

Aldo Giraudo

Fr PAUL ALBERA

Master of Spiritual Life

Fr. P. Albera

ALDO GIRAUDO

FATHER PAUL ALBERA
MASTER OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... 7

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS 11

First part

LIFE (1845-1921)

Chapter 1: THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1845-1868) 15

Childhood and adolescence 15

Amid the first Salesians 19

Assistant at the minor seminary of Mirabello (1863-1868) 23

Chapter 2: PREFECT OF VALDOCCO AND DIRECTOR OF
GENOA (1868-1881)..... 27

Ordination and early years of priesthood 27

Founder of the Salesian house in Genoa 31

Chapter 3: PROVINCIAL OF THE SALESIAN HOUSES IN
FRANCE (1881-1892) 39

1881-1884 39

1885-1888 45

1889-1892 49

Chapter 4: SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF THE SALESIAN
CONGREGATION 55

1893-1895 55

1896-1900 61

Chapter 5: VISIT TO THE SALESIAN HOUSES IN AMERICA
(1900-1903) 67

Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay 67

Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Peru 70

Ecuador 75

Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States 78

Chapter 6: ALONGSIDE FATHER RUA FROM 1903 TO 1910.....	85
1903-1907	85
1908-1910	90
Chapter 7: THE FIRST YEARS AS RECTOR MAJOR (1910-1913) .	95
<i>Second successor of Don Bosco (1910)</i>	91
1911-1912	100
1913 - <i>A very intense year</i>	105
Chapter 8: THE DRAMA OF WAR (1914-1918).....	111
<i>The outbreak of war</i>	111
<i>The care of Salesian soldiers</i>	116
<i>The last year of the war</i>	120
Chapter 9: TOWARDS A PEACEFUL END (1919-1921).....	123
1919-1920	123
1921	129

Second part

CONTRIBUTION TO SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

1. <i>The magisterium of life</i>	139
2. <i>Spirit of prayer</i>	142
3. <i>Life of faith</i>	145
4. <i>Don Bosco a model for Salesians</i>	148
Don Bosco's most perfect act	150
Love for the young	152
Don Bosco's Madonna	154
5. <i>The virtues of the Salesian</i>	158
Disciplined life	158
Obedience	160
Chastity	163
Poverty	164
Care for perfection	166
Salesian gentleness	169

Third part

SELECTED TEXTS

1. <i>The spirit of prayer</i>	175
2. <i>At Don Bosco's school</i>	180
3. <i>Living by Faith</i>	182
4. <i>The oratory is the soul of our Pious Society</i>	185
5. <i>Let us all be missionaries!</i>	188
6. <i>Our Lady and Don Bosco</i>	191
7. <i>Salesian gentleness</i>	195
8. <i>To bring Don Bosco to life in ourselves</i>	200
9. <i>Being worthy of our father Don Bosco</i>	202
10. <i>Don Bosco our model</i>	205
11. <i>Let us throw ourselves into God's arms</i>	209
12. <i>How Don Bosco loved us</i>	211
13. <i>The knowledge necessary for the Salesian priest</i>	217
14. <i>Growth in one's spiritual life</i>	221
15. <i>Vocations and Salesian spirit</i>	226
16. <i>Sowers of vocations</i>	232

INTRODUCTION

The charisma of a founder involves not only an original way of imitating the Lord, but also the ability to pass on his spirit and to involve others in the mission entrusted to him. In Paul Albera we have a man who was personally formed by Don Bosco, and one of those responsible for the handing on of his spirit and mission. Aldo Giraudo's book, *Father Paul Albera: Master of Spiritual Life* admirably gives us an insight into the personality and contribution of this second successor of Don Bosco. Albera has somehow remained in the shade up to now, but in the centenary of his death he is emerging into his own as a figure that is at once attractive and remarkable.

Albera's description of the irresistible fascination exerted by Don Bosco over his boys is well known. Not so well known is the fact that Don Bosco was himself impressed by the human qualities and spiritual sensibility of this delicate boy who, arriving at the Valdocco Oratory at the tender age of 13, had put himself immediately and totally into the hands of the good father, allowing himself to be guided in the ways of the Spirit. All this and more we learn from Giraudo in the first, biographical part of his very readable book.

Paul Albera's innate timidity stands in remarkable contrast to the extroversion and energy of Giovanni Cagliero. And yet this Salesian of the first times – youngest signatory of the list of the first members of 1860, pioneer of Mirabello under the leadership of Michele Rua – reveals a marked spirit of enterprise and an enviable ability to win hearts as founder of the Salesian work in Genoa and in France, along with a surprising tenacity of character that is revealed, for example, in the gruelling three year long voyage in America as representative of Don Rua.

But perhaps Albera truly comes into his own as Spiritual Director of the fledgling Congregation. Giraudo reveals to us a man who is constantly visiting formation houses, preparing formators, exhorting confreres to live out the Constitutions and Regulations, and attending to the implementation of the General Chapters especially in the area of formation and studies. Particularly impressive is Albera's habit of reading, meditating and annotating spiritual literature, something that bears fruit in the service of spiritual direction and in the countless Spiritual Exercises he preached.

As Rector Major, Albera continued to insist on the life of prayer and study as the vital source of apostolic fruitfulness. He appealed constantly and passionately to Don Bosco, a Don Bosco who had led him to an intense

following of the Lord: “Everything for Jesus and only for him!” His habit of reading also probably gave him a new appreciation of the significance of Francis de Sales in the spirit and charism of Don Bosco. All this and more comes to light in the second part of Giraud’s book, which touches upon the inner fire underlying an intensely busy life, as also in the third part consisting of excerpts from Albera’s own writings.

The early Salesians were men who had been deeply touched by Don Bosco, but each of them reflected his charism in different ways, as can be seen in the magnificent fidelity of Rua and the missionary dynamism of Cagliero, the formative ability of Barberis and the literary genius of Francesia. Among these founding fathers of the Salesian Congregation, Paul Albera stands out as a master of the spiritual life, as Giraud suggests, because of his ability to grasp the heart of Don Bosco and to communicate it to Salesians and to the members of the growing Salesian Family. Through Albera we are able to enter in contact with the sources of the Salesian charism in a way that has remained largely unexplored up to now. The personal diaries that have come down to us – written in Italian, in French and even in English – are a privileged glimpse into the ongoing dialogue between grace and freedom in the heart of the man, a precious window into the formative power of Don Bosco’s charism, a touching witness to the way our humanity perdures and yet is transformed into a vehicle of the Spirit. Albera was constantly plagued by a certain diffidence and melancholy, and yet he was one who stood out for his amiability, delicateness and goodness.

Remarkable also is Albera’s devotion to Don Rua and his insight into this man who is often dismissed as the Living Rule, a necessary but unimpressive imitation of Don Bosco. “Why was Don Bosco loved so much? Why was he able to win all hearts?” Albera asks. “Because he had to fortune to have a Don Rua at his side, who was always there to take all the odious tasks upon himself.” And then he adds: “When [Rua] was elected Rector Major, there were those who feared a rigorous rule. We saw, instead, how much goodness was there in his heart. This will remain one of the most beautiful pages of his life, and we will realize how much he contributed to the halo with which Don Bosco was surrounded.”

To Don Bosco and Don Rua we must now add Paul Albera, “le petit Don Bosco” who brought to his rectorate a personal familiarity with the Salesian works around the world and particular sensitivity to new contexts and situations. The gentleness of his character and his sensitivity become especially apparent in the way he accompanied the unexpected and extremely

difficult situation in which the Salesian Society found itself during the First World War, with almost half of its 3,000 odd members directly involved on different sides of the conflict. “When you celebrate your first mass,” Don Bosco had whispered into Paolino’s ear, “ask God for the grace to never get discouraged.” This advice stood Albera in good stead as he led the Congregation through the four long years of the war, encouraging confreres to fill the places of those who had been summoned to the front lines, and never allowing works for poor youngsters to be closed down for lack of personnel.

A sincere word of gratitude to Aldo Giraud in the name of all those who, through his work, will be able to enter into the world of Paul Albera. My wish and prayer is that we might be worthy inheritors of the spiritual patrimony given to the Church through Don Bosco and through those who, like Albera, allowed themselves to be shaped and formed by him.

Faced with changing times and the multiplicity of contexts, we have the task of grasping what is essential and enduring in our heritage – or better, of allowing ourselves to be grasped and surprised by it. This is what happens when we ruminate the pages of the gospels and the lives of the saints. This is what ought to happen when we look with loving eyes upon Don Bosco and the men he formed. May the gift that is Paul Albera catch us by surprise, warm our hearts and renew in us the desire to follow the Lord in the way traced out by Don Bosco. This is what Albera most ardently desired for his confreres and this is what he surely desires for all of us.

Fr Ivo Coelho
Councillor for Formation

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- AAT Archiepiscopal Archive of Turin
 ACS *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* (1921-)
 ASC Salesian Central Archives
 BS *Bollettino salesiano* (1877-)
 Eng SB English *Salesian Bulletin* (1892-1938)
Garneri Dominic Garneri, *Don Paolo Albera, secondo successore di Don Bosco*.
 Turin: SEI, 1939.
 Em Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario*. Introduction, critical texts and notes by
 Francesco Motto. 8 vols. Rome, LAS, 1991-2019.
 L Paolo Albera and Calogero Gusmano, *Lettere a don Giulio Barberis*
durante la loro visita alle case d'America (1900-1903). Introduction,
 critical text, and notes by Brenno Casali. Rome: LAS 2000.
Lasagna Paolo Albera, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna: Memorie biografiche*. San Benigno
 Canavese: Salesiana, 1900.
 LC *Lettere circolari di D. Paolo Albera ai Salesiani*. Turin: SEI, 1922.
 LCR *Lettere circolari di Don Michael Rua ai Salesiani*. Turin: SAID “Buona
 Stampa,” 1910.
 Lm ASC E444, *Lettere mensili ai salesiani soldati (1916-1918)*.
Manuale Paolo Albera, *Manuale del direttore*. San Benigno Canavese: Salesiana,
 1915.
 MB *Memorie biografiche Don Giovanni Bosco*, vols. VI-XVI. San Benigno
 Canavese and Turin: Salesiana and SEI, 1907-1935.
 English translation, ed. Diego Borgatello, vols. VI-XVI. New Rochelle, N.Y.:
 Salesiana, 1964, 1971-1995. Abbreviated as BM.

* * *

This volume has three sections.

The first is a brief biography of Father Albera, Don Bosco’s second successor. The primary sources of this section are the well-documented biography published by Dominic Garneri in 1939, his circular letters, his correspondence with Father Julius Barberis during the canonical visit to America, the Salesian Bulletin, and the autograph notebooks of his “spiritual diary” kept in the Salesian Central Archives (ASC B0320101-109).

The second section presents the key points of his spiritual teaching.

The third section contains an anthology of his most significant writings extracted from the circular letters to the Salesians (Turin 1922).

First part

LIFE (1845-1921)



Chapter 1

THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1845-1868)

*Young Paul Albera confessing to Don Bosco
(photo by Francis Serra, 21 May 1861)*

Childhood and adolescence

Paul Albera was born on 6 June 1845 in None, an agricultural town in Piedmont halfway between Turin and Pinerolo. From the documents accessible in the chancery for the admission exam to clerical investiture,¹ we learn that his parents were John Baptist and Margaret Dell'Acqua, who married in 1825. His father was a farmer, owner of a modest agricultural

¹ AAT 12.17.4, Elenco dei giovani aspiranti allo stato chiericale 1855-1867, year 1861.

holding (about six acres), worth 1,300 Piedmontese lire. They had seven children, six boys and one girl. Paul was the last child. He was baptised Paul Sebastian Norbert on the very day of his birth. Three of his brothers became religious: Louis (Lodovico) a Franciscan named Father Telesforo, Louis (Luigi) a Vincentian, and Frances a Daughter of Charity named Sister Vincenzina.

The serene and affectionate atmosphere of the family had a beneficial influence on the boy's education and the development of his personal skills. Father John Matthew Abrate, the parish priest, followed him with particular interest. He taught him to serve Mass and prepared him for Confirmation (1853) and first Communion, which he received at eleven, according to the practice of the time.

Paul attended the village school and was a bright student. After elementary school, he went to work in the fields, since the family did not have the financial resources to allow him to continue his studies. Father Abrate, who sensed his vocation, admired the boy's goodness and skills and tried to help him. In 1858 he invited Don Bosco to None for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, on 3 October. After the afternoon service, he introduced the boy to Don Bosco and said, "Take him with you." Don Bosco, won by the child's intelligence, physical characteristics, and serene, penetrating gaze, agreed.

On 18 October 1858 the parish priest brought Paul to Valdocco. He was thirteen and formed part of the lively young community of the "house annexed to the Oratory," made up of 120 students and 80 artisans. They were all boys from the working class, admitted with almost no fee, and integrated into the family and fervent atmosphere created by Don Bosco. The saint's active presence among the youngsters, his captivating, motivating educational activity, his loving relationship with each one, which became intimate in the sacrament of confession, created a unique, highly effective formational environment.

Helping Don Bosco were the prefect of studies, the gentle Father Victor Alasonatti, and a handful of clerics who had grown up in the Oratory and were infused with the saint's vitality and method: Michael Rua, John Cagliero, John Baptist Francesia, John Bonetti, and Celestine Durando. They were just a few years older than their companions, but with their composite action, their exemplary conduct, their spirit of dedication and sacrifice, they were models for the house, admired by the youngest of all.

