

Don Bosco's Second Great Hagiographical Essay "The Life of Young Dominic Savio"

Arthur J. Lenti, SDB

Introduction

The last days of February 1950 were wintry days deluged by frigid rain and blanketed with snow, even in Rome where the climate and the weather are generally mild. But by contrast March came in like a lamb, the harbinger of an early spring. Young people had come to the eternal city from far and wide for the holy year celebrations and in anticipation of a great, joyful event, the beatification of a young teenager, Dominic Savio. The solemn rite took place on March 5. Pope Pius XII, addressing the vast crowd of young people that filled St. Peter's basilica and much of the plaza, read the decree. At the words, "By our apostolic authority we bestow the title of Blessed on the Venerable Servant of God, the lay adolescent Dominic Savio," the image of the new Blessed appeared in Bernini's *Gloria*, greeted by tumultuous applause.

Dominic Savio was canonized four years later (1954), an even more momentous occasion, to be sure. But it seems appropriate, before the memory of the jubilee year fades away, to remember Dominic's beatification on its own "golden jubilee."¹

Many witnesses (28, to be exact) appeared at the processes of beatification and canonization to testify to Dominic's virtues and holiness. But it was Don Bosco's Savio biography that supplied the testimony that transcended all others.

In the late 1850s Don Bosco's workload was huge. His incessant activity as director of the house of the Oratory, as provider for an ever-increasing family, as writer and publisher and more, was exhausting, for up to that point he still had only one Salesian priest to help him, Father Vittorio Alasonatti. Yet, he found the time to write and publish in the *Catholic Readings* (January 1859) an important book, the *Life of Young Dominic Savio*.

Savio's was not the first (or the last) edifying biography of saintly young men authored by Don Bosco. While living in relative seclusion at the Pastoral

¹ The present writer, about to be ordained a priest at the time, had the good fortune of being present in St. Peter's on that memorable occasion. This article is intended as a grateful homage to the young saint.

Institute for Priests (*Convitto ecclesiastico*) of Turin, he had readied a biography of a close friend from his seminary days, the saintly Luigi Comollo who had died in 1839.² The book was published in 1844, a good dozen years before the *Life of Savio* and went through further editions in 1854, 1867 and 1884.

Originally it was dedicated to the seminarians of Chieri, and its stated aim was to propose a model for them, while paying tribute to a saintly close friend who had been such a decisive spiritual influence in his own life. Subsequent editions presented Comollo to wider circles of readers. He was the modern St. Aloysius, a model for any young man (especially if aspiring to the priesthood) and a model for anyone concerned about one's own salvation (editions of 1854 and 1867). He was the saint, a model for the Christian life as such (edition of 1884).³

The Comollo and the Savio biographies are not unrelated. In the 1850s Comollo was presented as a model to Oratory lads like Dominic, and the Comollo biography in its 1854 edition functioned as the *vade mecum* for the spiritual life of the youngsters who had decided for the priesthood. Two more important biographies would follow in the early sixties: of Michele Magone (1861) and of Francesco Besucco (1864), two young lads who, like Savio, had distinguished themselves for their holiness of life at the Oratory. Both are closely related to the Savio biography. In fact, they may be regarded as its complement, for they show further aspects of Don Bosco's educational approach to, and method of guiding the young in the spiritual life. But the Savio biography was not just an important book, as was Comollo's and as would be Magone's and Besucco's. It was a landmark book in its own right, because by it Don Bosco gave a concrete formulation to his style of pastoral care and spiritual direction of young people, and to his proposal for a youth spirituality.

The present essay does not aim at re-telling Savio's well-known story, except in very general terms, nor does it aim at inquiring in any depth into questions relating to Don Bosco's *Life of Young Dominic Savio*—questions that have

² *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo, Morto nel seminario di Chieri, Ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù, Scritti da un suo Collega* [Historical notices on the life of seminarian L.C., deceased at the Chieri seminary, admired by every one for his extraordinary virtue, written by a companion].

(Torino: Tip. Speirani e Ferrero, 1844) in *Opere Edite* I, 1-84. For text, introduction and comments, see also Alberto Caviglia, "Il primo libro di Don Bosco," in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*, Vol. V. (Torino: SEL, 1964), Part I, [9-128].

³ Caviglia sees great spiritual affinity in Don Bosco with Comollo. The Comollo biography possesses an autobiographical flavor in that Don Bosco's own thoughts, values, devotions, pastoral choices, and the spirit of his later work as educator and founder are reflected in Comollo [Caviglia, in *Opere a scritti*, V/1, 21].

already been expertly addressed.⁴ Our purpose here is to present only a general survey of the Savio story as told in Don Bosco’s *Life*, with a brief recall of some questions relating thereto. Therefore after a mention of the various editions, we shall give a summary presentation of the subject’s *cursum vitae* based chiefly on the first edition (1859). We will then discuss the documentation available to Don Bosco and the use he made of it, and address the question of the “character” of the *Life*. Finally there will be some comments on the spirituality that Don Bosco proposed to his young people through the *Life*. For all the above the article draws not only on Don Bosco’s work but also on testimonies given by contemporaries at the Ordinary and Apostolic Processes of Savio’s Beatification.⁵

I. Initial Presentation of Don Bosco’s *Life of Savio*

1. Don Bosco’s Savio Biography and Its Successive Editions⁶

A mere 21 months after Dominic Savio’s death (March 9, 1857), Don Bosco in January 1859 published his *Life* in the *Catholic Readings*. He followed this little

⁴ For an interpretation of the significance of the *Life*, see Alberto Caviglia, *La Vita di Domenico Savio e “Savio Domenico a Don Bosco”*: Studio di Don Alberto Caviglia (Torino: SEI, 1943), in: *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di “Don Bosco” nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali a manoscritti superstiti*, a cura della Pia Società Salesiana, Vol. IV. Don Bosco’s text is that of the fifth edition, 1878. The text is then followed by a 609-page study. [Caviglia, *Opere e Scritti IV*]

Alberto Caviglia, *San Domenico Savio nel ricordo dei contemporanei*. Posthumous (Torino: Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1957) [Caviglia, *Ricordo*]—Documentation and testimonies.

Carlo Salotti, *Domenico Savio* (Torino: Libreria Editrice Internazionale, 1915) [Salotti, *Savio*]

Michele Molineris, *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio. Quello che le biografie di San Domenico Savio non dicono* (Castelnuovo Don Bosco: Istituto Salesiano Bernardi Sememria, 1974) [Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*]

[Eugenio Ceria] San Giovanni Bosco, *Il Beato Domenico Savio Allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*. Edited by E. Ceria (Torino: Society Editrice Internazionale, 1950, 2nd ed., 1954). [Ceria 1950 and Ceria 1954]

⁵ The Ordinary (or Diocesan Informative) Process began in 1908, and the Apostolic Process conducted by the Roman Congregation of Rites in 1914. A number of the 28 people who testified had been eyewitnesses. Among those who were not eyewitnesses Dominic Savio’s sister, Teresa Tosco-Savio as the depository of the family traditions, was especially important. The testimonies are collected in the *Summarium* of the *Positio super introductione causae*. Since these official documents are not available to me, they are cited from the authors listed in Note 4 above, *Summarium*.

⁶ Caviglia, in *Opere e Scritti IV*, x-xvii.

book personally and with love through five successive editions, each revised and augmented.

(1) The first edition was published in the early series of the *Catholic Readings* and bore the title, *Life of Young Dominic Savio, a Pupil of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*.⁷

(2) The second edition came out in April 1860. It appears that this edition, no longer available, was prepared and published by Don Bosco to correct and complement his earlier treatment of the "swimming episode" (to be discussed below), following criticisms by Savio's companion Giuseppe Giovanni Zucca. The 2nd edition also featured various revisions, an additional chapter and an appendix. The additional chapter dealt with Savio's "mortification of all his external senses," and the Appendix reported "graces" obtained through Savio's intercession.

(3) The third, enlarged edition was published in August 1861. Besides including the new material of the 2nd edition, it permanently established the basic content of the biography through the addition of a good number of episodes. We may mention Savio's horror of blasphemy, his action against the impudent man, his correspondence with his friend Giovanni Massaglia, etc. The Appendix likewise contained more reports of "graces."

The first three editions came off the presses of G. B. Paravia in the older pocket-size format of the *Catholic Readings*.

(4) The fourth, enhanced edition of 1866 came off the Oratory presses in the new format (32mo) of the *Catholic Readings*. It was personally supervised by Don Bosco who improved the language and added new material in the first section, chiefly in the form of annotations.

(5) The fifth edition came out 12 years later in 1878. It was entitled *Life of Young Dominic Savio, a Pupil of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, with an Appendix of graces. The text of the galley proofs was that of the 4th edition, but Don Bosco re-worked the language in places and made two sizable additions. One dealt with Savio's scruples; the other was a biographical sketch of Father Giuseppe Bongiovanni (a close friend of Dominic), who had died in 1868.

All the above editions were issued under Don Bosco's own authority.

Reprints of the fifth edition appeared in 1890 and 1893.

(6) A 'new' edition was published in 1908 by Fr. Angelo Amadei on the basis of Don Bosco's third, fourth and fifth editions, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Dominic's death and of the beginning of the Informative Diocesan Process.⁸ In this "milestone" edition, Part I gives Don Bosco's text with

⁷ *Vita—del giovanetto—Savio Domenico—allievo dell'Oratorio—di San Francesco di Sales—per cura del Sacerdote—Bosco Giovanni.*—(Torino: Tip. G. B. Paravia e Comp, 1859). [*Letture Cattoliche* 7:11 (January 1859)], 142, pages, pocket-size format.

⁸ Ven. Giovanni Bosco, *Il Servo di Dio Domenico Savio. Con illustrazioni originali di Giovanni Carpanetto* (Torino, 1908).

the Appendices of the fifth edition; Part II (entitled, *Additional Memoirs*) gives, among other items, the text of the Lanzo Dream of 1876 (also called Savio Dream, or Dream of the Salesian Garden).

(7) Finally, in 1934, on the occasion of Don Bosco’s canonization, the Salesian Publishing House (SEI) published a new edition of the Savio biography, together with those of Comollo, Magone and Besucco, in the Series, *Lecture edificanti*. The text is taken very faithfully from Don Bosco’s 5th edition.

(8) Father Alberto Caviglia’s edition of 1943 in *Opere e Scritti* IV (followed by the “Essay”)⁹ gives the text of 1934 faithfully checked against the Mss. and the original of Don Bosco’s 5th edition. It is a “true and authentic definitive edition given us by the saintly Author in his own words, and in his own words only.”¹⁰

(9) Father Eugenio Ceria’s editions of 1950 and of 1954 (identical as to text, with the 5th edition), appeared on the occasion of Savio’s beatification and canonization, respectively. Comments, with quotes from the Processes, follow each chapter.

This summary publication history is sufficient to show the importance of the Savio biography in the Author’s mind and in the history of the Salesian Society.

2. Sources of the Savio Biography

For the biography Don Bosco obtained information and testimonies from people who had known Dominic in the places where he had lived. During his brief life of not quite 15 years Dominic lived in four different places. (1) He lived in the village of San Giovanni (under the municipal town of Riva, near Chieri), for the first 18 months of his life, from April 2, 1842 (date of his birth) to November 1843, when the family moved to Morialdo (under Castelnuovo). This was Don Bosco’s own village. (2) He lived in Morialdo for 9 years and some 4 months, until February 1853, when (3) the Savios moved to Mondonio. Mondonio (today under Castelnuovo) was a small separate municipal town in those days. Having met Don Bosco on October 2, 1854, Dominic left Mondonio and (4) entered the Oratory in Turin on October 29. There he lived until March 1, 1857, nearly two-and-a-half years. (5) He then returned to Mondonio where he died 9 days later, March 9, 1857. Dominic then spent some two-thirds of his life in Morialdo. There he began his primary school under the local chaplain, and from

⁹ See Footnote 4 above.

¹⁰ Caviglia, in *Opere e Scritti* IV, xvii.

there he continued his primary studies in Castelnuovo. Finally at Mondonio he completed his primary schooling.¹¹

Don Bosco applied (by letter) for information to the three priests who were Dominic's schoolteachers. They were Fathers Giovanni Battista Zucca (1818-1878), chaplain of St. Peter's church at Morialdo and local teacher, Alessandro Allora (1819-1880), teacher in the primary school at Castelnuovo, and Giuseppe Cugliero (ca. 1808-1880), teacher in the primary school of Mondonio. Their replies are included in the Acts of the process of Savio's beatification.¹²

The first of the three to reply, by letter dated April 19, 1857 (a mere 40 days after Dominic's death), was the teacher of Mondonio Father Giuseppe Cugliero. He sent in a substantial report on the virtues and good character of the best pupil he had ever had in his teaching career of 20 years.¹³

Father Giovanni Battista Zucca, the chaplain and teacher of Morialdo replied by letter dated May 5, 1857. He had only words of praise for young Dominic, familiarly known by the endearing name of *Minot*, whom he had first known when appointed chaplain in 1848. He does, however, disapprove of the parents' permissive indulgence.¹⁴

Father Alessandro Allora, Dominic's teacher in Castelnuovo in 1852-1853, wrote a fairly detailed eulogy, with a touching portrait of the boy. On visiting the Oratory some time later, he expressed his satisfaction with the fact that Dominic had persevered in the way of wisdom already undertaken under his teaching.¹⁵

At Don Bosco's request several youngsters, friends of Savio, as well as adults who had known him, submitted notes about him, all of them favorable if not flattering. In the adult category, Don Bosco had a number of testimonies from correspondents. We may list the following: a couple of pages from Giuseppe Reano (an alumnus of the Oratory, 33 years of age); a letter from

¹¹ Dominic attended school under the Boncompagni reform system of 1848. He did the first three primary years (1848-1851) at Morialdo under Father Giovanni Zucca and his fourth year (1852-1853) in Castelnuovo under Father Alessandro Allora. At Mondonio, under Father Giuseppe Cugliero, Dominic finished his primary schooling (1853-1954). Dominic began his secondary studies after entering the Oratory in Turin in the private school of Professor Carlo Bonzanino under whom he did his first two years in one (1844-1845).

¹² *Positio super introductione causae* (Rome: typ. Pont. Instituti Pii IX, 1913); *Summarium*. Not having access to the *Positio* or the *Summarium*, I shall rely on the works quoted in Footnote 4 above.

¹³ *Cenni storici sulla vita del giovane Domenico Savio di Riva di Chieri, frazione borgata di San Giovanni* (Historical note on the life of the young man, Dominic Savio, from San Giovanni, a village of Riva of Chieri), in *Summarium*, 212-214.

