembered. Don Bosco stopped him quickly and said calmly:

“You want to punish Don Bosco’s offender; you are right. We shall take revenge together. Will that be all right?”

“Yes” was the angry boy’s answer.

Don Bosco very sweetly took the youngster’s hand, led him to church where he put him kneeling beside him, and remained long in prayer. He must have prayed too for Brosio for in the twinkling of an eye the boy’s anger passed from him and love entered into his heart. Outside, Don Bosco said in a fatherly way:

“You see, my dear lad, the revenge a Christian takes is to pardon and to pray for the offender.”

Many were the occasions, to some of them, that presented themselves to the man of God for his own practising of this advice! From 1848 to 1854 his life was attempted many times. A rifle ball fired at him as he taught catechism pierced the sleeve of his left arm,

and grazed his chest. Two assassins were in hiding in a corner of Castello Square, for the purpose of stabbing him; but their attempt was frustrated. Twice he was called to the “deathbed” of simulacres and twice with his presence of mind turned the tables on those who diabolically tried to poison or stab him. Thrice he had to escape the fury of a paid cut-throat. In his own room he was threatened with a pistol, but was rescued by the entrance of one who suspecting danger, was mounting guard at the door. In Moncalieri Road a blow of a formidable cudgel would have smashed his head had not the would-be murderer in preparing himself for the ordeal accidentally made his presence known. And what about the four terrible times when he was saved by the mysterious dog? The wretches, criminals of the first order, lay in ambush in the darkness. They were armed with weapons to kill him, since he would not lay down his pen in the war against sin but was steadfastly remaining loyal to Pope and Church especially by his *Catholic Readings*. So many and such ugly attempts that would have made men of courage shiver, did not even ruffle the calmness of his ordinary occupations, so that few in the house knew even little about his adventures. The ideal that animated him in his arduous task is revealed by himself. In 1853 two men who were courteously received by him began to menace him in a cruel manner in order to force him to give up the publication of his periodical. He said to them clearly and frankly:

“When I became a priest I consecrated myself to the good of the Catholic Church and to the salvation of souls, particularly of boys. You, gentlemen, do not know the Catholic priests, otherwise you would not lower yourselves to such threats. You should know that Catholic priests work voluntarily for God as long as they live, that if they die in the accomplishment of their duty, they look upon death as the greatest fortune and highest glory.”

We must say that he would never have opposed violence with violence, for “the strength of the priest lies in patience and in forgiveness”. In fact, anyone seeking Don Bosco after such like encounters would have found him thanking God and our Lady, praying for the miserable persecutors, thinking in God’s presence how to return good for evil, and calling his soul back again to its union with God.

These armed assaults were interspersed with others more prosaic but more numerous; namely, the visits of creditors and proprietors of shops. Don Bosco was often reduced to extreme necessity as he continued his works of religion and charity, yet such conditions did not take away from him his deep faith, that necessary food for holy cheerfulness and peace.

“God is a good Father,” he used to say, “He looks after the birds of the air and will certainly care for us too.”

As regards himself and his mission he thus thought:

“I am only the humble tool of this work: the workman is God. It lies with the workman and not with the tool to supply the means of carrying out the work and doing it well. He will do this, when and how He judges best; it rests with me to show myself docile and pliable in His hands.”

This his habit of referring things to heaven used to make him say in the Goodnight:

“Pray; and those who can do so should offer their Holy Communion for my intention. I assure you that I pray too: nay, I pray more than you! I find there are difficulties in

my way and I need a grace from God. Afterward I shall tell you of it.”

A few evenings later he would keep his word by recounting (for example) how a rich gentleman had come to him with the sum of money he had needed: Don Bosco would add:

“You see, our Blessed Lady just today has obtained a great favour for us. Let us thank her wholeheartedly. Meanwhile, continue praying: our Lord will not abandon us. But if sin should enter the house, ah! then, miserable we shall be! Our Lord would be kind to us no more! Be careful then to shun the wiles of Satan and to approach the Sacraments often.”

These are jottings of Don Bosco’s words zealously noted down day by day by boarders of the Oratory and now jealously reserved in the Salesian Archives as a true echo of our Father’s voice and authentic document of the truth he himself uttered publicly one day in 1876:

“We have no human means: but we are wont to raise our eyes to heaven.”

The great proof that a man rivets his heart continually in God and has God in his heart lies in that renewal of strength (Isaiah 40:31), that perpetual taking on of new force, just when everything seems plotting to overwhelm him: steadfastness, an intimate participation of the Divine changelessness.

“Through thirty-five years,” Cardinal Cagliero asserts, “I don’t remember having seen him even once discouraged, upset, and bored in looking after his boys.”

To the rigours of hard journeys, to the annoyance of daily worries we must add sad facts that hurt the dearest affections of his heart. One example will do for all and this happened in the centenary of St. Peter. The Papacy was always one of Don Bosco’s great loves. In those times most perilous for the Pope, the saint showed every affection and zeal for the cause of the Holy Father, and, tried very hard as it was, this zeal was noticed by both parties. Offend Don Bosco in his love for the Pope and you wound him in the apple of his eye. Yet God allowed him to be tested here too. For the solemn world wide rendering of homage he had given to the press a supplement of *Catholic Readings* dealing with the Prince of the Apostles, a work that was welcomed by many people. But what a blow awaited him! What a bolt from the blue! It was brought to his notice that his booklet had been denounced to the Sacred Congregation for Condemned Books! Then came the report from one of the consultors; a demand weighty, severe, and even rude towards the person of the author, as though he had tried to undermine the Pontiff’s authority by erroneous teaching. Don Bosco prayed much, much counsel did he seek; then he wrote out a respectful answer. The night before he sent it to Rome he called one of his Salesians to transcribe it in fair copy: this move of his has resulted fortunately in this fact that now we know what otherwise would have been buried in the sepulchre of those dark hours. In the silence of the night that Salesian heard, coming from Don Bosco’s room next door to his, heartrending sighs and abrupt phrases, nothing more than earnest prayers. At midnight the Father sweetly opened the door and inspected the other’s work.

“Have you seen now?” he asked.

“Yes, I have seen how they treat Don Bosco!”

Then the saint casting his eyes on the crucifix exclaimed:

“Yet, my Jesus, You know that I wrote the book with a good intention ! Ah! My soul is sorrowful even unto death! Thy will be done! I don’t know how I’ll pass tonight. O Jesus, help me!”

How Don Bosco passed that night God alone knows; all we know is that at five o’clock the secretary (who had stayed to finish the work of copying) saw Don Bosco all calm and serene and in his usual way going down to hear confessions and celebrate Holy Mass. He seemed a new man after that for a merry twinkle was in his eye. The defence was set on foot but Pius IX himself stopped it. In the meantime when the affair was gone over again he was asked to retouch two points in a future edition. What a mountain from such a small molehill! But it was a wicked stab at Don Bosco. The prayer with which he had heartened himself in those sorrowful days was turned into an act of thanks to Mary as soon as the clouds rolled by.

But what is a lull of four months when set side by side with a trial prolonged, relentless, obstinate, unchanging for a period of well-nigh ten years? The wind may scatter every harsh word; polemics go much against the character of this work. History will do its duty, nay, even now it has begun. The heroic sanctity of Don Bosco has made giant strides these last ten years. It would be a serious neglect for us when speaking of Don Bosco’s union with God in trials to pass over in silence that trial which was for him the most piercing and most felt. In the archdiocese, then, we have on the one hand Don Bosco striving daily to smooth out dissensions, and on the other some people who took an Interest in creating distortions and causing trouble. For ten years these Sorrowful oppositions were prolonged and they needed the patience of Job. Yet our good Father who was always gentle when forced to speak of the trying situation had but one lament, one sole desire, and this we find in a letter written by him to Cardinal Nina.

“I have never asked and never will ask for more than peace and tranquility in order that I may work as a priest for the good of souls hedged in by countless dangers.”

Nothing existed for Don Bosco except souls: everything good name, fame, influence, counted as naught. What could he do then in this torrent of bitterness? To betake himself to prayer (says the Psalmist) is the consolation of the persecuted saint. And St. Paul adds that to unite to patience constancy in prayer when tribulation befalls is the way of the saints. Anyone searching among the ins and outs of the Acts of the Processes will come across three lines that ably describe that unhappy time.

“It was the crucible that purified his virtue from every base alloy and brought him more eminently into the spirit of faith and into union with God.”

Regarding the perpetrators of the troubles, Fr. Rua writes, “I know that he was not content to forgive, them merely but he prayed for them and had prayers said for them.”

There was one thing that Don Bosco never prayed for and that was cure from the illnesses that attacked him: he allowed others to pray as an act of charity. Physical sufferings borne with such a perfect agreement to God’s will are acts of a great divine love and voluntary penance: however, we must see to what degree. The illnesses that Don Bosco had to undergo during his life were neither few nor of no consequence. It would not be hyperbole to say that his body had no rest. Spitting blood was of periodic occurrence beginning with the days he was a young priest. From 1843 he had a burning eye trouble that resulted in the complete loss of sight in his right eye. From 1846 his

legs and feet became swollen increasing year by year, so that he was forced to use elastic stockings because the flabby skin used to fall over the rim of the boots, as was seen by him who helped the saint to dress. God knows how he kept on his feet at all! This swelling he called his daily cross. Again, he suffered splitting headaches that seemed to rend his head. Racking neuralgic pains shot through his gums for weeks on end. Too often he suffered obstinate attacks of insomnia; chronic spells of indigestion; palpitation, that at times it seemed a rib had broken. In the last fifteen years of his life he had to bear periodic fevers together with skin troubles: then on his sacral bone grew a tumour as big as a nut that made it a martyrdom for him to sit down or lie in bed. For motives easily understood he never breathed a word to anyone about this, not even to the doctor who with a small cutting would have relieved him. To his intimates when they would ask him to make himself comfortable he would reply:

“It’s all right for me to stand or walk: sitting tires me.”

Another cross that he had never revealed completely but which was discovered after his death. He had it from June 1845. In that year there broke out in the Cottolengo Institute an epidemic of spotted fever and Don Bosco, a frequent angel of charity there, caught the illness the marks of which he bore to the end of his life. The custodian of the saint’s remains saw something that would cause a stir among the faithful: namely, a kind of herpes spread over the whole body, particularly on the shoulders. A sharper hairshirt would have been less cruel! In his last five years his spine was infected and this made him stoop his shoulders a little beneath the burden of his crosses and call to his aid the strong and loving arms of his sons. A famous French doctor who visited Don Bosco in 1880 at Marseilles declared that Don Bosco’s body was a threadbare coat worn day and night, that had gone beyond repair and that needed rest if it were to be preserved as it was. And yet, in spite of this list of sufferings, he never uttered a complaint, never showed a movement of impatience; instead, he worked away at his desk, heard confessions for hours, preached and journeyed as though he was in perfect health; nay, more his happy character shed sunshine from his face and encouragement from his words. He was asked to pray to God for mitigation in these trials, but he replied:

“Even if I knew that one little prayer would be enough to cure me, I wouldn’t say it.”

He who commended his inconveniences to the One Who sent them found himself more loving the more painful they were. This is one fact alone that reveals to us the depths of spirit; a fact we could hardly believe had we not known how amiable God is in His saints. It offers us an opportunity of recalling a well-founded teaching of Tauler. The Sublime Doctor says:

“Of all the prayers Jesus said in His mortal life the most excellent is the one He addressed to His Father when He said: My Father, not my will but thine be done! The prayer that glorified the Father most of all and was most acceptable to Him, the prayer most beneficial to men and most terrible to demons. Thanks to the resignation of the human will of Jesus, all of us can save ourselves. Behold why the greatest and most perfect joy of men truly humble is in doing the Will of God exactly.”

And behold therefore a prayer Don Bosco knew how to offer perfectly throughout the sorely tried years of his life!

CHAPTER 6 In various misfortunes

Two dangers seriously menace men of action. Jesus pointed them out when He reproved Martha: "Thou art solicitous" and "thou art troubled"; that is, preoccupation of thoughts and inquietude of sentiments. These two things are common to people wont to spend their activity "about many things". In order not to walk into the trap we need the "one thing necessary" chosen by Mary, namely, union with God. The ship laden with its cargo ploughs the waves straight and sure as long as its centre of gravity is correct; she has also a stability not only of balance but also of energy, so to speak, to return to the level each time that she dips into the troughs of the waves. The centre of gravity of the active life is precisely this union with God that preserves from sinking and regulates the balance. How many waves unexpectedly batter against our frail craft! Not to suffer in like contrarieties even the smallest shock is a privilege rare indeed for men so united to God by being one in soul with Him. That Don Bosco was one of these privileged men we are given to believe by his actions and words in the presence of unforeseen and wearisome accidents which in spite of their hard contradiction and surprise never as much as shook his accustomed calmness: a possibility only to him who is always and everywhere in his proper centre.

Don Bosco had big troubles through the unexpected falling of some walls. One night in 1852 a part of a new building collapsed and God alone knows with what amount of sacrifice it had been built. The boys were rudely awakened and hastened out of the dormitory: they ran to Don Bosco and he gathering them around him led them to church to thank God and our Lady who had saved them all from greater perils. A few hours afterwards during recreation the remainder of the building crumpled up and pillars and walls fell in a huge heap of masonry into the playground. Don Bosco was astonished though he held himself serene at this new misfortune that defied all means and hopes of a speedy repair, yet he said jokingly:

"It seems we have been playing at making toy houses!" Then he continued with his fatherly tone of voice and peacefulness:

"Sicut Domino placuit; sit nomen Domini benedictum! We receive everything from the hands of God: He will take note of our resignation. Rather, let us thank our Lord and our Lady because throughout the miseries that oppress men in these days we have always a benign Hand that guides us."

One of his letters penned three days afterwards reveals to us the holy peace that reigned in his soul.

"I have suffered a reverse of fortune: the new building in course of construction tumbled to the ground in ruins just when it was nearly roofed. There were only three serious accidents, nobody dead. And I? A fear, consternation possess me. *Sic Domino placuit.*"

One midnight in 1861 a mighty rumbling shook the Oratory to its very foundations. A

thunderbolt fell into the room of Don Bosco, threw him into the middle of it unconscious, and left the place disorderly. His first thought on coming to was for his boys who slept on the floor above. He prayed to Mary for them; and there was need of his prayers. The electric discharge had passed through the dormitory, wrecked the roof, and filled the boys with so much fear, that their panic would have complemented the work of the thunderbolt. In the babel of cries, shouts, weeping and darkness the sweet and smiling figure of Don Bosco appeared holding a lamp before him and standing on a pile of bricks and mortar.

“Fear not!” he called in a reassuring tone, “We have a good Father and a good Mother in Heaven watching over us!”

As God willed, the confusion subsided. The father ascertained whether all were safe and having seen he uttered a “Thanks be to God!” that came straight from his heart.

“Let us thank ... !” he continued, “Let us thank our Lord and our Blessed Lady! They have preserved us from a grave danger. Woe to us if the house had also caught fire! Who of us would have been saved then?”

Not so much occupied was he in that moment as to forget to make all there and then kneel before an image of our Lady and recite the Litany in her honour. Later on the clerics came to visit him and ask him if he had suffered any injuries. It was the third time that a thunderbolt had played havoc on the Oratory but this last time far surpassed the other two. Don Bosco nevertheless said:

“We have obtained one of the best favours of Mary; let us thank her from the bottom of our hearts!”

In fact later investigation showed clearly that nothing was wanting to turn the accident into a hecatomb. He was told to put up a lightning conductor.

“Yes,” he replied, “up there we shall set a statue of Mary. Mary saved us so wonderfully from the lightning that it would be rank ingratitude to trust any other.”