The Oratory had an intense spiritual atmosphere, but without exaggerations. John Baptist Lemoyne, recording testimony from Father Albera

himself, states:

At the Oratory virtue was not ostentatiously flaunted. Remarkably, this atmosphere of spirituality, this steady succession of wondrous incidents and dreams with all the hallmarks of the supernatural, these predictions of death and revelations of consciences – all of which seemingly should have inflamed the imagination – never produced visionaries, religious fanatics, bigots, weaklings, or superstitious believers among the thousands of Oratory boys. There, an order of things was being unfolded which, founded on genuine piety, was openly willed by God. Father Paul Albera and many others firmly shared this opinion.²

When Paul arrived at the Oratory, Don Bosco was gathering documentation for the biography of Dominic Savio, who had died in March 1857. Many companions had witnessed the virtues and apostolic fervour of that wonderful teenager. They talked about him and tried to imitate him. Any newcomer immediately found himself at ease in that fervent environment and made worthy friends with some of his companions, including the exuberant Michael Magone.

In those years, the primary school of the Oratory was being consolidated. In the autumn of 1858, the first level of secondary school was added to the lower Latin classes, and in the following school year Don Bosco had the entire secondary school program with his own teachers. The first three classes were entrusted to the clerics Celestine Durando, Secondo Pettivo, and John Turchi, the last two classes to John Baptist Francesia.

From that moment on, the student section was increasingly important. Almost all the students were aspirants to the priesthood, carefully selected, strongly committed to their cultural and spiritual formation. Don Bosco followed the progress of each one with dedication and constancy, with gracefulness and respect. Paul was fascinated.

Sixty years later, he remembered the transforming power of that love:

Don Bosco's predilection for us was unique, all his own. We felt his irresistible charm. ... Even now I seem to feel all the gentleness of his predilection for me as a youth. I felt like I was held captive by an affectionate power that fed my thoughts. ... I felt I was loved in a way I had never experienced before, which was nothing like even the deepest love that my unforgettable parents had for me.

² MB VI 971-972/BM VI 581.

Don Bosco's love for us was something singularly superior to any other affection. It entirely enveloped us all, as if in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness, from which sorrow, sadness, and melancholy were banished. It penetrated our bodies and souls in such a way that we no longer thought of one or the other; we were sure that our good Father was thinking of us, and this thought made us perfectly happy.

Oh! it was his love that attracted, conquered, and transformed our hearts! It could not be otherwise, because from his every word and act emanated the holiness of union with God, which is perfect charity. He attracted us to himself through the fullness of supernatural love that flared up in his heart and with its flames absorbed and unified the little sparks of that same love, aroused by the hand of God in our hearts.

We were his, because each of us was certain that he was truly the man of God, homo Dei, in the most telling and comprehensive sense of the word.³

When they listened to Don Bosco's words and when they saw him praying and celebrating the Eucharist, the spiritual energy that emanated from his person captivated those boys. Father Albera wrote in 1912:

Having entered the Oratory as a youngster, I remember that from the very first days on hearing the Good Night talk in the evening, I could not refrain from saying to myself how much Don Bosco must have loved the Madonna!

Who among the older boys did not notice with what feeling and with what conviction he spoke to us about eternal truths, and how it happened not infrequently that speaking especially of the last things he was so moved that his voice failed?

Nor will we be able to forget with how much faith he celebrated Holy Mass.⁴

Paolino (as Don Bosco called him) entrusted himself to the holy educator with unlimited confidence and loving docility. The superior, conquered by the boy's goodness of soul and his moral and intellectual qualities, repaid his affectionate trust. He became the friend of his soul. He introduced him, gradually, into the ways of the Spirit. He taught him how to abandon himself to the interior action of grace. He tempered his soul and moulded his heart with discretion and balance, as he had done with Dominic Savio

³ LC 341-342.

⁴ LC 98.

and with all those who opened their souls to him to help them “give themselves totally to God.”

Amid the first Salesians

We do not know whether young Albera was part of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, a nursery for Salesian vocations, a cenacle of holiness. A year and a half after his arrival at the oratory, on 1 May 1860, at the recommendation of Don Bosco himself, he was admitted into the Salesian Congregation, founded in December 1859. He was not yet fifteen. The following month they sent the manuscript of the first Constitutions to Archbishop Louis Fransoni for approval. Don Bosco, Father Alasonatti, Father Angelo Savio, Deacon Michael Rua, and the other “Salesian members” signed the enclosed letter: nineteen clerics, two brothers, and a boy, our Paul, a “student of rhetoric.”

We, the undersigned, moved solely by the desire to ensure our eternal salvation, have united to undertake community life in order to attend more easily to those things which concern the glory of God and the salvation of souls. In order to preserve unity of spirit and discipline and to put into practice means known to be useful for our intended purpose, we’ve articulated some rules in the manner of a religious society, which, excluding any political principle, only sanctifies its members, especially through the exercise of charity towards one’s neighbour.⁵

From that moment on, Albera felt inseparably united with Don Bosco, who treated him with a certain predilection over his companions. Perhaps he predicted his future mission. We can deduce it from a dream Don Bosco had on the night between 1-2 May 1861.

“Don Bosco saw the Oratory and its beneficial results, the spiritual condition of his pupils, their vocation – as Salesian priests or brothers or as laymen in the world – and, lastly, the future of his budding congregation.”

He dreamed of a vast field planted with vegetables in which the Valdocco pupils called to a secular vocation worked. Next to it, in a vast field of wheat, those called to the priestly and religious vocation reaped and threshed.

One strip of land had been cleared and smoothed out for threshing. John

⁵ Em I 406.

Cagliero, who had just gone to the garden to collect flowers and had handed them out to his companions, betook himself to the threshing area, still holding a little bouquet of flowers. Threshing grain symbolizes God's call to instruct the common people.

Far off, black columns of smoke were rising to the sky. Some boys had gathered cockle and were burning it outside the field. This symbolized those who would remove the bad from the good as directors of our future houses. Among them I saw Francis Cerruti, John Baptist Tamietti, Dominic Belmonte, Paul Albera, and others, who are now studying in the lower Latin grades.

All the above scenes kept unfolding simultaneously. I saw some boys in that crowd hold lighted lanterns, though it was broad daylight. Evidently, they were destined to be beacons, giving good example to other workers in the Lord's vineyard. Among them was Paul Albera, who, besides carrying a lamp, also played the guitar. This means that not only will he guide priests, but he will also encourage them to persevere. He suggested, too, some high post in the Church.⁶

It should be noted that these future "directors" were very young: Belmonte was eighteen, Cerruti was seventeen, Albera going on sixteen, and Tamietti only thirteen.

The chronicles of the Oratory report that a few days later, on 19 May, Francis Serra, an amateur photographer who was a former student of the Oratory, wanted to photograph Don Bosco. First, he photographed him alone, then amid some youngsters: Albera, Jarach, Costanzo, and Bracco, and finally with over fifty pupils. Two days later "he photographed him hearing confessions: the closest penitents were Reano, Albera, and Viale; many others were behind preparing."⁷ That photo, an eloquent symbol of the mutual confidence between the saint and the adolescent who would become his second successor, is preserved.

In September 1861, at the end of the school year, Albera went to the chancery for the examination for admission to clerical investiture. We read in the archive's register that he presented himself to the vicar general with references from Don Bosco: "Notable for his piety. Distinguished for intelligence. He has completed second rhetoric in the Oratory of Saint Francis

⁶ MB VI 898 and 910/BM VI 530 and 540-541.

⁷ ASC A008, *Cronaca dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales n. 1*, ms D. Ruffino, 61-62.

[de Sales].” He has passed the catechism test and the vocation exam with a grade of excellent. We observe only a single grammar mistake in the Italian test, two mistakes in the Latin translation essay, but in both writings and in the subsequent oral exam he excelled. He was admitted to clerical investiture “under Don Bosco,” who was entrusted with his formation, as was the case of the other diocesan clerics who lived at Valdocco.⁸ Father Abrate, his parish priest, conducted the investiture ceremony in the church of None on 29 October, hoping to have Paul soon as his assistant.

In November 1861 he began to study philosophy at the seminary. Outside of class, he was assistant to the students of the Oratory and collaborated with the prefect, Julius Barberis, who entered Valdocco that year, and remembered Paul: “He was quite calm; he preferred to stroll or to withdraw to Father Alasonatti’s office, where he helped in little things. He was very studious and excelled at school, showing himself very talented and of good will. He also stood out for his piety, for which Don Bosco loved him very much. He obeyed Don Bosco and the other superiors without reservation.”⁹

In those two years of philosophical studies, he let Don Bosco moulded him. The formation of the first young Salesians was intense and singularly effective, as Father Albera himself wrote fifty years later:

The oldest confreres remember the holy efforts by which Don Bosco prepared us to become his collaborators. He used to gather us from time to time in his humble little room after night prayers, when all the others had already gone to bed, and there he would give us a short but very interesting conference.

We were few who heard him, but precisely because of this we considered ourselves happy to have his trust, to be part of the grandiose designs of our most gentle teacher.

It was not hard for us to understand that he was called to fulfil a providential mission on behalf of youth, and it was no little glory to see that he was choosing us as instruments to carry out his marvellous ideals.

So little by little, we were trained at his school, especially since his teachings had an irresistible attraction on our souls enamoured by the splendour of his virtues.¹⁰

⁸ AAT 12.17.4, AAT 12.17.4 *Elenco dei giovani aspiranti allo stato chiericale 1855-1867*, year 1861

⁹ Garneri 18.

¹⁰ LC 54-55.

In daily personal and confidential contact with the Founder's extraordinary personality and his broad apostolic visions, day by day they were being formed spiritually as his sons. When he judged them ready, he gathered them to formalise their religious consecration. We have a report that states:

On 14 May 1862, the rector [of the Oratory] summoned the confreres of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, and by formally making their vows most of them confirmed their membership in the Society that was coming to birth. They did so as follows: Don Bosco, the rector, dressed in a surplice, invited everyone to kneel and began the recitation of the *Veni Creator*, which they sang in alternation until the end. After he said the *Oremus* of the Holy Spirit, they recited the Litany of the Blessed Virgin with its *Oremus*. Afterwards a Pater, Ave, and Gloria were said to Saint Francis de Sales, to which the proper invocation and the *Oremus* were added. After this the confreres ... together recited the formula of vows, to which each subscribed in a special book.¹¹

It was a very emotional moment, a spiritual and charismatic experience. Cleric John Bonetti that evening wrote in his notebook:

A good number of us, therefore, made our vows according to the Regulations. Since there were many of us, we repeated the formula together after the Reverend Father Rua.

Then Don Bosco addressed a few words of calm and encouragement for the future. He said: "My dear confreres, we are in troubled times, and it seems almost presumptuous at this unhappy hour to form a new religious community, while the world and hell are working with all their might to destroy those that already exist. But it doesn't matter: we are sure that it is God's will that our society begin and continue. ...

I wouldn't end this evening without describing to you the special acts of protection we've had from Heaven since our Oratory was founded. Everything demonstrates that we have God with us and that we can go forward in our initiatives with confidence, knowing that we're doing his will.

But these aren't yet the arguments that give me hope for this society; there are greater ones, among them that the only purpose we've set for ourselves is the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. Who

¹¹ ASC D868, *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore* (1859-69), 9-10.

knows whether the Lord wants to use our Society to do much more good in his Church? Twenty-five or thirty years from now, if the Lord continues to help us as he has done so far, our Society, spread over different regions, could even swell to a thousand members. Some of these will reach out and instruct the lower classes with their preaching, and others to educate destitute boys; some to teach, others to write and disseminate good literature. In short, all will uphold the dignity of the Roman Pontiff and the ministers of the Church. How much good it will do! Pius IX believes we're already fully equipped. So here we are tonight, organized; we're fighting with him for the cause of the Church, which is God's cause. Let us be brave; let us work from the heart. As an excellent master, God will know how to pay us. Eternity will be long enough to rest."

Finally, Bonetti notes: "We observed that this evening Don Bosco showed indescribable satisfaction. He did not know how to leave us, assuring us he would spend the entire night in conversation. He told us many more beautiful things especially concerning the beginning of the Oratory."¹²

Assistant at the minor seminary of Mirabello (1863-1868)

In 1859 the kingdom of Sardinia launched a radical reform for schools, which secularised public education. On this occasion, the bishops of Piedmont felt it was urgent to revitalise their minor seminaries to ensure a solid Christian formation for future priests. In those years of political tension and economic crisis, they did not have the resources to take on this enterprise. Don Bosco immediately made himself available to help his diocese. With the consent of Archbishop Fransoni, exiled in Lyons, he organised the minor seminary of Giaveno. He appointed a trusted priest as director and sent a group of clerics trained at Valdocco for assistance. The school years 1860-1862 were very positive. When the archbishop died in March 1862, however, difficulties arose. To avoid tensions with the officials of the Turin chancery, the saint stepped aside and handed over to the archdiocese a well-ordered and lively seminary.

That experience taught Don Bosco three things: that the time was ripe

¹² ASC A0040604, *Annali* III 1862/63, ms G. Bonetti, 1-6

to expand his educational experience; that it was necessary for the good of young people, society, and the Church; and that in Valdocco there were young Salesians gifted with his same spirit and able to ensure the success of the undertaking. He had also learned that future foundations had to be guaranteed full independence in their administration and their educational academic program.