¹⁴ *Summarium*, 207-208. Zucca's letter will be transcribed and discussed below.

¹⁵ *Summarium*, 209-212.

Giuseppe Bongiovanni (a friend of Savio and a Salesian seminarian, 23 years of age); a memoir from Deacon Michael Rua (22 years of age); a testimony on Savio’s virtues from Luigi Marcellino (a seminarian at the Oratory, 22 years of age); a short biographical sketch by Giovanni Bonetti (21 years of age); a letter from Francesco Vaschetti (19 years of age, later a priest). Several young men, companions of Savio, also responded to Don Bosco’s invitation: for example, one named Roetto and another named Antonio Duina. These and other testimonies are included in the Acts of the Process of Savio’s beatification.¹⁶

Besides the testimonies from the Oratory people, Don Bosco used some correspondence between Dominic and the folks back at home, a eulogy by professor Matteo Picco who had been his teacher for the term 1856-1857 (fourth gymnasium, unfinished because of Savio’s death).

More importantly, Don Bosco relied on his own recollections and on notes he had taken regarding Savio over the period of the latter’s presence at the Oratory. Don Bosco writes in the biography with reference to Dominic’s offering of self to Mary on the occasion of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1854:

After he had thus placed himself under the protection of the blessed Virgin, Dominic’s life and conduct became so edifying and his practice of virtue so perfect that I began jotting down some of the things he did so as not to forget them.¹⁷

There’s no doubt that Don Bosco “researched” his subject with care. And although in some cases he edited some of his material and omitted certain things that were not judged compatible with his educational aims, the biography as a whole seems to rest on historical fact.

3. Presentation of the First Edition of the Savio Biography (1859)

The first edition of the Savio biography (1859) was a little booklet of 142 pages, about 12 x 9 cm. (4 3/4 x 3 1/2 in.) in size. The frontispiece of the booklet shows a badly conceived and executed portrait of Dominic, a drawing by Carlo Tomatis (1833-1905), to be discussed below.

After the frontispiece and the title page, Don Bosco transcribes the conclusion of a pastoral letter of the Bishop of Saluzzo (Giovanni Antonio Gianotti) to his diocesan clergy in which the bishop recommends the *Catholic Readings*.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Summarium*, 219-220, 241-243, 225-227, 236-238, 231-233, 233-235, 239, 240.

¹⁷ *Bosco, Vita Savio*, 40, in *Opere Edite*, XI, 190.

¹⁸ *Bosco, Vita Savio*, 3-6, *Opere Edite* XI, 153-156. Bishop Gianotti’s pastoral letter is dated October 9, 1858. It should be borne in mind that the Savio biography was first published in the *Catholic Readings* for January 1859.

There follows a brief foreword by the author entitled, "Dear Young People," for although the biography was published in the *Catholic Readings*, and therefore meant also for people at large, it was especially addressed to *his* youngsters. Don Bosco writes:

Dear young people, you have repeatedly asked me to put in writing for you some of the things that have to do with your schoolmate, Dominic Savio, and I have done my best to comply with your wishes.¹⁹

A little further on he adds:

Some may wonder why I have chosen to write about Dominic Savio, rather than about other young men who lived among us and have left behind them a reputation for outstanding virtue. [...] Such were Gabriele Fascio, Luigi Rua, Camillo Gavio, Giovanni Massaglia, and others. However, the life of none of these is as noteworthy and as beautiful as Savio's. [...] Begin, therefore, with taking to heart what I will be writing [about Savio] and what St. Augustine used to say, "If he [succeeded in becoming a saint], why not I?"²⁰

The structure of the biography is clear. The first six chapters (pages 11-33) describe Dominic's edifying early life and education before entering the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. This section covers the first twelve-and-a-half years of Dominic's real life, from April 2, 1842 to October 2, 1854.

The main part of the book (Chapters 7-22, pages 34-109) is concerned with Savio's meeting with Don Bosco and his subsequent entrance and virtuous life in the Oratory. This period runs from October 2, 1854 to March 1, 1857, spanning some two-and-a-half years, as noted above.

The closing chapters (23-26, pages 110-136) relate Dominic's departure from the Oratory, the progress of his illness and his saintly death (March 1-9, 1857), with additional testimonies.

The foregoing preliminary remarks may guide us through a reading of the biography in any edition, for the basic structure remained unchanged in the process of editing. However, in the survey that follows, while relying on Don Bosco's first edition for the text, we present Savio's *cursus vitae* within a somewhat more detailed place-time framework for the sake of greater clarity.

¹⁹ Bosco, *Vita Savio*, 7; *Opere Edite XI*, 157.

²⁰ Bosco, *Vita Savio*, 7; *Opere Edite XI*, 157.

II. Dominic Savio's *Cursus Vitae*

Our survey of Dominic Savio's brief earthly career of 14 years and 11 months draws on Don Bosco's first edition of the *Life* as a starting point. Additional data from various sources are used to make the framework more understandable.

1. Dominic Savio's Parents, Family and Childhood²¹

(1) *Ranello (1815-1840)*

Dominic's father, Carlo Baldassarre Savio, was born of very poor family at Ranello, a village of the municipal town, Castelnuovo, on November 8, 1815. As a young man, he learned the blacksmith's trade from an uncle at Mondonio, a small town of less than 400 people, near and east of Castelnuovo.

On March 2, 1840 he married 20-year old Anna Rosa Brigida Dorotea Gajato (Agagliate, Agagliati).²² The documents refer to him as "illiterate." But later he signed his first-born son's baptismal certificate; and 15 years later he wrote a letter to Don Bosco to tell him of Dominic's death. He was probably self-taught.

Dominic's mother, Brigida, was born at Cerreto d'Asti on February 2, 1820. As a girl she learned to be a seamstress; and in spite of 10 pregnancies and confinements over a period of 23 years, by her trade she helped the family through times of financial distress. In 1956, a woman who had known her recalled that she was "a tall, slender, refined and beautiful woman."²³ Dominic as a boy had proper manners and a refined appearance. The way he was dressed (with the elegance of the poor) showed that he was indeed a seamstress' son. It may be this circumstance that prompted him to say to Don Bosco at their first meeting, "I am the material. Will you be the tailor? Take me along and make a beautiful garment for the Lord."²⁴

(2) *Mondonio (1840-1841)*

Not long after their marriage the Savios left Ranello and settled at Mondonio, where Carlo no doubt intended to ply the blacksmith's trade. This move was but the first forced on Carlo by family circumstances and poverty. At Mondonio

²¹ Data on the family based on Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 13-44; Caviglia, *Ricordo*, xvii-xx.

²² The name is recorded as "Gajato" in the documents, but Teresa Tosco-Savio (Dominic's married youngest sister) in the Apostolic Process (1915) testified that her mother, known simply as Brigida, said "Agagliati" or "Agagliate" [*Summarium*, 45].

²³ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 23.

²⁴ Bosco, *Vita Savio*, 55, in *Opere Edite* XI, 185.

their first child, a boy, was born; they named him Domenico Carlo. He lived less than two weeks (November 3-18, 1840).

(3) *San Giovanni of Riva near Chieri (1841-1843)—Dominic's Birth*

In 1841 Carlo Savio was out of work. Mondonio was a very small town, and apparently there was not enough work for two blacksmiths. He moved to San Giovanni, a hamlet of Riva, near Chieri, where he worked as a blacksmith.

Domenico Giuseppe (our Dominic), their second child, was born at San Giovanni on April 2, 1842. The name Dominic ("the Lord's"), though ordinary enough, became significant for the boy later on.

(4) *Morialdo (1843-1853)*

In November 1843, when Dominic was 20 months old, circumstances again forced Brigida and Carlo to move, this time to Morialdo (a village of Castelnuovo), close to Carlo's family at Ranello and close to the Boscos still living at Becchi. Here they lived for some 10 years in a few bare rooms of the Pianta cottage. Carlo had hoped to establish himself and better his circumstances, but it just didn't work out.

At Morialdo their third child, Carlo, was born and died immediately (February 15-16, 1844). Subsequently were born two girls, Raimonda or Remondina (1845-1913) and Maria (1847-1859), and another boy, Giovanni (1850-1894).

At Morialdo in 1848-1849 Dominic began attending primary school. The schoolteacher was the local chaplain, Giovanni Battista Zucca (1818-1878), who had been a seminary companion of Don Bosco at Chieri. After Dominic's death Father Zucca, responding to a request from Don Bosco, wrote a glowing report on his pupil and spiritual son. We read it here as given in the collection appended to the *Summarium* of the Process of Beatification.

(5) Letter of Father Giovanni Battista Zucca (1818-1878) to Don Bosco, May 5, 1857²⁵

Murialdo, May 5, 1857.

Dear Don Bosco,

You (*tu*) wish to have a short account of the life of Savio, recently deceased. Since he lived nearby and attended my school and our village church of St. Peter I am happy to comply with your request.

In the first days after my arrival at Murialdo I would often see a boy of about 5 years of age walking up with his mother. They would stop to pray at the entrance of the chapel, and I was struck by the boy's devout demeanor, something unusual at that age. We would often meet on the way to or from the chapel, and he would greet me respectfully. I was greatly impressed and deeply touched by all this, and naturally I was eager to learn who he was. They told me that he was the son of Savio the blacksmith, and that his name was *Minot*.

The following year he enrolled in my school, which he attended faithfully, working with docility and diligence. Since he was gifted with sufficient intelligence, in a short time he made considerable progress. The devotion he showed as he prayed with his mother at the church entrance deepened with the years, fostered also by the fact that he quickly learnt how to serve Mass, which he did practically every day. He loved all church services and he loved to serve at the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. He was fond of singing hymns and sacred songs with a schoolmate of his and with his father; this he did also at home and at stable gatherings [on winter nights].

He went to confession several times a year, and as soon as he reached the age of discernment he was admitted to Holy Communion, which he received with extraordinary devotion.

By force of circumstances he had to associate with undisciplined companions. But I am not aware that he ever took part in any serious quarrel, or that he ever let himself be dragged into dangerous, morally risky or indecent situations. He never took part in those pranks in which such rabble is often engaged as, for example, raiding other people's fruit trees, causing damage to property, making fun of old and physically impaired people.

Watching him I have often thought that here was a boy that held out the highest hopes, provided he could get out of that house. In that house none of the children, whether boys or girls, turn out well because of the indolence, etc., etc. of the parents. Unfortunately this is often the case, and daily experience, wise teacher that it is, confirms the Marquis de Breme's statement—that the love of parents, like the

²⁵ *Summarium*, 207-208, in Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 63-64. Molineris writes: "I transcribe the letter from the archival manuscript, because in [Don Bosco's Savio] biography it was subjected to some editing." As a matter of fact, Don Bosco omits the last paragraph of the letter entirely (as unflattering to the parents) but he gives the rest with substantial fidelity [*Vita Savio*, 1859, 14-17, in *Opere Edite* XI, 164-167].

other kind of love, is blind and more often than not, in spite of the best intentions, it does more harm than good.²⁶ [A few personal matters follow.]

Your dear and devoted friend,

Father Zucca.

On Easter Sunday, April 8, 1849 Dominic at the age of 7 made his first Communion with the famous resolutions ("My friends will be Jesus and Mary," "Death but not sin") in the parish church of Castelnuovo.²⁷ Cardinal Giovanni Cagliero, at the time a young lad making his third Easter Communion on the same occasion, testified to Dominic's devotion.

The people of Castelnuovo d'Asti were deeply moved by Dominic's devotion, as he made his first communion on Easter 1849. His perfect demeanor, his spirit of piety and devotion were extraordinary, also in view of the fact that he was only 7 years old. I was present and part of the service since I was making my third Easter Communion.²⁸

(6) *School at Castelnuovo from Morialdo*

The village of Morialdo offered only the lower section of the primary school in its two levels (1a and 1b), taught by Father Zucca as one class. After completing the lower section, Dominic would have had to attend the upper two-level section at Castelnuovo, and walk a distance of nearly 5 km four times a day. His parents, however, preferred to keep their 8-year old son, who was of very frail constitution, at home. He was ill on and off from October 1850 to June 1852.

Dominic began to attend the upper section of primary school at Castelnuovo on June 21, 1852. One day on his way to or from school the small and frail ten-year old child met some one who asked him if he wasn't afraid to walk

²⁶ This is the paragraph that Don Bosco obviously found to be unsuitable to his hagiographical portrayal of the young saint. As one reads the Italian text, one gets the impression that Father Zucca is speaking of the Savios, rather than in general terms about what all too often is the case with parents.

Nel vederlo io ho più volte detto: ecco un figlio di buone speranze, purchè s'en vada fuori di casa, poiche in essa pochissimi ragazzi, tanto dell'uno the dell'altro sesso, fanno buona riuscita, per l'indolenza ecc. ecc. dei parenti. Gli esempi sono sgraziatamente molti, a la quotidiana maestra delle cose, l'esperienza, mi ha fatto toccar con mano quanto avesse ragione il marchese di Breme quando disse: l'amor dei genitori, come quell'altro amore, ha pure la benda sugli occhi e bene spesso, senza volerlo, invece di giovare nuoce [Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 64].

²⁷ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 19-20, in *Opere Edite XI*, 169-170.

²⁸ Cagliero, in *Summarium*, 132-133, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 101

that lonely road alone. He answered that he was not alone because his guardian angel walked with him.²⁹ At this point Don Bosco records also the swimming episode, to be discussed below.

At Castelnuovo Dominic did the first level (2a) from June to September 1852 and the second level (2b) from November 1852 to February 1853, when he was forced to discontinue, again because of illness.

His teacher at Castelnuovo was Father Alessandro Allora. Like Father Zucca, he made a very favorable report to Don Bosco, praising Dominic for his virtue and diligence.

(7) *Letter of Father Alessandro Allora, Teacher at Castelnuovo [August 20 (?), 1857]*³⁰

[Date? Address?]

I am very happy to have the opportunity of expressing my opinion of young Dominic Savio who in a very short time won my complete good will. Indeed I did love him with the tenderness of a father. I am happy to respond to your request because his diligence in study, his moral conduct and his virtues are still vivid in my mind.

I cannot say much about his religious practice, because he lived quite a distance from town and was therefore dispensed from attending the congregation.³¹ But I'm sure that if he had attended he would have given evidence of his piety and devotion.

