

DON BOSCO AND COUNT CAVOUR

Count Camillo Benso di Cavour was one of the most illustrious personages of the Italian Risorgimento,¹ and has been frequently described as the symbol of political know-how and realism, of boldness tempered with moderation, of remarkable resource, a lover of liberty, a dynamic fighter for civil and social progress, and a strenuous defender of the Italian cause; it seemed that every practical and theoretical effort for the furthering of the Risorgimento was to be found in him.

Many saw him also as the darling of the Protestant element of Europe the hero and standard-bearer of free thought in regard to the territory claimed by his supposedly great enemy, the Papacy.

Yet others considered him as full of duplicity and ominous scheming, the personification of all kinds of deceit and bad faith, a questionable character in strident contrast to any genuine 'Hero of Both Worlds'.

We prefer to speak of Count Camillo Benso di Cavour as one of the most illustrious personages of the Risorgimento, a man whom Don Bosco knew well, with whom he often discussed matters of small and great moment, and always in an honest and utterly frank manner.

The details of these contacts between Cavour and Don Bosco, between a laymen of fragile religious faith and a priest most faithful to the Church and the Pope, will perhaps reveal certain aspects of interest in the personality of a man so famous and so much in the thoughts and discussions of both hoi polloi and intelligentsia.

<As Don Bosco remembered Cavour>

Don Bosco actually wrote the following interesting information to his Salesians: :

<He visited the Oratory a number of times, and willingly chatted with the pupils. He enjoyed watching them during their lively recreations; he attended our sacred functions; more than once he took part in our St Aloysius procession with candle in one hand and prayer-book in the other, and singing together with the boys. If I ever wished to speak with him, he always gave me an audience while lunching with him.²>

¹ The *Risorgimento* was a kind of extension of the Italian *Renaissance* with reference to political and social affairs.

² ASC, 132,bk.2, p.94.

The <Biographical Memoirs > comment:

<It is worth noting that the brothers Gustavo and Camillo, the sons of the Marquis Michael Cavour, had been brought up in the faith by their Christian parents and could be referred to as 'born Catholics'.³ >

In those early years at Valdocco, Count Camillo di Cavour was all in favour of the Oratory. Even as Minister, he always held Don Bosco as one of his friends, willingly joining him in friendly conversations that were characterised by genuine and cordial esteem. Many times he suggested that Don Bosco should develop the Oratories as corporate bodies, and offered a generous financial contribution for the purpose.⁴ Don Bosco politely refused the offering much to the surprise of Cavour, who well knew that Don Bosco was always short of both personnel and cash. But it was clear to the saint that if he accepted the money, his Oratories could come under Government control and the proffered help would eventually be assumed by the bureaucracy and perhaps even, in the long run, by the boss of that bureaucracy, Cavour himself, the present would-be generous donor of the contribution.⁵

The Count was not offended, and no longer pressed the matter.⁶

The good relations between the Count and Don Bosco were not limited to the early years of the Oratory. Even in the last decade of Cavour's leadership, Don Bosco acted as the secret intermediary between the Holy See and the Cavour Government in the thorny question of the return from exile of the Archbishop of Turin, Luigi Fransoni.⁷ At that time (1858), although Don Bosco clearly disagreed with the Count, he did all he could to settle the disagreement.

At no time did the Count ever show any hostility towards Don Bosco.⁸

<Death of Count Cavour>

The last documented meeting Don Bosco had with Cavour was on 16 July 1860.⁹

³ MB III, 408.

⁵ Don Bosco had to use all his astuteness to avoid obvious involvement in the general suppression of Religious Orders that was rampant in Italy in those days.
⁶ v. MB IV, 107.

⁷ v. F.Motto, *Ricerca Storiche Salesiane*, V,1, p. 3-20.

⁸ MB IV,111.

⁹ MB VI, 678-683

In the October of that year Cavour declared in parliament that the Government intended to make Rome 'the splendid capital of the Italian Kingdom'. It was the swan song of the famous politician.

Shortly after this announcement, Don Bosco predicted that in the following year, 1861, a famous member of parliament would die unexpectedly, and all Europe would be greatly surprised.¹⁰

On 6 June 1861 Count Camillo Benso di Cavour passed away after receiving the Last Sacraments from the parish priest of the <Our Lady of the Angels > church, Giacomo da Poirino.

On the evening of that day Don Bosco announced the death to the community, and added: < Let us take comfort in the hope that, through the intercession of St Francis de Sales, a relation of Count Cavour on his mother's side, God touched his heart and extended to him his infinite mercy.¹¹>

¹⁰ MB VI, 783.

¹¹ MB VI, 964.