Opportunity presented itself soon with the request that he open a boarding school in Mirabello Monferrato in the diocese of Casale. He could count on land and a house made available by the father of the Salesian Francis Provera. He got the trust and unconditional support of the bishop, Louis Nazari di Calabiana, who gave him ample freedom of action. Don Bosco immediately accepted. He enlarged the existing building and presented the new institution as a diocesan minor seminary.

The composition of the formation team sent there on 13 October 1863 confirms Don Bosco's courage and trust in his men. Father Michael Rua was the director, the only priest. He was twenty-six years old. The others were all clerics: the prefect Francis Provera (twenty-six), the spiritual director John Bonetti (twenty-five), the assistants Francis Cerruti (nineteen), Paul Albera, and Francis Dalmazzo (both eighteen). Some boys from Valdocco, fifteen and sixteen years old, joined them as makeshift clerics in the following weeks. It may seem like a daring operation to us, but certainly they were more mature than their age would suggest.

They opened three elementary classes and five secondary school classes at Mirabello. The organisational problems, those of an educational and didactic nature, were progressively resolved thanks to the solidity of the group and the work of Father Rua, who reproduced the spirit and family atmosphere of Valdocco in the house. Don Bosco had given him a memorandum with spiritual instructions, rules for governance, and pedagogical guidelines, considered the primary document of the Salesian Preventive System.¹³ The saint produced an expanded version in 1870, entitled "Confidential Reminders," to be given to Salesians appointed as directors of new foundations.

Albera spent five wonderful, hardworking years at Mirabello. He assisted the students in the study hall, the refectory, the playground, and the dormitory. He taught, and in the meantime, studied theology. It was an excessive workload for him and his companions, but it was supported by a generous spirit of sacrifice and enthusiasm, with the joy of having been

¹³ Em I 613-617.

chosen by Don Bosco to carry out his plans.

To overcome the opposition of the school authorities, who did not want to grant legal recognition to the school, Don Bosco asked Albera and the others to study for teacher certification. On 10 October 1864 Paul successfully took the examination for his elementary teaching certificate, and on 10 December of the following year he graduated as a secondary school teacher at the Royal University of Turin. Like Cerruti and Dalmazzo, he could have continued his academic career as far as a degree, but he did not want to “for fear of harming his vocation and virtue,” as he confided to his friend Father John Garino.

In September 1865 Don Bosco called Father Michael Rua back to Turin to replace the deceased Father Alasonatti. At Mirabello all suffered from the loss of the spiritual friendship they had with their director and confessor. Father John Bonetti, a twenty-seven-year-old priest, took over the reins Rua had handled, changing nothing, so that the climate of Mirabello remained the same.

Don Bosco often visited the seminary, met the confreres, spoke to the boys, and instilled his enthusiasm into everyone. Every year he gathered the Salesians for a retreat, a precious opportunity for more incisive spiritual direction. Father Albera wrote:

From 1866 onwards, when he began to gather us for retreats, Don Bosco’s activity would be exercised on a much larger scale. Every year on the auspicious occasion [of the retreat] we were given the opportunity to gather and to count ourselves, and it was a great comfort for us to see there were ever more of us.

Our good Father with his instructions, so packed with holy thoughts and put forth with ineffable fervour, continually opened new horizons to our astonished minds, made our intentions ever more generous and our will firmer to remain with him always and to follow him everywhere, without reservation and at the cost of any sacrifice.¹⁴

The saint enjoyed the generosity of his young collaborators. Father James Costamagna, future missionary bishop, recounted how on the evening of 3 May 1867 on the train to Turin, Don Bosco confided his joy to me at the many favors the Lord had granted to him, especially in sending to him such talented young co-workers as Durando, Francesca,

¹⁴ LC 55.

Cagliero, Cerruti, Bonetti, Albera, Ghivarello, and so on. “They all excel in some field or other,” he remarked – “rhetoric, literature, music, writing, theology, sanctity.” Of some, he predicted singular abilities that came to light later on, but which nobody could then surmise.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Albera combined his educational work with the study of theology. As the time of ordination approached, the insistence of the parish priest of None increased to claim him as his parish assistant. He did not understand that Don Bosco’s was a religious congregation, not simply a pious society. As Lemoyne recounts, Father Abrate had tried unsuccessfully to induce Paul Albera, his parishioner, to enter the diocesan seminary; then, when Albera, then a teacher at the Mirabello junior seminary, was ready for ordination, he once more attempted to entice him from Don Bosco. ... “After all [he said], the seminary is for seminarians, and that’s where they belong. Why does Don Bosco keep them at the Oratory? I want Albera for myself. He is mine!”¹⁶

He went to complain to the vicar general of the diocese, insisted with Don Bosco himself, but in the end he understood that Paul had responded to a special call from the Lord. He resigned himself and put no more pressure on him.

¹⁵ MB VIII 773/BM VIII 333.

¹⁶ MB VIII 1004-1005/BM VIII 424-425.

Chapter 2

**PREFECT OF VALDOCCO
AND DIRECTOR OF GENOA
(1868-1881)**

Father Paul Albera among the orphans of Sampierdarena

Ordination and early years of priesthood

When asked to issue dimissorial letters for the ordination of Salesians from his archdiocese, the new archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi di Netro, resisted. He was worried about the shortage of priests and wanted

Don Bosco's clerics to join the diocesan clergy. In the end, faced with the decision of those young men and the reasons presented by Don Bosco, he conceded. The saint pointed out to him that most of his diocesan seminarians came precisely from the Salesian institutes of Valdocco and Lanzo Torinese, and he needed the young men in question in order to continue providing good secular vocations as well.

On 25 March 1868, in the church of the Immaculate Conception next to the episcopal palace, Archbishop Riccardi conferred minor orders on Paul Albera, James Costamagna, and Francis Dalmazzo, and three days later the subdiaconate. He ordained them deacons on 6 June.

Paul prepared for ordination with great fervour. A diary (18-28 March 1868) written during his retreat to prepare for the subdiaconate is preserved. On its title page we read: "Your Heart, O my lovable Jesus, is open just to prepare a refuge for me: here I will run, here I will find peace, and I hope I will never leave. Sweet Heart of my Jesus, make me love you more and more!" After the first meditation of the retreat, he noted:

From this sermon, which God out of his goodness let me hear, I will draw these fruits: 1. I will often think of my nothingness; 2. I will often have in mind the greatness and omnipotence of God. With these two thoughts well fixed, I hope, O my Jesus, that I will no longer offend you with sins of pride, and that I will direct all my actions to your greater glory. May I engrave the saying in my mind, on my every action: *All for Jesus*.

At the end of the retreat, Don Bosco suggested some "mementos":

The three virtues that must adorn the life of a priest are chastity, *humility*, and charity. You will observe chastity with a noble love for all, avoiding particular friendships, avoiding every word and deed that, if it were done or said to you, would displease you. You will observe humility by regarding all your companions as superiors, so that you can then treat them as equals with all charity. Remember your sins and the humility and meekness of the Heart of Jesus, and you will be truly humble. Observe the third point by working as much as you can and doing everything for the glory of God, with prayer made from the heart and with faith, with temperance in eating and great mortification of the eyes.¹

¹ Garneri 35-36.

Two months later he made another ten days of retreat (18-28 May 1868) to prepare for diaconal ordination. He wrote:

I will begin my retreat by impressing on my mind what my spiritual director told me in confession. I must beware of little things, since they are already very serious shortcomings regarding the goodness of God, and they deprive us of big graces; and also because they usually lead to serious faults. I will flee any relationship that is too close, every glance, writing, or touch of the hand that could offend this beautiful virtue. Heart of my Jesus, the purest of all hearts, make me like you. Most pure virgin, Queen of virgins, who did so much and would have done more to preserve your chastity, here at your feet is a wretch who would like to imitate you but can't; help me in everything, bring me entirely to yourself. *Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis!*

Also on that occasion, Don Bosco dictated some mementos:

1. *Meditation* in the morning, visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the day, *spiritual reading*, even if brief but habitually, in the evening.
2. Respectfully accept any advice; indeed, thank those who give it to us.
3. Give friendly advice to your companions, offending no one and be zealous for the salvation of others.
4. Take the utmost care in little things, especially in terms of modesty.

Albera closed his retreat with this invocation: "Most precious blood of Jesus Christ, descend, if not on this sheet of paper, on my heart, which matters more, and seal these resolutions of mine. Make the fruit of this retreat constant and lasting. Most Holy Virgin, don't abandon me until you see me in heaven praising you for ever. Amen, Amen!"²

On 9 June 1868, Deacon Albera with his confreres and pupils from Mirabello took part in the solemn consecration of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco. It was a powerful experience. Fifty years later he recalled the emotions:

I remember as if it were today the solemn moment in which Don Bosco, radiant with joy, his eyes veiled with tears of deep emotion, was the first to go up to the high altar to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass, under the compassionate gaze of his great Help of Christians. At those most solemn festivities, which lasted a good eight days, eight bishops increased

² Garneri 36-37.

the splendour with their sublime dignity, celebrating pontifically and proclaiming the divine word eloquently and profitably to the extraordinary crowd of the faithful, who came even from distant towns.

To those of us who were already older, it did not escape how the face of our Venerable Father seemed almost transfigured, and how he was tireless in speaking of his Madonna. We jealously preserved the memory of what he, reading into the future, told us on that occasion about the wonders that Mary Help of Christians would work on behalf of her devotees.³

That same day, Don Bosco invited Paul to prepare himself for priestly ordination. Bishop Peter Mary Ferrè, the new bishop of Casale, ordained him at Casale Monferrato on 2 August 1868. On the eve, Don Bosco said to him: “When you have the happiness of being able to say your first Mass, ask God for the grace never to be discouraged.” Years later, in a conference to the Salesians, Father Albera confided, “Then I did not understand the importance of these words; only later did I understand their full value.”

On 19 September 1868, he made his perpetual vows in the house of Trofarello. Don Bosco wanted him with him in Turin. He remained there four years, during which (he wrote in 1920) he could “enjoy his intimacy and draw from his great heart those precious teachings which were so much more effective on us because we saw him practising them in his daily conduct.” At his side, one was always persuaded that “the only thing necessary to become his worthy son was to imitate him in everything.” Therefore, following the example of other early Salesians, “who had already copied in themselves the way of thinking, speaking, and acting of their Father,” he strove to do the same.⁴ He was twenty-three and was entrusted with the office of prefect of the day pupils, with receiving visitors, and with accepting students. He was the most suitable person. Whoever entered his office for the first time was won over by his sweet smile and delicate manner.

In January 1869, the Holy See definitively approved the Salesian Society. On his return from Rome, the Salesians and the pupils triumphantly welcomed Don Bosco.

For the opening of the First Vatican Council (8 December 1869), Father Albera wrote a hymn in honour of Pius IX, set to music by John Cagliero.

³ LC 262.

⁴ LC 331.

Two days later, he was elected a member of the superior chapter, the central governing body of the Congregation, to replace his former teacher Father Francesia, who had been sent to be the director of the boarding school of Cherasco. As a councillor, he attended an important event of which he spoke later: "In May 1871, Don Bosco convened the chapter and recommended praying for a month to obtain enlightenment to know whether he should also take care of girls, as people occasionally urged him to do. At the end of the month, he met with the chapter again, asking each for his opinion; everyone agreed." Then the saint added: "Well, now we can take it as certain that it is God's will that we also take care of girls."

In those years other important decisions were taken for the development of the Salesian Society: the opening of the boarding schools of Alassio (1870) and Varazze (1871), the expansion of the boarding school of Lanzo Torinese, transferring the minor seminary of Mirabello to Borgo San Martino (1870), the foundation of a boarding school for orphans in Genoa-Marassi (1871), the acceptance of the Valsalice secondary school (1872).

Founder of the Salesian house in Genoa

In 1871 the members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences in Genoa asked Don Bosco to open a boarding school for orphans in that city of Liguria. They were willing to pay for the upkeep of the boys and the rent of the place. Senator Joseph Cataldi provided a house for 500 lire a year. The building was in the Marassi area, on the hill to the east, between the city centre and the Staglieno cemetery. It was not entirely suitable for the purpose; but the saint, encouraged by Archbishop Salvatore Magnasco, accepted with the approval of his chapter.

Father Albera was sent as director, along with two clerics, three coadjutor brothers, and a cook. At his departure, Don Bosco asked him whether he needed money. He replied it was unnecessary, since the treasurer had given him 500 lire. The saint replied that starting a work of charity with this amount was a sign of distrust in Providence. He had the money returned and gave him a much smaller sum along with some letters for benefactors.

They left Turin on 26 October 1871. At the Genoa station, no one was waiting for them. They asked passers-by for information and reached their destination. A farmer was working on the adjacent land. He asked them who they were. They introduced themselves. "Ah, you are the people of the rascals," he answered and ushered them into the completely empty

building – no chairs, tables, beds, or provisions. Father Albera was not dismayed. He gave the cook the money to go to town for supplies. On the way, he met a caravan of mules carrying provisions to the villa. The president of the Saint Vincent Conference had sent them. It was the first sign of Providence.