After completing his first primary course [the lower primary cycle, to be more exact] in Morialdo, the good lad asked for and obtained to be enrolled in the second primary course, which I taught [second primary cycle]. He was admitted on June 21, 1852, the day dedicated to St. Aloysius, protector of the young.

Dominic's constitution was rather delicate, almost fragile. His face had an air of gravity mixed with sweetness, serious and pleasing at the same time. He had the gentlest and sweetest temperament, and his disposition was always even. His demeanor in class (in church and elsewhere also) was such that when the teacher's eye, thought or word addressed him, his face took on the most beautiful and happy expression. Such response is one of the sweetest rewards a teacher can hope for, a recompense for the hard, unacknowledged work he has to put in to educate the minds and souls of some unreceptive pupils. I can truly say then that he was Savio [wise] in name and in fact, giving proof of it in study, in piety, in conversation, and in his every action. For the time that he attended my class, that is, from June 21, 1852 to the end of that school year, and then again in the four months from No-

²⁹ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 22-23, in *Opere Edite* XI, 172-173.

³⁰ *Summarium*, 209-212, in Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 81-82.

³¹ The “congregation” was a meeting of the students on Sundays and holy days for catechetical instruction, Mass and other religious exercises. Dominic Savio, because of the distance involved, was exempted from attending.

vember 1852 to February 1853, when the family moved to Mondonio, his progress in studies was steady and extraordinary. (At Mondonio his brother William was born who died at the age of 12.) Dominic always earned first place in his class. He also won other school awards, as he earned top grades in almost every subject that was being taught. Such happy results in his studies were due not solely to his gifts of mind, but also to his great love of study and to his virtue.

His extraordinary diligence in the performance of the least of his duties as a Christian student was a source of admiration. This is especially true of his admirable constancy in attending class. Continuously plagued with poor health, he would nonetheless walk 4 km four times a day to and from school. Through it all he maintained perfect peace of mind and an unruffled disposition even during the winter season when he had to brave the bad weather, frigid rains and snow. As his teacher, I could not fail to appreciate such an admirable example and such rare, heroic commitment.

Then this wonderful pupil took sick during the school year 1852-1853, and subsequently the family moved. I was sorry indeed to lose such a dear pupil, and began to fear lest because of ill health and lack of means he should have to interrupt his studies, and the bright hopes he held out for the future should come to naught.

It was a great comfort for me to learn that he had been admitted as a student to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. This opened up again for him a path for the further cultivation of his mind and of his luminous spirit of piety.³²

(8) Back to Mondonio (1853-)

In February 1853 the Savios moved back to Mondonio. The reason for the move may have been the death of Carlo's uncle, the blacksmith. Carlo would thus have taken over the equipment and the customers. Here the family's circumstances improved slightly.³³

At Mondonio Dominic attended the school of Father Giuseppe Cugliero from February 1853 to June 1854. He completed the upper section of primary school (second level, 2b) that had been interrupted at Castelnuovo because of illness and the family's move. Father Cugliero also sent to Don Bosco a glowing

³² Father Allora recalls a visit he made to Don Bosco not long after Dominic's entrance into the Oratory. He writes: "I visited Don Bosco in Turin, perhaps in 1854. I was then pleased to see once again this excellent former pupil of mine, who was pursuing his studies together with a select group of companions in that Oratory. I was happy to learn then that the good lad had not in the least abandoned the way of wisdom. Because of his virtuous life and rare accomplishments in his studies he had won the good will of his superiors and the love of some benefactors who were helping him in the pursuit of his career" [*Summarium*, 209-212, in Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 81-82.]

³³ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 20.

report of Savio’s excellence. In it he also relates the incident in which Dominic silently accepted the blame for a prank others had committed.³⁴

(9) Letter of Father Joseph Cugliero’s, School teacher at Mondonio (Excerpts)³⁵

At Castelnuovo, under the teaching of the Very Rev. Father Alessandro Allora [Dominic] was always outstanding in his serious bearing and in his moral conduct. He was obliging with everyone and was loved by all. At his appearing in the classroom, his classmates immediately adopted a modest demeanor. Dominic loved everyone, but kept away from those schoolmates who were negligent.

He often won first honors (*medaglia*) in class, because his love of study was second only to his piety. His teacher greatly admired the gifts of virtue that adorned the soul of the young boy. [...]

In my twenty years of teaching young boys I can truthfully say that I have found no one who could equal Dominic Savio’s piety. He was young in years but had the sense of a mature person. His keenness and perseverance in study and his pleasant ways soon won him my affection and endeared him to his schoolmates. In church I was amazed at seeing such recollection in a lad so young, and I often said, “Here is an innocent soul in whom Heaven takes delight and who in his heart’s desire already lives with the angels.” [...]

One day some of my students did something so very wrong as to deserve expulsion from school. Anticipating trouble, the culprits agreed to lay the blame on Dominic; they came to me and made such a clever case of it that, against my better judgment, I believed them. Justly angry, I stormed into the classroom and after taking the culprit to task in general terms, I turned to Savio and I shouted, “And you had to be the one to do this! Don’t you know you should be expelled for it? You’re lucky it’s your first fault. Make sure it’s your last!”

All Dominic needed to do to clear his name was to speak up, and his innocence would have been instantly established. Instead he chose to keep quiet; he lowered his head and not daring to raise his eyes accepted the rebuke as though he was really guilty. But God defends the innocent; the next day the real culprits were found out, and Dominic’s innocence was vindicated. Sorry for having given Dominic an undeserved scolding, I called him aside and asked, “Why didn’t you tell me at once that you were innocent?” His reply was, “Because that boy has been in trouble before and would perhaps have been expelled. In my case, I hoped I would be forgiven because this would have been my first fault in school. Besides, I remembered that our Lord was once falsely accused, too.”

³⁴ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 32-33, in *Opere Edite* XI, 182-183.

³⁵ Cugliero, Document No. 3, attached to the Acts of the Process, 450, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 9. Don Bosco writes: [At Mondonio] [Dominic] continued to live as he had in Morialdo and Castelnuovo, so that the report made by Father Cugliero, his new teacher, is not much different. Hence, were I to quote it in its entirety, I would have to repeat what his earlier teachers have written. I shall, therefore, pick only a few of the more striking things [Bosco, *Vita Savio*, 1859, 31, in *Opere Edite* XI, 181].

No more was said, but everybody admired Dominic for returning good for evil and even for being willing to take the punishment for the boy who had falsely accused him.

Meanwhile on April 13, 1853, Dominic received the sacrament of Confirmation at the parish of Castelnuovo from Bishop Luigi Moreno of Ivrea, as one of a class of some 800 young people from neighboring parishes.³⁶

(10) *The Rest of the Family*

Dominic was 11 years old, and at the time the Savio family was greeting a new arrival. For at Mondonio Brigida and Carlo had 4 more children: Guglielmo, the new arrival (1853-1865), followed by Caterina (1856-1915), Teresa (1859-1933) and Luigia (1863-1864).³⁷ Carlo's wife Brigida died in 1870, at the age of 51.³⁸

Mr. Savio's three surviving daughters, Remondina, Caterina and Teresa, were married in 1866, 1878 and 1876 respectively. Teresa was married to Giovanni Battista Tosco on February 20, 1876, when she was less than 17 years of age; they lived in Turin. She called herself Teresa Tosco-Savio.

In 1878, after Caterina's marriage, Mr. Savio (then 63 years old) was left to live alone with his 28-year old son Giovanni. He asked Don Bosco to accept him as a worker and lived and worked at the Oratory as a *coadiutore* (domestic

³⁶ Because of Archbishop Fransoni's exile and the political situation, but also by custom, Confirmation was administered at longer intervals.

³⁷ The 10 Savio children in order of birth are: Domenico Giuseppe Carlo (November 3-18, 1840); [St.] Domenico Giuseppe (1842-1857); Carlo (February 15-16, 1844); Maria Caterina Raimonda ("Remondina," 1845-1913); Maria Teresa Adelaide (1847-1859); Giovanni Pietro (1850-1894); Giuseppe Guglielmo (1853-1865); Maria Caterina Elisabetta (1856-1915); Maria Firmina Teresa (1859-1933); Maria Luigia (1863-1864). Of the boys only Giovanni reached adulthood; and of the girls, Remondina, Caterina and Teresa. Raimonda and Caterina migrated to France, so that of all the children only Teresa was available to testify at Dominic's Apostolic Process of Beatification. She testified on January 26, 1915. It is through her (apart from parish records) that much of the information pertaining to the family has come down to us. Her testimony regarding her brother Dominic is also important, for in spite of not having known him (she was born 2 years after his death), she reported incidents as heard in the family.

³⁸ Testifying at the Process about her mother's death Teresa recalled: "I remember the pastor walking into the house just after my mother's death. I was then 11 years old. When he saw me and my sisters crying, he said to us: 'Don't cry; your mother was a saintly woman, and she's gone straight to heaven.'" [*Summarium*, 43, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 3].

or brother?) from January 11, 1879 until his death on December 16, 1891, at 76 years of age.³⁹

2. Dominic Meets Don Bosco and Is Accepted as a Student at the Oratory (1854)

After this brief family history, recounted chiefly in order to isolate a star witness (Teresa Savio-Tosco), we backtrack in time to recall young Dominic’s “fateful” meeting with Don Bosco. It was no fortuitous event. At mid-1850s Don Bosco was well known in those parts, also on account of the yearly autumn outings on which he took his boys. He had recruited or accepted several boys from the area of Castelnuovo. Angelo Savio, a Salesian seminarian from Ranello (Castelnuovo) who was a close friend of Dominic and his family, wrote in his memoir of 1858:

Before [Dominic Savio] came to the Oratory I had known him as a young man of uncommon virtue. He had spoken to me on a number of occasions of his great desire to enroll as a student at the Oratory. One day I asked him why he wanted to be a student there, and he answered, “Because I want to be a priest so as the more easily to save my soul and help many others do the same.”⁴⁰

Don Bosco relates the circumstances of the encounter. Father Cugliero, Savio’s teacher at Mondonio, had spoken to him about this pupil of his, “a veritable St. Aloysius.” They agreed that the boy should meet him at Becchi in October, when Don Bosco came with his youngsters to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary and for the yearly outing. Dominic accompanied by his father kept the appointment. It was October 2, 1854, and the rest is history.⁴¹ The “good material” was now in the hands of a skilled tailor for a “beautiful garment for the Lord.” Dominic entered the Oratory on October 29, 1854 and would leave after a stay of only 28 months on March 1, 1857. He would die nine days later, at home in Mondonio.

When Dominic entered the Oratory in the autumn of 1854, a new situation had developed on many fronts. The cholera epidemic that had raged unchecked and had made numerous victims, especially in Turin, was subsiding. It would

³⁹ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 21. Father Caviglia says of Mr. Savio: “He lived to the age of 75. I knew him when he was an old man; he was still healthy and with plenty of his old spirit left in him.” [Caviglia, *Savio e Don Bosco*, in *Opere e scritti*, IV, 15 (of the study).]

⁴⁰ Angelo Savio, *Written Memoir* of December 13, 1858, *Summarium* 453, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 9.

⁴¹ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 34-37, in *Opere Edite* XI, 184-187.

flare up again in 1855, though with diminished virulence. Don Bosco's boys had formed an association for the purpose of helping to care for the stricken. As will be noted below, Dominic would have wanted to be of service, but apparently Don Bosco did not think it advisable.

On the political scene, after the liberal revolutions of 1848 and the granting of the *Statuto* that made Piedmont a constitutional parliamentary monarchy, the program of secularization had also begun in earnest. The school system in the realm had been secularized in principle by the Boncompagni reform of 1848. This is the system under which Dominic had done his primary school and was now about to undertake his secondary studies. In 1850-1851 Parliament had stripped the Church of traditional privileges and immunities. And even as Dominic was enrolling at the Oratory, the bill of suppression of religious orders and of confiscation of Church properties was being debated in Parliament, and would shortly be passed. It was in this connection that Don Bosco, prompted by dreams, wrote to King Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont, threatening him with divine chastisement if he should sign the bill of suppression into law.

On the religious front, Don Bosco was already fully engaged through the press (the *Catholic Readings*) in a bitter polemic against the Waldenses ("Protestants"), who had obtained freedom of worship under the constitution and were actively proselytizing. Attempts were made on his life on this account.

The sickly, delicate, small 12-year old child who enrolled at the Oratory in the fall of 1854 was probably kept insulated from the turmoil of such political and religious confrontations. But he was probably aware of the drama playing out in the wider society. He would also be aware of attempts made on Don Bosco's life, and must have heard reports of the Gray Dog's (*Grigio's*) interventions in Don Bosco's defense.

On the home front, Dominic would witness the physical development in effect within the Oratory itself. Don Bosco's building program had begun in earnest. The object was to replace the small Pinardi house and chapel with new and larger premises. The church of St. Francis de Sales had been dedicated in June 1852, and the Pinardi chapel now served as a study hall. In 1853-1854 the first section of a new building ("Don Bosco's house," the new "Home attached to the Oratory") was completed (after collapsing) and was in partial use, with an enrollment of 65 boarders for the year 1854-1855. Building continued throughout Dominic's stay.⁴² The old Pinardi house was demolished in 1856 to make

⁴² A distinction should be made between the "oratory," that is, the Sunday assemblies of boys from the neighborhood for church services, recreation and religious instruction, and the "Oratory," that is, "the Home Attached to the Oratory" for boarders (students and apprentices). The Home had been established in 1847 with a couple of boarders who were housed in rented space in the Pinardi house. More boarders were given shelter in next few years. But it was not until proper premises were provided that the "Oratory" could make a significant start.

room for a second section of Don Bosco's house, the number of boarders rising to 153. By the time Dominic left the Oratory never to return (March 1, 1857), the boarders numbered 199.⁴³

In the meantime, however, Dominic's immediate concern was to be the good material in the hands of the master tailor, and obviously to pursue his secondary studies for the priesthood in earnest.

3. School Year 1854-55

(1) *First Steps toward Holiness under Don Bosco's Guidance*

About his first meeting with Dominic at Becchi Don Bosco writes: “I realized that here was a boy whose soul was totally attuned to the spirit of God. I was quite surprised to see the wonderful workings of divine grace in a person so young.”⁴⁴ These words illuminate Dominic's past life, but they are also a presage of his life at the Oratory. In paragraph after paragraph the biography is a record of Dominic's striving for holiness.