The little statue, the true protection of the pioneer Oratory still stands there a token of the filial love of Don Bosco for the Queen of Heaven. Before the end of that year the Oratory was again frightened, this time by the sinking of a vault beneath a new building. Don Bosco calmed them all by his example

“The devil,” he remarked tranquilly, “wanted to put his tail in again! But never fear; onward is the word!”

He was already an old man when a misfortune like the preceding brought out that same abandonment into the hands of God. Twenty-four years afterwards a fire broke out in the workshop of the bookbinders just at the moment of a farewell dinner to a band of missionaries. The luggage of the travellers was piled up at no great distance from the fire. Everybody well knows the commotion that happens under such circumstances: a house is soon turned into a bedlam. Don Bosco although by no means indifferent in this event, never moved from the refectory but sat there in silence and recollection. At intervals he would ask if anyone was hurt and hearing that on one was so, he entered into his recollection again. He was told that the damage amounted to a hundred thousand lire.

“It is a large sum,” he said, “but the Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. He is master.”

When giving any office of responsibility to a Salesian he would use an advice of St. Teresa:

“Let nothing upset you!”

But sometimes it came in useful for himself in certain unexpected events which in themselves were not very inconvenient but which nevertheless make a great impression on one who had the habit of always thinking that no leaf falls without God willing it. Imperturbability is rare in such disappointments the more so in proportion to a natural nervousness: whence the perpetual self-control and sweet calmness are prerogatives of one totally steeped in God. Who is there (by way of example) who on a journey has not at some point come up against the unpleasant experience of having gone off his course? It is a trivial fact; but it is like a word insignificant in itself, a ‘perhaps’ of some sort that escapes the tongue at a certain time and reveals a wide vista. One day Don Bosco stepped from the train unto the platform at Asti. He delayed in the station over some business or other and missed the coach that was to take him to Montemagno: so he had to stay there for some hours. He was not at all put out. He got busy with a gang of boys and before long he had them making their confessions at once in a nearby shop. Another time he missed the train from Trofarello to Villastellone and so without more ado he took some printer’s proofs from his pocket and did the journey on foot correcting as he went along. When he reached his destination he raised his eyes from the papers and remarked to his companion:

“It’s true that misfortunes can be utilised in some way. Not even at home would I have had so much time for this amount of work. Thanks to the accident!”

One morning he had arranged to go to a certain place not very far from Turin in order to say Mass. Just as he came out of his room he met a cleric who had a word to say to him: Don Bosco stopped and listened. He went down the stairs and there was another who wanted a word: Don Bosco calmly heard him. He made to cross the porticoes and at once he was surrounded by priests and clerics to whom one and all he gave satisfaction. Finally he was on his way to the station but a boy came shouting after him: he stopped and answered the lad’s questions. But the train was not waiting for him: he got to the platform just in time to see it off. Don Bosco turned back, said his Mass in the city, and caught the next train. To make more conspicuous the sympathetic and amiable Superior in this last case requires an habitual intercourse with God. St Bonaventure says: Only He Who is the ocean of goodness dropped into his prayer that sweetness through which he became all to all.

The worst trials to Don Bosco were from his fellow men, from those in humble station, those of some consequence, those in authority. There was a humble lay brother destined for the house at Santa Cruz in the Argentine but he could not bear the discomforts. He left the Society and obtained work in a colonist’s business. Don Bosco was deeply hurt by this news and he commanded the man to return to Italy. Someone mentioned the great expense for the journey but Don Bosco answered calmly and firmly:

“Expenses count for naught when it is a question of saving a soul.”

The cook of the Oratory was of humble rank too. One evening Don Bosco returned very late from his confessional and had to sit down to a cold dish of badly cooked rice-soup. The server who knew by experience that Don Bosco would not utter a word of

complaint took it upon himself to upbraid the cook. The latter was a little off form when the server said:

“What stuff is this for Don Bosco?”

“And who is Don Bosco?” asked he cook, “He’s one like the others.”

The server either through anger or to acquit himself reported the cook’s words verbatim to the saint. Don Bosco just as he carried the spoon to his mouth said nonchalantly:

“The cook is right.”

Of humble station also was the refectorian who was rebuked by Don Bosco for not having changed the soiled tablecloth in time. He could not take the fatherly rebuke in good part but wrote a strong letter to the saint mentioning even that that was the first time he had seen Don Bosco serious. The servant of God without the slightest shade of anger met him and referring to the expression the refectorian had used said with his usual meekness:

“Do you not know that Don Bosco is a man like the others?”

From St Paul down to ourselves each man must look upon himself as a debtor to all (Rom 1:14), to the unwise no less than to the wise. And again St. Bonaventure tells us that it is our relations with God that render the superior’s heart humble.

Devotio cor humiliat.

A notable person was Abbot Amedeo Peyron, Philologist and Orientalist of no mean standing, and professor of the Regia University of Turin. He was presiding over a meeting of priests for the discussion of what interested their ministry. The conversation turned upon the necessity of multiplying educational publications suitable for the people. Don Bosco caught this opportunity and recommended his *Catholic Readings*. He could not have done worse! The President seeming to have waited for this chance let fall a torrent of words that railed against the defects of language, grammar, and style frequent in such books. The authority of the man, the flow of his words, the biting of some of his phrases made the audience gape. The servant of God Leonard Murialdo was among the listeners and it hurt him very much to see the humiliating of his friend. He knew how some of the others were not at all friendly with Don Bosco and so he waited trembling to hear the reply. He was not ignorant either of the way authors feel when their work is criticised, if not put on the rack. At the end of the tirade Don Bosco rose and said:

“I am here precisely for help and counsel. I recommend myself to you all: I would like you to mention anything I should correct and willingly will I abide by your advice. Nay, it would give me great pleasure if others more versatile than myself would undertake the revision of each folio.”

Fr Murialdo breathed easily. In 1896 when recalling the dramatic episode, he had felt since then that Don Bosco was a saint.

With other noteworthy ecclesiastics also Don Bosco had many hard rubs not through any malice of theirs but just through the prejudice of preconceived ideas. Under these conditions he showed clearly that total self-detachment which is the fruit of the uninterrupted union with God Whose peace reigns supreme in the thoughts and sentiments. Where God is, disturbance is not. In a famous town outside Italy a new school was opened by Don Bosco. He went to visit an important religious institute while there, but

was received very coldly indeed. On coming out of it Don Bosco's companion showed his disgust at the way they were treated. But the saint said:

"Cheer up! Cheer up! They will be more confused than we for their treatment of us."

At once the shade of the annoyance passed away and Don Bosco talked of other things.

In the same city while he was visiting the school he came in for strong language from the local parish priest who was giving way to an impulsiveness not uncommon to people of good will. For a half hour the saint listened and when the tempest abated, he slightly bowed his head like one asking in a humble way to speak.

"Father," he said, "you are right to complain: I am sorry I can't fully comply with your wishes. You are our benefactor and I remember with great gratitude the good you have done to us. We shall always try to be of service to you. I shall die soon but I have commissioned my successor to pray for you."

Each word was a healing balm to the inflamed outburst of the priest and in the end he asked pardon of Don Bosco and became his great friend.

Let us cast a glance at the newspapers. We would be building a rare monument were we to gather together one upon the other all the 'bricks' hurled unexpectedly at Don Bosco and his Oratory by papers of every sort. A person writes of having a personal remembrance of Don Bosco, indelible though sad. As a boy he first came across that dear name of the saint in a cartoon in the political paper *La Rana* where there was printed an ugly reptile with a human head topped by a priest's biretta and in the act of biting a boy. The legend accompanying it read:

"Help this ugly monster to feed on tender flesh!"

But we shall let the dead bury their dead: all the more so since Don Bosco let them bay at the moon while they lived. He would not tolerate revenge, tit for tat, rancour against calumniators, and this his works affirm. In the face of such like stabs from the press he would raise his eyes and hands to heaven and say with great faith:

"These too will pass! So, have patience! They're good people who want nothing but to do good; that's why they shout at Don Bosco! Shall we then have to leave off saving souls? They act so without knowing the work of God and He will easily unravel all knots!"

Much more than the importunate ranters of the papers there is the unfavourable attitude of authority that offends the wise and holy. Don Bosco tells us himself that his character was impetuous and haughty and so he could not bear to see himself passing an unpleasant fifteen minutes every time he saw himself brow beaten and hindered by representatives of both sides, in spite of the fact that he was seeking alone God's glory and the salvation of souls! But nature, acted on by the supernatural forces of grace, made Don Bosco in those moments the most reconcilable and peaceful of men.

In times of public commotion how many times did the State authorities, pushed on by sectarians, turn upon Don Bosco! And how often did he subdue even the most indisposed souls and lead them to meeker thoughts! But before entering the lists, he turned to God in prayer trying to discover how efficacious this would be in moving the heart of those officials.

"With this means," he was wont to say to his Salesians, "if well done, you will obtain everything you want even from those who don't like you or esteem you. God will touch

the man's heart in that moment, so that he may listen willingly to your request.”

Here we have the source of his great courage in hard and disconcerting occasions. In 1862 there was talk of his having to close the Oratory schools. The Minister of Education granted him an audience after two hours of waiting: when he did receive him he was seated in a pompous armchair: Don Bosco had to stand before him. Before the saint could open his mouth the dignitary let loose a flood of abuse lasting half an hour and more, against priests and monks, against the Pope and Don Bosco, against his schools and his books. Seeing the visitor standing calm, immovable, and without defending himself he called him a fool and ended his harangue. Don Bosco began to speak. In a grave and polite tone he pointed out that all the other had said so far had nothing to do with the question of his coming: then he went on to give the reason why he had come. The Minister who had never had occasion to deal with men of Don Bosco's type could not believe his eyes or ears. From that moment he felt a growing esteem and liking towards him whom he had abused a short time previously. He changed and began to treat Don Bosco with kindness and from that time he was a friend and protector. In this case as in many others Don Bosco could (with the necessary changes) have made his own those words of Nehemias:

“I have prayed to God in heaven and then I spoke to the king. And the king allowed all because the helping hand of God was with me.”

The spirit of prayer (which the servant of God Contardo Ferrini calls the feast day of holy thoughts) really has this result that it upholds the soul in thoughts cheerfully holy and holily cheerful even in embarrassing circumstances. How wearisome for Don Bosco, faithful and wise servant of Holy Church (as the Pope called him in a speech on the saint's miracles), for just then troubles were rising with the Ecclesiastical authorities! But with what cleverness did he know how to correlate the duties of a Subject and the rights of justice! In God he sought the solution of Gordian knots.

A document in the archives has this note by a strange hand in the margin:

“Poor Don Bosco! If God had not been with him he would surely have succumbed.”

The document is about an official report drawn up and sent to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars by an excellent Monsignor who had a duty from the Holy See to the Subalpine Government. Herein he depicts the life of Don Bosco's clerics in colours so dark as to cause the much desired approbation of the Pious Salesian Society to be deferred indefinitely. The good prelate was judging as one who had not apprehended Don Bosco and his spirit and who was using old criteria and methods which in their simplicity upset traditional pedagogical ideas. When Don Bosco came to know of this state of things he saw the great danger he was in. He reported the situation to the Chapter of the Society, but he used very polite and becoming terms when mentioning the author of the document. He did more, for he received him into the Oratory with sincere signs of respect and whenever he could do a good turn he did it with right good will. *Corde magno et animo volenti.*

The procedure for the approbation of the Society made the servant of God swallow many a bitter pill. He already had the written recommendation of many Bishops: but he was given to understand that he must also have a collective recommendation of the Ordinaries of the Ecclesiastical province of Turin. The opportune moment came when His Grace Archbishop Riccardi called together his suffragans in view of the forthcoming

Vatican Council. Don Bosco then presented his humble petition that it may be read out to the assembled bishops among whom were many of his good friends. There was no doubt about the issue. But the placid waters were disturbed: so he had to be content with a reply as courteous in form as it was effusive in substance. Sadly deluded he exclaimed:

“Patience! All for the love of God and Mary!”

During a stay in Rome in connection with this affair of the approbation, a very unpleasant surprise awaited him on the eve of his departure. He had been an object of sympathy from Romans of every rank. While he was paying a farewell visit to the illustrious Vitelleschi family, Cardinal Altieri whom Don Bosco had found no time to visit was announced. It seems that because of this the noble Cardinal held himself aloof from the saint and when the latter approached respectfully the Cardinal gave him a cold ‘good day’. In that house where Don Bosco was much esteemed, the prelate never as much as paid him a compliment or said a word, or favour him with a glance. The others did not know what to do or how to effect a peace, for they knew the strong character of the personage concerned. Don Bosco was the most tranquil of all.

“It’s nothing!” he said, “Tomorrow everything will be all right.”

In fact the next day he recommended himself to God and asked for an audience with the Cardinal. In the audience all the frowns were dispersed, which fact gave tangible proof that nothing was amiss.

Since we are thus dealing with troubles from the princes of the Church why should we not carry on to the top now that we have started? Don Bosco had a quarrel with Pius IX. Once he used the influence he enjoyed at the Vatican to obtain an audience for the Piedmontese lawyer Tancredi Canonico. The lawyer belonged to that party of the infatuated followers of the Polish fanatic dreamer Towianski, the forerunner of modernists. Don Bosco had overlooked these circumstances. When the lawyer was before the Holy Father he began to reel off phantasms, forgetting where he was and with whom he was speaking. The venerable Pontiff interrupted him and bade him leave the room, which he did after putting on the table one of his writings containing things which, he had foreseen, would never have been said before the Vicar of Christ. Don Bosco was called at once after the lawyer had gone. The Pope said to him:

“Either that fellow is a big trickster or Don Bosco is a bit too simple.”

The saint smiled and the Pope continued:

“Why did you get him here? And do you still laugh at my anger?”

“I laugh because it is the anger of a loving father” was the calm and ready answer.

He told the Holy Father how he got the lawyer the audience and the Pope smiled to hear it.

One day Don Bosco wrote to a Salesian this word of encouragement and comfort in certain trials he had:

“Joy and courage, and especially let us pray for each other.”

Prayer was the secret of the tranquillity and peace of Don Bosco in afflictions, according to the inspired words of St. James:

“Is any of you sad? Let him pray.”

CHAPTER 7 Confessor, preacher, writer

The intimate relationship with God makes a priest not only know but also feel that he is a sacred person. Without this relationship he could not have fixed in his conscience the lustrous idea of his character whenever he speaks or acts, in public or in private, or in treating with men of every rank, file, and condition. Then the priestly spirit pervades the whole life, shedding supernatural energies around that heal and purify souls, that strengthen them in the right path, that raise them to heavenly things. As in Jesus the human nature hypostatically joined to the Divinity was instrumental in accomplishing wonders, so in the priest living the interior life there is no word or act that does not wear the sacerdotal trademark, that does not serve to cause a salutary reaction in souls. Of him it may be affirmed that he scatters about him health-giving virtue for spiritual evils: “virtue went forth from him and healed all.” (Lk 6:19). We are now going to see this while examining the triple activity of Don Bosco in the confessional, in the pulpit, and in the field of writing.

1. Confessor

With regard to confession we can understand fully his manner of administering the Sacrament, only when we take into account his own practice and ordinary teachings.