In the following days, other expeditions completed what was missing to start the work, which was called the Saint Vincent de Paul Hospice. The first two orphans arrived, then others. The start was tough, but there was no shortage of benefactors, first the farmers of the area. Fifty years later, Dominic Canepa, who lived nearby, recalled:

I remember when Father Albera and his companions arrived in Marassi. We looked at the newcomers with a certain suspicion. Perhaps because of the nearby “rascals’ institution” in the Bisagno valley, this name was given also to the first boys recommended by the Conference to come to Marassi. Everyone, however, soon became convinced that this nickname was not at all fitting.

With great amazement and with a sense of pleasure, they observed the familiarity that existed between staff and pupils. They conversed, played together, and in the evening on the terrace sang beautiful praises to the Madonna, which the neighbours enjoyed immensely. The echo rose pleasantly up to the shrine of Our Lady of the Mountain, which practically faced the hospice.

Our greatest wonder was especially to see those young people playing or walking in the middle of the vineyards, without feeling the temptation to pluck any of the magnificent bunches of grapes. No matter how many times we spied on them, we never caught them doing that.⁵

Dominic Canepa also was an orphan. He helped an uncle work in the fields bordering the Salesian house. One evening, while he was leaning against the door of the boarding school, he felt a touch on his shoulder. It was Father Albera, who asked with a smile, “Would you like to come with me?” Won by such cordiality, he immediately replied, “Yes, sir!” A few months later, when the institute was transferred to Sampierdarena, he entered the community and eventually became a Salesian.

The first year, about forty young people were taken in, as many as the house could hold. They were divided into three workshops: tailors, shoemakers, and carpenters. Father Albera, the only priest, celebrated Mass,

⁵ Garneri 48.

preached, heard confessions, and taught. The small number of students allowed him to devote himself totally to their training. Results followed: those restless boys gradually became respectful, hardworking, and devout.

Don Bosco visited Marassi twice during the school year. He immediately realised that the building was inadequate and was located in an out-of-the-way spot with little possibility of development. Supported by the archbishop, he found a more suitable place in Sampierdarena. The railway station under construction would favour the industrial transformation of the village, making it an important commercial centre well connected with the Riviera di Ponente and with the Piedmontese and Lombard hinterlands.

Archbishop Magnasco helped him buy the old Theatine convent and the attached church of Saint Cajetan, which was in an awful state. The convent had been suppressed in 1796 and been used from time to time as a warehouse, barracks, hospital, glue factory, and stable. It did not have a playground. Don Bosco bought a large adjoining lot. The purchase of the building and the lot and the restoration of the premises involved an expense of over 70,000 lire: an enormous sum, put together thanks to the generosity of the Genoese benefactors whom the saint personally got involved with the help of the young director, Father Albera, whose kindness and humility won general sympathy.

Don Bosco spared no expense in restoring the church. He enlarged the orchestra platform, installed a new organ, and built a large sacristy. Under the direction of architect Maurice Dufour and the supervision of Father Albera, the plaster, roof, doors, windows, interior cornice, and choir stalls were redone. They built new marble altars with balustrades. Finally, a beautiful marble floor was laid.

After the move to Sampierdarena in November 1872, many more pupils were admitted. Father Albera's work also increased with services in the public church. As the restoration work continued, the people of the neighbourhood flocked to services. They liked well-celebrated liturgy with music, altar servers, and ministers, all directed by the dynamic young director. They appreciated his preaching they, for it was well prepared and substantive, convincing and measured at the same time. A large group of Cooperators formed around the work, animated by Father Albera. Archbishop Magnasco also took part. Their contribution made it possible to develop the institution. Applications for the acceptance of poor boys increased, and a new building had to be raised. The archbishop blessed its cornerstone on 14 February 1875; construction was completed in two years. New workshops were gradually added for bookbinders, blacksmiths,

mechanics, typographers, and composers. A secondary school for boys inclined towards a priestly vocation was also begun.

With his industrious zeal and amiable character, Father Albera reproduced the model and spirit of Valdocco at Sampierdarena. The past pupils of the time unanimously testify, “His exquisitely paternal traits attached all souls to him. His goodness of heart made him very attentive to his sons’ various needs. His elevated and lively piety edified us and led us to do good. His cultured and open mind was ready to perceive the psychological dispositions of each and to offer help.” Coadjutor Brother Charles Brovia writes:

In Father Albera we had not only the director but also a very tender father. Affectionate to the students, he never tired of exhorting them, coaching them in their duties with Don Bosco’s charity. The young people responded fully, bringing him the most pleasing satisfaction. He knew how to encourage piety, and how much joy he showed as feasts occurred if he could see good number youngsters going to Communion!⁶

In 1875 Don Bosco conceived the Sons of Mary Help of Christians program, a sort of seminary for adult vocations. It was a brilliant and innovative intuition that over the years produced abundant diocesan and Salesian vocations. It provided a faster but more demanding period of training (called the “school of fire”), suitable for young adults who had not been able to study in adolescence. The program could not be established in Turin because of opposition from the chancery. Hence Don Bosco commissioned Albera to get the approval of Archbishop Magnasco and entrusted him with setting up the project. He was an excellent choice. In 1875-1876, the Sampierdarena school was enriched with this new section, which prospered thanks to the young director’s apostolic zeal and spiritual energy.

Father Albera’s workload gradually grew, along with daily worry about coping with economic problems and staffing shortages. His health suffered, which the members of the superior chapter noticed. In the minutes of the session of 18 September 1875, we read that Father Rua asked those present “whether it was necessary to change him from director of Sampierdarena, because the air was noxious and he has not been in good physical shape for about three years. Some suggested that they first consult a doctor to see whether it really was the air; but all agreed that what made him ill was especially his worries. He’s very sensitive; moreover, he’s not outgoing and

⁶ Garneri 54.

can hardly hold up.”

Father Albera was absent at that moment. They waited for his arrival to “ask him about what he thought was best for his health.”⁷ The chronicle says nothing else. He probably ignored his problems and made himself available to continue.

In November of that year, the Sampierdarena house hosted the first group of missionaries leaving for South America under the leadership of John Cagliero. They arrived on Thursday, the 11th, at midnight. Over the next two days, they completed travel preparations and legal formalities. On Sunday they were escorted to the port. Don Bosco and Albera boarded the ship for the farewell. It was a moving scene, reported by Father Lemoine.⁸

On 2 February 1876, during the annual Conferences of Saint Francis de Sales, in which the directors met to update the confreres on the state of their institutes, Father Albera presented a sober report on the work of Sampierdarena. The house, he said, is in full expansion; the artisans and students received in the new building number 120 and will soon be “more than doubled.” The confreres “work a lot for the good of souls.” Everyone’s health is good.

We work a lot and also study a lot. Such is the piety of the confreres, especially in approaching Communion, that this example alone attracted many to the Church. They also had the fortune to call some sheep back to the fold who had fallen away and even enrolled in secret societies: abandoning sin, they now work as good Christians. Some confreres also go to the city churches to teach catechism. Many boys come to the house on holy days, so that – although the church is very large – we can’t teach catechism and preach there, since it is full, especially on feast days. They go to some classroom and after having learned some catechism and listened to a short sermon, they are brought back to the church for Eucharistic Benediction. The people are very pleased and receive us very favourably. Every morning there are many who receive Communion, especially the Sons of Mary, who number about thirty.⁹

On 6 February 1877, at the general conference of directors, Father Rua presented the individual Salesian works. Of the house directed by Father Albera, he said:

⁷ ASC D869, *Verbali del Capitolo Superiore 1884-1904*, 15-16.

⁸ MB XI 391-394/BM XI 366-368.

⁹ ASC A0000306, *Discorsetti vespertini. Quad. I 1876*, ms F. Ghigliotto, 19.

I must speak with some envy of Sampierdarena, because it threatens to outdo the Oratory. Five years ago, it was a shed where in a few small bedrooms you had to make your school, bedroom, kitchen, and study hall. ... There were many questions. There were many day pupils. A building corresponding to the need was wanted. In Sampierdarena, a city famous for its lack of religion and Freemasonry, it was a risky undertaking. Providence wanted it. Our superior paid no attention to the difficulties and set up a large, beautiful workshop for both the boarders and the day pupils. In a short time, the number of boys grew, and now there are 260 or 300. They almost equal the numbers of the Oratory.

This growth is to be attributed also to the Sons of Mary Help of Christians program, for which young adults study Latin to provide the Church and the Congregation with good ministers of the Lord. This year there are seventy of them at Sampierdarena. Almost all of those of the last year put on the cassock; we enrolled most of them in the Congregation, and they are here in Valdocco. This year Sampierdarena gave us some clerics, some of whom are in the seminary, others here among us. The festive oratory also began this year. They turned a corridor into a chapel for catechism classes and Benediction. It also serves for their reception of the sacraments. The print shop also is noteworthy; from it several outstanding books have already been published, the dissemination of which will do much good among the people.¹⁰

For Father Albera 1877 was a memorable year. The Sons of Mary grew, and requests for admission multiplied even beyond the school year. Don Bosco wanted all those who had the requisites to be accepted, regardless of when they enrolled. The director was concerned about their academic formation and his insufficient personnel. The superior chapter discussed the problem, and they decided that latecomers had to be engaged in manual labour and some preparatory classes until there were enough of them to form a class to which a teacher would be assigned.

In June Archbishop Frederick Aneyros of Buenos Aires landed in Genoa leading an Argentine pilgrimage to Rome. Don Bosco awaited him in the house of Sampierdarena. When the archbishop arrived, Don Bosco was in the sacristy for thanksgiving after Mass. Albera hastened to inform him, but the prelate stopped him: "Don't bother a saint while he's with God after Holy Mass!" He

¹⁰ ASC A0000301, *Conferenze e sogni. Quad. 1 1876, ms G. Gresino, 52-54.*

waited for him to return to the church. It was an emotional meeting.¹¹

That same year Father Albera had some trouble with a little volume of the Catholic Readings concerning the graces granted by Mary Help of Christians to her devotees, printed in the Sampierdarena print shop. Archbishop Gastaldi of Turin contested its publication, since he thought it was within his competence to judge the authenticity of miracles alleged to have occurred in a church of his diocese. He considered the imprimatur granted by the chancery of Genoa illegitimate. Albera tried to mediate. He met Archbishop Magnasco to inform him about Don Bosco's true intentions and helped to ease the tensions between Turin and Genoa.

At Don Bosco's behest, the Sampierdarena print shop had been equipped with expensive modern machinery. They had enormous debts. To pay them, Father Albera organized a lottery authorized by the government's prefect in Genoa; the result was excellent. On 10 August 1877, the first issue of the *Salesian Bulletin* was published in the print shop of the Saint Vincent de Paul Hospice. It continued to be printed there until September 1882, when conflicts with Archbishop Gastaldi had eased.

Between 5 September and 5 October 1877, Albera took part in the First General Chapter of the Salesian Society. He was a member of three important committees: those on common life, on the organization of the provinces and the responsibilities of Salesian provincials, and on the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Back in Sampierdarena he welcomed the missionaries of the third expedition, who sailed on 14 November. He took Don Bosco aboard the steamship *Savoie* to say goodbye. On that occasion, he also met Sister Mary Domenica Mazzarello, who accompanied the sisters' first missionaries to Genoa on their way to Argentina.

The complexity of the work and the concerns connected with the management of such a varied community progressively wore down its director's stamina. Don Bosco, who knew Albera's sensitivity, treated him delicately. He encouraged, advised, and supported him with letters and frequent visits. Despite his precarious health, Albera's years in Genoa showed fruitful initiatives and intense work. He did not spare himself. Every month he received the *rendiconto* of the Salesians, the Sons of Mary, and individual pupils. Every fortnight he gave the community the conference prescribed by the rules. Every morning during the community Mass he went to the confessional. Every evening he gave the Good Night

¹¹ MB XIII 133/BM XIII 102.

talk. On Sundays he explained the Gospel in the morning and gave religious instruction in the afternoon. He made himself available for outside ministry when it was compatible with his primary commitments. Constantly tormented by the nightmare of debts, he regularly visited benefactors and Cooperators. His strong faith, trust in Providence, and confidence in Mary Help of Christians helped him to overcome every obstacle. Often the confreres found him in the silence of the night kneeling before the image of the Virgin to invoke the grace to provide bread for the next day. “He won all hearts. All the doors of the Genoese nobility and the people were always open to the young priest, so modest and so lovable in his austerity.”¹²

Albera received Father Raphael Crippa, who later became a missionary among the lepers of Colombia, into the Sons of Mary program in March 1879. He states:

For two years I was charged to wake him every morning before five o'clock, because besides being the confessor of those in the house, he was also confessor to many outsiders who crowded to his confessional every day. A priest of the house suggested that when I knew Father Albera was not feeling well, I should call him later for the artisans' Mass. But as soon as I acted on this advice, he ordered me to be punctual regardless at the appointed hour ...; as for rest, he would see to it himself. ...

He had a lively spirit of poverty. One morning he came to breakfast before the others and, as there was still no one in the refectory, I prepared to serve him. While I was preparing his place, I carelessly dropped a little piece of bread on the floor. He pointed it out immediately, and when I had picked it up, he asked me to give it to him. I hesitated, but he insisted, telling me he ate the little pieces more willingly because they saved him time; and with a beautiful smile, he added, “We're poor, and we should not turn up our noses at anything.” These last words convinced me: a spiritual conference wouldn't have made a greater impression on me, and I've never forgotten that brief lesson.¹³

One of the primary concerns of the young director was the care of religious and priestly vocations. During the years of his leadership, many diocesan priests and many excellent Salesians came out of the house at Sampierdarena, effectively formed by his spiritual direction.