The saying he read in Don Bosco's room, “Give souls, take away the rest,” and his own consecration to Our Lady on December 8, 1854, on the occasion of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception marked the beginning of a ceaseless striving.⁴⁵ At this point Don Bosco writes:

After placing himself under Mary's protection, Dominic's life and conduct became so edifying that from that moment on I began to record some of the many virtuous deeds so as not to forget them. [...] I have now accumulated such a store of edifying and virtuous incidents, all deserving of being presented to the reader, that I have decided to proceed topically rather than chronologically. [...] I shall begin by speaking of his Latin studies [for the priesthood], for this was the main reason why he was accepted into this house.⁴⁶

(2) *Beginning Secondary Studies*

The course of secondary studies (*ginnasio*) was a five-year course conducted under the terms of the school reform inaugurated by Carlo Boncompagni with the liberal revolution of 1848. The course consisted of a lower section of three years (1st, 2nd and 3rd *ginnasio* or Grammar) and a higher section of two (4th and 5th *ginnasio* or Humanities and Rhetoric). The law allowed the running of private schools, whether by individuals or by institutions, provided they com-

⁴³ Ceria 1954, 53-54.

⁴⁴ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 35, in *Opere Edite XI*, 185.

⁴⁵ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 38-40, in *Opere Edite XI*, 188-190.

⁴⁶ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 40-41, in *Opere Edite XI*, 190-191.

plied with standards set for state schools, especially with regard to programs and teacher certification.

When Dominic entered in 1854, no in-house school program had as yet been established at the Oratory. The students attended the private schools of Professors Carlo Giuseppe Bonzanino (d. 1888) and Father Matteo Picco (1812-1880), who admitted Don Bosco's students out of charity. Professor Bonzanino's school offered the lower section of the 5-year secondary course of studies and Professor Picco's the higher section.

Dominic then joined the group that attended Professor Bonzanino's school in the city. The students gathered in the entrance (Dominic often scolding the tardy), and under the supervision of a trusted leader, "Don Bosco's boys" twice a day made their way to school and likewise returned.

Since Dominic had already begun the study of Latin under Father Cugliero in Mondonio, and because of his diligence and desire, he was able to complete two years in one: 1st and 2nd *ginnasio* (or Grammar).

(3) Edifying Incidents

For this first year at the Oratory, Don Bosco records in detail Savio's heroic intervention to stop a fight between two schoolmates and to bring about their reconciliation. He also speaks of Dominic's exemplary conduct on the way to and from school, and of his repeated refusal of invitations by schoolmates to go off and play instead of going straight home.⁴⁷ Dominic was active in helping his companions in other ways—by good example, by zealous concern, by advising new boys, by helping with the catechism classes, etc.

Giovanni Roda-Ambrè, an apprentice who also entered the Oratory in 1854, testified at the Apostolic Process of beatification:

I first knew the Servant of God in the year 1854, when I was accepted at the Oratory. The Venerable Don Bosco entrusted me to Dominic Savio so that he would guide me during the first days and would instruct me in what I was to do. He spent the first few days almost entirely by my side, and I remained ever after the object of his attentions and concern. This was the job the Venerable [Don Bosco] had given him. I'd like to add that when I entered the Oratory, I was completely ignorant of the prayers that a good Christian should know and had never gone to Confession or Communion. I owe it to the Servant of God's zeal that I began to receive the holy Sacraments once a week, and later almost daily.⁴⁸

On one of my first days at the Oratory, as Savio and myself were playing at *bocce*, I let slip a blasphemy, a habit I had formed when living without parental care, instruction and education. No sooner had Savio heard the blasphemy than he stopped playing and reacted instinctively with a groan of painful surprise. Then he

⁴⁷ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 42-49, in *Opere Edite* XI, 192-199.

⁴⁸ *Summarium*, 22 and 55, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 15.

came up to me and in the kindest manner urged me to go to Don Bosco without delay and make my confession. This I did immediately, and this admonition turned out to be so very helpful that from then on I have not blasphemed again.⁴⁹

(4) *Savio's "Second Conversion": Turning Point in the Pursuit of Holiness and in the Spiritual Life*

Some six months after arriving at the Oratory (perhaps in April 1855), Dominic experienced something in the nature of a second conversion. A sermon by Don Bosco on “becoming a saint” turned the initial resolve into a new life’s orientation. He expressed himself in these terms: “I have a great desire and an urgent need to become a saint. My life would be a total failure if I did not become a saint, now that I know that it is easy and that one can be happy and be a saint too.” On hearing from Don Bosco that the name “Dominic” meant “of the Lord,” he replied: “See, even my name tells me that I’m the Lord’s.”⁵⁰

Don Bosco immediately set out for him a way of spiritual life, holiness through the exercise of practical charity.

The first suggestion Dominic was given to become a saint was to try to win souls to God, for there is no work in the world so holy as helping to save those souls for whom Jesus Christ shed every drop of his precious blood.⁵¹

This proposal of a spirituality for young people, holiness to be achieved through the apostolate, stands at the head of Chapter XI as the hagiographical foundation of the whole story. From this point on, much of the biography is dedicated to describing Dominic’s ascent to holiness through ardent and practical love of God and neighbor. He corrects a boy who had uttered a blasphemy. He expresses his desire to be a missionary and instruct other youngsters in the faith. And when a schoolmate scolded him: “What business is all this of yours?” Savio’s answer was: “It’s my business because Jesus shed his blood for us, and we are all brothers.”⁵²

The theme is voiced again at the head of the next chapter: “The thought of winning souls to God was ever present to him.” He animates the recreation with friendly conversation. He dissuades schoolmates from masquerading and from going swimming, and with some good friends he forms a group dedicated to helping wayward companions and encouraging them to receive the sacraments.⁵³ A testimony written in response to Don Bosco’s appeal for information shows

⁴⁹ *Summarium*, 55 and 220, in Ceria (1954), 82.

⁵⁰ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 50-52, in *Opere Edite* XI, 200-202.

⁵¹ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 53 [Chapter XI], in *Opere Edite* XI, 203.

⁵² Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 53-56 [Chapter XI], in *Opere Edite* XI, 203-206.

⁵³ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 57-62 [Chapter XII], in *Opere Edite* XI, 207-212.

how Dominic helped other boys. The writer is a simple, barely literate apprentice named Antonio Duina, who had been taught by Savio to read and write.⁵⁴

That fortunate and dear companion of mine, Dominic Savio.

I, Antonio Duina, had the good fortune of having him as my instructor in secular subjects.

In the first place, he never began any activity without thanking and praising the Lord. For the whole time I had him as a teacher I could see that he willingly did all in his power to help me learn.

For my part, I did occasionally say or do things that offended him, but he never talked back to me, rather he appeared happier than usual. This shows that to suffer some pain or ridicule was important to him, because he did it for the Lord.

That's about all I know, but I recall that one day he went to the hospital to visit a schoolmate of his who was ill and when he got back dinner was over and he had to eat his food cold. He had not been able to see [his friend] because he had gotten there late. But at least he had taken the trouble of walking the distance [to the hospital].

Savio's already fervent spirit of prayer and his devotion to Mary especially during the month of May become more intense. He speaks of Mary and invites companions to honor her. He organizes a little raffle to raise funds for a shrine in Mary's honor in the dormitory.⁵⁵

In speaking of Dominic's spirit of piety, Don Bosco enunciates another important principle of the spiritual life for young people, the Sacraments. "Experience proves beyond question that Confession and Communion are a youngster's greatest source of spiritual power." Don Bosco goes on to describe Savio's frequent and regular use of the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Dominic began by choosing a steady confessor who would guide him in the spiritual life. He received Communion each day with a different intention, and lived in union with Christ with great joy.⁵⁶

Out of love for Christ, Dominic had a burning desire to practice the kind of penance that punishes the body and that he read about in the *Life of Comollo*. Don Bosco forbade any such penance and recommended instead, "obedience" and "putting up with injuries, heat, cold, tiredness, wind, rain, all the discomforts of weak health"—another wise directive for the spiritual life of young people.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Document No. 13, *Summarium*, 478, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, xxiii and 25, undated but written before the publication of the *Life*, though not used by Don Bosco. See photograph in Caviglia, *Opere e scritti* IV, opp. p. 40.

⁵⁵ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 62-67 [Chapter XIII], in *Opere Edite* XI, 212-217.

⁵⁶ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 67-72 [Chapter XIV], in *Opere Edite* XI, 217-222.

⁵⁷ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 75, in *Opere Edite* XI, 225.

4. Summer of 1855

Don Bosco discouraged his boys from going home for holidays, in the belief that they would be exposed to spiritual and moral harm. He encouraged them to stay on at the Oratory, and made sure they had an enjoyable time. Dominic wanted to stay on, but Don Bosco overruled him and, once school was over at mid-July, sent him home for a month's vacation, for he had not been well and needed a break. Dominic spent part of that month with his family, keeping busy with entertaining and teaching children in the village, as well as his “little brothers.”⁵⁸ He also spent some time with his aunt in the town of Piova, as certain testimonial cards, left behind and jealously kept in that family, tend to show.⁵⁹

Back from the holidays in fairly good health in mid-August, Dominic learned that the cholera that had flared up again during the summer was in remission. He settled in with the scheduled classes preparatory to regular school year and eventually got to see Don Bosco, for he was carrying a request from his father that had to do with his sister Remondina. In a letter to his father he speaks of an hour-long conversation with Don Bosco.

(1) Dominic's Letter to His Father

[Undated but postmarked September 5, 1855]

Dearest Father,

I have a very interesting piece of news, but first let me tell you about myself. I've been well since my return, thank God, and at the moment I'm enjoying perfectly good health. I hope it's the same with you and the whole family. I am making steady progress in my studies, and Don Bosco has been increasingly pleased with me.

Now for the good news: I spent a whole hour alone with Don Bosco—unusual, since before this I've never spent more than ten minutes at a time with him. I spoke to him about a number of things, including an association for protection against cholera. He told me that it has begun to flare up and that, were it not for the chilly weather that is setting in, it would still be causing much damage. Don Bosco made me also a member [of the association], but now it's really only for prayer.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1959), 56, in *Opere Edite* XI, 206. See below for a comment on the catechizing of his little brothers.

⁵⁹ Cf. Molineris *Nuova Vita Savio*, 149-151. One of these testimonial cards from Professor Bonzanino reads in Latin “*Ingenuo bonaque spei adolescenti Savio Domenico diligentiae testimonium. Bonzanino Prof.*” [Testimonial awarded for diligence to Dominic Savio, a young man of noble temperament and of high hopes. Prof. Bonzanino].

I also spoke to him about my sister [Remondina] as you asked me to do. He suggests that you take her to his house [at Becchi] on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, so that he may have some idea of her education and of her abilities, and together you may come to a decision.

This is all for now. Regards to you and our whole family, to my teacher Father Cugliero, and also to Andrea Robino and my friend Domenico Savio of Ranello.

I am your most devoted and most loving son,

Dominic Savio.⁶⁰

(2) *Special Friends*

On entering the Oratory in the fall of 1854, Dominic made the acquaintance of a saintly young man, Giovanni Massaglia, who had entered the year before.⁶¹ They became close friends and entered into a spiritual relationship that deepened during the time they spent together at the Oratory in the summer of 1855. The young man, apparently in good health, took sick and had to leave. He died at home on May 20, 1856. In late October (1855), the new boys were entering for the school year 1855-1856, and Dominic was eagerly on hand to meet them and help them adjust to the new environment. Under these circumstances Dominic met another saintly lad, Camillo Gavio, and a deep spiritual friendship developed between the two. Gavio had been ill, and almost immediately he suffered a relapse and was forced to go home, where he died on December 26,

⁶⁰ Autograph Letter in ASC 9.131 Savio, transcribed in Caviglia, *Opere e Scritti* IV, 86-87 and Ceria (1954), 67.

The passage in the letter that speaks of the cholera and the association is far from clear: Dominic writes: "*La novella è, che avendo potuto stare un'ora sol con D. Bosco, siccome per lo addietro non ho mai potuto stare dieci minuti solo, gli parlai di molte cose, tra le quali di un'associazione per l'assicurazione del colera, il quale mi disse che è in un buon principio e se non fosse del freddo che già s'inoltra, forse farebbe un grande guasto, e mi ha anche associato io, il che sta tutto in preghiera.*" I take this to mean that Dominic spoke to Don Bosco about the group (association) that had been active during the height of the epidemic the year before. Perhaps he suggested that it be reassembled and that he should be allowed to join it. Don Bosco replied that there was no need, because in spite of the recent flare-up the cholera was being contained by the cold weather. He did, however, allow Dominic into the group (association), which was now only for prayer. The sentence, "*Mi ha anche associato io*" makes it unlikely that Dominic asked Don Bosco for permission to found a new association. The English Biographical Memoirs, however, understand the passage differently [EBM V, 219]. In this connection Lemoine goes on to report the incident in which Savio discovered a woman stricken with the illness in a nearby tenement [EBM V, 219-220].

⁶¹ Cf. Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 167-168, citing archival documents and correcting Caviglia.

1855. Don Bosco devotes two whole chapters to these friendships, clearly with an educational purpose in view.⁶²

5. School Year 1855-1856

For the school year 1855-1856 Don Bosco began an in-house program of secondary studies, starting with 3rd *ginnasio* (“Grammar”), under teacher Giovanni Battista Francesia (1838-1930), a 17-year old Salesian seminarian. Under him Dominic took his Grammar that year. In this connection Don Bosco notes Dominic’s failing health and gives this as the reason why he had him do 3rd *ginnasio* at the Oratory. He wouldn’t have to walk to and from school twice a day.⁶³

(1) Charismatic Experiences

At one point in the biography, Don Bosco devotes some space to Savio’s charismatic experiences. He writes:

Up to this point I have reported nothing extraordinary [of Dominic], unless we view his perfect conduct, [...] his lively faith, firm hope and an ardent charity as extraordinary. Now, however, I intend to speak of some special graces and uncommon experiences that may draw criticism from some people. But I want to assure the reader that [...] these are things that I witnessed personally and directly.⁶⁴

Don Bosco mentions incidents of ecstasy before the Blessed Sacrament, ecstatic colloquies with God, supernatural knowledge of a dying person in need of reconciliation, etc. Then there is also mention of Dominic’s purity of life and of his intense love of and union with God, even during recreation. Finally, Don Bosco relates Savio’s vision of Pius IX bearing the torch of the Catholic faith to England.⁶⁵

⁶² Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 83-93 [Chapters XVII and XVIII], in *Opere Edite* XI, 233-243.

⁶³ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 49, in *Opere Edite* XI, 199.

⁶⁴ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 93-94 [Chapter XIX], in *Opere Edite* XI, 243-244.