Don Bosco was attached to confession from his tenderest years and no change of life was able to weaken his habit of frequently approaching it. In fact, he went with right good will: even when he had not his mother to accompany him; he went very often too, a thing rare in those days for the majority of boys and rarer still for youngsters and those scattered sons of the soil. When he was a pupil at Chieri and therefore free to do as he willed he thought of choosing a fixed confessor who, notwithstanding the boy’s humble birth and rustic manners, predicted a great future for him because of his diligence and care in approach the holy tribunal. As a Seminarian he was quickly and always distinguished for punctuality and regularity in approaching confession every week. As a priest in Turin he confessed weekly to Saint Joseph Cafasso and when This latter died Don Bosco chose a pious priest, one of his fellow pupils, who was in the habit of going every Monday to the church of Mary Help of Christians and making his confession to Don Bosco. Whenever he went on a journey or when his own ordinary confessor was absent for any reason whatsoever our saint still kept faithful to his practice by going to one of his Salesians or to any other priest according to circumstances. For example, during a two month stay at Rome in 1867 he went weekly to Rev. Fr. Vasco of the Society of Jesus. Sometimes his Salesians would hesitate to hear his confession but he brushed aside their temerity:

“Come along! Do this charity for me and let me confess!”

Notable was his way of fulfilling the sacred duty: we shall but complement what we

have elsewhere said. He did not seek for place far away or choose lonely hours like some evildoer to make his confession, but would rather be in full view of all. Hence his boys and others were able to observe how from his preparation and thanksgiving he was completely immersed in the grandeur and holiness of the act. This practice of frequent confession with such a vivid and enduring affection was for him like a vigil and an uninterrupted guard over his heart. This guard helps to keep the heart free from any impediment to the working of the Holy Spirit, so that He pours into our hearts the abundance of His heavenly gifts.

The personal practice of Don Bosco regarding confession was reflected in his teaching both oral and written on this subject. Herein is found a note all his own which is the outstanding tendency not only to attract the faithful but also to attach them to himself. This was so especially in the case of boys who were the particular object of his providential mission. The originality of Don Bosco when he wrote of confession was not a new thing, though what was new was the apostolic ardour shown by him in making loved a Sacrament he himself loved. In his life of Michael Magone he has made a digression with which, in words ringing with priestly charity, he addresses himself first to his boys to excite them to filial confidence in the father of their soul; then, he turns to the confessors of the boys to beg them to have fatherly goodness in the exercise of their ministry. In a memorandum destined for the Salesians he desires that the priest, if asked to hear confessions, should "respond with joy in his heart" and that no one should "at any time use roughness or ever show himself impatient". He recommended that "the boys be taken very gently and lovingly" without ever scolding them or demanding marvels of them through ignorance or things confessed. In the same work he lays down this norm:

"It is an important and useful thing indeed for boys that none of them ever go away from us discontented."

In the *Companion of Youth* he sets up an easy guide by following which anyone can confess with real spiritual satisfaction. In fact, reading those simple and sweet pages even one who is a boy no longer, even he whose brows are furrowed with care, experiences a sense of trustful abandonment that moves him to fall before his confessor's feet with a fervent spirit and calm simplicity like to his younger years. In the regulations for his oratories, schools, and sodalities, confession holds a place of honour, and always portrayed deliberately in a tender light.

As in his writings, so in his talk. The great biographer of the servant of God affirms that every phrase of Don Bosco was an incentive to confession. Let us overlook what may be hyperbolic in the expression taken universally (though it would be right to say that all hyperbole has good foundation in fact): but as to the real efficacy of his every exhortation to confession there is nothing to discuss, for reason is valued at naught in front of facts: since these are rioted so numerous and with so much variety that one who reads the account gapes in wonder and has to admire the marvels of Divine Grace in the work of salvation. The fount of the return to God so took irresistible possession of the mind of those invited by Don Bosco that they forthwith fell at his feet and opened up their conscience, be they his own or strange boys workmen or professionals, simple or influential or good or evil people. Don Bosco's victories in this field were numberless. Now, the ease of finding the way to hearts in order to lead them to this act so hard in

itself, harder for certain individuals, is not possible unless there is, besides a great faith in the Sacrament of Penance and a great apostolic frankness, another quality that may be the soul of the rest. Which is it? Don Bosco himself let slip the revelation of it. In 1862 a good priest of Osimo wanting to find out Don Bosco's secret for winning souls asked him to tell it He replied:

"I don't know of any secret. If that good priest loves God he will do better in that affair than I."

We find in the book of Chautard an excellent commentary on these words to which we shall do well in referring.

"Between natural goodness, the fruit of character, and the supernatural goodness of an apostle there lies all the difference between the human and the Divine. The first can give birth to respect and even sympathy for the evangelical worker though at times deviating towards the creature an affection that should go to God: but it can never determine souls to make the sacrifice necessary for turning them to their Creator. This effect can be obtained only through the goodness arising from union with God."

If Don Bosco did this in isolated cases how much more did he succeed in and profit by the occasions in the ministry of the word. In teaching catechism he would always harp back on the dispositions necessary to receive the fruit of the Sacrament of Penance, showing the pupils the goodness of Jesus in instituting it, and the good it does to souls. From the love of confession and Communion he made depend the possibility of passing over without stain the time of passion or that of rising after the first falls. There were very few of his talks to his boys, to his Salesians, to people of all kinds, in which he did not touch upon the theme of Sacramental confession opportunely and inopportunely. But in doing so, did he not grow tiresome or did he not take care not to offend the opinions of his audience? No! He who speaks with faith and love speaks with inspiration that fascinates the hearer. Cardinal Cagliero in fact had heard the saint many many times and yet he says that that was the favourite theme of Don Bosco about 'which he spoke in new and charming ways.' As for digressing from his subject he never did: since in any person, in any congregation of persons he had before him, Don Bosco saw not men but souls. This sentiment stirred two sentiments in his heart: one of desire, the other of fear; the desire to see all men saved, fear lest any be given to evil ways. Nay, these two sentiments, blended in Divine Love which was the very reason of the existence of his works and words, contributed the fundamental tenor to his talks, variating in multifarious ways. Of these the most ordinary and most deftly introduced was a call to the Sacrament of mercy.

The grand way Don Bosco administered this Sacrament showed forth how much and what kind of charity habitually inflamed his heart towards God, as was shown when he wrote or spoke of it. Huysman, a great convert in France, believes that for his contemporaries "who ought suddenly to change their way of living" it would "truly be a good and profitable thing" for them to be comforted and helped as Don Bosco comforted and helped his penitents in such a way that his way of hearing confessions was an image of the boundless mercy of Christ. The mere sight of him in this so holy office generated reverence and love for this august Sacrament in those who saw him. With this sense of Divine things peculiar to him, he would approach the confessional with his biretta held

before his breast and not on his head; and before he sat down he always said a prayer and made a devout sign of the cross. Usually he would hear confessions in an armchair with a prie-dieu on each side of him. His posture was one befitting a representative of God, that is dignified and moving: his knees together, his feet upon a footstool, his body erect, his head slightly bowed, his face showing forth that absorption in the divinest of acts and radiant with the spirit of God. Alternately he turned from left to right with grave and modest movements. It was not his practice to look into the face of a penitent or to give any sign that he knew him: but, leaning with his elbow on the prie-dieu, he held his ear near the penitent's mouth hedging it in with his cupped hand. He listened attentively with an unalterable sweetness of manner and a never changing aspect. What passed between him and his penitent is not revealed except by some who had him as their confessor. One of these and one of the most authentic was Cardinal Cagliero, a penitent of the saint for upwards of thirty years. He says in the Canonical Processes and elsewhere:

“The goodness of Don Bosco with the boys and adults was something wonderful. Almost all went to confess to him and to gain by his meekness and benign and patient charity. He was short, without haste, kind to a dot, and never severe: he always gave a brief sacramental penance suited to our age, but a penance always salutary. He knew how to be little with the little and how to give us opportune advice in such a way that we were led to love virtue and hate vice. An angelical atmosphere rested over his person and his exhortations.”

It was a common thing to see people coming to him without much confidence but going away penetrated with consolation as if full of trust in God's infinite mercy. This method of his instilled great confidence, so much so that anyone who experienced it never more forgot it. His own penitents meeting him again even after the lapse of many years either manifested to him of their own accord the state of their soul and the time of their previous confession, or they answered his questions with sincere affection. If any of them learned of his presence in a certain place they would hasten there from short and long distances in order to have the pleasure of confessing to him.

We could not possibly satisfy this account of his way of hearing confessions if we did not add two observations that help us to apprehend better the depths of his interior life. In the first place, when he was in the confessional he was a man totally removed from the things of the world. And what a host of affairs weighed upon his shoulders, and so important and numerous were they that they would have occupied many people of active character for quite a long time. Yet, when he was asked to hear a confession, he did not show himself upset or say he would be ready another time, but from the midst of that sea of business he would rise and humbly place himself at the service of that soul. Naturally, then, at the hour of confessions he was sought by everyone: and at that moment nothing of importance seemed to exist any more. This happened every Saturday, the vigil of every feast, and every morning before and during the community Mass. There in the confessional he would remain for hours on end, wholly given up to his duty, without sign of annoyance, and never omitting it for purely human reasons. Even when exceptional convenience counselled it he would not postpone it. It is useless to argue, the saints had no earthly business that could supersede the interests of God. One Sunday morning

a very much-desired guest arrived at the Oratory, Marquis Patrizi of Rome. The few superiors there—Don Bosco was hearing the confessions of the boys—gave him as best a welcome as they could. Someone told Don Bosco and he calmly said:

“Good! Tell him I am glad he has come and that I shall be with him in a moment when I have finished with these boys who want to go to Communion.”

That moment lasted an hour and a half!

The second observation was his impassibility by which he bore any inconvenience, disturbance, or trouble, once he was seated in the confessional. Impassibility to weariness was seen when after days of great work he remained steadfast hearing the confessions of those who came, in spite of the fact that he needed rest. Impassibility to changing temperature was seen when before the days of the Oratory’s central heating he had to face the rigours of Turin’s winter up to ten or eleven at night. At Liguria the mosquitoes attacked him but he let them bite him until his face and hands were swollen. Impassible was he to things even worse: the poor Oratorians of those days used to bring to the confessor not only sins but also after confession, sometimes, Don Bosco had a task of ridding himself of minute aggressors of various kinds: he was aware of these invasions but he took no heed of them so intent was he on his care for souls. What about confessions of the prisoners? Prisons then were very unlike those of today in regard to cleanliness and decency. Though Don Bosco was gifted with a delicate sensitiveness yet when inside in that foul ambient he seemed to have neither eyes nor nose, so taken up was he with healing the spiritual wounds of those poor creatures that he had no time to waste on the susceptibilities of his senses. In short, after all this do we not recall the words of Pius X written in his encyclical in June 1905, to the Bishops of Italy, where he formally asserts that, where there is not the help of the interior life, all strength to support the annoyances attached to one’s mission perseveringly is lacking?

2. Preacher

Intimacy with God that was the soul of the confessor was likewise the soul of the preacher. Not a shadow of self glory followed the word of Don Bosco in the pulpit: the inspiration of God alone always permeated and illumined it. Yet the desire to show ourselves brings great temptations to preachers of the Divine Word. It filters so slowly into the cleverness of thoughts, into new turns of imagination, into catchy ornaments, into, elegance of form, into the very tone of voice, and into the way of delivering it; after that, flattery in the guise of politeness does the rest for him who has a weakness in this respect. This great misery, that not a little tickles the self-love of a poor preacher, is cautiously though vainly cloaked over because it always leaks out despite all precautions, leading superficial persons astray with thoughts the Word of God was never meant to convey and filling level-headed people with disgust. It is certainly the adulteration of the Word of God, according to St Paul’s strong expression, and hence it becomes more or less barren. Don Bosco had attacks of this same temptation when he first began his preaching, as he tells us himself. His cleverness, studies, tenacious memory, and an ambient, slightly vitiated, pushed him into it: but the love of God ought to have taken and did take the upper hand in his soul. Don Bosco prepared himself humbly for his sermons. Here is one of his norms:

“The sermon that gathers the best fruit is that which is best studied and prepared.”

He gave preference to humble prayer. While at Turin he went to confession weekly and during his apostolic ministry humiliated himself oftener at the Holy Tribunal (he who had never known what it was to have scruples), for the sole end of making himself a worthy instrument for the reception of God’s grace and for the good of souls. Thus, wherever he went to announce the Divine Word (and he preached many times in many places even outside Italy) he conducted himself as a genuine minister of God, sent more than come “to give knowledge of salvation to his people”.

In his first Mass Don Bosco had ardently begged the Lord for the efficacy of word, that is to say, the power of persuasion to do good to souls. This request was heard in such a way that he could not have desired better, so much so that at the end of his life he wrote with all humility and modesty:

“It seems that God has listened to my humble prayer.”

As regards the words he gave out from the pulpit it is to be understood that his sermons went from beginning to end without brilliant flashes, without flights of thought, almost without gesture, with a slowness of delivery, with monotony of style, with language the lowest could understand, and not infrequently with some bits of plain Piedmontese. Sometimes he would be rather long. Yet, people enjoyed those sermons and listened to them with relish, so much were sweetness and naturalness present in them. At Saliceto, Mondovi, for example, the peasants made him preach six hours complete. It is to be understood besides that his themes were much used and very much reused—the importance of saving one’s soul;

the end of man;
the shortness of life;
the uncertainty of death;
the enormity of sin;
final impenitence;
forgiveness of injuries;
restitution of ill-gotten goods;
false shame in confession;
intemperance;
blasphemy;
right use of poverty and of afflictions;
sanctification of feasts;
necessity of praying;
frequenting the Sacraments;
Holy Mass;
imitating Christ;
devotion to Mary;
facility in persevering

yet people listened to him without blinking an eyelid. Among that people were noblemen, clever men, clergy and bishops: all were, I would not say fascinated, for that would sound as if it were the effect of human suggestion, but rather they were sweetly caught by the divine fire that the disciples of Emmaus had discovered in themselves.

Oh, with what truth could that exquisite response be applied to Don Bosco the preacher which the Trappists say on the feast of S. John the Evangelist:

Supra spectus Domini recumbens Evangelii fluentia de ipso sacro Dominici pectoris fonte portavit et verbi Dei gratiam in toto terrarum orbe diffudit.

Leaning upon the breast of the Lord he drew from the sacred fountain itself the waters of the Gospel and poured the grace of God over the whole world.

Yet all the evangelists were inspired. But how can we deny that power in the eloquence of St John that comes from the heart and goes to the heart? And whence did he draw it if not from the same Heart on which he leaned his head at the last Supper? And which is always the true source of a priest's eloquence? This is the Breast that makes Catholic priests fluent. Not for nothing did Don Bosco bear the name of the beloved disciple of our Lord. That particularity that says nothing in itself recalls to us the motive of Jesus in selecting John, according to the thought of St. Jerome (*quem fides Christi virginem repererat, virgo permansit, et ideo phis amatur a Domino et recumbit super pectus Jesu*), and makes us, on the question of Don Bosco's preaching, refer to a proof given us by a young diarist of the Oratory. Under the date May 29th 1861, this boy writes:

"When we came out of the church many of us were astonished and exclaimed one to another 'How many lovely things Don Bosco told us this morning!' I could pass days and nights listening to him! Oh, how I wish that God will give me when I'm a priest the grace of inflaming the hearts of boys and adults to love this beautiful virtue."

Don Bosco had that morning spoken on purity.

A frequent idea in the sermons of Don Bosco was the necessity of saving the soul. In this especially we priests "are ambassadors for Christ, God as it were exhorting us": We are the radio of God to souls in things concerning their salvation. This Don Bosco held as his incumbent duty. Let it suffice to say that he would not abstain from this even in panegyrics, that form of sacred eloquence wherein orators are easily led to fly into the heights, just when people expect or almost exact something new and flowery. This is the reason why Saint Joseph Cafasso had not much care for panegyrics: but in those of Don Bosco the master did not find anything condemnable. We shall take one as an example: it was the panegyric on St Philip given at Alba in 1868. Passing over everything else Don Bosco went on to develop as his theme the pivot on which the saint practised all the other virtues, namely, "zeal for the salvation of souls". He painted his apostolate in clear colours: then seeing that some priests were among the congregation he killed two birds with one stone by bringing in something for them too. He paved the way by supposing he had heard someone say that St Philip did so many marvels for the safeguard of boys because he was a saint. Here was his answer to this hypothesis:

"I say differently. St Philip did all this because he was a priest who fell in with the spirit of his vocation."