¹² Garneri 68.

¹³ Garneri 69.

Chapter 3

**PROVINCIAL OF THE SALESIAN HOUSES
IN FRANCE (1881-1892)**

*Father Paul Albera, director of the work of Marseille
and provincial of the Salesian houses in France and Belgium
(1881-1892)*

1881-1884

In the autumn of 1881, Don Bosco assigned Father Albera to direct the Salesian institutions in France. He needed an intelligent, prudent man with a sufficient mastery of the language to expand the Salesian work in

that nation and to adapt the spirit and method of Valdocco to the French character. At the beginning of October, Father Albera handed over the direction of the house in Sampierdarena to Father Dominic Belmonte. Then he went to Turin to meet the Founder. He hoped he would be spared his new obedience, for which he did not consider himself suitable. “What? Have you not yet gone to Marseille?” Don Bosco exclaimed. “Leave immediately!”

The saint had been planning that transfer for a year, knowing that he would have to forestall the opposition of a great benefactress of Genoa and other people devoted to Sampierdarena’s director. He prepared them from afar, with great tact. He also warned Albera to arrange things so that he could leave the work without problems.

Having heard Don Bosco’s order, Albera immediately returned to Genoa. He introduced the new director to the benefactors, especially the main Cooperators gathered at the villa of Fanny Ghiglini. Then he left. In those ten years, he had earned the esteem and affection of the Genoese clergy, the chancery, and the archbishop. The vicar general, saying goodbye, threw his arms around him in tears: “I’m losing a friend!” Father Albera also felt the pain of separation, but he generously made the sacrifice asked of him.¹

He was 36 when he reached Marseille in the second half of October 1881. The four Salesian houses in France – Saint Peter’s Hospice of Nice, Saint Leo’s Oratory of Marseille, Saint Isidore’s Orphanage of Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer, and Saint Joseph’s Orphanage of La Navarre – were detached from the Ligurian Province to set up an independent territory under the direction of Father Albera, appointed as provincial. The confreres entrusted to him, forty-three professed and sixteen novices, confidently awaited him. Father Joseph Bologna, director of Marseille, wrote to Don Bosco to thank him: “Father Albera’s experience, goodness, and virtue make us long for when we’ll have him among us.”

It was not a propitious time for French religious communities. The previous year, the French government had decreed the expulsion of unauthorised congregations. By the end of 1880, 260 convents had been closed and 5,643 religious expelled. The Salesians had come to France without official government permission. Don Bosco maintained that the Salesians were simply a charitable society whose members enjoyed all their civil rights. He assured his men of the protection of Mary Help of Christians:

¹ MB XV 455-456/BM XV 379-380.

“Don’t worry. You’ll have trouble, disturbance, and aggravations, but they won’t drive you away! In a dream, I saw our Lady spreading her mantle over our houses in France.” The anti-clerical newspapers of Marseille had launched a heated campaign against the Salesians, but when Albera reached his headquarters, the situation had calmed down.

For two years, he was at Father Bologna’s side in the house’s leadership, until Bologna was sent to direct the new work in Lille. Then he began serving as both provincial and director, resuming the lifestyle he had led in Sampierdarena. He multiplied his efforts to copy in Saint Leo’s Oratory the atmosphere he had experienced in Valdocco as an adolescent. He succeeded. He knew how to make virtue and piety thrive in young people. He saw the fruit in the many vocations that flourished in the house while he was there.

A French Salesian wrote: “Perhaps there were never as many vocations as in the days of Father Albera. The past pupils who most distinguished themselves for piety and solid Christian life were his.” Another confrere who was a pupil in Marseille when he arrived tells us:

Our superior’s modest and humble demeanour edified me. His constant smile encouraged us, and his gentle, amiable manner attracted us. There was no recreation in which he did not appear among us; but he also came to visit us in other places, especially in the refectory and chapel. He spoke little, but his presence was enough to make us respectful. Father Albera was my confessor all the time I was at Saint Leo’s. He helped me progress in the religious and priestly life with excellent advice and fatherly encouragement, helping me to overcome the inevitable difficulties. The members of the Saint Aloysius and Blessed Sacrament sodalities frequently had him at their weekly meetings, and his words stirred them to piety and virtue.²

He did nothing but apply the “holy tactics” recommended by Don Bosco in his “Confidential Memoirs for the Directors”: getting to know the students and making himself known by them by spending as much time as possible among them; occasionally whispering a few affectionate words into their ears; winning hearts with kindness and gentle manners. ...

Father Albera was a man of great piety and spread devotion to the Sacred Heart, which was especially dear to him. He loved to meditate on French spiritual authors, especially the works of Saint Francis de Sales.

² Garneri 80-81.

His talents, goodness, zeal, love for the young, and the sanctity of his life shone so much in the eyes of the people that they soon called him *le petit Don Bosco* (Little Don Bosco), as if he were the saint's authentic replica.

He also proved to be a good superior. His organisational skills, orderly and intelligent activity, and attention to relationships produced surprising effects. During his tenure as provincial, the Salesian houses in France grew from four to thirteen, despite the climate of suspicion and persecution against religious.

On 7 January 1882, the Founder wrote to him: "I hope to celebrate the feast of Saint Francis [de Sales] with you, trusting that our patron will break the horns of an entire horde of demons which give us no rest."³ Keeping to his word, the saint's presence in Marseille made it possible to purchase two buildings next to Saint Leo's, which were valuable for expanding the work. Don Bosco stayed until 20 February. Albera did not let him out of his sight for a moment. In the Founder's presence, he remained reserved so as not to overshadow him, while accompanying him and always joining his many meetings.

On 24 February Albera sent Cardinal Lawrence Nina an impressive report of all the wonders he had witnessed in Don Bosco's company, especially the many healings carried out with the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. On that occasion, he also experienced the generosity of Providence, since the offerings for the house in Marseille exceeded 42,000 francs. He responded to such generosity by accepting more of the poorest boys free of charge and reducing the fees of others.

Eudoxie Olive, a benefactress of the Salesian house in Marseille, asked Don Bosco for advice on choosing a spiritual director. The saint recollected himself for a moment, then replied: "Take Father Albera as director. He's a man who works miracles in the guidance of souls!"⁴ Correspondence with the many people who relied on his spiritual guidance confirms this flattering judgement. He knew how to accompany souls with enlightened prudence, discretion, a sure hand, and, if necessary, energy and firmness.

The following year Don Bosco returned to France. On 29 March 1883, in the house's chapel in Marseille, he blessed the beautiful statue of Mary Help of Christians by the sculptor Gallard. Then he gave a conference to the Cooperators of the city, recommending the work directed by Albera, burdened by the debt contracted for the construction of the new building

³ MB XV 476/BM XV 397.

⁴ Garneri 79.

intended to accommodate another hundred poor boys. Later he went to Lyons and Paris, where he stayed from 18 April to 25 May. It was a triumphal journey.

Meanwhile, at Saint Leo's Oratory, the month of May was celebrated with particular fervour. In front of the statue blessed by Don Bosco, Albera gave a short, passionate sermon every day that warmed the hearts of the young. In June, month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, he preached with such fervour that a Cooperator won over by his reflections gave the institute a statue of the Sacred Heart. On 22 July Father Albera solemnly blessed it with an instruction on the essence and importance of this devotion.

In September 1883 he took part in the Third General Chapter, held at Valsalice in Turin. He was a member of two committees: the one drawing up regulations for parishes run by the Salesians, and the one that studied "the direction to be given to the working class in Salesian houses and the means to develop vocations in young artisans." When the article on the novitiate was discussed, he presented "the difficulties of getting French aspirants to go to Italy to make their novitiate, due to language, differing educational systems, and especially national antipathy." So the chapter decided to open two novitiates in France, one for the Salesians, one for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The Salesian novitiate was inaugurated on 8 December of that year in Sainte-Marguerite, near Marseille, on a property donated by a Parisian benefactor.

Because of the fame Don Bosco had gained in France and Belgium, furthered by Father Albera's tireless and zealous action and by the good educational results of the Salesian works, Catholic public opinion considered the young congregation as a providential instrument offered to the Church in a difficult historical moment. Requests for foundations multiplied.

In January 1884 Father Albera took over the orphanage at Lille, previously managed by the Daughters of Charity, and entrusted it to Father Bologna's direction; it was reopened as a trade school. The following December, he took charge of Saint Peter's Hospice in Menilmontant, a working-class district of Paris, which Don Bosco wanted to call the Salesian Oratory of Saints Peter and Paul.

At the beginning of 1884 his beloved mother died. Albera reached None just in time to attend the funeral. He could not stay long with his family because in those same days the work at Lille was being dedicated.

Even that year, Don Bosco wanted to visit France despite his poor health. He arrived in Nice on 5 March. From the 15th to the 25th, he stayed in

Marseille. Albera tried to see that he got time to rest. He also organized a consultation with Doctor Paul Matthew Combal of the University of Montpellier, who visited the saint and diagnosed severe physical exhaustion. Father Barberis, Don Bosco's traveling companion, testifies: "On that occasion I especially witnessed how much Father Albera loved Don Bosco. How many times he attended to our dear Father. He took Don Bosco to visit various families and benefactors who were treating him to lunch. In these appointments Father Albera supported the conversation wonderfully and with spirit and grace."

In June 1884 cholera struck Marseille. Father Albera immediately notified Don Bosco, who promised special prayers for the Salesians and their pupils. He guaranteed the safety of anyone who wore the medal of Mary Help of Christians, often repeated the ejaculation *Maria Auxilium christianorum, ora pro nobis*, and received the sacraments. Father Albera reported the saint's words to his confreres, benefactors, parishioners, and pupils, and the disease affected no one in the house.

He wrote to his father to inform him of the cholera's rage, the flight from Marseille of over 100,000 inhabitants, and the number of deaths in the city: from ninety to one hundred every day. He added:

In our oratory, thanks to the protection of Mary Help of Christians that she promised us, and thanks to the precautions taken in time to avoid contagion, we've not had even one case. I will say better: four times, we've seen all the symptoms of cholera in some youngsters, but to our consolation these symptoms completely disappeared within a few hours. ... It is a miracle of our Lady. In our house we have over 150 boys who can't leave, either because they are from the city of Marseille itself, or because relatives can't take them away. Even of those who went to their own homes, their health is excellent, and the terrible disease has struck no one. ... More consoling news: none of our benefactors and friends so far have fallen ill.⁵

In September the epidemic ended, leaving many orphans without support. Albera took in a good number of them. To provide for their livelihood, he launched an appeal to the French Cooperators, who generously came to his aid. On 3 December Don Bosco spoke to Father Charles Viglietti about the French provincial's financial problems: "How great is Providence! Father Albera wrote to me he could no longer continue and needed 1,000 francs immediately; and a lady from Marseille who had been longing to see her brother, a religious, in Paris, happy to have received such

⁵ *Bulletin Salésien* 1884, 91.

a grace from our Lady, brought him the 1,000 francs he needed the same day.”⁶

1885-1888

On 28 February 1885, some French newspapers announced Don Bosco's death. It was fake news, but it produced a lot of despair. Albera promptly denied it at a meeting with his patrons and announced the Founder's desire to pay a visit to Marseille around Easter. But the rumour of his beloved father's death had a severe impact on his frail health. Father John Baptist Grosso wrote to a benefactress on 3 March: “This morning Father Albera had a hard time saying Mass. He can hardly speak because of a sore throat, and he did not sleep a wink tonight. He's not in bed because when he's lying down his kidneys hurt, which he has had for a long time and add to his suffering.”

Don Bosco kept his word. He reached Marseille on 3 April, two days before Easter, and it was a glorious celebration for everyone. In those days Albera did not let go of him for a moment. On Wednesday the 8th, he took him to the Olive family for lunch. After the meal, the five sons and four daughters, in turn, met privately with the saint to discern their vocations. The spiritual quality of those young people edified him. Three of them became priests, and two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. On Friday the 10th, he visited the novices at Sainte-Marguerite. On Sunday the 12th, Albera organised a lunch in honour of Don Bosco for the benefactors in the Salesian house. In his address on the occasion, Mr. Bergasse praised the students of the institute: “These dear young people are loved and admired by everyone. It is enough to hear them sing, to see them in church, respectful, modest, disciplined, to say: These are Don Bosco's sons!” It was an indirect tribute to their director, so attentive to the education of young people and so capable of forming them to a sense of piety and a love for the liturgy and Gregorian chant. Father Grosso, the music teacher of the house and founder of the institute's schola cantorum, wrote about Father Albera:

One hallmark of his spirit of piety was the great commitment he had to promoting respect for religious services. He enjoyed them when they were carefully prepared and turned out solemn and devout. On

⁶ MB XVII 389.

solemnities he gladly attended services at Saint Joseph's Parish, where the boys of Saint Leo's Oratory in Marseille sang and served the sacred rites. He was full of encouragement and praise for students and teachers. He showed all his enthusiasm and his satisfaction at hearing Gregorian melodies, which, precisely in those years, Benedictine Dom Joseph Pothier and his confreres from Solesmes were reviving in their ancient purity and expression.⁷

On the morning of 20 April, Don Bosco left for Turin. Albera could not hold back his tears. In early July a smallpox epidemic hit Saint Leo's Oratory. Don Bosco assured his prayers, and the thirty sick boys recovered. Then cholera returned. Albera wrote to John Bonetti: "I can't take it anymore. I don't feel like continuing at this rate until September. But God's will be done." To his preoccupation for the health of the students were added the financial problems that always nagged him. Since most of the boys were orphans, their upkeep weighed on the shoulders of the director, who was constantly looking for help.