⁶⁵ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 94-98, in *Opere Edite* XI, 244-248. Don Bosco adds that during an audience in 1858 he told the Pope about the vision. Pius was very happy and made favorable comments. [Cf. also *EBM* V, 577] For a brief discussion of this episode, see below.

(2) The Company of the Immaculate Conception

In the biography Don Bosco devotes a sizable chapter to the founding, purpose and regulations of the Company of the Immaculate Conception.⁶⁶ In his first edition of the *Life*, he speaks of Dominic Savio as the sole originator and founder of this sodality and as the author of its regulations. Although the date of the founding is given as June 8, 1856, Don Bosco connects it (at least as to the original idea) with the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1854, and with Dominic's own consecration to Mary on that occasion. With regard to the purpose of the association, Don Bosco writes:

The purpose [of the founding] was to ensure the great Mother of God's protection [for the members] in life and especially at the point of death. To this end Savio proposed two means: to undertake and promote devotional exercises in honor of Mary Immaculate, and frequent Communion.⁶⁷

In the founding act of consecration to Mary, which functions as a kind of preamble to the 21 articles of the regulations, the members promised to imitate Louis Comollo to the best of their powers. Then they continued:

Therefore we bind ourselves, 1st, faithfully to observe the regulations of the house; 2nd, spiritually to help our companions by charitable admonition, and to encourage them to good conduct by word and even more by example; 3rd, to make the best possible use of the time at our disposal.⁶⁸

The matter of the founding of the Company of the Immaculate Conception will be given further attention below.

6. Illness and Rest at Mondonio in the Summer of 1856

Dominic's declining health had Don Bosco worried to the point that he called in Dr. Francesco Vallauri, who had a flourishing and reputable practice in the city. The doctor found no symptoms of any specific disease, but only an extreme general weakness that he ascribed to intense spiritual effort [!]. He suggested a period of rest away from the smoky city. Dominic left school for home toward the end of June, hence before the end of term, which ran to mid-July. His health improved only slightly, but he was back at Valdocco for examinations in August. On September 12, Dominic asked Don Bosco for permission to go home to

⁶⁶ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 75-85 [Chapter XVII], in *Opere Edite* XI, 225-235.

⁶⁷ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 76, in *Opere Edite* XI, 226.

⁶⁸ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 76-77, in *Opere Edite* XI, 226-227.

see his mother who was “ill.” The sickness in question was Mrs. Savio’s confinement for the birth of her eighth child, Caterina. It was a difficult and painful delivery, successful nonetheless due to the scapular that Dominic put around his mother’s neck as she lay “ill” in bed.⁶⁹ Dominic stood as godfather to Caterina at her baptism the next day (September 13), and then returned to Valdocco. But his stay in Turin was brief, for Don Bosco sent him home to Mondonio for the remainder of the holidays (September-October).

7. Unfinished School Year 1856-1857

Feeling better but not quite well, Dominic returned to the Oratory after mid-October to get ready for the new school year (1856-1857). He would be in 4th *ginnasio* or humanities. The in-house school program consisted only of 3rd *ginnasio* or grammar, established the previous year, attended by Savio and taught by Seminarian Francesca, and of the two lower classes, 1st and 2nd *ginnasio*, recently established and taught by Professor Francesco Blanch.

For his 4th year of *ginnasio*, therefore, Savio in November 1856 began to attend the private school of Professor Father Matteo Picco, in the city. In spite of frequent bouts with illness, however, he excelled, as Professor Picco stated in his eulogy after Savio’s death. Witnesses concur in praising his extraordinary diligence and perseverance. Some testimonies also give him credit for superior intelligence. Others, on the other hand, speak of average intelligence, supplemented by hard work. Msgr. Giovanni Piano, who had been a schoolmate of Savio, testified at the process of beatification:

In my opinion his intellectual powers were ordinary, but by his diligence and perseverance in study he almost always placed among the first in his class. This won him the love and esteem of his teachers.⁷⁰

The four months during which he attended Fr. Picco’s school, before he left for home never to return, were plagued with the recurring illness, coughing and splitting headaches. He was often confined to the infirmary, where Marianna Occhiena (Mamma Margaret’s sister) also ill, had a room. A companion of his, Giuseppe Reano, testified at the process of beatification:

The pain he endured in his illness was extremely severe, yet for the whole time of his illness at the Oratory never once was he heard to complain. Once I saw him depressed and I asked him why he was not willing to talk. He answered me that he had such a splitting headache that he felt like he had knives driven into his temples.

⁶⁹ An additional comment will be made on Mrs. Savio’s “illness” below, as reported by Dominic’s sister, Teresa Tosco-Savio.

⁷⁰ *Summarium*, 84, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*. 18.

He added, however, that he bore it all with patience in the hope that his pain, united with the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, would gain him heaven. Jesus had suffered a lot more without complaining.

When he got some of his strength back, he would get out of bed. Once I found him in Auntie's room warming himself by the fire, while she moaned and complained of her aches and pains. Dominic, young as he was, did not hesitate to scold her for her impatience.⁷¹

Don Bosco speaks of Savio's premonitions of death. "Because of poor health, frequent ailments and unrelenting spiritual tension he was getting weaker by the day." The spiritual program of the Company of the Immaculate Conception, the exercise for a happy death practiced at the Oratory, and Dominic's own reflection reinforced those premonitions. When consulted about Savio's health problem, Dr. Vallauri's verdict was: "The best cure would be to let him go to heaven."⁷²

He attended classes on and off, and finally his weakness became extreme, so that he had to be confined to his bed. He hated the thought of having to go home and discontinue his studies. But the time came when his father had to be sent for and his departure was set for March 1, 1857. He knew he would never return. He wanted to be reassured that his sins had been forgiven, that he would be saved by God's mercy and that from heaven he would be able to see and visit his companions and his parents.⁷³

The morning of his departure he insisted on receiving Holy Communion for the journey. He then took leave of his schoolmates and of his companions of the Company of the Immaculate Conception. It was an emotional goodbye. Out the door, he asked Don Bosco for a parting gift: to be included in the plenary indulgence recently granted by the Holy Father.⁷⁴

8. Progress of Dominic's Illness and Saintly Death

The excitement of the trip and the change of scene reinvigorated him for a time; he was up and about for four days before taking to his bed.

⁷¹ Giuseppe Reano, Written Report No. 3, *Summarium*, 458-459, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 64. "Auntie" ("Magna" in Piedmontese) was the boys' familiar name for Marianna (Maria Giovanna) Occhiena, Mamma Margaret's elder sister. The boys called her "Auntie" and they called Margaret, "Mama." She had joined Margaret at the Oratory after Father Lacqua, whom she served as housekeeper, died in the early fifties. Marianna died in 1857, two years after her sister.

⁷² Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 101-102 (Chapter XX), in *Opere Edite XI*, 251-252.

⁷³ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 102-106 (Chapter XXI), in *Opere Edite XI*, 252-256.

⁷⁴ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 106-109 (Chapter XXII), in *Opere Edite XI*, 256-259.

(1) *On His Deathbed*

Don Bosco records details of his fervent reception of the sacraments and of the last rites. Other details are supplied by eyewitnesses. A woman who lived next door, Anastasia Molino by name, testified:

I visited the Servant of God often during his last, fatal illness, and I never heard him complain. His mother stood by helpless and in tears, as his condition deteriorated during the last few days. He would try to cheer her up by saying: “Mom, please don’t cry; I’m going to heaven.” He also said that *he saw Our Lady and the Saints*. I stood by his bedside as he lay dying. An old gentleman was commending his soul to God, while Dominic lay transfixed following the prayers. His father and mother and some close neighbors were present when he peacefully breathed his last.⁷⁵

City councilor Carlo Savio, mentioned above, confirmed the neighbor’s statements, when he testified:

This same lady [Mrs. Molino] told me that she was with the Savios when their son Dominic was about to die. They stood by crying helplessly, but Dominic turned to them and said: “Please don’t cry. I already see Our Lord and Our Lady waiting to receive me with open arms.” With these words he breathed his last.⁷⁶

In spite of Mrs. Molino’s confusion as to who read the prayers of commendation, these testimonies support Don Bosco’s own statement, when he writes:

Before entering into agony, Dominic asked his father to read the litany for a happy death from the *Companion of Youth*. His mother broke into tears and left the room. Dominic’s last words were: “Goodbye, dear dad! *Oh, what a beautiful thing I see!*” Dominic died on March 9, 1857.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Summarium*, 344-355, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 134.

⁷⁶ *Summarium*, 332-333, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 135

⁷⁷ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 109-119 (Chapters XXIII-XXIV), in *Opere Edite* XI, 259-269.

(2) News of Savio's Death at the Oratory

The news of Dominic's saintly death reached the Oratory by a letter from his father, Carlo Savio. He writes to Don Bosco:

Very Reverend Sir,

Mondonio, March 10, 1857

It is with tears and profound sorrow that I write this note to you, most reverend sir, to convey the saddest possible news. My dear little boy Dominic, your pupil, the spotless lily and new Aloysius Gonzaga that he was, returned his soul to God the evening of the 9th of the current month of March.

[The course of] his illness was as follows. He took to his bed on Wednesday, March 4, and under the care of Dr. Cafassi they performed ten bloodlettings on him. But while we were waiting to learn [from the doctor] what the disease was so we could write and let you know, he passed away. He had also developed a deep cough.

I can't think of anything else, very Reverend Father, except offering my regards to you and wishing you every success.

Your most obedient servant,

Carlo Savio⁷⁸

(3) Father Matteo Picco's Eulogy

On receiving the news of Dominic's death, his teacher, Father Matteo Picco, spoke of him to the class extolling his virtues. As confirmed by Father Francesca,⁷⁹ Professor Picco put his voluble eulogy down in writing, and Don Bosco quotes it apparently in its entirety.⁸⁰

In the closing chapter Don Bosco speaks of the general admiration for Dominic's holiness. He also reports graces received through his intercession and ends by calling on all to imitate Dominic Savio's virtues and holy life.⁸¹

⁷⁸ From the photostat in Caviglia, *Savio Domenico and Don Bosco* (the study), facing p. 560.

⁷⁹ Francesca, *Summarium*, 398, in Ceria 1954, 205.

⁸⁰ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 121-129, in *Opere Edite* XI, 271-279.

⁸¹ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 130-136, in *Opere Edite* XI, 280-286.

9. After Dominic's Death: Noteworthy Questions and Incidents

(1) *What Did Dominic Die of?*⁸²

Dr. Vallauri in Turin thought that the illness resulted from a combination of “frail constitution, precocious mental development (*cogniztone precoce*) and continuous spiritual tension.” These were responsible for his progressive weakness.

At home on March 1, he stayed up but his condition, especially the insistent deep cough, was growing worse. The doctor diagnosed condition as “inflammation,” by which was probably meant “pneumonia.” He ordered him to bed and began treatment by bloodlettings. Father Augustin Auffray in his Savio biography states that inflammation and pneumonia were terms for “tuberculosis.” But Molineris thinks that the symptoms as we know them, especially the persistent cough, point neither to pneumonia nor to tuberculosis, but rather to pleurisy. Be that as it may, the gross abuse of bloodletting only succeeded in hastening his death.

(2) *The Saga of the Dominic's Burials*

On March 11, simple funeral rites were held for Dominic Savio. Francesco Deideri, a friend of Dominic and a neighbor, later a city councilor, testified:

I attended the funeral of the Servant of God and accompanied the bier to the cemetery. It was a modest funeral because of the family's circumstances, but a large number of people participated. The family and their deceased young man were held in high esteem.⁸³

Dominic was buried in the little cemetery of Mondonio. The remains lay buried there until removed to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in 1914, when Dominic's cause of beatification was introduced in Rome. About Dominic's burials Mr. Carlo Savio, then a member of the Mondonio city council, and a childhood friend of Dominic, testified:

The servant of God was buried, as is common knowledge in town, in a common grave in the local cemetery. A few years later, Don Bosco took the initiative to have his remains transferred to a grave near the [cemetery] chapel, and some time later to a tomb specially prepared within the chapel.⁸⁴

⁸² This section relies on Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 268-270.

⁸³ *Summarium*, 335, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 139.

⁸⁴ *Summarium*, 331, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 140. Mr. Savio testified both at the Ordinary and at the Apostolic Process, when he was 64 and 71 years of age respectively.

There were therefore three successive burials at Mondonio, before Dominic's remains came to their final resting place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. The first grave, so it has been ascertained,⁸⁵ was located 5 meters behind the chapel of the local cemetery against the enclosing cemetery wall. It was not a "common grave," but it was a poor grave in the bare ground in a crowded little area reserved for children's burials. The Oratory boys visited the grave on their annual outing in 1858 and left a wreath hanging from the simple wooden cross that marked the grave.

Don Bosco was concerned about the inadequacy of that first burial, and almost immediately moved to secure it in view of a future need of identification. A suggestion to transfer the remains to Castelnovo proved impractical, but in 1860 the grave (originally in the bare earth) was given a protective shell, and the coffin was strengthened.

A second burial took place on November 21, 1866. The remains were placed in a stronger coffin and buried this time under the back wall of the cemetery chapel, so that they lay under the altar attached to the wall inside. An inscribed marble plaque attached to the wall identified the place.⁸⁶

In October 1906 Dominic's remains were exhumed and canonically examined in view of the introduction of the process of beatification. Then on September 26, 1907, on the fiftieth anniversary of Savio's death, a third and more honorable burial took place. The coffin was transferred to a marble tomb constructed inside the cemetery chapel, where it rested until 1914.⁸⁷

On October 27 and 29, 1914, on the occasion of the beginning of the apostolic process of beatification, Dominic's mortal remains were transferred to Turin and entombed in the church of Mary Help of Christians. But it wasn't an easy undertaking. By this time people were having recourse to Dominic's intercession, and the "miraculous" pink scapular was being passed from one expecting mother to another. They wanted to keep him "handy." Witnesses described the incident.

The body was transferred to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin toward the end of October, 1914, by a happy providential coincidence on the very day and in the very month [October 29] in which Dominic had entered the Oratory as Don Bosco's pupil 60 years before.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Cf. Testimonies cited by Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 261.

⁸⁶ On October 7, 1895 a memorial plaque was affixed to the wall of the Savios' house in Mondonio.

⁸⁷ On October 5, 1907 a memorial plaque was installed in the house where Dominic had been born at San Giovanni di Riva near Chieri. The Diocesan Process for Dominic's beatification began on April 4, 1908, with the title "Servant of God."

⁸⁸ Cardinal Cagliero, *Summarium*, 341, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 141.