He then continued to hammer on the need priests have of imitating the saint in gathering boys together and teaching them catechism, encouraging them to go to confession, and to hear their confessions. He warned parents, employers, masters, with apostolic ardour and then said:

"What a terrible position for a priest when he will appear before the Throne of God Who will say 'Look down to the world. How many souls walk in the way of sin and

tread the paths of perdition! They are there because of you! You did not devote yourself to them making them listen to the voice of duty! You did not seek them! You did not save them! Others through ignorance have gone from sin to sin and are now buried in Hell. Oh, look what a crowd of them! Those souls cry vengeance against you. Now, Unfaithful steward, you will serve no more: give me an account of your stewardship. Give me an account of that precious treasure I confided to, you, the treasure that cost me my passion, my blood, my death. Let your soul answer for them who through your fault are now lost. *'Erit anima tua pro anima illius'.*"

Finally, he concluded his speech with encouragement to all to confide in the grace and mercy of God.

As is seen, Don Bosco the preacher exploited to the full the popularity that surrounded him. Even in little-liked panegyrics he took no heed of what people said, but wanted and knew how to get down to practical things. Certain nuns of a famed convent experienced the same thing when they invited him to preach about their holy patroness, a martyr of the Church. They were very anxious to hear him for they expected he would say some delicious things. Don Bosco came to know that there would be present also great men and women, so he outlined his panegyric. He began by pointing out that for the past century the eulogy of the holy martyr had been repeated in that convent and therefore it would be of little value if he retold them things they already knew well. He thought it better then to change the subject and show them the necessity of tending to perfection and the salvation of their souls by means of confessions well made. So without caring for human considerations he forgot himself in the development of his theme intending to kill several birds at the same time. For the religious he spoke of perfection and for the laity he spoke on the salvation of the soul; and for all he carried out a good examen of conscience of their past confessions. Was the change a fruitless one? No, not if we judge from the devout attention given to his words. Certainly these are things not understandable to him who does not know that the first rule of the orator is to forget himself. To blow one's trumpet in the pulpit is to do the mean role of "sounding brass" and "tinkling cymbal": whereas from the mouth of him who preaches Christ Jesus comes forth that "word of God" which "is living and effectual and more penetrating than any two-edged sword" and that reaches into the very fibres of a man's being.

There was one great occasion for Don Bosco (the only one in his life) in which a literary digression in a religious subject would have been not only justifiable but also advisable. In fact, he was prepared for it. The classics were for him, even outside the classroom, a tasty pasture of day and night reading during a period of ten years. But that was nothing to him. The occasion is worth mentioning. In 1874 friends of his in Rome had set his name alongside that of Clistine Cassiopeo in the Arcadia. Two years afterwards the Academy appointed him to give the usual speech on the passion of Christ held on Good Friday. The literary character of the Academy, the more than secular tradition of committing that charge to men of letters or to men of fame, as for example Monti and Leopardi, the whole tone of literature that pervaded the place, the quality of those assembled, and the men of letters there were all circumstances Don Bosco did not overlook or pretend to overlook. He said that he was charged with reading an address for the occasion and he confessed that the "eloquence of tongue and polish of style" which

usually shone in that “hall of knowledge” had “embarrassed him a great deal”: but he consoled himself with the thought that the “versatile pens” of others could easily make up for his insufficiency. He, however, wanted to be even there simply a priest as he had been at other times in other places. In fact, after this presentation of himself as a humble priest he began his speech purely as a priest. He did not turn to ascetics or to rhetoric for that was no sermon: he did not turn to erudition or explanations for that was no school. Who would have expected him to choose for his theme the Seven Words? For a man of Don Bosco’s priestliness it seemed absurd to him that a priest on that day, at that hour could have given himself over to literature instead of treating with priestlike zeal the cruel sacrifice of the Eternal Priest two thousand years ago. He did not set aside his wish, even though by carrying it out he would be going against the prevailing current. Hence when he announced his subject he protested again that the “sublimity of thoughts” and “poetical flights” were not in his line and that he left these to better men. As for himself he said that the poverty of his speech merited no applause but it would give his hearers a chance to exercise their kindness.

He finished his introduction! He felt that he had made efficacious excuses, so he began with peaceful simplicity to speak thus:

“After a thousand bruises and torments, subjected to a cruel scourging, crowned with thorns, and condemned to the ignominious death of the cross, our loving Saviour with racking pain bore the instrument of His sacrifice up to Calvary.”

And so on he went with a detailed and objective treatment. The sap of that discourse he extracted from the Scriptures, the Fathers, St. Thomas, sacred commentators with a discernment noteworthy and pleasant. He did not express his own sentiments for Don Bosco was a saint ruled by a spiritual shyness which did not permit him to reveal the secret movements of grace. “My secret for myself!” But well did he reveal his intentions, the intentions of a priest in order to enlighten souls and to detach them from sin and unite them with God.

3. Writer

The heart of Don Bosco throbs today in his written words, no less than in his spoken words of years ago. He took up his pen as a writer in 1844 and left it down no more: thus he gave much to be printed of which much is extant today. Three helps made it easy for him to write, in spite of the burden of occupations weighing on him: first, the old habit of making use of every crumb of time; second, the vivacity of his mind and memory built upon an equal vivacity of will-power; third, the rare capacity of accomplishing different things at the same time, even to a simultaneous control of many things. But these alone do not explain the great number of his publications unless we keep in mind the common principle he continually put into act for the space of forty years, namely, his burning zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. We would be therefore much mistaken were we to judge Don Bosco’s works from literary criteria. The good Father with a kind smile on his lips would soon point out our error to us in words very like those of St. Francis de Sales:

“As for the embellishments of style I never gave them a thought because I had something else to think about.”

What inspiration is to the poet, what the prevailing bent of minds is to the thinker, and, to sum it all up, what are vanity and lightheadedness to the freelance writer was for Don Bosco the apostolic spirit under the unending impulse of Divine love. This it was that made him attentive to the topics of the day, that made him haunt libraries and made him bend over his writing-desk. It is not to be said of him that it was a passion of his to keep the presses groaning, as the phrase of those times was used to mean full time work: even to print anything was (he tells us himself) a cause of fear to him. However, he thought it a part of his ministry to develop the talents God gave him, even if that meant his opposing evil publications with good ones or disputing every inch of ground error was covering. Thus came leaflets, booklets, books, strings of periodicals, manuals for boys and people to help them to acquire solid piety, and opportune religious instruction, and other publications with salutary maxims strewn among the columns. In short, the Don Bosco who wrote for the press was the same Don Bosco who was confessing and preaching. Whatsoever form of activity he turned his hand to was always the same, the man of God, for whom the Seraphic Doctor had written:

“What is spiritual must always and everywhere be preferred.” Hence, our drawing ordinary literary considerations into the question would be a useless work.

In such an amount of spiritual writings it would seem obvious that we would repeatedly come across places where the author reveals something of himself and his interior life, which places would be of great importance and interest to us. But we find none! A Bishop (Mgr. Galletti) writing about Don Bosco refers to the latter’s way of speaking, “deliberate doing and saying.” This is a picture of him who watches over his conversation : and a similar watchfulness marks his writings. It happened in this case that the personality of the writer appeared not on the stage: those who seek it must look behind the scenes. Nevertheless, this silence has its own eloquence, for as much as it exalts the writer so much the more will he remain mute concerning himself. Somebody else expresses his modesty of feeling joined to the consciousness of Art by penning himself as “a worker of the word”; Don Bosco, without saying anything else, shows himself to us as a priest of the word. A worker of the word is one who carries out his programme with the word both through taste and wish; a priest of the word, we can say, is one instead who with the word carries out a ministry, the ministry of the word. This is a new expression of a new thought with which we mean to signify a holy use of language through the duty of one’s calling and carried on in the name of God and the spiritual welfare of one’s fellowmen: a use therefore wherein a man has nothing to show of himself but has all to show of God. Such a ministry is fulfilled in the Church usually by preaching: but it is still enlarged by means of writing and with much more fruit. In this case the writer who sows the word of salvation and who hides his own identity, as was Don Bosco’s custom, lays bare the fact that he has a heart unburdened of wretched miseries and vanities, that he has a pen dipped in the pure love of God.

The inner dispositions of Don Bosco the writer can be better understood if we consider this his humility as the energetic handmaid of his charity. In those days when the religion of youth and people was subject to daily outrages he felt moved by the charity of Christ to combat the poison of error with the antidote of truth and for this end he thought of forming a large circle of readers. An obstacle presented itself: boys and people as

a whole did not understand the language of the books, so he condemned himself to a great sacrifice. The Pope lets us see the grand measure of this sacrifice when in his speech on the heroicity of Don Bosco's virtues he says that Don Bosco "gifted as he was with an uncommonly energetic mind and intelligence, far superior even to the ordinary and peculiar only to geniuses properly so called, would have succeeded as a professor, philosopher, or writer." So he used those great faculties for promulgating and not for creating: it was his first renunciation. A second follows after. Even in the field of spreading ideas a man of his temperament would have done wonders: yet he left aside high literature and gave himself over to making use of the language of the poorest people. He surpassed the credible in this: in fact, he would read his work to illiterate people so that he could bring it down to their level. Sometimes he would give the press proofs to a poor old gateman and make him repeat what he had read, so that he (Don Bosco) would be able to put his finger on the adequacy of the matter and the intelligence of the class of readers chosen by him. When we think of the wonders passed over by the humble charity and of the heroic priestly soul of him who did it, we see today not without emotion that the leading Catholic Italian periodical of 1833 (*La Civiltà Cattolica*) pointed out to its readers "a modest priest ... called Don Bosco", apropos of certain "small pamphlets full of solid instruction adapted to the mind of everyone, and coming at an opportune time"—a very difficult matter in those disturbed days.

"The modest priest" cited by the Roman paper became the "Angelic priest" of a few years later in the book of a Florentine writer, A. Alfani. Angelic indeed he was for many reasons, the chief of which we shall deal with now. Jealous love for the angelic virtue permeates his writings. The thirty-fifth article of the Salesian Rules says:

"He who has not a well-grounded hope that he will with the help of God preserve this virtue of chastity in thought, word, and deed should not seek admission into the Society."

The sixth beatitude of the Gospel that tells us of intimate communings between God and the clean of heart justifies sufficiently our entrance into this argument which we see clearly breathed out in the things of our saint. Sometimes it is an insignificant event that draws out the moral characteristics of a man not less than a long speech would do. Don Bosco as a young priest prepared the mysteries of the Rosary for printing. When he was revising the proofs of the third joyful mystery in the presence of a priest friend, he stopped:

"Let us contemplate our Blessed Lady giving birth ..." he considered what he read; "No, it doesn't sound well. 'Let us contemplate how our Divine Saviour was born of the Virgin'. No, that won't do either! It's better like this: 'Let us contemplate how our Divine Saviour was born in the town of Bethlehem'."

The candour of his soul shines out from first to last in his Sacred History which he compiled with unheard of trials. Never did even the smallest stain blemish the whiteness of his purity: a boy was not struck by any Biblical particular or any words used by the writer that would have produced impressions other than what were chaste. To consult the book saves one from the embarrassment found in some writers who are all out to express their opinion on many delicate points. It is a masterpiece of Christian reserve in the education of boys and a monument that speaks of the beautiful and angelic interior of him who planned it and wrote it. The principal biographer of our saint has written the

following sentence that seems to put the finishing touches to what we have been saying so far and to supply what else we could not insert.

“We are thoroughly persuaded that the secret of his greatness, that is, the fact that God had showered down on him in abundance graces and blessings and has helped him in great works, was because he kept himself always pure and chaste.”

In perusing the pages of his Sacred History we note something else: between the facts of the Old and New Testaments Don Bosco dexterously conceals a small apologia of Catholicism that was all the more efficacious the less it seemed intentional. Who before him had ever thought of using the Bible facts in order to confute the protestants? We would need the extremely fine sensitiveness of Don Bosco for all that touched the Church. Of this sensitiveness (which is surely the most perfect “feeling with the Church” of St. Ignatius) all Don Bosco’s books, from his biographies of boys to his series of almanacs for Gentlemen, will remain as an undying witness. The doctrinal and hierarchical authority of the Church ought to stand as the chief among a writer’s thoughts whom it makes, in all that regards it remotely, to rejoice and suffer, to act and react, as a result of a legion of publications printed at short intervals throughout the space of forty years.

The student who going through the works of Don Bosco wants to engrave with lapidary thoughts the idea formed by the author can put down as his own that short epitaph carved on the tomb of the great Bishop and Cardinal Mermillod:

"Dilexit Ecclesiam."

And this the more so when we remember that like the glorious bishop of Switzerland Don Bosco had to suffer untold sorrows for the cause he loved. The boldness of the enemies of Holy Church was so impertinent then in Piedmont that poor Don Bosco could not find the revisors required by Canon Law for his books: whence at the beginning when he needed the necessary revision for his Catholic Readings, the stumbling block of the sects, he was given approbation without a name signed and afterwards no one would take the risky responsibility of revising them. Stormed at by menacing letters, threats, and armed men he confided still in God, mistrusted the Philistines, and carried on the holy war, without his sensibility degrading into mere animosity as is so easy in religious polemical disputes. The Spirit of God inflamed his zeal and governed his pen. Yet, seek in all his writings as diligently as possible and you will see nothing—neither treatise, sentence nor word, not even a comma—that should be repealed, that betrays in him, we shall not say secret pleasure, but rather the momentary carelessness felt by an adversary humiliated after a defeat. Sentences like “our Holy Mother the Church”, “Our good Mother”, sentences common to believer and non-believer when talking of the Church, reveal his prevalent solicitude, as if it were his dominating passion, of making men love her; they reveal too his filial love for her, that love that is so much a part of piety the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Letters form part of Don Bosco’s written word. He wrote an incredible number to every part of the world and on every subject: he wrote to prelates, princes, nobles, private people, religious communities, workmen, poor women, and children. But what is more important for us is that these letters reflect the soul of the writer. We shall not however expect any more than what we find there. The amount of his correspondence which constrained him to put his thoughts down without much thinking of them or the

correct forms to be used, did not lessen his control of his mind or his habit of thinking holily, so that many revelations of what regarded his interior life escaped him. Certain introspections that often appear in the letters of holy persons are omitted from Don Bosco's. The main point is very well understood, but he does not commit himself to speak of intimate things. We are satisfied with the inevitable echoes that come from the movements of his heart ever joined to God: that is, the full submission to the Divine Will, the glory of the Lord, the salvation of souls, Sacraments, prayer, offences against God, trust in Divine Providence, invitation to feasts, Scriptural quotations, ejaculations. He often enclosed holy pictures with legends written by his own hand in order to raise the mind of the addressee to heavenly things. And then the tone of them. After reading some we feel within us a sense of calm which is the disposition next to goodness of thoughts, words, and deeds. Does anyone receive angry and offensive letters? Don Bosco was wont to say that an immediate answer of sweetness and esteem gains the victory of changing enemies into friends. How often he himself was put to this test! Finally, his naturalness is noteworthy when he brings into his letters the names of God, Jesus, and Mary. These names (writes his biographer) were pronounced by him, while writing them, with fulness of heart but in a way that no one heard him, for he disliked singularity; he seemed to print them on The paper with his very breath.