In mid-March 1886, despite his physical weakness, Don Bosco set off in small stages on another journey to France. After stopping in the houses of Liguria, he reached Nice on 20 March. On Monday the 29th, he went on to Toulon. He arrived in Marseille on 31 March. The boys welcomed him with a spectacular entertainment program and offered him a thousand francs they had saved up for the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. It was Albera's idea. On 7 April the saint went on to Spain, where he received a solemn welcome. On 8 May he returned to Montpellier, and from there he sent a donation of 10,000 lire to Albera for the needs of the province. On 16 May he returned to Turin. It was his last trip to France.

Each visit of Don Bosco aroused enthusiasm and stimulated the zeal of his sons. That year Father Albera opened the carpentry, tailoring, and shoemaking workshops in Paris, and then he blessed the new buildings and workshops in Lille. In August at Marseille he summoned public officials, friends, and benefactors for an expo of the work of the artisan pupils and the distribution of prizes.

After this event, he left for Turin, where the Fourth General Chapter would take place. We have his testimony of the method followed in the chapter discussions:

Each one calmly and respectfully expounded his own point of view.

⁷ Garneri 91.

At the end of the discussion, we expected Don Bosco to resolve the difficulties, decide the open questions, and with certainty and precision show the way forward. These assemblies were so many schools where our revered Master, feeling that the day when he would have to leave his beloved disciples, seemed to want to condense his teachings and all his long experience into a few words.⁸

In 1887 Don Bosco, who could no longer travel, also wanted to meet periodically with Albera. He summoned him to Turin every two months. In the latter part of the year, Albera was in constant apprehension about his beloved father's health. When he took leave of him at the end of his November visit, he saw him crying and complaining because he did not have the strength to tell him so many things he wanted to. It was a painful separation for both of them.

On 5 December the saint celebrated his last Mass, and on the 21st he took to his bed for good. Father Albera went to visit him on 28 December. He returned on 12 January. He wrote to Mrs. Olive: "I'm lucky enough to see our venerable Don Bosco. What consolation and what pain at the same time! He's extremely weak; he can hardly eat and rests very little. We have to pray for him; we're far from seeing indications of the cure we wish for."

Then he described what had happened between them in that last meeting:

After I expressed to him how sorry all the boys at Marseille are about his illness, I spoke to him about our dear benefactors and Cooperators. I named for him several families who treasure his work, among others the Olive family. I could not leave him ignorant of how much they have prayed for him and how one of them wished to offer his own life to obtain his healing. Our venerable father looked at me smiling, and after a few moments of silence, barely holding back the emotion, he replied: "I know that in Marseille they love Don Bosco very much, and that they pray for me, and how good the Olive family is towards me: but ... but ..." This reticence and the movement of his head that went along with it made me understand that there was no longer any hope for his recovery.

He did not have the comfort of being in Valdocco on 31 January 1888, when the saint passed away. Don Bosco would have wanted him at hand. On the evening of the 28th he whispered several times: "Paolino! Paolino, where are you? Why do you not come?" Father Grosso, vice director at Marseille, wrote:

⁸ *Lasagna* 214.

The last time Father Albera saw Don Bosco, he was heartbroken. He did not know how to decide whether to return to France, fearing he wouldn't see him again. Don Bosco, too, understood what was going on in Father Albera's soul and did not have the heart to impose this sacrifice on him. An old companion and friend – Father Cerruti – intervened for him to make up his mind and assured Father Albera that he would advise him by telegram in case of danger. Trusting this promise, he left.

But when he received the news on 31 January of Don Bosco's death without forewarning, he could not find any peace.

Father Albera arrived in Turin just in time to view Don Bosco's body and attend the funeral on 2 February. Dejected, he immediately returned to Marseille for a commemoration held there on 8 February in Saint Joseph's Parish, with the participation of the bishop, the canons of the cathedral, the college of parish priests, and representatives of religious orders.

Don Bosco's death did not stop the development of the Salesian work in France, which flourished the more under the impetus of Father Albera. In the first months of 1888, he promoted a series of pastorally beneficial initiatives. Abbé Louis Mendre, parish priest of a working-class neighbourhood in Marseille where many Italian immigrants lived, asked him to send a priest every Sunday to take care of them. He immediately sent a confrere to preach and hear confessions in Italian. Often he went there personally, despite his precarious health. He also accepted the pastoral care of the Italian miners of Valdonne. He wanted to preach missions himself among the workers of the Montredon factories during the Easter season. He went there on Saturday evenings and heard confessions late into the night. On Sundays, he got up before 4:00 A.M. and went immediately to the confessional. At five o'clock, he celebrated Mass, distributed Communion, and concluded with a brief exhortation and Eucharistic Benediction.

He also paid particular attention to the numerous Italian priests who had emigrated to Marseille from southern Italy as assistant priests. He preached retreats to them in Italian and helped them in delicate circumstances with advice and material aid. For his pastoral zeal, his tact in dealing with people, his culture, and the spiritual charm he exercised, various French priests, many Catholic families among the laity of Marseille, and most of the Salesian Cooperators chose him as their spiritual director. We have traces of this in surviving correspondence, which reveals the vigour of his spiritual guidance.

His activity also led to new Salesian institutions. In February 1888 he opened the Grevigney agricultural school in Burgundy. In the following

months, he found the funds for the reconstruction and modernization of the workshops of the house at Lille, which a fire had destroyed. He opened other works in the following years: at Le Rossignol in 1889, at Dinan in 1890; and four houses in 1891: Liege (Belgium), Oran (Algeria), Ruitz, and Saint-Pierre de Canon.

1889-1892

Father Albera became the point of reference for the Salesian Cooperators movement in France and Belgium. When he was summoned to Turin in April 1889 by Father Rua to deal with urgent business, his departure from Marseille caused concern in the Committee of the Patronesses. They were afraid of losing him. From Valdocco he reassured them: "It is not a question of a change. Don't be afraid of anything in that regard." The secretary of the Committee wrote in the minutes of the meeting: "Father Albera's presence and experience are indispensable amid the ever additional difficulties of the present moment. Don Bosco sent him, and he continues to represent his paternal concern in Saint Leo's Oratory, and better than anyone else he appeals to us his with special care."⁹

He took part in the Fifth General Chapter in September 1889. He prepared a report on the state of the novitiate houses and was a member of the committee asked to draw up the regulations for the Salesian houses. Back in France, he oversaw various projects: the renovation of the workshops in Marseille, the opening of a new festive oratory in the city, the start of the Sons of Mary program for adult vocations, and the organisation of the agricultural orphanage in Le Rossignol.

When Father Michael Rua undertook his first journey as rector major in France, Spain, Belgium, and England in February 1890, Father Albera accompanied him to La Navarre, Toulon, Marseille, and the novitiate. In February 1891, Father Rua was again in Nice, and he proposed the transfer of the Salesian novitiate to the ancient Benedictine abbey of Saint-Pierre de Canon. The move took place the next month, and the house of Sainte-Marguerite became the novitiate of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

At the end of April 1890, the abbot of Solesmes, Dom Joseph Poithier, promoter of the reform of Gregorian chant, visited Marseille. He was invited to the Salesian house to give a theoretical-practical conference on the

⁹ Garneri 117.

interpretative method of liturgical chant. The provincial wanted confreres, novices, and many guests to attend. The event had a major impact. The Salesian oratory was famous in those years for the quality of the sacred music of its schola cantorum, inspired specifically by the Solesmes method and directed by Father Grosso, who had founded a similar schola in the diocesan parish of Saint Joseph, which became a model imitated in other French parishes and dioceses.

On 1 July 1891 Father John Bonetti, spiritual director of the Salesian Congregation, passed away suddenly in Turin. Bonetti had been a close friend of Albera since their secondary school days. They had shared the best years of their youth. They had been together at the minor seminary of Mirabello between 1863 and 1868. His death grieved Albera very much.

On 15 August Albera went to Paris to lay the foundation stone for the new buildings in Menilmontant, while in Marseille three Salesians, all former students of Saint Leo, were preparing to sail to Oran, Algeria, to open a new work, the first on the African continent. Albera returned to Marseille, and on 22 August he bid them farewell in the presence of a large audience with a speech on the supernatural beauty of evangelization.¹⁰

Albera also promoted a multitude of initiatives in 1892: a great trade expo in the house in Nice; the dedication of a new festive oratory in the same city, with Father Rua in attendance; the receptions of the veil by the first French postulants in the novitiate of Sainte-Marguerite.

The Sixth General Chapter began in Turin in August. On the evening of the 29th, the chapter unanimously elected Father Albera spiritual director general of the Congregation in Father Bonetti's place. At Marseille, they received the news with sorrow, especially Mrs. Olive, who grieved because she was losing her spiritual guide. Father Albera wrote her a letter that reveals the quality of his ministry of accompaniment:

I know my nomination has saddened you. ... I know the thought of my leaving Marseille hurts your good heart. In this circumstance my words of consolation have certainly not sunk in. ... I will limit myself only to telling you that the good Lord won't be very pleased if you act in this circumstance like a young woman who doesn't have a solid piety and well-established virtue. You have reached a certain age; you are the mother of a large family, which with the grace of God you have raised in piety and virtue; you are the wife of a great Christian. Your situation

¹⁰ *Bulletin Salésien* 1891, 180.

oblige you to possess a certain level of virtue. In the present case, you must show this virtue to everyone by courageously submitting to the will of God. Your mind must win over the heart; above all, it would be unseemly for you to show your grief.

After all, I too suffer from having eventually to separate myself from so many people that Divine Providence has placed in my path to help me do a little good. The sacrifice is therefore reciprocal, and we have to bear it in a laudable Christian way.

For the guidance of your soul, God won't leave you bereft. Every good priest can direct you, as did poor Father Albera. You'll have to struggle to put into practice what I've always recommended. Approach the sacraments with confidence, and don't believe that the good Lord requires a disposition that you can't muster. The sacraments were instituted for human beings and not for the angels, who don't need them. You need a calm and trusting piety: total abandonment to the will of the confessor who directs you in the name of God. I will come soon, and we'll talk at our ease. But I wish one thing from you, to find you calm and resigned. Pray every day for me; I assure you that distance won't change my thoughts, feelings and above all my prayers for you and your family.¹¹

The Committee of Patronesses greeted him at their 14 October meeting, expressing deep regret at having to lose him. He comforted and encouraged them to prepare the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the Salesian house with solemnity. He took part in these celebrations and then left for Turin. From there he wrote a letter that shows how much it cost him to leave Marseille, a place and a community he was deeply attached to. He told them:

I arrived in Turin during the beautiful Christmas holidays; this will certainly not make me forget Marseille. It seems to me that, as at other times, I'm only passing through here and will have to leave momentarily for Marseille. Sweet illusion, but the disillusionment that follows is cruel. Here I live with memories of Marseille. At every moment, so many things remind me of your goodness and charity.¹²

When he left for Turin, those who accompanied him to the station

¹¹ Garneri 124-125.

¹² Garneri 126.

realized his grief and saw him cry as he left the institute so dear to him. In the French Salesian Bulletin we read this narrative of the ten years he spent in France:

Saint Leo's Oratory in Marseille had its Don Bosco, and this explains the wonderful progress of which we're the happy witnesses. Loved by our young students, venerated by our dear Cooperators, enlightened adviser to all our confreres in France, this son of Don Bosco was the supernatural engine thanks to which everything could proceed *slowly* without uncertainty (so great were the obstacles and the difficulties constantly renewed), but surely: or to put it in the words of the Holy Spirit, *softly and strongly*.

Here is the secret of his success in France. After his death, Father Louis Cartier wrote of him:

He was a man of action, above all of interior action. The spiritual and supernatural formation of his confreres and of the young was undoubtedly his greatest concern. Early on, he devoted himself to the study of ascetical authors and was formed from the best of them. He was eager to know all the ascetical works published by the wisest writers, and not only read them but also annotated them and extracted notes that were useful for his monthly conferences to his confreres and the various religious associations. In his conferences, frequent and substantial, he opened up to his confreres the beauty, grandeur, and dignity of their vocation and backed his words with personal example, finding time, amid his many occupations, to attend scrupulously to the duties of religious life. He was a vigilant custodian of religious discipline. He frequently visited the various houses and made the Founder's spirit of charity and sacrifice reign in them. The Rule and the regulations were something sacred for him, but he wanted them to be observed with love and joy. He was compassionate towards human weakness and knew how to overlook many small, inevitable things.¹³

Father Albera had the gift of spiritual fatherhood and was an effective guide on the path to perfection. He was the first to implement in the French communities the article of the Constitutions which recommended during the monthly retreat (called the Exercise for a Happy Death) a half an hour of reflection on one's progress or regress in virtue. Every Wednesday he

¹³ *L'Adoption*, Decembre 1921.

visited the novices: he listened to them, encouraged them, instructed them with sermons and conferences, and advised them. He also did the same with the confreres of the houses, whom he nourished spiritually and urged to be exemplary and zealous in their duties. He cared lovingly for the Christian formation of the young. Father Barberis wrote:

I heard Father Albera's preaching many times at Marseille. I was edified and admired it for the practicality of what he said. He was zealous in encouraging young people to virtue. ... He had a significant influence on young people, a result of his virtue, of the persuasive strength and dignity of his word, which very well reflected his character, at the same time both calm and strong.