A few months ago, the Servant of God's body was transferred from the cemetery of Mondonio to the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. On that occasion, there was a minor revolt in town. The people who came to take the body away were prevented from doing so. The trouble started with people who were habitués of the local pub and its games, but who were not much of church. Some women also joined the protest because they thought that they could no longer obtain certain graces with which the Servant of God had favored them in the past.⁸⁹

The people finally agreed to the transfer on receiving a pledge that, after eventual beatification, some “important” relic of Dominic would be returned to Mondonio.⁹⁰

Dominic's remains, however, were not allowed to rest in peace even in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. The urn that contains them was violated at various times, but no part of the body was stolen until the notorious theft of February 18, 1971. Someone hid in the church and during the night removed the marble slab that covered the tomb, took out the urn, broke open the lid, emptied the contents on the chapel floor and made off with the skull, the hands and one of the large leg bones—clearly the work of a madman.

Molineris, who transcribes a detailed report of the incident from a local paper, states that at the time of writing (1974) the stolen relics had not yet been returned or recovered.⁹¹

2. Dominic Savio's Portrait

The frontispiece of the *Life* is a portrait of Dominic Savio from a drawing by Carlo Tomatis (1833-1905), a “friend” of Dominic and a student at the Albertine Arts Academy.⁹² It is a work of no artistic and of no technical merit to be sure, but apparently it did convey young Dominic's basic physical appearance, for Don Bosco retained it through the first four editions of the *Life*. (It no longer appears in the fifth, definitive edition.) The picture shows Dominic seated by a desk dressed in poor peasant threads, but with starched-collared shirt and bow tie, vest and matching jacket. His slightly oversized and badly drawn head is bent toward the right shoulder (his habitual posture, according to some testimonies). His left arm is wrapped around a statue of Mary (the *Consolata*) on the

⁸⁹ City councilor Savio testified on April 26, 1915, *Summarium*, 331, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 140. With respect to the protest of the women, it should be borne in mind that Dominic is popularly revered as the protector of pregnant women [see below].

⁹⁰ Dominic's cause of beatification was introduced in Rome (Apostolic process) on February 11, 1914.

⁹¹ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 338-340.

⁹² The signature reads: “C. Tomatis, suo amico, dis.” (Drawn by his friend, C. Tomatis).

desk, and a scroll unfurled from his right hand bears the famous legend, "Death but not sin."⁹³ The small and frail body gives him the appearance of a child rather than of a 15-year old adolescent. In real life Savio was short, and sickly-looking, but his face was habitually serene and gently smiling.⁹⁴ And this is the portrait's sole saving feature.

In 1908, Father Stefano Trione, promoter of Savio's cause of beatification, had a new picture painted for Amadei's edition of the *Life*. This picture, painted by Professor Lorenzo Kirchmayr (1869-1933) was to present Dominic Savio to a new generation, in fact to an international readership. Father Trione, in agreement with Father Francesia, chose a teen-age student from the Oratory school and had him pose for the painting. There was no effort or intention to "portray" Savio; the only aim was that of showing a likely teenager posing with the props of the original painting.

This was not Savio, and Father Caviglia, who in 1941 was about to publish his monumental work on Savio (cited above), was eager to remove the "forgery" from circulation. With this in mind he approached Professor Mario Caffaro-Rore (1910-1981) of the Academy about the possibility of lifting the best features of Tomatis' engraving and producing a new portrait. After studying all available accounts, Caffaro-Rore, retaining the basic traits and abstracting the plastic qualities of the original, produced the "new portrait." The boy appears slightly older, but retains the childlike qualities of the original. This is the portrait that appears on the frontispiece of Father Caviglia's book (1942).

For Dominic's beatification in 1950, Father Fedele Giraudi (administrator-general of the Salesian Society) engaged Caffaro-Rore again to paint a new portrait along the same lines. This is the image of Savio that was circulated at the time of the beatification in hundreds of thousands of copies.

Professor Caffaro-Rore explains all this, not without a hint of criticism for Giraudi, in a letter to Father Molineris dated March 31, 1970.⁹⁵

⁹³ "La morte ma non peccati."

⁹⁴ Cagliari's testimony in *Summarium*, 307-308.

⁹⁵ For details see Caviglia, in *Opere e Scritti* IV, xvii-xxii (Introduction), and Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 48-56.



Portrait of Dominic Savio (1859) Frontispiece of Biography, Ed. 1-4. Drawing by C. Tomatis (1833-1905) Lithography by B. Hummel.



Portrait of a 13-year old boy to represent Dominic Savio (1910). Painting by L. Kirchmayr (1869-1933).



Portrait of Dominic Savio (1950) by Mario Caffaro-Rore (1910-1981) based on drawing by C. Tomatis and contemporary documentation.

III. Sidelights in the Savio Biography

3. Vision on England

Among the many remarkable spiritual qualities that Don Bosco's Savio possesses, one of the most remarkable is his thirst for the salvation of souls. Don Bosco had proposed this to him as the foundation of a true Christian spirituality. "There is no holier work in this world than to contribute to the salvation of souls, for whose redemption Christ shed the very last drop of his precious blood."⁹⁶

An instance of this apostolic missionary spirit is Dominic's reported vision on England and his concern for her conversion to the Catholic faith.⁹⁷ A witness in the Process of Beatification testified: "He ardently wished he were old enough and in a position to go [to England]. He entertained the hope that by word, by encouragement and above all by example he would win many souls for

⁹⁶ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 53, in *Opere Edite* XI, 203.

⁹⁷ Cf. Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 97-99, in *Opere Edite* XI, 247-249.

the Lord."⁹⁸ According to Fr. Cerruti, Dominic's vision on England took place some time in 1856, when the lad was not quite 14 years of age.⁹⁹ Don Bosco had probably been speaking about a forthcoming trip to Rome he was planning, to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Society. Dominic said he wished he could see the Pope, for he had something very important to tell him. Don Bosco asked what that might be. Dominic replied:

If I could speak to the Pope I would tell him not to cease, even in the midst of the tribulations that are in store for him, to be particularly concerned about England. God is preparing a great triumph for the Catholic faith in that kingdom.

When Don Bosco asked him why he would want to tell the Holy Father such a thing, in strictest confidence Dominic told him of the vision. He said that while he was absorbed in prayer after Holy Communion he had "a great distraction." Dominic saw a vast plain shrouded in thick mist, and a multitude of people walking about that plain as though they had lost their way. A friendly Interpreter explained that that land was England. Then Dominic saw Plus IX advancing toward that crowd of people bearing a brightly shining torch aloft. As he drew near to them the thick mist would disperse and those people would enjoy the light of a bright sun. The friendly Interpreter explained that the bright torch represented the Catholic faith that would bring light to England. We know that Don Bosco delivered the message to the pope in 1858, and that Plus IX took it seriously.¹⁰⁰

As to historical context, this remarkable episode bears no connection with the Waldenses Protestants and Don Bosco's apologetic efforts of the period. The "vision of England" is connected with the Oxford Movement, still quite vigorous at mid-century, and with Father Lorenzo Gastaldi's reports on his English mission. The movement toward Catholicism in England had begun over twenty years before with the Oxford tractarian activity of which Newman, Faber and Manning were the most illustrious representatives, and then the most illustrious converts, though by no means the only ones. Father Faber likened England to Ezechiel's valley of dried bones awaiting the movement of the Spirit to bring them to life. Though never a mass movement, there was no important family in England that did not have a convert within its pale. In 1850-51 Pius IX re-established the Catholic hierarchy in England with Cardinal Wiseman as its leader.

These successes of the Catholic faith were, of course, hailed and prayed over at the Oratory, for Don Bosco would not miss this opportunity. Father Ga-

⁹⁸ *Summarium*, 124, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 114. This is the testimony of Father Giuseppe Melica, a companion of Savio from September 15, 1856.

⁹⁹ *Summarium*, 125-126, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 114-115.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *EBM*, V 577.

staldi, a Rosminian working in England at the time, returned to Turin in 1856-1857 and spoke at the Oratory. Dominic must have caught the spirit.

This episode from life at the Oratory dating from the middle of the heroic decade reveals the fervor and the apostolic concern with which Don Bosco could animate his youngsters and move them toward a meaningful spirituality.

The following sidelights on the Savio biography further illustrate some of the author's attitudes and some aspects of Savio's spirituality.¹⁰¹

4. The Swimming Incident

In the first edition of the *Life* (1859), Don Bosco reports that when Dominic attended school at Castelnuovo from Morialdo, he was tempted by some schoolmates to go for a swim with them in some local swimming hole or pond, but that he rejected the evil suggestion out of hand. (Swimming was regarded as morally and physically dangerous.)¹⁰² However, when the *Life* came out in 1859 and was read at the Oratory, a boy named Giuseppe Zucca from Morialdo (who had meanwhile enrolled at the Oratory) came forward with an astounding revelation. He said that he was the one that had urged Dominic to go swimming, and that Dominic had indeed gone along. When asked a second time, however, he had refused. This revelation of Dominic's peccadillo caused a big stir, and Don Bosco was very upset. In Lemoyne's heavy-handed report in the *Biographical Memoirs*, Don Bosco appears to have feared lest Dominic's saintly image would be tarnished. In any event Don Bosco immediately put out a second edition (1860) with a revised account of the episode. This is how Lemoyne reports the incident.

Among those who talked rather too freely and irreverently of the biography was a young cleric. The pupils were divided in their opinions, but many of them shunned the critics, not wishing to be involved in arguments. Just then an incident came to light which seemed to support the faultfinders. In describing how Dominic had been invited to go swimming, Don Bosco had omitted the fact that the first time Savio had yielded, it was to the pressing insistence of a companion. Now this very same boy, whose last name began with a "Z," was a boarding student at the Oratory. He openly denied that Dominic had refused to go swimming, for he himself had invited him and had gone with him. The fool nearly bragged about it. His assertion came as a shock. The genuine structure of Dominic's virtues erected by Don Bosco seemed to be in danger of collapse. If one episode proved false, others might be too. For a few days Don Bosco said nothing in his own defense, not even privately, though he was quite aware of the talk going on. Finally, one evening af-

¹⁰¹ Cf. Stella, *Piccola Guida alle Memorie Biografiche*, unpublished class notes 1989-1990, 14-16.

¹⁰² Cf. Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 23-26, in *Opere Edite* XI, 273-276.

ter night prayers [...] he stood on a chair with a grave look that was seldom seen on his face. Truth was at stake. Calmly, without introduction, he spoke:

"When Savio died, I invited his schoolmates to tell me whether, during his three years' stay with us, they had noticed any fault in him or the lack of some virtue. All unanimously agreed that they could find no fault in him, nor could they think of a virtue he did not possess. As for me, all I have written about him I have either seen myself or have heard from persons in this house, now present, and from other reliable sources. [...] Yet during these days you have heard comments on certain incidents of Dominic's life. Among other things I have been accused of telling you a lie. Someone has denied that Savio refused to go swimming. Yes, it's true; he did go swimming. But one thing you must know: Savio was invited on two occasions. He did go the first time, but when he told his mother about it, he was forbidden to do so in the future. Savio wept bitterly at having done wrong and flatly rejected the second invitation. I decided to write only of this second occasion because the boy who took Savio along the first time and tried to do so again is here among you. I was hoping I had safeguarded his reputation and that he would understand his wrongdoing and be grateful for my silence. Instead he chose to contradict me, to belie my words, and to cast an undeserved slur on Dominic. I want all of you to know, then, that if I narrated only the second episode, it was because I wanted to spare this lad embarrassment and pass over what he should forever feel remorse for the danger in which he placed himself of betraying a friend. This boy, however, saw fit to reveal himself. If he has to hang his head in shame, it is all his fault. After betraying his friend in life, he resolved to betray him also in death. Once he risked robbing him of his innocence, now of his honor."

The boy thus upbraided was present. His embarrassment was extreme, as all eyes were riveted on him. Seldom did Don Bosco speak in this fashion; the impression it made is indescribable. When he finished, there was a general murmur of approval. From then on, all gossip ceased. In due time, when a reprint was made, Don Bosco added the missing episode with suitable comments.

Obviously it was the hagiographical purpose of the *Life* that prompted Don Bosco to omit the less flattering part of the incident. It is unlikely that he did so (as he claims, according to Lemoyne) to spare the culprit embarrassment, assuming that he knew the identity of the culprit.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ It should be borne in mind that Lemoyne was not an eyewitness, since he joined Don Bosco in 1864. Don Bosco's Good Night talk is not recorded in the chronicles (since in 1859 there was as yet no chronicling activity to speak of). Lemoyne must have learnt of the incident from one of the early Salesians or from Don Bosco himself.

5. The Company of the Immaculate Conception¹⁰⁴

As noted above, Don Bosco credits Savio with both the idea of the Company and the initiative in its founding. He writes:

Motivated by the zealous charity that was habitual with him, [Dominic] selected a few of his most trusted companions, and proposed that they join together in an association to be named after the *Immaculate Conception*. Its purpose was to ensure [for the members] the great Mother of God's protection in life and especially at the hour of death. To fulfill this purpose Savio suggested two means: to practice and promote exercises of devotion in honor of Mary Immaculate and frequent Communion. Then in agreement with his most trusted friends he compiled a set of regulations. Finally, after a lot of work and pains, on June 8, 1856, nine months before his death, he read them with his friends before the altar of Mary Most Holy.¹⁰⁵

This statement in the *Life* is followed by the minutes or acts of the founding, which (except for the opening list of names) have their identical counterpart in the earliest extant minutes or acts preserved in the Salesian Archive and quoted by Stella. Both are transcribed here by way of comparison.

¹⁰⁴ For extensive treatment of the topic, especially for what concerns the role of Dominic Savio in the founding and organization of the Company, see Caviglia, *Opere e Scritti* IV, (Essay) 441-464.

¹⁰⁵ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 76, in *Opere Edite* XI, 226.