Fra Angelico used to say that he who carries out the things of Christ should stay always with Christ. The best religious norm absolutely; but there is a much more fundamental law for the priest, namely, that he who intends to form Christ in souls should live habitually with Christ. Don Bosco would be a riddle indeed were he to doubt that the wonderful efficacy in his priestly ministry was derived from any place except his life of intense union with Jesus, Whose minister and minister alone he wished to be and was. In the office of a minister of another sphere who wanted to draw him into political maelstroms, Don Bosco spoke out his mind in order that no misunderstanding would exist:

“Your Excellency, you must know that Don Bosco is priest at the altar, in the confessional, in the midst of boys; priest in Florence as he is in Turin; priest in the houses of the poor as in the palaces of kings and ministers.”

Such a concept of one's character reaches the right depth in the priest when he is really another Christ, the living personification of Him. Not without great reason did Don Bosco allow one sole and simple title to his name, namely, that of "priest", for it expressed what he regarded chiefly in himself and what he preferred as worthy of other people's esteem.

Part III.

LUCIS ANTE TERMINUM

CHAPTER 1 The gift of counsel

The spiritual light of Don Bosco was at its height towards the decline of his life. That was when his works were well established; when his followers had reached their maturity by constituting a Society; when his energies of body were fast dwindling away forbidding him to carry on the old routine. Then did extraordinary charisms that, to speak the truth, had accompanied him from the age of nine with undimmed refulgence, become so bright and radiant that his life was passed in the supernatural itself. God knows with what temerity we approached Don Bosco's soul in the previous two parts of this our study; and now, since we have left the treatment of his supernatural gifts to this third part, our temerity is changed into holy fear which approaches that of one nearing the Ark of the Covenant. Has not mystic theology called it the "noble height" of sacred science? And what can be said of mystical experiences, Hot expounded in treatises, but lived in reality? The famous French Apologist, Augustus Nicolas, a man venerated for his old age doctrine and sanctity of life, went to visit Don Bosco a few years before the Servant of God left this world. He knelt before him and wanted to remain like that with hands joined throughout the whole of the conversation, piously collecting holy words from the Saint's lips as if they were the mortal sound of the Immortal Word. This is the best attitude the humble writer felt right to have in the presence of so much greatness.

God truly showered his graces abundantly on Don Bosco in order to make him a tool in His Divine Hands for the furtherance of His plans. It is in fact in the order of Providence that one who is called for some special office is first of all disposed for it and prepared to accomplish it. Now among the graces with which God enriched Don Bosco we must mention the gift of counsel which illumined his interior life and which was joined as though by concomitance to other excellent privileges in order not to be passed over or illustrated alone.

By means of the gift of counsel the Holy Spirit renders perfect in the soul the natural virtue of prudence and gives it a supernatural intuition by which it readily and accurately forms its judgement as to what it must do, especially in difficulties. This gift therefore has for its object the proper direction of our or another's particular actions according to the changes of times, places, and individual circumstances. While applying to Don Bosco in concrete what a great Bishop (Mgr. Landrieux) teaches formally, we shall say that thanks to such a gift our good Father always possessed the right discernment of his means, always saw the road to take, that he trod this road fearlessly through trials, weariness, and disgust which too often arose before him, that he always knew when to await the opportune moment. The reader who has followed us so far will not seek ulterior proofs for this statement; almost all the foregoing pages show how he saw clear, very clear in all that concerned the government of himself. It would then be covering trodden ground to continue the subject more. Let us preferably study his clearsightedness in governing

others.

It was so universally believed and diffused that Don Bosco was a man of counsel not by virtue of any inborn greatness and the mere effect of human prudence but by the grace of superior lights, that from every nation under the sun people wrote or came to him for his illumined words.

Numberless persons, even of high standing, had recourse to him by letter in questions of a different kind. Few documents of the first are still extant because letters with such contents were ordinarily destroyed by him. In the Archives, however, there is an abundance of counsels about family-life, opportunities for transfer, employment, trade, or loans, on lawsuits, on the way of regulating one's home or of educating one's son, on the choice of a state of life—so great was the confidence generally put in the superhuman wisdom of his advice. Pope Pius IX himself thought of Don Bosco and his superior lights in an hour of great trouble when, after the taking of Rome, his mind was wavering between remaining there or betaking himself elsewhere, so he planned out prudent preparations for the journey, although he was still hesitating. To those insisting that he should not delay the Pope answered that he had asked advice from Don Bosco and was decided to follow it no matter what it was. The Servant of God prayed long and then wrote his answer thus:

“The guardian, the Angel of Israel must stand at his post watching over the Rock of God and the Holy Ark.”

The Holy Father took these words of Don Bosco as coming from the mouth of God.

Whoever was able went personally to the Saint, and on account of this the immense weariness of giving audiences was something unimaginable. The Jesuit, Father Joseph Oreglia, asserted that even without other penances this alone was sufficient to show forth the heroism of his virtue. People besieged him at home and on the streets, in the city and outside it, in a measure and insistence that was surely unknown. Persons of every social class and rank came to consult him; ecclesiastic and laymen, princes and paupers, rich and poor, friends and strangers learned and ignorant, good and bad—all crowded into his waiting room. Often, too, superiors of orders and of religious houses, directors of monasteries, and various nuns craved a word with him. Don Bosco in the manner of one dispatching a duty which was to be done equally toward all, never gazed into anyone's face: those who came to him were treated with sweet and gentle manners as though they were sent by God. He listened without interrupting and interested himself in all that was told him, even were it the endless weary tale of some poor scrupulous person. If while he was speaking his visitor interrupted him he at once kept silent to listen. Seeming to have no other thought in the world he never was the first to end the talk or give a sign that he wanted it cut short, in spite of the other's repetitions. At Marseilles he, was one speaking to a mother who did not seem to want to go; he was told three times that many people were waiting. He whispered to the one who told him:

“We must do things as best we can or not do them at all. No time is wasted here at all and as soon as possible we shall allow others to enter.”

In his room at the Oratory there rested the peace of Heaven (writes a witness). But since that celestial peace emanated from the person of Don Bosco and not from the walls of the room, then outside visiting or journeying he was always in an ambient of peace.

Wherever he went there was soon formed there an atmosphere of calm and confident expectation, so much so that his words fell like an oracle, like a panacea, like a mystical star, according to the occasion.

The Spirit of the Lord that spoke through the mouth of Don Bosco showed itself in a certain exquisite liberality with which, whether asked of not, he gave his salutary counsels to every type of people. For us who look more to good example, it is natural that we love to stop and catch some of those moments wherein, inspired by the Sower of Counsel, he scattered fecund seeds of wholesome and holy thoughts in men's souls without as much as a glance at human respect.

"But of that which remains give alms."

To those rich who were slaves of their riches he similarly gave spiritual alms. A wealthy Jew had desired to know the Saint and was rewarded by a chance: when he left the Oratory he said that if there was a Don Bosco in every city the whole world would be converted. Another wealthy Jew and a Rabbi at that said that he would not return a third time otherwise he might be forced to stay with him.

He approached cultured persons, too, but without feeling uneasy. In 1884 a stranger, an advocate of renown, a defender of the Church, discussed for a long time with the Saint on the right activity for the good cause, when suddenly he was asked:

"Sir, and this religion you so honourably uphold do you practise it?"

The other was stunned; he winced and changed the topic, but Don Bosco took his hand between his own and asked again:

"But the religion you publicly defend so well do you practise it?"

That was God's time for the poor advocate who had even gone so far as to disbelieve in confession. Don Bosco once on leaving the house of a noble family gave a word of advice to each one there, except to an army general who was a guest there too. The old soldier, a man of learning but indifferent to things of religion also asked for a word as a remembrance of their meeting. This is what Don Bosco said to him:

"General, pray for me, pray that poor Don Bosco may save his soul." The soldier was surprised.

"I? Pray for You?" he replied, "Give me some good counsel!"

Don Bosco thought a moment then answered:

"General, think that you still have a great battle to fight and if you win fortunate will you be. The battle is the salvation of your soul."

Those present were amazed, but the soldier declared that only Don Bosco could talk so frankly to him. There is a moving conversation Don Bosco had with the seventy-year old Count Cibrario, historian of note and minister of State. Don Bosco said to him:

"You know, Count, I am a grand well-wisher of yours and I esteem you very much. Now, as I hear it said your life can't go on for many more years, so I would like to remind you that before you die you have something to settle with our Holy Mother the Church."

In Paris Paul Bert, Minister of Education, visited Don Bosco who led the conversation round to eternity and led him also to a revision of his book on morals over which many people had used much ink. In Paris, too, what a dramatic talk he had with Victor Hugo! We have the text of it written immediately afterwards in his presence and corrected by

him. The novelist had entered Don Bosco's room with certain ideas and left it with thoughts about the lot awaiting him beyond the tomb.

Much had our Father to deal with persons in authority. He respected authority but did not court it. The minister Urban Rattazzi had experience of him when he asked him whether he had incurred condemnation because of his bills in Parliament. Three days afterwards he received this reply from the Saint:

"I have examined the question, have sought and studied how I could say no; but I must say I haven't succeeded."

Rattazzi was thankful for these words addressed, as he said, to him, by a man whose sincerity he knew. One day in 1874 when he was coming out of the office of the Minister of the Interior in Rome he confidentially mentioned to a friend that he gave the minister some good advice and with fruit. At Lanzo during the inauguration of the new railway line the Salesian school was chosen to honour with refreshments the authorities who came for the occasion. Three famous ministers along with senators and deputies were present. Don Bosco went there too and during the reception he gradually had all the conversation to himself. He set about at once to turn the useless talk of those men unto reflections of the sacred truths which they had not heard for quite a long time. Even for crowned and uncrowned heads Don Bosco did not spare his salutary advice. To the Royal House of Naples, exiled in Rome, and mindful of the wrongs perpetrated by their forefathers against the Church he counselled resignation, since the designs of Providence were against them. Before this his demotion and love for the Kings of Savoy did not prevent his raising his voice to warn his King of wrong steps. The effect was not what was desired, there was also some irritation; but later on Victor Emmanuel II told the Archbishop of Genova that Don Bosco was truly a saint. With the passing of the years he grew so much in the esteem of the two supreme powers that he was called in on jealous and thorny affairs: but always he conducted himself in such a way as not to compromise what was God's with what might be Caesar's.

That the Holy Ghost was in Don Bosco's mouth when giving advice, we see too from the facility he had in counselling, in giving just the right advice, and in an irresistible efficacy, even if sometimes a little bitter. Many things daily happened in the Oratory to priests, clerics, and pupils when they approached him in the playground, in his room, in the confessional.

The advice given in the playground was called: "Word in the ear". Don Bosco took part as long as he could in the recreations of the boys and even when he could not stay for long he put in an appearance, for it was then that he saw an opportune time to know his chicks and drop them individually a grain or two. For this end it is written in the rules of his houses:

"Remember the example of the chickens. Those that stay near the mother hen receive much more than those who stay by themselves. So also those boys who keep near their superiors, always receive some advice or particular correction."

In his last years he could not do this any more: when he walked along the balcony and reached the door of his room he did not enter at once but turned to the boys whose eyes had lovingly followed his dragging steps. Then he spoke some good word that was immediately snatched up and applauded by them. How often in other days had he

whispered such words to each boy according to his needs! An educator who is forever giving advice becomes a bore to his pupils who weary of him and, when they see him appearing scurry away. But the boys of the Oratory loved Don Bosco to advise them and even asked him for it. Holy Scripture says :

“A correction spoken into a docile ear is like an earring and a bright pearl.”

This is how he did it: Don Bosco would put his hand on the boy's head, bend down to his ear, and his other hand shielding it, he spoke the good word, and others did not bear. It was a question of a few seconds, but the effect was magical! It was sufficient to observe the change on the boy's face and his movements, a sudden smile, a quick seriousness, a blush, a tear, a yes or no, a thanks followed by a run to the games, an invitation to church, a whisper into Don Bosco's own ear. Sometimes this phenomena happened that after a boy had heard the whispered word from Don Bosco he was not able to leave his side as though he were enraptured by a Divine idea. Other effects materialised later, such as, approaching the Sacraments, more recollection in prayer, greater care in school duties, more politeness and charity to companions. The biographer (MB VI. 417) tells us that there were cases of boys whose names we could mention, who by such simple means became so fervent in piety that they began to do extraordinary penances so that Don Bosco had to restrain them: other boys stayed all evening by the Father's door tapping lightly ever so often that he may come out to them, for they did not want to go to bed with sin on their soul.

Of these "Words in the ear" the saint's biographer compiles for us a beautiful anthology. There is missing from these accounts the vividness of expression that came from the tone, the look, the smile, or the seriousness of him who spoke them; there is missing too the freshness of reality that came from his condition of soul as he bent over his hearers, he figure of Don Bosco in the midst of his boys stands out from these few lines written by an eyewitness:

“I still seem to see him smiling, to hear his sweet words, to gaze on his loving face wherein was clearly etched the beauty of his soul.”

Were the advice Don Bosco gave in private to be collected in all its genuine simplicity recognized from the few maxims remaining and inferred from the real appreciation of witnesses, what an excellent code of Christian wisdom it would form! He who heard these counsels willingly remarked upon their value, but kept them jealously reserved for himself. In the memory of the writer there still remains clear the first meeting with Don Bosco within the holy walls of his room. The chief moment was when he heard the good Father give him a golden word of advice for the spiritual life. Don Bosco expressed it unexpectedly in precise and simple words, and in a tone more fatherly or authoritatively it would be hard to say, so that the sound of it still reechoes. In that grand Noah's Ark, the Oratory, no one, even were he the last of all, was forbidden access to the Father's room, no one felt timorous when going to talk to him, everyone was always received with the same ceremony. Don Bosco sat at a modest desk on which were piled letters and papers that often increased by arrival of the post during the conversation. He never gave this newly-arrived mail much thought beyond putting it there; his only care was for the one sitting nearby, as if there was no other to hear and satisfy and as if all his duty was just there. Naturally the visitors left his room enlightened, encouraged, and happy. The

successor of Fr Murialdo in the direction of the artisans has well described the lot of these who lived near that real sanctuary where the light of counsel so much shone. He wrote:

“You have a great benefit in your house that no other house in Turin and no other religious Community has got. You have a room into which one enters full of sorrow and comes out full of joy.”

“And,” notes his Biographer (MB VI. 441), “thousands of us have proved it so.”

Advice in confession brings us near to a point already touched upon.

The only one of Don Bosco’s first disciples (Don Francesca) still living writes of him as a confessor that three adjectives describe him; namely, “loving, wise, and reasonable.” If then one wants to know the why and wherefore, one has no more to do than not put into practice the old *experto crede* (believe him who knows) How can anyone know better than he who has had a long long experience? Personal memories make the venerable Father Francesca say that “to hear a boy’s confession, to give him advice, to help him to persevere, to console him if he had fallen, was for Don Bosco the holiest work he ever had to do and he did it in such a way as to leave sweet impressions.” Identical is the daily experience spoken of by Cardinal Cagliero.

“Drawn by Don Bosco’s meekness and kindness we ran to make our confession to him and afterwards we returned happy, joyful, and satisfied! How he loved us! What calmness he brought our souls!”

Small things these are, yes, but they illustrate in a magnificent way the triple statement of that eyewitness who judges from right knowledge Charity. One day in the declining years of his life Don Bosco spoke thus to a few intimate Salesians:

“Last night I dreamed that I wanted to go to confession. In the sacristy there was only so and so. I looked at him from afar and felt somewhat repugnant. ‘He’s too strict,’ I said to myself.”