He was a passionate promoter of vocations, as Father Grosso testifies:

He chose the best the students of the upper grades who showed promise of success. ... He often gathered them for conferences, admitted them to the confreres' retreat, and helped and counselled them paternally as Don Bosco used to do at the Turin Oratory. He also fostered vocations for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. For some years the sisters who went to Marseille in 1881 did not have the opportunity to open a festive oratory in their temporary home. Father Albera provided for this work, as well. ... He set up a house that was spacious enough for the sisters to open their festive oratory which, when it flourished sufficiently, became a breeding ground for religious vocations.

To support the works and to maintain the novices and the many orphans entrusted to him by Providence, he was constantly searching for funds. He used all the resources of his creativity to extend the Salesians' charitable activity. The Cooperators loved him, captivated by his talents, especially by the affability of his smile. They longed for his visits and enjoyed his pleasant conversation, which possessed "a certain austerity which, however, did not lack either the seriousness of the occasion or due humour, but was always edifying, because he possessed the secret of lifting one up to God," as Father Louis Cartier recalls.¹⁴

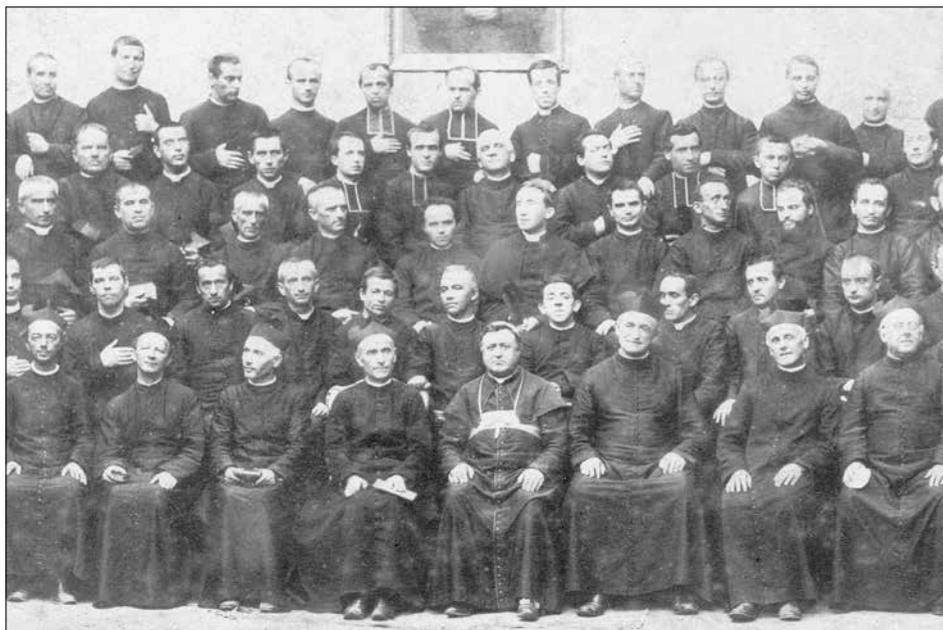
His decade in France had been productive of experience and culture. The contact with different ecclesial and religious environments, with personalities of culture and administration, had enriched his skills. As provincial Father Paul Albera carried out an incessant action in promoting

¹⁴ Garneri 130-131.

the Salesian Family and of pastoral service. He used everything – frequent visits to the houses, monthly circulars letters, the preaching of retreats, personal conversations, and conferences to the Cooperators – to form the confreres and others in the Salesian spirit, nurture their faith, increase their educational and charitable commitment, and direct them towards the service of God and neighbour.

Through his spiritual direction of the Salesians and the Salesian sisters, youngsters, and every category of people, he had become an expert guide of souls. He was particularly involved in the care of the novices and young priests, in order to mould them as disciples of Don Bosco and consolidate their interior life. Trials and difficulties of all kinds had strengthened his personal piety and trust in God. Now the Lord was entrusting him with the delicate mission of spiritually directing the entire Congregation.

Chapter 4

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR
OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION**

*Father Paul Albera (second from left in the front row)
with the members of the Tenth General Chapter (1904)*

1893-1895

In his first years in his new office, Father Albera felt a little lost. For twenty years, he had been very active, acting directly to inspire and lead people. Now he was forced into a rather secluded life with little pastoral ministry.

His *Confidential Notes*, begun in February 1893, written in French until

1899 and in English from 1903, reveal his feelings and suffering. They are also a valuable witness to his relentless work in self-improvement. Thanks to this spiritual document, we can follow him systematically during the eighteen years he exercised the responsibility of spiritual director of the Congregation.¹

This intimate diary opens on 17 February: “Today begins the month of Saint Joseph. I intend to imitate this great saint in union with God. When will I be able to say: *mortui estis et vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo Jesu?* For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3).” A few days later, he reproached himself for “having spent the day wastefully,” for “having found himself weak in certain struggles,” for “not having worked usefully.” He adds, however: “I’ve promised truly to do God’s will manifested through my superiors. Others on their journey did not find only roses ...; the virtues and patience of others must serve as an encouragement for me.”

On 27 February he comments: “It has been three months since I left Marseille. I’ve not yet made much progress for myself and nothing, almost nothing, for others.” On the eve of the feast of Saint Joseph, we read a sad note: “I can’t protect myself from a deep melancholy. I think about what I was doing in other years on that day! How miserable I am!”²

He gladly accepted the assignment to preach the retreats in the formation houses at Foglizzo, Ivrea, Valsalice, and San Benigno, even though he was convinced that he did not have the skill for that type of ministry. Part of his notes of these instructions have been preserved, in which he lays out the classic themes of consecrated life around a fundamental idea: “*Everything and only for Jesus!*”

After presiding over the funeral service for Father August Czartoryski, a prince of Poland, on 27 April 1893, he wrote in his notebook: “I meditated a lot on the great sacrifice he made to be a Salesian. And you? ... What sacrifices have you made for God and the salvation of souls?” He often thinks of death. “Prince Czartoryski edified me a lot for his simplicity: he did not care about his rank, his nobility! What a lesson to your pride!”

The next day he celebrated a Mass in suffrage of Father Angelo Savio, who had died in Ecuador: “Another opportunity to reflect on myself. My

¹ ASC B0320101-105, *Notes confidentielles prises pour le bien de mon âme*, ms aut. P. Albera 1893-1899; B0320106-109, *Useful Notes for my soul*, ms P. Albera 1902-1910.

² ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 17.02.1893.

God! Death is approaching for me too. Will I have done some good? Will I be calm in that moment?" On 29 April he witnessed the blessing of the Salesians' sepulchre in the public cemetery of Turin: "In that place," he wrote, "a place is ready for me there!"

The thought of death often recurs in these early years in Turin. Every occasion reminds him of it, perhaps because of the melancholy state that oppresses him, perhaps because of the health problems that are tormenting him. 6 May: "Today I meditated on the death of the bad priest. I was frightened. My God! Will I have the misfortune to find at such a terrible moment that I've been evil? I will pray a lot to the good Lord to preserve me. Today I feel much downhearted. I've not overruled some proud thoughts that occasioned it. I think too much about Marseille."

At the end of the month, Father Rua sent him to France. He arrived in Marseille on 29 May. He visited the novitiate of Sainte-Marguerite. "I satisfied my heart a little too much; I felt a lot of joy. The affection for this house must become purer." He spoke to the sisters about the importance of meditation: daily meditation is more useful, he said, than even Communion. In fact, one can receive Communion even in a state of sin, "while no soul who does her meditation well can live in mortal sin."³ Then he preached the retreat to the novices and visited the various Salesian houses in France.

In July he retired to Rivalta, near Turin, to draft the text of the *Deliberations* of the last general chapter and to write a circular letter on retreats. In those days, he read Father Joseph Cafasso's *Meditations for Retreats for the Clergy*, published by Canon Joseph Allamano. He felt deeply involved in what he read. He wrote in his diary that his reading had convinced him of the need to dedicate himself only to the service of the Lord. Between August and September, he preached retreats to Salesian priests, to those about to be ordained, and to the French confreres. On 12 October, he accompanied Father Rua and Bishop Cagliari to London for the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart in Battersea. On that occasion, he noted in his diary the "need to learn English."

On the return journey, he visited the houses of Belgium and presided over the retreats of the confreres of that nation. He used to introduce himself with a conference on the importance of retreats:

In them we recollect our spirit, we enter the depths of our hearts, we plumb all their hiding places, and with the grace of God we come out

³ ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 29.05.1893.

renewed in mind and heart. It is true that all year we are engaged with the things of God. ... It is true that particular practices of piety are prescribed for us; prayer is our daily nourishment. ... Yes, throughout the year we work for God, we amass treasures of merit; but alas! We are men, and that is enough. Over time, our fervour fades, languishes, and almost by an inclination of nature bends towards indifference.

He suggested the indispensable dispositions of mind: resolute desire to make the retreat well; complete recollection combined with silence; the exact observance of the timetable; absolute confidence in God; courage and generosity.⁴

On the evening of 31 December 1893, he drew up a spiritual examination of the past year, stressing the aspects he intended to correct:

Last day of the year. I've thought about the past a bit. I was not very faithful to my vocation. I should have used this year better. All my occupations should have led me to devotion, to union with Jesus Christ. Everything I saw in this year, especially in Father Rua, was done to edify me and encourage me to do well. Here less concern for the material that previously absorbed all the energy of my spirit: Therefore, I should have made progress that is much more personal, fought my passions, and trained myself in spirituality. Why did I not? Even for my office, I'm not happy. I fear suffering too much; I've not yet entirely overcome my excessive shyness. What a tendency to discourage myself from seeing everything critically: what I do, and (unheard of!) with so much pride! ... I also find that my heart is not yet truly free, not free of its affections. It still has too many likes and dislikes. *Miserere mei, Deus*. [O God, have mercy on me] ... I'm not happy with myself.⁵

In the early days of 1894, a bad flu gripped him. We see the consequences throughout the year: weakness, physical ailments, and melancholy. Despite all this, he completed the tasks entrusted to him by Father Rua between April and June: visiting houses and preaching retreats in France, Algeria, and Sicily. He returned to Turin with his health compromised and continual stomach ailments. In September he preached the retreats to those to be ordained.

⁴ ASC B0480111, *Tutto per Gesù: Istruzioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali*, ms aut. P. Albera, 4-6.

⁵ ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 31.12.1893.

In February 1895 he accompanied Father Rua to the Holy Land. It was a demanding but spiritually fulfilling journey. They landed in Alexandria, Egypt, on 24 February and were guests of the Jesuits. On the 27th, they sailed for Jaffa. Father Charles Gatti welcomed them. He later testified:

From the first conversation with Father Albera, I understood I was in the presence of a superior who spoke candidly to me, and kindly listened to my stories and somewhat strong expressions, dictated by my (perhaps excessive) sensitivity. For this, I placed all my trust in him and then wrote to him freely with no fear, because I was certain that he would use it only for my good. How many times my confidence in Father Albera and his goodness were my comfort, my salvation! Father Albera possessed the intuition lacking in those who have not been abroad for some time. He understood why I have dedicated myself to studying languages and did not blame me; on the contrary, he encouraged me to use them to do good.⁶

In the following weeks they visited the holy places and the works founded by Canon Anthony Belloni, now entrusted to the Salesian Congregation: Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Cremisan, and Beitgemal. Father Albera had the joy of being able to celebrate Mass at the Holy Sepulchre, after having served Father Rua's Mass. During the pilgrimage, he wrote many letters that testify to the emotion of being able to pray and meditate on the Gospel at the places linked to Jesus' life.

At the end of their journey, at the end of March, he stopped in France for the novices' retreat. On 23 May in Turin he witnessed the episcopal consecration of Bishop James Costamagna, chosen as vicar apostolic of Mendez and Gualaquiza, Ecuador: "I enjoyed the ceremony, I reflected, and I was humbled by comparing myself to him, so deserving and so humble at the same time."⁷

Then he left for France. He preached the retreat to the novices and visited the confreres in Marseille and Nice. At the end of August, he was in Turin for the retreats of those to be ordained.

In September 1895 he took part in the Seventh General Chapter. He chaired the committee charged with studying how to make religious instruction in Salesian schools "more responsive to the particular needs of our times and the current duties of a young Catholic." His experience and intelligent intuitions concerning the challenges that the new generations

⁶ Garneri 148.

⁷ ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 23.05.1895.

would have to face allowed him to suggest some norms that remained in force for years.

After the general chapter, he took part in the retreats at San Benigno Canavese, and then he preached to the French novices. He returned to Turin in mid-October in an increasingly fragile state of health: sleepless nights and sluggishness in the afternoon hours. On 7 November, he received the tragic news of the death of Bishop Louis Lasagna in a train accident in Brazil. Lasagna had been his pupil in Mirabello, and he felt a deep affection for him. He was shocked:

At first, we did not want to believe it. That courageous missionary, who marched through America by leaps and bounds, planting schools and works of religion and civilization; that missionary who never said enough, whose mind still dreamed of many other wonderful designs to win souls for God, to save poor and marginalized youth. The bishop on whom the Vatican had based so many beautiful hopes; that apostle, who was in the fullness of his strength and his effectiveness, could not have died. Finally, it was necessary to recognise the reality of the awful disaster.⁸

On 4 December, during the funeral service at the church of Mary Help of Christians, Father Albera delivered a much-appreciated eulogy. Father Rua instructed him to collect documentation to write the bishop's biography.