Bosco, <i>Vita Savio</i> (1859), 76-77 <i>OE XI 226-227</i>	MS. in ASC 3223
<p>We, Domenico Savio, etc. (the names of other companions follow)—</p> <p>in order to ensure for ourselves the patronage of the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin in life and in death, we dedicate ourselves entirely to her holy service. Having received the holy Sacraments and resolved to be filially and constantly devoted to our Mother, before her altar and before our Spiritual Director, on this 8th day of June, do solemnly promise that to the full extent of our strength and ability, we shall imitate Louis Comollo, we shall perfectly observe the regulations of the house, we shall edify our companions by admonishing them charitably, and by encouraging them by word and example to make good use of their time.</p>	<p>We, Giuseppe Rocchietti, Luigi Marcellino, Giovanni Bonetti, Francesco Vaschetti, Celestino Durando, Giuseppe Momo, Domenico Savio, Giuseppe Bongiovanni, Michele Rua, and Giovanni Cagliero—in order to ensure for ourselves the patronage of the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin in life and death, we dedicate ourselves entirely to her holy service. Having received the holy Sacraments and resolved to be filially and constantly devoted to our Mother, before her altar and before our Spiritual Director, on this 8th day of June, do solemnly promise that to the full extent of our strength and ability, we shall imitate Louis Comollo, we shall perfectly observe the regulations of the house, and we shall edify our companions by admonishing them charitably, and by encouraging them by word and example to make good use of their time.¹⁰⁶</p>

In the *Life* Don Bosco follows the founding text up with the 21-article regulations and with his own seven amendments.

Clearly then Don Bosco makes the 14-year old Savio the prime architect of both the Company and its regulations. A contrary claim is made by Giuseppe Bongiovanni (1836-1868) in a letter dated in 1857 and addressed to Don Bosco in response to his appeal for information. The relevant passage is quoted by Caviglia. The 20-year old Bongiovanni, a close friend of Savio, and later a Salesian and a priest, writes:

¹⁰⁶ Stella, *DBEcSoc*, 265 and cf. *DB: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 353. In *EBM V 313 Lemoyne* (perhaps to avoid argument) quotes the minutes in edited form without any names.

[No. 3] [Dominic Savio] was one of the founders, the fourth to accept the proposal, which he did with great joy. One need not be surprised, for the Savio who had the previous May consecrated himself, body and soul, to Mary could offer her nothing better than to enter into our Society. He would thereby be offered further opportunities to display his devotion to Mary that had already completely won his heart. He observed all the obligations laid down in our regulations with the most exemplary fidelity.¹⁰⁷

In his monumental essay Caviglia goes on to refute Bongiovanni’s claim by adducing testimonies from people themselves involved in the process, all supportive of Don Bosco’s position. It should, however, be borne in mind that perhaps no one was more involved than Bongiovanni.¹⁰⁸

Lemoyne, probably wishing to combine Don Bosco’s statement with various reports gives a more complex scenario. He writes:

One weekday morning something most unusual occurred at Mass: not one boy went to Holy Communion. [...] One of those present was Celestino Durando. [...] On his way [to school] with Giuseppe Bongiovanni [...] Durando remarked to him [...]: “Did you notice? Don Bosco must have felt quite sad.” That same afternoon, after they returned from school, they called together a few of their school-mates—Bonetti, Marcelino, Rocchietti, Vaschetti and Michele Rua—and decided to form a group whose members would go to Communion on different days so that no day would go by without some one receiving. [...] Needless to say, Dominic Savio eagerly joined this group. However, acting upon a suggestion by Don Bosco, he planned to make it permanent. With his usual zeal, therefore, he selected a number of his most trusted friends and asked them to join him in founding a sodality to be called the Immaculate Conception Sodality. [...] After consultation with these friends, and with the assistance of Joseph Bongiovanni, Dominic drafted a set of regulations. Then, after much thought, on June 8, 1856, nine months before his death, he read them aloud as the sodality members knelt before Our Lady’s altar.¹⁰⁹

The same Caviglia, in summary fashion, writes elsewhere:

Guided solely by the testimonies in our possession, we would be hard put to establish with certainty, and even less with unanimity, the history of the founding of the Company of the Immaculate Conception. This is true for what concerns its primary author, who is Savio himself, its purposes and the date of its founding. The reason for such uncertainty is to be sought in the fact that the activity leading to the crea-

¹⁰⁷ Caviglia, *Opere e Scritti* IV, Essay, 444, in *Summarium*, 480 (Written Testimony No. 14).

¹⁰⁸ Don Bosco eulogized Father Bongiovanni in the fifth edition of the *Life* (1878). This dynamic Salesian (who died suddenly in 1868) went on to found the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and the Altar Boys Society.

¹⁰⁹ *EBM* V, 312-313.

tion of the Company was mostly confidential and secret, and restricted to a few chosen friends. Don Bosco alone would have been in a position to tell the true story. Hence we must be guided by what he writes in the *Life*. As for Savio, the founding and the activities of the Company represent the culminating point of his saintly life and his highest and noblest achievement. [...] ¹¹⁰

At first the existence of the Company was not common knowledge. Its members were a select group engaged in a sensitive apostolate. They may also be regarded as the forerunners of the Salesian Society in the time when it had as yet no official existence.

In the session of July 27, 1856, Giovanni Battista Francesia was voted in as a member. The members present were: Seminarian Rua, presiding and Seminarian Cagliero, and the students Bonetti, Vaschetti, Marcellino, Durando and Bongiovanni. Savio was absent for, as mentioned above, Don Bosco had sent him home to rest and hopefully recover his health.

6. Dominic's Brothers and Sisters

Other interesting omissions are revealed when one compares what is known of the Savio family with what Don Bosco records in the *Life*. We have already mentioned above that Don Bosco omitted Father Zucca's critical remarks regarding Dominic's overindulgent parents. This is readily understood in the light of the *Life's* hagiographical purpose.

Likewise (though for a different reason) Don Bosco never mentions Dominic's sisters. In the *Life* one may read that during the summer holidays "Dominic cared for his two little brothers (*fratellini*), taught them to read and write, helped them recite their catechism and say their morning and evening prayers."¹¹¹ Dominic's two little brothers (Giovanni and Guglielmo) at the time (1855-1856) were only 5 and 2 years of age respectively. It is more likely that he taught and helped his two "little sisters," Remondina and Maria, who were 11 and 9. The obvious, and perhaps the true, reason for this omission is to be sought in the fact that one of Don Bosco's aims for the *Life* was educational, and his educational model excluded girls.

7. Mrs. Savio's "Illness" and the Pink Scapular

Don Bosco also omits the incident of Dominic's mysterious knowledge of the "grave illness" that required his presence at his mother's bedside. He omits the episode in spite of being well informed, as is apparent from the testimony. This "illness" was Mrs. Savio's confinement at the term of a difficult pregnancy that

¹¹⁰ Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 117, Footnote 2.

¹¹¹ Bosco, *Vita Savio* (1859), 56, in *Opere Edite* XI, 206

put her very life in danger. The source of the story is Dominic’s younger sister Teresa, who heard it from her father and other family members. Teresa told the story several times: in a written account preserved in the Salesian Archive and as an attachment to her Letter of Petition of February 27, 1912 for the introduction of Dominic’s cause in Rome.¹¹² When called as a witness at the Apostolic Process on January 26, 1915 she told the story again under oath. In transcribing her testimony Caviglia (after Salotti’s example) re-phrases those passages that have to do with pregnancy and childbirth in a “more delicate manner”.¹¹³ Teresa’s account is given here as transcribed by Molineris.¹¹⁴

Even as a small girl I heard from my father, from members of my family and from the neighbors about an incident that I have never forgotten.

One day, September 12, feast of the Holy Name of Mary, my brother Dominic, a pupil at the Oratory went to see Don Bosco, his saintly director, and asked him for a day’s leave. “Why, where do you want to go?” “I want to go home because my mother is very ill, and Our Lady wants to cure her.” “How do you know she is ill?” “I just know.” “Did you get a letter?” “No, but I know it just the same.”

The Saint was well acquainted with Dominic’s virtue. He had a number of times come upon him in ecstasy before the tabernacle in conversation with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Therefore he took Dominic’s request seriously and told him, “Leave at once; here is some money. You can travel by coach to Castelnuovo (29 km.); from there you shall have to walk to Mondonio, unless you find some other means of transportation. You have enough money.” Dominic left.

Meanwhile my mother was in labor and was having the most painful time of it. The women who usually are on hand on such occasions had tried everything, but nothing seemed to help.

My father then decided to go to Buttigliera and fetch Dr. Girola. When he came to the Buttigliera road, he met my brother [Dominic] who was coming out of Castelnuovo and walking in the direction of Mondonio. Worried and distraught, father wanted to know where he was going. “I am going home to see mother who I know is ill.” Dad did not want to have him around the house in Mondonio under the circumstances and told him, “Go to your grandmother at Ranello and stay with her.” Then he hurried off toward Buttigliera. Ranello is a small village lying between Castelnuovo and Mondonio. My brother, however, driven, I am sure, by an inner inspiration, made straight for Mondonio and home.

The neighbor women who attended mother were very surprised at seeing him. They told him that mother was ill and must not be disturbed, and tried to keep him away from her room. “I know she is ill,” Dominic replied, “that’s why I came to see her.” And not paying any attention to them, he went up to see mother, who happened to be alone in her room at that moment. “What on earth are you doing here,” my mother exclaimed. “I learnt that you were ill, and I came to see you,”

¹¹² ASC 9 Savio Domenico and *Positio, Aliae litterae postulatoriae*, No. 3, 3-5.

¹¹³ *Summarium*, 316-319, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 129-132.

¹¹⁴ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 29-32.

was his answer. Mother managed to sit up and said, "It's nothing; wait downstairs; rather go to the neighbors', and I'll call you a little later" "I will, but first I want to give you a hug." He jumped on the bed, gave her a big hug, kissed her and then left the room. Immediately the pains of labor subsided, and my mother had a successful delivery. When my father and the physician arrived, the latter merely confirmed that all was well. It was 5 o'clock in the evening.¹¹⁵

Then the women who were hustling about attending to mother's needs noticed that she had a piece of silken cloth stitched in the form of a scapular and attached to a ribbon hanging from her neck. They asked her where that came from, and she noticed it for the first time. Then she realized what had happened and exclaimed, "Now I know why my son hugged me, and why I immediately felt free of pain and healed. It was he who put it around my neck when he hugged me, for I have never owned one like it."

Back at the Oratory, Dominic went to see Don Bosco to thank him for letting him go home and told him, "My mother is well. I put Our Lady's scapular around her neck, and Our Lady cured her."

Some months later, my brother left the Oratory and returned home gravely ill. Before he died he called mother and said to her, "Do you remember, mama, the time when you were very ill, and I came to see you? On that occasion I left a scapular around your neck and you got well. What I'm asking you is, keep it carefully and allow your women friends to use it when they find themselves in similar situations. As it saved you, so will it save others as well. Please lend it out freely and don't ask for anything in return."

For as long as she lived my mother wore the dear relic that had been her salvation. I also had the good fortune of experiencing its power. I was very ill [in childbirth]. My sister who had come from Turin with her husband to take care of me, as well as my friends and neighbors, were very worried and feared for my life. My sister immediately contacted our brother John and asked him to try to recover that precious object. He made inquiries in village after village and found it. No one held out any hope for me, but they put the scapular around my neck as I lay completely exhausted [from my labor]. It worked its effect instantly; it restored my health and my life to me.

This miraculous object has since been much in demand and has been worn by numerous mothers whose life was in danger. Unfortunately I never got it back.¹¹⁶

The nature of the illness in question easily explains Don Bosco's silence. The biographers who carry the incident also usually refer to Mrs. Savio's predicament as her "illness."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Dominic's sister, Catherine, was born on September 12, 1856, and was baptized the following day, with Dominic standing as godfather.

¹¹⁶ Molineris cites an incident, dated 1914, in which a woman of Castelnuovo used the "miraculous" scapular in the difficult birth of a son. The same woman in 1962 assured Father Molineris that the object was still being passed around by pregnant women in Castelnuovo. (Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 32)

In her testimony at the Apostolic Process (1915), Teresa speaks of her father's subsequent visit to the Oratory and of his conversation with Don Bosco.

Some time later my father went to see his son in Turin and had occasion to have a word with Don Bosco. He wanted to know why he had allowed Dominic to go home without being asked and without notice. The Venerable Don Bon Bosco told him, "He asked me for permission, and when I asked him why, he replied that it was because his mother was very ill. 'How do you know she's ill?' I asked him. 'I just know it,' he replied. 'Did anyone write to you?' 'No, but I know it.' 'And so I gave him permission, because my experience has been that when your son asks with insistence I do well to comply'." By this Don Bosco let it be understood that he saw some supernatural intervention in the incident. My father was also convinced that Dominic had received this knowledge from above.¹¹⁸

Don Bosco and Mr. Savio, and obviously also Teresa, believed that knowledge of this "illness" had come to Dominic from a supernatural source. So do the biographers that report the incident (Caviglia, Salotti, Molineris, etc.). But wouldn't a fourteen-year old country boy, even in those days, normally have known about his mother's pregnancy and the imminence of the birth? As a matter of fact, as mentioned above, Dominic had been home on vacation but a month before, when Mrs. Savio was already "très grosse."

Father Alessandro Allora, Dominic's teacher at Castelnuovo, in his letter to Don Bosco of November 11, 1859, already cited, relates a grace obtained by a woman who found herself in a similar predicament. He writes:

A woman who found herself in danger from a very difficult pregnancy remembered the graces obtained by devotees of Savio's. She was suddenly prompted to pray, "My dear Savio, please!"—nothing more. The woman experienced instant relief from the pangs of her labor.

Again, although Don Bosco makes use of Father Allora's letter in the *Life*, he omits this bit of information. Dominic is popularly regarded as the heavenly patron of expecting mothers.

8. Dominic's Headaches and St. Aventinus

Don Bosco omits yet another episode for which he had reliable documentation—the St. Aventinus episode. This saint was widely honored and invoked as

¹¹⁷ For example Carlo Salotti, *Domenico Savio* (Torino: Libreria Editrice Internazionale, 1915) 180-182 and Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 129-132.

¹¹⁸ *Summarium*, 317-318, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 131.

a protector against certain ailments.¹¹⁹ Now, Dominic Savio, as is attested,¹²⁰ suffered from severe headaches. So, he asked a companion, one named Giusto Ollagnier, if he could recommend a saint that was powerful in that field. Giusto, responding to Don Bosco's appeal for information regarding Dominic in view of the biography, wrote the following letter:

Dear Reverend Father,

You wish to know of any good deed or good work by that excellent young man, the late Dominic Savio. What I am about to relate is all I could hear or see in my dealings with him.

The above-mentioned Dominic had for some time been suffering from a nasty headache (and I myself, too). He asked me if by any chance I knew of a good prayer to the glorious St. Aventinus, protector against headaches. I told him that I did. So, I had my father write it out for me. When we got the prayer, herewith enclosed, we went and recited it in church every morning. He would go to church at other times by himself and recite it, and would pray insistently to the glorious Saint to free him from that ailment. Many a time also I found him kneeling before the altar of the Blessed Virgin or that of St. Aloysius, in the act of commending his soul to them and of offering the Rosary or other prayers. Please believe me; what I am writing is the truth.