The hearers had a hearty laugh as they looked to see the effect the Salesian named by the Father. He was laughing, too, and said the others:

“Who would have imagined it? Don Bosco afraid of me?”

The little incident contained a lesson for all. Who could not have understood it at once? The opportunity even out of time. It was general knowledge that Don Bosco did not say many words in confession but what he did say were so well suited to the circumstances that he imprinted in souls a firm resolution of amendment together with a great idea of the Sacrament. A boy, a day scholar of the Oratory, was appointed to sing in a religious role at the Royal Theatre of Turin. It seemed a grand honour for the house then! But Don Bosco did not think like that; always solicitous for the welfare of the boys’ souls, he felt pained indeed that a boy should go to the theatre. What would result from his forbidding such a thing? The superiors anxiously awaited. Sunday morning in confession Don Bosco spoke and advised: the penitent nodded without a murmur and to cut short the gossipings of his companions when he met them; he said:

“When it is a question of conscience, the confessor it is who always commands.”

WISDOM

One of the most yearned for ideals Don Bosco had was to get more and more boys for the ministry of God. The conviction then prevalent that he spoke under God's inspiration led many and many to him who needed advice about their vocation: a yes or no from Don Bosco dispersed all doubts even in affairs of great moment. In the course of the Apostolic processes several witnesses touching this point of Don Bosco's priestly zeal have unanimously declared that they have never heard of anyone bewailing his following the advice of Don Bosco whether or not it was for the ecclesiastical state; or have come across anyone who had made a mistake in following it.

An unpublished diary preserves for us a little incident that almost dramatizes the extraordinary effect produced by such charity, opportunity, and wisdom on the soul of those boys absolved by Don Bosco. A boy finished his confession but before moving away he asked Don Bosco for a favour, namely, to kiss his feet. The Servant of God without the least discomposure said:

"There's no need. Kiss my hand as that of the priest." The boy took his right hand, and kissed it with emotion.

"How fortunate I would have been," he cried "if I had had opened my eyes before as you have done for me this evening!"

The spirit of God not only supplied tangible assistance to Don Bosco in the zealous work of good counsel, but He also gave him supernatural insight to discover hidden sins and deep thoughts in those near him as in those afar. A fact astonishes us with regard to this heavenly gift, which the saint was rather reticent about. We read in a document of 1861:

"During the ten years I have been at the Oratory I have heard Don Bosco say thousands of times: Give me a boy I have never seen before and if I look into his face, I shall be able to reveal his sins to him even from his tenderest year."

A diary notes under the date 23rd. April 1863 the actual words of the "goodnight" of the previous day wherein Don Bosco among other things said:

"During all these days (Spiritual Retreat) I have seen into the heart of the boys as though into a book. Clearly and distinctly did I see their sins and perplexities."

The writer of this diary notes under the twenty-fifth of the same month:

"I asked Don Bosco whether his reading into the heart of the boys was a fact peculiar only in confession or elsewhere. He replied: 'At all hours of the days, even outside confession'."

This is not to mean that the gift was continuous but that it would have been given to him at any moment if he had asked for it for the good of souls.

Who can ever know why Don Bosco, although he held locked with seven seals what passed between God and himself, freely revealed himself on the question of these mystic communications? It must be a big "because" or maybe two. In the first place the knowledge of a thing so out of the ordinary and impossible to be kept hidden could not but give occasion for comment in the little world of the Oratory: therefore it would be prudent to clarify ideas in such a way as to do away in all simple candour, with every doubt about the origin and nature of this phenomenon. A second reason, however, weighs more with us. The zealous hunter of souls hunting by means of confession knew

what a formidable enemy he had in the dumb devil who has trapped so many souls with insincerity in confessing their sins. This was always the thorn in his side. A good French parish priest, a frequent preacher of missions and retreats, was very much alarmed at seeing so many souls living in sin because of confessions badly made. Fearing that it was a delusion he wrote to Don Bosco in order to obtain his advice and peace for his anxieties. Don Bosco replied:

“Do you tell me this who have preached in all Italy and have not found it otherwise ?”

Once in the beginnings of his priesthood he had been persuaded that his sons had unlimited confidence in him; but he was quick to discern Satan pushing in his tail. We take the following from our usual diary under the date 18th April, 1851. A cleric was "surprised to hear, that not a few were in the habit of keeping back sins in confession even where there was a large choice of confessors. Don Bosco after saying that not all confessors had "ability, experience, and means to scrutinize consciences and dislodge the wolves that were gnawing into hearts" concluded sorrowfully:

“There are two big beasts, namely, shame, and fear of dropping down in the confessor’s estimation.”

Maybe it is here that we must seek the moving principle that made him come out of his reserve in this matter. It was good that Don Bosco when he read hearts clearly discovered there certain little secrets; but when he revealed the penitent’s, sins would the temptor have not prevented the boy by making him keep a malicious silence? He found it beneficial, therefore, to let everyone be warned be forehand that in his confessional the devil’s wiles would all be unveiled. Therefore, did he warn the boys not to be deceived but rather to profit by this his gift for the good of their souls. And this in fact did the inmates of the house understand. Many pupils knelt down before him, and then began their confession by requesting him to say their sins and Don Bosco would do so with astonishing exactness. So common was this that in one good night he spoke of it. Fr Lemoyne, the chief biographer of our Saint, read it at the processes from an old memorandum.

“Up to now when you came to confession you said to me: ‘Speak to me, Father!’ and I did the talking. But really this is the duty of the penitent and not of the confessor. I am now not able to talk for hours and hours; my stomach suffers too much. So from now onwards you yourselves must do the speaking; if you get entangled I shall come to your aid.”

Even outside the confessional box Don Bosco distinctly saw sins and thoughts.

Inside communities there circulate turns of phrases that make up a kind of local patois or convention that no dictionary can translate. In the Oratory there was one of these phrases, namely, to read your forehead, which was said of Don Bosco and meant to find out your sins. The thought that when he looked at a boy’s forehead he found there certain telling marks of secret disorders was so common among the boys that had anyone a conscience not well cleaned, he would not go near the saint, for fear his forehead would have been read. If such a boy was called by Don Bosco for something or other he quickly pulled his cap more to the front of his head or else harrowed his hair with his fingers unto his forehead. We understand that Don Bosco allowed that expression to go about, for it helped to veil the supernatural character, attached to the fact. For all that, we

get instances of impudent little boys, who winked an eye at this and even challenged Don Bosco to tell their sins publicly if he wanted. Don Bosco tactfully drew this kind of boy apart and dropped a word or two into their ear with the effect that they were amazed, they blushed, they wept.

This can similarly be said of thoughts; though in this case the fame was more limited. Fr Rua attests from personal experience that when someone felt it convenient to hide from the saint secrets of business which he had a right to know every subterfuge was in vain because in the conversation he showed that he knew everything in detail. A cleric was once much troubled by scruples. He was making his examination of conscience preparatory to confession when he began thinking in this wise :

“If Don Bosco turned to me and told me to go to Holy Communion tomorrow without making my confession, I would know that my mental disturbance was all tomfoolery.”

In the evening he felt a hand tapping his shoulder and the voice of Don Bosco say:

“Go to Communion tomorrow, it’s not necessary to confess.”

As we are still on the subject of thoughts we wish to refer to an anecdote that is little known but that should be known by us all for it shows us once again what was the spirit of Don Bosco. A cleric, then the co-founder of the Giuseppini, Fr Eugene Reffo, went with his superior, Fr Murialdo, into Don Bosco’s room. He remained in one corner while the two men of God spoke among themselves. The playground outside was a hubbub of boyish noise helped by the band at practice. The cleric listened and thought within himself:

“My ! I wouldn’t allow such a din! ’The Lord is not in the whirlwind!’”

Don Bosco interrupted his conversation and came near Fr. Reffo.

“Oh, yes!” he said, “Don Bosco is right!” Then imitating with his hands the motions of the cymbals and big drum, he continued:

“Ching! Ching! Boom! Boom! That’s what the Lord wants. Noise, laughter, uproar, all in their own time.”

Also from distances were such powers exhibited. When Don Bosco wrote to his Salesians from the Oratory, or from somewhere else, he would often bring to the superiors’ notice things that had happened but unknown to them and that could never have come into his knowledge without revelation from on high. He described names, places, and circumstances, with such accuracy to the truth that those called by him to answer for some neglect or other stood really astonished and incapable of giving any excuses. During the usual good night talk when familiarity was so much the chief point, that questions were asked and answered, Fr Rua, Don Bosco’s right-hand man and substitute, went near the saint and asked how he could know things at a distance. The serio-comic reply was:

“By my telegraph I fix up communication even to far-away places I see and know then all that redounds to the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

At Barcelona in 1886 there was neither letter nor telegraph! From the Rector of the house concerned the writer heard the account of the event the authenticity of which cannot be called into doubt. That Rector saw Don Bosco (who was just then in the Oratory in Italy) standing at the foot of his bed at midnight. The vision bade the Rector get up and follow it through the school: the path they trod was all lit up with a kind of daylight. Don Bosco pointed out some disorders here and there, led the Rector back

to his room, gave him some advice, and disappeared leaving Fr Branda standing in the dark spellbound.

Now, we shall begin to deal more with the supernatural in his life.

CHAPTER 2 Dreams, visions, ecstasies

The heading of this chapter was suggested by a saying of St. Isidore as commented on by St Thomas. The Angelic Doctor writes:

“Isidore divides the gift of prophecy according to the manner of prophesying ... According to the way of impressing the phantasms lie gives three distinctions, dream, vision, ecstasy.”

These are gifts freely bestowed which by themselves are not necessary or expedient for sanctity, though they frequently accompany it. By means of them God manifests in supernatural ways hidden things to souls. In Don Bosco's life such things take so important a place that we cannot overlook them without overlooking an element of vast importance that helps us to the full knowledge of his intimate union with God. Those who have come into a Salesian atmosphere have heard of the so called dreams of Don Bosco, a designation that he himself began and that lives necessity for us to prove that supernatural dreams do exist: it would be now in all his houses where no comment is even needed. There is no merely opening an open door. Who would ignore the dreaming dreams which Joel counts among the gifts that were to gladden by a generous effusion of the Holy Spirit the latter clays, that is, as St Peter explains, the days of the Messiah? Let us come to speak of Don Bosco's dreams.

These dreams were myriad for they took place at intervals from the beginning of the saint's boyhood right up to ripe old age. Some of the* are in his exact words dictated by him or revised by him in person; others have come down to us from eye witnesses and men of honour: a few are merely oral traditions here and there: many are either only vague remembrances or traces of what were. In the first nine volumes of Don Bosco's Biographical Memoirs Fr Lemoyne has collected seventy two recorded at length or mentioned: but that is up to the year 1870. A classification of them would not be very difficult. That which is described therein turns more or less dramatically on one of these backgrounds: the Church, the Salesian Society, the Oratory at Valdocco. Concerning the Church he saw future happenings either for its life in general or for particular nations: concerning the Society he saw clearly the works he had to do, ways to follow, obstacles to avoid; concerning his boys he saw the state of their conscience, their calling, the time of their death. That he was dreaming we can deduct from some of his expressions. So, speaking of a dream he had on the night between 1867 and 1868 he said:

“It was such a dream that I could realize what I was doing, hear what was said to me, and answer questions put to me.”

There was usually a guide by his side to interpret for him whenever necessary; this guide however was not always the same. Drawing conclusions from what we know we say that the guides were some deceased pupil, St Francis de Sales, St Joseph, or some other saint, or angel of God: these were often accompanied by processions or secondary

apparitions.

What did Don Bosco think of his own dreams? Of the first ones he was slow to put any trust in them for he believed them to be the results of imagination: hence when telling them he would be always afraid, especially when future things came in lest he had mistaken mole hills for mountains or for having said what should not be taken seriously. The fact remains however that he distinguished very well between dreams and dreams, and if some (as really happened) passed over him without making any impression others etched deeply into his soul lasting impressions. While speaking with his Salesians he would often repeat at the end of this kind of dream that he had confessed the whole fact to Fr Cafasso in an offhand manner. Fr Cafasso listened and reflected for some time then said to him:

“As long as what you say comes true you can be at ease and continue.”

Nevertheless he did not think it wise to lay aside all precautions just yet. In one of the above-mentioned diaries under the date January 1861 are noted these words of Don Bosco bearing on a dream that spread through three consecutive nights.

“On the first day I did not want to give my consent, for God forbids us in Holy Scripture. But during these last three days after making few experiments by taking a few boys aside, telling them what I had seen in the dream, and hearing them assuring me that it was true, I cannot doubt any more that this is an extraordinary favor the Lord is bestowing on the boys of the Oratory. Therefore, I find myself in duty bound to tell you that God calls you and makes you hear His voice. Woe betide you if you close your ears!”

Not even this, however, gave him any excuse for setting aside precautions, so humbly distrustful of himself was he. Therefore, we read under the date 15th of the same month:

“I shall repeat what I have already said. When I had that dream I didn’t wish to consent but, on the other hand, I saw that it was so important and so I examined it very well.”

The examination consisted in questioning three boys again whose miserable state had been revealed in the dream and he found it tallied with the conditions already noted by him. Seven years afterwards on April 30th, 1868 he spoke thus:

“My dear boys, yesterday I told you I had some ugly things to narrate to you. I had a dream but I was determined not to relate it, maybe because I supposed it was like any other dream that happens at night or because every time I related something there were always observations or complaints. But another dream makes me refer to the former.”

In this dream that he then related the voice of some personage had asked him:

“Why do you not speak?”

It cannot be thought that in this as in many other things Don Bosco was lacking in prudence. In the meanwhile the end we set out for gives us more comprehension of a confidence he shared with Fr Julius Barberis in 1876 with a serious mein and a look of preoccupation.

“When I think of the responsibility the position I am in lays on me I tremble greatly. The things I see befalling are such that the account I must render will be extraordinary indeed ... What an account indeed must I give for the good of our Society! It can be

said that Don Bosco sees everything and is led onwards by the hand of Mary ... At every step, in every circumstance she is there.”

How did Don Bosco narrate his dreams? It appears from the above quotations how earnestly he did so: nevertheless there is still something to add. A witness, Canon Ballesio, informs us that he said what he said "with simplicity, gravity, and affection". He avoided all that would be defective or suggestive of any idea of self-glory. While narrating; he would intercalate witty phrases and comic descriptions in order to distract the hearers' attention from matters of greater singularity. But among these hearers there were perspicacious men who Understood and remembered. Always with the idea of cloaking any impression of the extraordinary he would give uninteresting names to the personage who was wont to accompany him, calling him guide, interpreter, or more vaguely still, the unknown: sometimes, however, when speaking in private, he would give less vague indications. Thus he had a good way of setting up what redounded to his own humiliation. In 1861 he narrated a dream wherein he told the boys of his great sorrow at their being deaf to his advice and corresponding so ill to his kindness.

“Then,” he continued, “my interpreter began to rebuke me. ‘Oh! the pride! Look at the pride! Who are you who imagines to convert souls just because you work Because you love your boys does it mean that they all fall in with your wishes? Do you believe yourself more than our Divine Lord in the question of loving, working, and suffering for souls? Do you believe that your word should be more efficacious than that of Jesus? Do you preach better than He? Do you think you have more charity towards your boys than He towards His apostles? You know they lived with Him continuously, they were moment by moment enriched with all kinds of favours, they heard the precepts of His doctrine and His warnings day and night, they saw His deeds that should have been a quickening stimulus to the sanctification of their life. How much did He not do for and say to them, to Judas too! Yet Judas betrayed Him and died impenitent. Are you better than the Apostles? Well, they ejected only seven deacons, seven and elected with the greatest of care, yet one off them proved unfaithful. Are you then astonished that a small number from out of five hundred should prove themselves adamant, in spite of your care for them? Do you think you can carry on without having even one bad, one perverse? Oh, the pride!’”