With every token of esteem, I remain,

Your most obedient pupil,

Giusto Ollagnier.¹²¹

Both the stories of the pink scapular and that of St. Aventinus, Protector against headaches, afford interesting sidelights on Dominic's religiosity and popular devotional world. If the story of the pregnancy was omitted for reasons of taste, the story of St. Aventinus was omitted probably because it conflicted with the type of devotion that Don Bosco meant to inculcate.

¹¹⁹ Most probably the Saint Aventinus in question here is the sixth-century bishop of Chartres (France), renowned for his zeal and devotedness as a pastor of souls. Many miracles are recounted worked through his prayers. [*The Book of Saints, a Dictionary* (...), compiled by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate, V ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 36.]

¹²⁰ See Footnote 71 and related text above.

¹²¹ P. Stella, "Sant'Aventino, San Domenico Savio a alcune questioni di storia," in *L'Impegno dell'educare. Studi in onore di Pietro Braido*, ed. J. M. Prellezo (Roma: LAS, 1991) [361-373], 372-373. The letter is in *ASC 9: Savio Domenico*. Stella also transcribes the prayer in question from another source.

9. The Stranger at Table

According to testimony originating with Dominic’s father, Dominic had a sweet, affectionate and docile disposition. He seems to have been especially attached to his father. He easily learned his prayers, and by the age of four he recited them without needing to be reminded. In the 1866 (fourth) edition of the *Life*, Don Bosco records the episode of the “stranger at table,” probably as reported by Mr. Savio. Teresa related it at the Process as follows:

I also remember my father telling me about a man who came to dinner one day and sat down to eat without making the Sign of the Cross. Dominic took up his bowl, left the table in disgust and retreated to a corner of the room to eat his soup. My father asked him why he acted in such a manner. Dominic answered, “That man isn’t a Christian since he didn’t make the Sign of the Cross before sitting down to eat. Then we shouldn’t sit with him, should we?” As my father related this episode to me, he made it a point to lecture me on the way I should teach my children, should I ever get married and have a family.¹²²

10. A Beautiful Singing Voice—Savio’s or Magone’s?

On June 8, 1956 Dominic Savio was adopted as the heavenly patron of the Boys’ Choir of the Wooden Cross (*Petits Canteurs a la Croix de Bois*), an outstanding boys’ choir directed by Msgr. Maillet in France. How did this come about? Was Dominic a member of a choir or did he possess a good singing voice?

In 1861 Don Bosco published a biography of the saintly Oratory student Michael Magone, who had died on January 21, 1859. He relates that Michael loved to sing and that he had a silvery and most pleasing voice. Don Bosco would occasionally send Oratory choirboys to the church of the *Consolata* where they would sing at evening or other services. On the occasion of the Christmas novena Michael performed a solo so beautifully that it won the admiration and the praises of his companions. Don Bosco found him in tears. Michael explained. “I have worked in vain. I lost half of the merit because I thought I did well; now I lost the other half because of all the praise. I am left with nothing but my effort.”¹²³

In 1869 Giovanni Branda, a student at the Oratory at the time, and later a Salesian, heard the story from Don Bosco. When called to testify under oath at

¹²² *Summarium*, 44, in Caviglia, *Ricordo*, 4 and Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 69-70.

¹²³ *Cenno Biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per cura del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni* (Torino: Tip. G. B. Paravia a Como, 1861), 32-33, in *Opere Edite XIII*, 186-187.

the Apostolic Process of Savio's beatification he repeated the story, but substituted the name of Savio to that of Magone.

One evening in 1869 Father Rua sent me (being a little older than other Oratory students) to meet Don Bosco at the railway station and to accompany him home. Along the way Don Bosco began to speak of the virtues he wanted to see practiced at the Oratory, and in so doing he told me a story about Dominic Savio that I have never forgotten. Young Dominic had been with other boys to the church of the *Consolata*, where they were to sing at an evening service. Dominic Savio had performed a solo so beautifully that after the service a number of people sought out the little artist and offered their congratulations. Don Bosco had attended the service, and when he got back to the Oratory with the boys he was told that Dominic Savio was crying. Don Bosco wanted to know why. Dominic told him that during the performance he had experienced feelings of vanity, of which he had repented. Then came all the praise from the people, and at the end all his merit had gone up in smoke.¹²⁴

That is how Dominic acquired the beautiful singing voice that he apparently never possessed. Nothing like it appears in any of the editions of Don Bosco's Savio biography.

This detail of Branda's testimony escaped the attention of the modern biographers until 1950, when Father Antonio Cojazzi "discovered" it and told it in his Savio biography, assuming it to be true to fact.¹²⁵ The story was included in the 1951 special issue of the French *Salesian Bulletin*. From the *Bulletin* to the *Petits Chanteurs* was an easy leap.¹²⁶

Concluding Comments

(1) Don Bosco's Reasons (Aims) for Writing the Savio Biography¹²⁷

In writing the life of Dominic Savio Don Bosco was motivated by a number of more or less conscious aims. Perhaps the most evident point made in the biography was that Dominic had reached such a high degree of holiness that he could be a candidate for canonization. His earlier life had already been truly edifying (Chapters 1-9). In the central chapter (Chapter 10) Dominic decides "to become a saint," thus giving a fresh orientation to his whole life. The chapters that follow (Chapters 10-18) describe his heroic practice of virtue, his zeal for the salvation of others, his fraternal charity, his devotion, his spirit of penance, the

¹²⁴ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 146.

¹²⁵ Antonio Cojazzi. *Il B. Domenico Savio [...]* (Alba, 1950), 136-137.

¹²⁶ Molineris, *Nuova Vita Savio*, 144-146. Molineris acknowledges his debt to Father Francis Desramaut, noted French Salesian scholar for the information.

¹²⁷ F. Desramaut, *Don Bosco en son temps*, 533-538.

spiritual friendships that he formed, etc. Don Bosco then speaks of special graces granted to Dominic and relates a number of extraordinary experiences (Chapter 19). The description of Savio’s last days and saintly death (Chapters 20-24) followed by testimonies to his holiness (Chapters 25-26) wrap up the case. Don Bosco states that after Savio’s death the Oratory boys began to pray to Dominic for graces from God and their prayers were heard.¹²⁸ An entry in Father Bonetti’s chronicle reports words of Don Bosco: “If Dominic Savio continues to work such miracles [...], and I am able to promote his cause, I’m sure that holy mother Church will allow his veneration, at least here at the Oratory.”¹²⁹

From this point of view, therefore, the Savio biography does not merely fulfill an edifying and educational purpose. Like the Comollo biography, it is overtly hagiographic. It tells a story in which Savio is presented both as having practiced virtue in a heroic degree and reached the heights of sanctity, and also as having been favored by God with extraordinary, miraculous and mystical experiences. This is hagiography. The choice of material, the editing or the omission of some written sources and testimonies, and the special slant imparted to the narrative were dictated by a strong hagiographical purpose.

Another point is equally certain; Don Bosco intended to express his ideas of Christian life and spirituality for the young as exemplified in a real young person, one whom his readers had known and admired. He meant to give them a model to imitate, even as his great educational experiment was in progress in the 1850s. The model he offered them was not just one of personal holiness (of devotion, prayer, duty, obedience, purity, penance, etc.) in which Savio excelled. It was also a model of a special brand of spirituality that Don Bosco proposed to young people. This is proclaimed in a central statement of the biography:

The first piece of advice that [Dominic] was given for achieving holiness was that he should endeavor to win souls to God. For there is no holier work in this world than that of contributing to the salvation of souls, for whose redemption Jesus Christ shed the very last drop of his precious blood.¹³⁰

This is holiness through the apostolate, the practical exercise of charity. We have here a statement of Don Bosco’s fundamental spiritual teaching, the teaching that he embodied in the early Salesian constitutions as the purpose of the Society and that he also enjoined on the Salesian Cooperators. For example, in

¹²⁸ Cf. Bosco, *Vita Savio* 1859, 130-132. Here Don Bosco quotes a letter from Dominic’s father writing that his son had appeared to him and assured him that he was in heaven.

¹²⁹ Bonetti, *Annali* 111, 54, in *ASC* 110, *FDB* 923 E2. Cf. *EBM* VII, 152.

¹³⁰ Bosco, *Vita Savio*, (1859), 53, in *Opere Edite* XI, 203.

the Historical Sketch of 1874, he explains his idea of the Society in question-and-answer form and writes:

[Q] In this Society is your aim the good of neighbor or that of its members?

[A] The purpose of this Society is the spiritual advancement of its members *through* the exercise of charity toward neighbor, especially toward poor young people.¹³¹

This is also the spiritual doctrine taught in the 1876 document, "Salesian Cooperators."

This Association might be regarded as a traditional Third Order, but with this difference, that whereas there perfection was made to consist in exercises of piety [devotions], here the main purpose is the active life and the exercise of charity toward neighbor, especially toward young people at risk.¹³²

Don Bosco never swerved from his conviction that, for the Salesian and for his cooperators holiness is achieved through the work of charity undertaken in imitation of Christ's pastoral charity. He places the same proposal before his young people, and much of the Savio biography is dedicated to presenting Savio as a model in this way of holiness: teaching, catechizing, exhorting, animating, envisioning mission, banding companions together for the apostolate.

(2) *The Question of the Historical Value of Don Bosco's Life of Savio*

Father Alberto Caviglia, the Savio expert, in the masterful study referred to above praises the *Life* for being, among other things, one of the few books of Don Bosco that was not a compilation from other books, but was instead completely his own and written out of his own experience. He was the main source. He was narrating facts that he had witnessed and had even inspired. He was expounding a program of the spiritual life that he himself had set in motion in the real life of adolescents.

The biography leans heavily in favor of the two-and-a-half-year period that Dominic spent at the Oratory. The dozen years or so he spent at home with his parents are left quite bare. Father Rua collected some information from the family, and Don Bosco sought the testimony of priests who had taught Dominic in school or had had him "as a parishioner." What Don Bosco relates is factual without a doubt, or at least believed to be such. However, the question whether

¹³¹ *Cenno storico*, in Braido, *Don Bosco per i giovani*, 125.

¹³² Bosco Giovanni, *Cooperatori salesiani, ossia un modo pratico per giovare al costume ed alla civile società* (San Pier d'Arena: Tip. Salesiana, 1876), in *Opere edite* XXVIII, 260.

or not the work has historical value is legitimate. The overarching edifying, educational and hagiographical purpose of the *Life* discussed above leaves one in doubt. As Stella notes, and as the instances submitted above may show, Don Bosco, with special aims in view, made rather "elastic and selective" use of the information available to him.¹³³ And as a matter of fact the historicity of the *Life* was impugned at the Process for Don Bosco's canonization.

After Don Bosco's beatification in 1929, on June 17, 1930 the cardinals of Congregation of Rites voted for the introduction of Blessed John Bosco's cause of canonization. It was at this point that the cause of Dominic Savio's beatification was paired to that of Don Bosco's canonization.¹³⁴

The process for Dominic Savio's heroic practice of virtue was quickly begun, and Don Bosco's Savio biography was "subpoenaed." The real problem arose at the preparatory congregation, held on May 3, 1931. The votes were largely favorable, but objections were raised by Father Henry Quentin, the historian of the Congregation of Rites.¹³⁵ The criticism touched on two main points. First, Quentin claimed that Don Bosco, in his concern to propose a model, wrote not historical biography but educational fiction. Secondly, he maintained that the testimony given by the witnesses (at the process) was so similar in concept and language to Don Bosco's narration that it carried no independent historical value. In other words, the biographical poverty of the work made it unreliable for the purpose of establishing Dominic's heroic practice of virtue. Also the supernatural occurrences narrated (the 'charismatic gifts') had Don Bosco as the only witness. They may have been (in Quentin's view) embellishments introduced by the "pious author" for the purpose of edification.

In the debate that followed Fathers Angelo Amadei and Alberto Caviglia in Turin responded to Quentin's understanding of the Savio biography. They attacked his interpretation stressing also the existence of independent testimonies, and established the "substantial" historical value of the biography. Don

¹³³ Cf. Stella, *Piccola guida critica*, 15.

¹³⁴ On April 4, 1908, Cardinal Agostino Richelmy had opened the diocesan (ordinary) informative process of Dominic Savio's beatification in Turin. The diocesan process lasted less than two years. Then on February 10, 1914, after the presentation of 518 letters of petition and of the documents of the diocesan process, and other formalities, the Congregation of Rites introduced the cause in Rome, with the approval of Pope Pius X, first, and then of the newly elected Pope Benedict XV. But the war broke out, and after the war the Salesians saw the urgency of seeing Don Bosco's own cause through to beatification (1929).

¹³⁵ The scholarly Father Quentin, a Benedictine from Solesmes, was head of the historical department of the Congregation of Rites, an office created by Pius XI the previous year to ensure critical quality in causes of beatification. For details see Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol. III: La Canonizzazione (1888-1934) (Roma: LAS, 1988), 213-223.

Bosco aimed at presenting a model of holiness that consisted in the perfect fulfillment of one's "Christian duties" in accordance with what one's state in life required—doing the ordinary with extraordinary fidelity. This was a maxim straight out of St. Francis de Sales. Besides Dominic Savio had established himself as an extraordinary model not only with the Oratory population but also with his family and the folks in the hometown—"a new St. Aloysius," as stated in his father's only letter (cited above). What Don Bosco did by his biography was to present the model, already established, in a systematic manner.

By special arrangement a second preparatory congregation was held on February 21, 1933. Father Quentin restated his position, pointing out places where Don Bosco had taken liberties in quoting his sources. But the vote was favorable. On June 27, 1933, the general congregation with the Holy Father present (*coram Sanctissimo*) was held. Father Quentin did not relent, but the Pope's own word ensured success. The Decree on Dominic Savio's heroic practice of virtue, with the title of Venerable, came on July 9, 1933.

The Decree opened the way for beatification. This, however, was delayed by Don Bosco's own process of canonization (1934) and by the intervening Second World War.¹³⁶

Dominic Savio was beatified on March 5, 1950 and canonized on June 12, 1954 by Pope Pius XII.

¹³⁶ In 1942, centenary of Dominic's birth, because of the war, Dominic's mortal remains were transferred to the shrine of Mary Help of Christians at Becchi (together with those of Don Bosco, Fr. Cafasso and Mary Mazzarello), where they remained entombed until May 14, 1945.