To reduce to a possible minimum whatever could give rise to an opinion of the supernatural, it is wholesome to humiliate one's person with such hard rebukes; but still truth had its rights. For the which he exhorted everyone not to ridicule what they had heard but rather to do their best in all. Yet these exhortations were also based on evangelical humility. Another quotation will not be displeasing; it is a little long but it is the last. The dream of 1861 wherein the foregoing reproach appeared was narrated in three consecutive evenings. The conclusion was like this:

”Now that I have related all these things, you might think perhaps: ‘Who knows? Don Bosco is an extraordinary man, a prodigy, saint of course!’ My dear boys, in order to avoid silly judgments about me I leave everyone free to believe these things or not, to give what importance he likes. I recommend you, however, not to turn any of these into ridicule with companions or strangers. But I don't hesitate to say that our Lord has many ways of manifesting His will to men. Sometimes He uses the most unsuitable and

unworthy of instruments, as for example the ass of Balaam that spoke ... of Balaam, the false prophet who predicted many things regarding the Messiah. So the same can happen to me. Therefore I tell you not to look to my works in order to regulate yours. Take care of what you must do because this, as I hope, will be the Will of God and a benefit for souls. As regards what I do, you should not say: 'Don Bosco does it, therefore it is good!' No. Observe first of all what I do and if it is good then imitate it: if you perchance see me doing what is wrong, be on your guard and do not imitate it; leave it as ill done."

He never, said in public all that was revealed or said to him in his dreams. Some items he secretly communicated to those whom they concerned: others he told to him who, being an intimate of him, asked him in private; still others he kept for himself as things for himself alone. In fact, one of the diarist informs us that for certain dreams much was heard by degrees as to "double or treble the material", and for others, their detail would fill many books. As an example we take the dream of 1861 mentioned above Don Bosco said that he learned more theology in those three nights that he even studied in his seminary years and that he intended to write those theological questions, omitting, however, the "particular facts" of the third night and mentioning only "the theory" of the first two. Hence we conclude that granting his narrations to be for the edification, comfort, instruction of others or even a warning to someone, he in his public account wisely choose parts, so that the whole would turn out to the good advantage of his listeners. A blind man would have easily seen the effect derived from them. The horror for sin especially grew very much then there was more sorrow at confession, there were many general confessions, a general frequenting of the Sacraments; there was, in short in the phrase used by the Saint himself on such occasions Satan's bankruptcy.

The first characteristic is a psychological element. In natural dreams the fantasy not under the reason's control governs or rages. Weariness is the normal condition for the beginning of the dream. Weariness produces poisoned matter in the brain that will give rise to a general poisoning: nature has so arranged it that when these reason; have reached a certain number they react as a check to stop the motor apparatus that consumes most energy. This check removes the psycho-physical energy necessary for normal activity away from the nervous centres, removes it in proportion to the individual's need of sleep. The little remnant of psycho-physical energy in the higher centres suffices for the activity of a dream: but ordinarily it is too little to excite the motor centres in an effective manner by radiating from sensory centres. Now if we consider that Don Bosco on retiring to bed had always a great need of sleep we have here a reason already that points to this fact, namely, so much dream activity in him could not have a human explanation.

But there is something better. The check that isolates the motor apparatus and the lessening of the psychopathic energy of the central nervous system have an influence on the activity of the fantasy causing there two phenomena of irregularity and of quick changes experienced by all of us in our dreams. The insufficiency of psycho-physical energy makes it impossible to pursue one motive for a long time; it is enough for any external stimulus to lead that rag of energy onto another path. Thus the image of the dream fades away. Hence, it is that the activity of the fantasy in dreams is not generally guided by any positive intention. Therefore we are not wont in natural dreams to verify either the rational order of arrangement, or the logical chain of thought; there are too

many flittings about with numberless unexpected leaps into whims and sudden steppings into the ridiculous or the extravagant. Totally opposite was that which happened in Don Bosco's dreams. His are symbolical representations like those given to St. Peter in the vision of the sheet let down from heaven and filled with clean and unclean beasts. The web here is either more or less completed and the weaving of it is often long with acts distinct as in a real play: besides, and here is a peculiarity, he saw always in those images something that came about in reality, and in the words, he heard or read a significant value that forms one sole totality with the images themselves. Each dream turns about a central, and goes straight for a well-defined, end: the whole action is developed orderly and progressively as the best dramatic productions. There remains to say that, although in the symbolism the sensible forms are accepted to the common mentality, yet never are there introduced elements rude, vulgar, frivolous, or even unpleasant to a holy aim. To give examples would be a delight, but the economy of our task holds us back.

A second characteristic of Don Bosco's dreams is their prophetic element. Can we have an inkling of the future from an imagination that in sleep combines and separates at its own own sweet will uncontrolled by reason? Such a thing does not happen when we try to divine what is to come even with the fulness of our intellectual powers! By multiplying observations on facts and phenomena near us we can almost predict effects more or less distant, but if one prop is missing here and now every attempt to scan the future is useless: what must it be like during the unconsciousness of sleep? Yet the dreams of Don Bosco did not contain vague or sybilline predictions, but clear and exact revelation of events hidden in the bosom of the days to come. To say the truth, the prophetic spirit dwelt in him because as many prophecies as he had made of all kinds of things came about before or after his death in the time and the way he announced. The often-quoted Canon Ballesio writes:

"In Don Bosco this did not seem an instantaneous flash like a momentary rainbow in the mind, but rather it was the ordinary condition of his mind so that he prophesied while praying, talking, and joking, and prophesied while he or others round him did not realize it. And in dreams lie prophesied too, with prophecies which were relevant to, if not the sum total of, those dreams. How many announcements of death did he not give beforehand, having come to know them in his dreams! He did not say any names, but he gave exact dates: the initial letter of a name he would sometimes reveal in public or sometimes tell a Salesian in private. In the fulfilment of these dreams the good boys rejoiced, that is almost everyone, accustomed as they were to gather with veneration the father's salutary sayings; the diffident boys would remain mute, yet these, although a rare sort of swimmers in a wide sea, vouchsafed then as now for the historicity of the prophecies in spite of their reticence in believing. We shall not give instances on this point, otherwise we may seem to be usurping the biographer's place: rather we shall note two words from the golden writings of Don Bosco himself."

A diarist of the Oratory in those times notes the saint's observation of 17th February, 1861, which alludes to his dream prophecies:

"The things which we do and say in our house, singular as they are, are permitted to be spoken only among ourselves, for if they were told to anyone outside these people would surely dub them fables. But we have always this as our norm that when something turns

out to the good of our souls it certainly comes from God, not from Satan.”

But the enemy of God and of souls had a different field of labour wherein to launch his attacks against Don Bosco. Fr Poulain S.J., an authority on mystical matters, has this very opportune remark:

“We seem to see this result from the lives of the saints that if they suffer grave obsessions this happens mostly when they have a period of ecstasies or even of revelation only and Divine visions, whether such graces continue or they become suspended for a time. The extraordinary action of the devil sets itself opposite the extraordinary action of God.”

Even for the saints of the militant Church the battlefield is the earth. Of Satan’s wars against Don Bosco we have official documents that come down to us from the time of his first encounter and that give us some idea of the three-year campaign which followed. The devil showed, his capability towards the Servant of God especially by robbing him of his sleep at night. A loud voice bawling into his ear, a gale of wind shaking him from head to foot, a general ransacking of his room, a dispersing of his papers, a confusion among his books—all these were in the order of Satan’s ambushes. For some evenings he left on his table the corrected proofs of his book *The Power of Darkness*, but when he got up in the morning the leaves were scattered across the floor or were nowhere to be found. The dead-out stove would be enveloped in licking flames. As soon as he was in bed a mysterious hand would pull the bed clothes slowly towards his feet: he would right them and again they would slip slowly down. When he lit his lamp the phenomenon would cease, only to continue when the lamp was out. Once the lamp was extinguished by a powerful and unknown breath of air. Just as he was about to sleep his pillow would cut capers under his head. The sign of the cross or a prayer would quieten it, but on composing himself again he would feel the whole bed on the move. The door would groan as if shaken by a strong wind. Fearful noises from the ceiling would remind him of thousands of cart wheels in motion: piercing cries would also be heard above his head. One night the door opened wide and a huge monster with mouth like a cavern entered as if to devour him: the sign of the Cross put it to flight. A very daring priest wanted to keep watch in the saint’s room, but he fled headlong when he heard an infernal din at midnight. Two clerics offered to go through the same test and watch in the adjoining library: the result was like the former Poor Don Bosco sought some peace in the residence of the Bishop of Ivrea: but again, after the first night of calm, the fiend came and continued his antics worse than before.

The foregoing is sufficient to give an idea of the terrible battle of the prince of Darkness. In 1865 Don Bosco speaking of the subject mentioned that he had finally found a very effective remedy; but he did not reveal what it was.

Paulo Majora Canamus!

Supernatural dreams appertain to that kind of vision called imaginative by mystics, because they come about as the result of a superior cause impressing the fantasy through the imagination; but such visions are produced during wakefulness. Many people indiscriminately qualify visions of both kinds through Don Bosco’s dreams, while in spite of the strict analogy they differ somewhat among themselves. Thus the imaginary vision during wakefulness seems incapable of being separated from something of ecstasy, that is, from an ecstasy in which the abstraction of the senses is more or less. In this way

the servant of God saw in 1870 a complex series of public events whose latter part is befalling in these days. The introduction of the written text Don Bosco dictated seems to confirm this opinion. He so expresses himself:

“On the eve of Epiphany this year 1870 all the material objects of my room disappeared and I found myself contemplating heavenly things. It was of short duration but I saw very much indeed. As to form or sensible appearance it would be difficult to communicate it to others with external and sensible signs. What is following will give an idea. There the word of God becomes adapted to the word of man.”

In the same manner and on many occasions he saw before him the holy youth Aloysius Colle of Toulon whom he had known on this earth. Between 1881 and 1885 this departed boy appeared to him in the confessional, at Mass, at the distribution of Holy Communion: once he appeared in the station at Orte where Don Bosco was forced to wait for four hours. Such apparitions were always enlightening and happy, sometimes with conversation, sometimes no. He had a similar sort of vision at Lanzo in 1887. A Daughter of Mary Help of Christians was eager to receive the blessing of the saint. She was tired of waiting in the anti-chamber so she lightly opened the door that led to Don Bosco's study. What did she see? She saw the good father like a person enraptured and listening to someone. His face was bathed in a bright and white light, its features were sweet and calm, his arms spread towards heaven, his head from time to time nodding yes.

“Hail, Jesus! ... Father, may I come in?”

The good nun repeated again and again but Don Bosco did not move. At last after about ten minutes the scene was closed with a sign of the cross and a reverential bow of the head that is beyond description. There is this to note that during the year Don Bosco could not stand on his legs without assistance, whereas the nun had seen him like a robust and healthy man.

Besides the imaginary visions we know two other kinds one inferior, the other superior to the preceding. The inferior kind is that of so called sensible, corporal, ocular visions; in them the senses perceive external things that could never be seen or understood without supernatural aid. Don Bosco had one vision of this kind when he foresaw the future of the sick youth before him, John Cagliero. He stepped into the room to visit him and prepare him for death but just then he had two visions each lasting a fraction of a minute. He saw a snow-white dove with an olive twig in its beak flying round the room. It then went to the dying boy, touched his lips with the olive, and then let it rest upon his head. It was a prediction of a missionary apostolate and fullness of the priestly powers. After that a horde of unknown savages anxiously bent over the boy: they were belonging to two different tribes that were found in really in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

The other kind of visions the highest of all others bears the name of intellectual: in them the mind intuitively perceives spiritual truths without any help of sensible images. Did God give some of these visions to Don Bosco? We cannot affirm it with certainty. But who can ever know all the wealth of supernatural gifts that enriched the soul of Don Bosco? His spontaneous naturalness in everything and his habitual simplicity of life were purposely shown in order to conceal the secret operations of grace when the discovery of these would be of no benefit to his neighbour. Anyhow, do not the cases of levitation and

luminous aureola bear any value for the future to the hypothesis that not even visions of the highest kind were wanting to him? In 1879 while the Servant of God was saying Mass at his private altar on three different days there was seen a radiant light on his face that filled the room; little by little he was raised off the predella and held in the air for about ten minutes. The historian, Fr Lemoyne, on three consecutive evenings saw the Saint's face lit up with a splendour that looked transparent. His whole manner emitted a strong and sweet brilliance. Our late reverend Rector Major, Fr P. Rinaldi, experienced on three occasions, in broad daylight and in different places, when he was ten, twenty-two, and thirty years old, the eyes of Don Bosco becoming suddenly illumined and brilliant, and this light extending to all his person like a glorious aureola that outdone the day's light and far surpassed any painters' conception of paradise. Liteness and splendour are beautiful gifts reserved for glorious bodies. If such gifts cause here below admiration in living bodies, will it be wrong to think that such a phenomenon may happen when souls, like unto God, rejoice in the vision of Divinity?

The notice of these last heavenly favours had not as much echo as his fame of wonder worker that accompanied his name with continuous increase until his death. It is not our task to dilate on his gift of miracles; nevertheless a rapid glance, just in keeping with our plan, will find a place before we close this chapter. From the *Memoirs* which Don Bosco in his old age gradually wrote down with trembling hand and open heart, we shall cull some sentences that, even had he said nothing, were the conviction of those who were daily with him. For us however his declarations are the best we could desire in order to know well what were his intimate thoughts concerning the supernatural gifts that flooded his soul and over-flowed into acclaiming him Miracle-man. The neglected form of the composition says clearly that his only intention was to open his soul frankly and not to act the highbrow. Thus he writes:

“Sincerely do I recommend to my sons to be on their guard over word and writing that they may never assert that Don Bosco had obtained graces from God or had worked miracles in any way. He would fall into a great error. Although the bounty of God has been generous towards me, nevertheless, I have never claimed to know and work supernatural things. I have done nothing else than pray and have prayers said that Jesus might bestow his graces on good souls. I have always found out that the common prayers of our boys were efficacious to bring the good God and His Holy Mother to our aid. This was most especially realized when we had to provide for our poor and abandoned boys and more especially when they were in danger to their souls.”

CHAPTER 3 The gift of prayer

The extraordinary phenomena hitherto described are marvellous signs that manifest the presence of God in the soul. God lives in us when grace unites us to Him; but in certain souls He makes Himself felt with an indescribable touch that goes deep to the essence of the spirit itself, according to the expression used by the mystics. Then it follows that, while the superior powers of the intellect and will are bathed as though in Divine light and action, the senses act no more: as happens precisely in ecstasies. We are not certain of anything like this in the lives of Jesus and Mary on earth, for, although they rejoiced at every moment in the experimental perception of the supernatural life, yet they underwent no change to waywardness in the inferior powers on account of the perfect state of integrity that carried with it the full submission of the senses to the reason. Now we can ask ourselves, granted that we see in Don Bosco the exterior signs that usually mark the mystic life¹, can it be undeniably held that he was really raised to the mystic union? If so, to what extent? In other words, since this is carried out by means of contemplation infused, is it possible to find out in what measure this gift of infused contemplation adorned the exquisite soul of Don Bosco?

A priori in the reality of things it would not seem timorous to reply affirmatively! In fact, Benedict XIV, basing himself on the grounds of history, has not hesitated to assert:

“Almost all the saints and especially founders of Orders have received Divine visions and revelations.”

“Without doubt,” he adds, “God speaks familiarly with His friends and favours in a special manner those whom He has chosen for His great works.”

Father Poulain, after having said that usually canonized saints (that is, those who have reached the heroicity of virtue) have been chosen favourites of the mystic union, observes that if it seems that any were without it we cannot positively declare that it was a real privation but rather we lack sufficient documentary evidence for an historical account. Fortunately, the precautions of Don Bosco did not, as is seen, rob us of all the exterior manifestations of his mystic life: thus a posteriori we lack no arguments.

We would rather prefer to have a like security in determining the rank of his mystical union with God. After thorough examination it seems (passing by special moments when its intensity was greatest) we think we can show that he was the habitual possessor of that grace of prayer called by St. Teresa “entire union”, by Fr. Poulain “full union”, by others, especially Italians, among whom are Scaramelli and St. Alphonsus, “simple union”. St Alphonsus describes it so:

“In simple union the powers are suspended but not the body senses, although these are much hindered in the functioning.”

Hence the gift of prayer presents two characteristics: first, the soul is absorbed by the Divine object and no other thought can occupy it, it has no distractions; second, the

senses however continue their actions more or less, for their possibility of communicating with the world is not wholly removed, so the person can hear, see, speak, walk and even freely leave the state of prayer. Weighty mystical writers who have culled the fundamental ideas of this delicate theme from St. Thomas enumerate and describe seven effects of the simple union. In order to avoid the danger of beating air we shall cast a rapid glance of its presence in Don Bosco.

Faciant meliora potentes.

The nature of the argument, however, counsels us not to proceed without setting forth an idea which the reader may have formed from the foregoing pages. Don Bosco's soul enjoyed this union with God, without interruption in order to say it frankly; indeed this seems to have been his gift, namely, never being distracted from the loving thought of God in spite of many many important and continual occupations and pre-occupations. We see in the Summarium of the *positio super virtutibus* the seventh heading *De heroica charitate in Deum* some adequate expressions on this question that just suit us. The witnesses, all of the greatest authenticity, are persons who when talking of Don Bosco can take for themselves the moving prologue of St. John's Epistle:

"What was from the beginning that we have heard, that we have seen with our eyes, that we have looked upon, that our hands have touched ... we are witnesses and we announce it."

Let the three successors of Don Bosco be the first to speak. Fr. Michael Rua (whose cause for beatification has been introduced at Rome) says:

"That which I have continually noted in Don Bosco was his uninterrupted union with God. And these sentiments (of God's love) he manifested with so much spontaneity that it was understood they flowed from a mind and a heart wholly sunk in the contemplation of God and His attributes."

Fr. Paul Albera says:

"He seemed to receive his counsels from his intimate union with God, those counsels he gave to his sons."

Fr. Philip Rinaldi says:

"It is my firm conviction that the Venerable was wholly a man of God, continually united with Him in prayer."

Fr John Francesia, the only one remaining of the first Salesians and who formed part of those epic days, takes a place of honour among the three Rectors Major with his words:

"I saw how easy it was for the Venerable father to recollect himself in God."

Seven other Salesians follow whose testimonies are trustworthy on account of their virtue, culture, or office, or the three combined. Their reports tell us:

"The life of Don Bosco seemed an endless union with God so that he would answer like one absorbed in meditation to whatever he was asked at any time, even in the midst of the most distracting affairs."

"He lived continuously in the presence of God and his thoughts were always centred in Him."

"It can be said that mental prayer was his continuous practice." "Love for God shone out in his union with Him."

"His heart was so full of God that his thoughts and words piloted on Him."

“The Venerable always showed a true and deep spirit of prayer and union with God, as was seen every time his sons approached him.”

“His was a perfect union of spirit with God.”

Finally follow the words of two prelates. His Lordship Bishop Tasso C. M. of Aosta, a pupil of Don Bosco from 1861 to 1865, says:

“The Venerable burned always with great love for God and I am convinced that he lived continuously in union with Him. I remember that we boys had the same conviction, that is, the Venerable spoke directly with God especially when he had advice to give us for our future.”

Cardinal Cagliero who needs no introduction thus remarks:

“Divine love lit up his face and radiated from his whole person and from all the words that fell from his lips while he spoke of God in the pulpit, in the confessional, in public and in private speeches, and in familiar conversation. This love was his only ardent desire, his only sigh, the strong wish of all his life. Thousands of times have I heard him repeat ‘All for God and His glory!’. In intimate union with God he gave audiences, sat busy at his desk, came into recreation with us, prayed like an angel before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and celebrated Holy Mass. If you approached him at any moment he always welcomed you with exquisite charity and so much calm amiability as if just then he had left an exact prayer or the Divine Presence. I repeat the Cardinal Alimonda said to me: ‘Don Bosco was always in intimate union with God’.”

How often always appears in these reports! The eloquent Cardinal who became Archbishop of Turin and so much consoled the last six years of our Father expressed the above-mentioned words also in a funeral discourse for the month’s mind. He unhesitatingly defined Don Bosco as:

“Continuous union with God.”

In conclusion: as the ancient chronicler of St. Bonaventure reports that this saint made a prayer of every truth in his writings, so we can apply the some affirmation to every act of Don Bosco’s admirable life. What Don Bosco did was a prayer.

The long list of witnesses will shorten our road somewhat. It will not be out of place or difficult to note opportune points that will gradually appear as we treat the seven effects of the simple union spoken of above.

The first effect is the only one whose proofs are almost unattainable. We can designate it with the word dissolution; a word suggested by the Biblical phrase:

“My soul dissolves as soon as my Beloved has spoken.” It could be called a consummation of the heart by the most ardent fire of charity or (leaving aside metaphors) a sweet feeling of Divine Love which fills the soul with an inexpressible joy that produces a mystical longing in the body sometimes making it fall into a swoon: Are such-like sensible phenomena verified in Don Bosco! We shall answer with two general observations and three particular facts.

The first observation is that humility stands out clearly among the fruits of contemplation. The contemplative knowing better than others the greatness of God has a greater idea of his own nothingness: so, to delight in the Divine gift, he almost fears lest even the air should know it, and without an insistent urging will not unburden his soul; nay, he uses every means to keep the fulness of love to himself. Not his will alone it is that

does all, but his temperament also lends its aid. Grace works in nature but does not suppress it. We have seen in connection with Aloysius Comollo that if after Communion he had not given vent to his overflowing affections his heart would have burst. Don Bosco instead controlled the impetus of his fervour and so would he have wished his friend to do too; but his friend's physical resistance was not like his.

Here, now comes the second observation. Don Bosco was master of his nerves, he tempered their steel, or, to use language less profane, he was a man to whom the following words of the Psalmist can be applied:

“My soul is in my hands continuously.”

He had at the service of his humility a will that dominated his inferior powers and therefore capable of guarding the strength of his feelings that they might not overcome him. Hence, it follows that the absence of outward phenomena, superadded as they are, forms no decisive argument to deny the gift of infused contemplation. Besides, how can you explain how a person touches, nay is frequently overwhelmed with most acute sorrows that even draw blood, and yet shows himself more cheerful than usual? Do afflictions therefore produce joy? Sorrow in hearts elevate to contemplation is mystically changed to love, and it is love that widens hearts. This is the first of the three facts. The second fact is that in Don Bosco's last years he, after whole mornings spent in receiving visitors, used to retire to his room for at least one hour in the afternoon no matter where he was. Here he was often seen sitting at his desk (his body erect, his hands joined, his attitude wholly sweet) totally absorbed in heavenly things. This was the hour when the Sister saw him as we related in the last chapter.

It was also in his last years (and this is the third fact) when his worn out body had to give way to the liveliness of his feelings, that while celebrating Mass he was sometimes moved in all his being, sometimes seemingly shaken with a holy ague, especially during the moment of the Elevation.

The second effect of passive prayer is a tender need of weeping. In intimate union of the soul with God the lover, conscious of the Divine bounty, awakens in his heart sweet and lively emotion which no longer can contain itself but calls on the help of the eyes, according to a word picture of St Catherine of Sienna. Don Bosco had the gift of tears over which his strength could not command at times. In his last journey to Rome he burst into tears at least fifteen times while celebrating in the new church of the Sacred Heart. The priest who was assisting him tried to distract him in order that he might finish the Mass. Afterwards he again wept with extraordinary emotion in front of those who accompanied him. During all his priestly life whenever he was preaching on certain subjects he would purposely think of silly things in order to avoid weeping but he did so in vain. These tears of his, however, were very beneficial to an eyewitness—perhaps it was a motive not outside the designs of Providence in bestowing on him uncontrollable emotions. We have more amply treated this elsewhere (Chap. 3 of part 2): it will be worthless to repeat it here.

The third effect is to feel the presence of God with such certainty as to exclude any doubt. St. Teresa (in the fifth mansion of her 'Interior Castle') says:

“God comes precisely to remain in the depths of the soul, so that when she looks into herself she feels sure beyond doubt that she is in God and God is in her. This

truth becomes so impressed on her that even should years pass away without her again reaching that state she will not be able to forget the favour received or doubt its reality.”

Don Bosco was full of the thought of God: to show it would be a task indeed. Mgr. Tasso, cited above, speaks of the charm derived from it when he says:

“It was enough to deal a little with him to understand at once that he was truly a man of God. The supernatural permeated his every word and his whole person. This I have proved by experience.”

The fourth effect: courage, strength and unalterable patience. Fourth in suffering all for the love of God. These souls are so inflamed with divine love that they greatly desire to suffer for God, a desire that increases more alongside of the desire to be Thus was Don Bosco. Truly, many of the foregoing pages sing his superhuman greatness in the midst of pains: nevertheless two new quotations send us an echo still. The first refers to moral sorrows, and the servant of God, Fr M. Rua, after enumerating them says:

“His patience was always admirable, as also were his courage and resignation. It seemed that difficulties and sorrows put strength into him so that in sorrow, especially if it came from the Ecclesiastical Authorities he never lost his calmness, nay, it seemed as if he had acquired more courage for we would see him more cheerful and humorous than usual.”

Regarding his physical pains numerous and heavy as they were, Fr. Lemoyne attests:

“He never prayed for his own cure and thus his sufferings were voluntary. He never complained or grew impatient, but continued his work.”

The fifth effect is an ardent eagerness to praise God. The man enflamed with Divine Love wishes to be naught else than a voice to give praise to God, wishes Him to be known, loved, glorified. He knows that God is greater than all praise, yet for the thought of such immense greatness and goodness there is no better (delight than in adoring, honouring, and thanking God. The great Seraph of Assisi, in order to satisfy this goading desire, called to his aid with burning words of charity all creatures, the irrational as well as the intellectual and even imaginable creatures, that they might join with him in praising their God. But St. Francis of Sales asserts that in the Church variety goes hand in hand with unity. On the unfailing basis of charity’s gold the admirable many sidedness of the saints is explained “all is of love, in love, and for love in the bosom of the Church.” Don Bosco, a soul so enamoured of God, had his own three ways of inviting and inviting praise for God: he placed the most scrupulous diligence in the decorum of the church services; he spoke with tenderness of God and holy things to those who came near him; and he underwent sacrifices courageously to promote the glory of God always. These three things, especially the last which embraces the rest, give us so much material that were we to insert it here our work would grow apace.

The sixth effect is a great desire for the welfare of one’s neighbour. The soul that lives by God often succeeds in being useful to its neighbour without its even realizing it because in the act of helping, consoling, or dealing with it, it receives help from on high in a mysterious manner that makes its work effective. These three are the ways St Thomas mentions in his Summa for helping the needy.

To say Don Bosco was to say charity—endless charity in treating with his fellowmen, sweet charity in upholding the sorrowful and comforting the dying, heroic charity in seeking the ways of practising charity. For this the world loves Don Bosco: “we have

believed his charity.” On this supernatural charity it is pleasant to read a synthetic thought of one who was a real second self to Don Bosco and who bore the travail of the day and the heat for many years alongside the saint. “His life was consumed in the exercise of this charity. We can say of his charity that in part that it came to him as a special gift of the Divine Will and went on increasing and becoming more perfect as years rolled by. He saw the work of God in his neighbour, he saw God Himself too, he saw each man as a brother in Christ Jesus, and so he loved him for the love of God and employed all his cares ceaselessly to draw all to Him. It was not simply a natural sympathy, it was the love of God, the charity of Christ that urged him to spend himself for his neighbour.”

The seventh and last effect of the prayer of simple union, and most admirable in a poor son of Adam, is the practice of all the theological virtues, the Cardinal virtues, and the moral virtues in an heroic degree, in a measure that is which for intensity and constancy far outgoes the limit commonly reached by virtuous men. God, bending down to give such largess of His gifts to a soul to enrich it with every virtue, wishes that the whole Church be benefited by edification and honour and this happens precisely in consequence of heroism in the practice of Christian virtues. In such a state, the soul has nothing else to do than to correspond by simply giving its consent to the torrential shower of heavenly graces. There is no danger of pride for the soul in this, as though it would forget its own nature. Nay, as much as it rises in the loving knowledge of God, so much the more does it debase itself in its own eyes. Thus as humility grows, grace grows too, and at the same time there grows an enthusiastic and very visible leaping to every virtue, none excepted. On this point there is a notable observation of Poulain who writes:

“God comes not alone into the soul. His sanctifying action is so much greater and more sensible the greater is the amount of prayer. The soul saturated with God in the mystical union feels, without knowing how, enveloped with love, humility, and the spirit of sacrifice. God Himself presents the occasions for exercising ,when He sends her trial upon trial ... temptations, illnesses, failures, injustices, scorn.”

To begin a discussion now on the heroicity of Don Bosco’s virtues after the Church has spoken would be to carry water to the ocean. But there is something we should put in relief: it shoots forth spontaneously from the last sentence above mentioned. The life of Don Bosco has experienced! various and uninterrupted changes of Divine intervention painted out by the Biographer. Now we note the teaching of St. Paul when he writes:

“For, whom the Lord loveth He chastiseth.”

Such language is hard and impenetrable to worldly heads: it signifies that trials, the means God uses to purify and urge souls on the road of perfection, constitute a proof of God’s love. Such proofs of love Don Bosco received from God throughout his life; a different kind of proof was given to God by the saint when he practised every kind of virtue heroically in the midst of crosses through his mortal career. His life stands before us with a lucidity that clarifies everything in our gaze, yet where we find naught but what is holy. His Eminence Cardinal Cagliero says, and with his words we hasten to the finis of our task:

“The heroism of virtues he practised in childhood and boyhood was often mentioned to me by my neighbours; the other confreres with me, all observers of his life, attest it of

him as a priest, Rector of the Oratory,, and Superior of the Congregation. On my return from America I found the servant of God more tender and more loving in his charity, more united with God, and more equipped with spiritual greatness. I saw, if my filial love does not deceive me, his venerable old age surrounded by a kind of heavenly glory and angelic air, and his life seemingly already glorified which was all spent in self sacrifice for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

Still another drop must flow before the cup is full. Then, also Don Bosco was a mystic? We know well that not a few, having nothing worse to say, seemed to think this an extraordinary idea; but this is not the fault of mysticism. An author thus treats the figure of mystics:

“True mystics are practical men, men of action, and not of reason and theory. They have a sense of organization, the gift of commanding, and are furnished with excellent methods in business. The works they set afoot are living and enduring. In thought and direction their undertakings give proof of prudence boldness, and that right of possibility that is the characteristic of common sense. And it seems proper, in fact, that common sense is their predominant quality; a common sense undisturbed by a morbid exaltation or by disordered imaginations, but united to a very rare faculty of discernment.”

This, unless we are deceived, is the living portrait of Don Bosco in which contemplation has enlightened and directed the fulfilment.