In December 1895 he led the retreat of the candidates to the priesthood and noted in his diary: "I'm still a long way from being a good retreat director. I want to work harder to make myself capable of such an important office."⁹ He always felt inadequate, but thirty years later one participant wrote this testimony:

In the retreat preparatory for priestly ordination, made at Avigliana in 1895 (we were seven or eight candidates), we admired, besides his zeal in dictating the conferences alone, also the dear familiarity and pleasantness with which Father Albera spent time with us in those ten days, doing what Don Bosco did in the early years of the Oratory with his first clerics. It pained us to witness the serenity with which he concealed the discomforts of cold, food, and fatigue, but we also admired it, while he was very careful so that nothing was lacking for us.¹⁰

⁸ *Lasagna* 8.

⁹ ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 8.12.1895.

¹⁰ Garneri 152.

In his personal examination drawn up on 31 December, Albera wrote:

1895 heaves itself into eternity. For me, it was full of joys and sorrows. I was able to see the house in Marseille again, where I left most of my heart. From there I went to the Holy Land and was edified by the company of Father Rua. What a spirit of sacrifice and mortification! What zeal for the salvation of souls; and above all, what a balanced personality! I saw Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth: what sweet memories! I was able to take part in the Congress at Bologna. I have an unforgettable memory of it. ... I was able to preach retreats to the sisters in France. This was good for my soul. I was able to take care of the candidates to the priesthood, and I was much more satisfied with the previous years. I wrote a few pages about Bishop Lasagna.

1895 also ends without my most serious weaknesses being corrected. My pride is still of the highest degree. My character is always difficult, even with Father Rua. My piety is always superficial and doesn't significantly influence my conduct or my actions, which are all still human and unworthy of a religious. My charity is unpredictable and full of partiality. I'm not mortified in eyes, taste, words.

Illnesses have increased:

I could have died at any moment in the state I'm in. This is not an idea, it is reality, and I'm aware of it. In the new year I want to start to live healthier, to die better. I remember having directed two of my confreres who made the vow to be slaves of Mary. They edified me with their zeal, with their devotion. Their blood has sealed their commitment, and I, who have had the air of being their teacher and director in all of this, am nothing. ... Mary, my mother, don't allow me to have the shame of recognizing myself as inferior in virtue to my subordinates: give me a great love for you. *Domina mea, numquam quiescam donec obtinuero verum amorem erga te* [My Lady, I will have no rest until I've achieved a true love for you].¹¹

1896-1900.

He began 1896 with this plan of action: "I want at all costs to progress in

¹¹ ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles*, 31.12.1895.

devotion, humility, and the spirit of sacrifice.” His health concerned him. On 19 January he wrote in his diary: “Today I don’t feel very well. My God, I place myself in your hands: your will be done! I accept death at the moment and in the way you want.” 31 January: “It is the eighth anniversary of Don Bosco’s death. I thought that I, too, could die at any moment with *my ailment*. Am I prepared? I think not. Therefore I must work.”

We do not know what that *ailment* was. On 7 February he confesses: “I don’t know how to talk about it to Father Rua. In good conscience I feel obliged to do so.” He told him about it two days later: “I’m glad I revealed it; whatever happens now, he won’t be surprised.” He went to visit Dr. Fissore on 10 February: “He made me understand that I must be resigned. I can no longer do as I did in the past, and it is useless to attempt an operation.”¹²

On 28 February Father Rua instructed him to compose the *Director’s Manual*. He was able to start work only on 1 November, because illness and frequent absences from Turin prevented him. He collected materials from the Salesian Constitutions, general chapter deliberations, and the circular letters of Don Bosco and Father Rua. He accumulated a huge amount of documentation, but his sense of inadequacy and concern for absolute fidelity to the charismatic tradition of the Founder made the project drag on. It was published only in 1915.

“I frankly admit,” he wrote in the introduction, “that mixing my poor advice with the teachings of Don Bosco and Father Rua seemed to me almost a profanation. Hence I did it with no little repugnance and only to comply with the advice and prayers of some good, respected confreres.”¹³

Between March and April, he preached retreats in Avigliana, Ivrea, and Foglizzo, where he replaced the seriously ill director for several weeks. “He stayed with us for a considerable time,” wrote Father Vincent Cimatti, then a novice. “He entertained us with funny stories from his life in France. He no longer seemed an ascetic, but the most affable and generous of confreres.”

Father Louis Costa adds:

I remember the favourable impression that Father Albera’s edifying, learned, and profound teaching made on everyone. Everyone listened with eager and visible pleasure. . . . His discourse, finely and exquisitely polished and presented, his modesty and humility that did not lack

¹² ASC B0320102, *Notes confidentielles*, 31.01.1896.

¹³ *Manual* 6.

propriety and stately decorum, commanded respect while gaining the affection and confidence of those who approached him. In several cases regarding abuses and non-observance that he corrected, and in the presence of some confreres whom he effectively reminded of their duty, I heard them comment favourably on his energy, almost surprised to see in him, so delicate and frail, so much firmness and willpower.¹⁴

On 6 May he left for France, where he remained until the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians. Illness continued to torment him, and on 3 June he was operated on at the Chieri hospital. After a long convalescence, on 5 July he was able to return to Valdocco. In the following months, he preached retreats in Italy and France.

On the last day of 1896, he wrote in his diary:

Last year my health was terrible, and meanwhile I felt I had more courage and energy. The various retreats that I preached were stamped with a certain fervour. Now, to tell the truth, I'm doing better, despite some pain, but I'm weak in spirit. ... During the year, I preached two sets of retreats in Avigliana, two in the novitiates, and two during the vacations. God visibly helped me. ...

I had the strength to obey Father Rua by undergoing a painful operation, and God's grace helped me. After all, I knew how my nature is weak, and how suffering repulses me. I went to Marseille three times; it is extraordinary. Perhaps I went there too willingly. A little bit of good was accomplished, thanks be to God, everywhere and especially in the novitiates of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I promise you, my God, that I no longer have preferences. I will go wherever you want, and I will likewise work willingly everywhere. ... For the new year I would like to obtain more courage and energy from Mary Help of Christians. I will also pray for some wisdom to do what my office requires. My God, how do you put up with such a stupid, negligent servant? I'm ashamed to talk to others about zeal to save souls, I who spend my life doing nothing for the well-being of souls. So, Mary, my good and sweet Mama, give me a bit of zeal.¹⁵

On 1st January 1897 he articulated these resolutions: "I outlined the program of the year to the confreres, and I want to be the first to follow

¹⁴ Garneri 157-158.

¹⁵ ASC B0320102, *Notes confidentielles*, 31.12.1896.

it: 1. More willingness to avoid sin, correspond to the graces of God, and advance in the path of perfection. 2. To serve better my mother the Congregation, practicing its spirit and having its interests at heart. 3) Work better for the salvation of souls. Piety, humility, and sacrifice.”¹⁶

Despite his poor health, between March and June he preached several retreats for young Salesians in Avigliana, Foglizzo, Ivrea, Valsalice, Sainte-Marguerite, Saint-Pierre de Canon, and again in Avigliana. In July, he took part in the jubilee celebrations of the hospice of Sampierdarena, a work he had begun twenty-five years earlier. He was happy: “It was one of the best celebrations. God truly blessed the efforts of Don Bosco and his sons in Sampierdarena: 5,000 pupils and 300 priests!” He continued with retreats for the confreres in Italy and Belgium. In November, Father Rua sent him to France as his representative for the blessing of a new house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

In December, he preached again to the candidates for the priesthood. We have the testimony of Father Terrone:

What beautiful days were those for us of December 1897! Father Albera presided over our retreat, preached three times a day, spent all the recreations with us, treating us with great affability and cheering us on with pleasant anecdotes of Salesian life.

It was a very cold winter, but we could not think of heating the house. Father Albera felt sorry for us, pitied us, asked us whether we were sufficiently bundled up, whether we needed anything; just as the most tender of mothers would do. ...

His preaching was prepared, lofty, always full of food for thought.¹⁷

His health deteriorated over the course of the month. He thought he had reached the end of his earthly journey. On 1 January 1898, he wrote in his personal notebook:

I must especially devote this year to preparing myself for death. I fear it too much, and I’ve done nothing to get myself suitably ready for the Divine Judge. This thought of death must make me act with *more fervour* in the practices of piety, and more zeal in my ordinary occupations, and make me flee with a *more sensitive conscience* from every sin, even

¹⁶ ASC B0320103, *Notes confidentielles*, 1.01.1897.

¹⁷ Garneri 162-163.

venial. Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust these resolutions to you.¹⁸

The annotations of the following weeks reflect his commitment to put these resolutions into practice. We notice a constant fervour, a joyful activity even for little things.

On 1 February 1898 he left to visit the houses of France, Spain, and Belgium. He returned to Turin on 10 April, exhausted. After only two days, however, he resumed retreat preaching. During the following months, great sorrow and a sense of discouragement tormented him. He also had the impression that Father Rua was not happy with his service. He thought it was the fault of his “self-love” and resolved to throw himself “at the feet of Jesus Christ and tell him with a big heart like Saint Augustine: *Hic ure, hic seca, hic non parcas, dummodo in aeternum parcas* (O Lord, who burn, who cut, do not spare me here, as long as you pardon me in eternity). Jesu, fili David, miserere mei! [Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!] (May 31).

In June he was back in France and Belgium. He returned to Turin relaxed and in better health: “My spirit is calmer. I accepted with more joy certain things that would have bothered me before.”

On 30 August, during the Eighth General Chapter, despite his desire to be relieved of his office, he was re-elected spiritual director general with 200 votes out of 217.¹⁹

Between 4 and 7 September he took part in the third Marian Congress, held in Turin. He noted in his diary: “When will it be that I, too, will love the Blessed Virgin with all my heart, like so many priests and so many faithful seminarians?”²⁰

On Sunday the 18th, he went to Castelnuovo for the dedication of the town’s monument to Don Bosco. His health had worsened again. Father Rua sent him to Marseille to rest. He had to stay in bed for several days and undergo medical examinations. He would have liked to return to Turin, but the rector major ordered him to remain longer in France. Gradually his health improved. He returned to Valdocco for Christmas.

In January 1899 he began reading a recently published three-volume work, *Le prêtre* [The Priest] by Romain Louis Planus. It pleased him very much, and he felt encouraged to a more ardent pastoral zeal. On 8 January,

¹⁸ ASC B0320104, *Notes confidentielles*, 1.01.1898.

¹⁹ ASC B0320104, *Notes confidentielles*, 31.05.1898; 1.07.1898; 30.08.1898.

²⁰ ASC B0320104, *Notes confidentielles*, 6.09.1898.

after meditating on the importance of the ministry of Reconciliation, he noted: “How much good it does me to hear confessions; then I feel I’m a priest and can help some poor person break the chains that bind him to sin. Oh! If at least I could carry out my priestly ministry a little better! Reading Planus fills me with confusion: I know so little about the dignity of the priest ... and I’m so far from possessing his virtues.”²¹ Spiritual reading was his interior nourishment. It offered him substantial material for preaching and comforted him in his fatigue and constant health problems.

Meanwhile, he was trying to write the biography of Bishop Lasagna, constantly interrupted for preaching retreats. Between February and April, he preached retreats in Avigliana, Ivrea, Valsalice, San Benigno, and Nizza Monferrato. Then he stopped for a few days to compile the acts of the Eighth General Chapter for publication. He resumed preaching in the summer and autumn months. In November Father Rua entrusted him with exorcising a woman oppressed by the devil. He tried several times, but with poor results. On 18 November he wrote, “The Devil humiliated me very much, but he did not go away.”²²

In mid-December he finished drafting the life of Bishop Lasagna. It was published at the beginning of the new year with the title *Bishop Louis Lasagna: Biographical Recollections*. This book of 450 pages had cost him a great deal of effort, yet he was not completely satisfied with it. He noted in his diary, “I recognize that it is easy to criticize, but it is hard to do better than others!”

²¹ ASC B0320105, *Notes confidentielles*, 8.01.1899.

²² ASC B0320105, *Notes confidentielles*, 18.11.1899.

Chapter 5

**VISIT TO THE SALESIAN HOUSES
IN AMERICA (1900-1903)**

*Father Albera photographed together with a delegation of Bororos
(Cuiabá, May 1901)*

Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay

On the silver jubilee of the Salesian missions (1875-1900), Father Rua entrusted Father Albera to visit the Salesian works on the American continents as his representative. The trip took him two years and eight months. It was an important experience that further tested his physical stamina. In the meantime, Father Julius Barberis, with whom he maintained constant correspondence during the long journey, replaced him in the position of spiritual director general. His letters and those of his secretary – published

by the Salesian Historical Institute – are an eloquent document of what they did in that extraordinary, tiring journey.

Father Albera left Turin on 7 August 1900. By way of France he reached Barcelona and took part in the first Spanish provincial chapter. His young secretary Father Calogero Gusmano joined him on the 16th, and the following day they sailed together on the steamship *Perseo*. They arrived in Montevideo on the first Sunday of September. In the following days they visited the Salesian works in the area. The confreres welcomed him with joy and found that he spoke proper Spanish.

On Tuesday, 11 September, they went on to Buenos Aires. The Salesians and youngsters from the five houses in the capital received them. They stayed in the region for an entire month, visiting the works of the city and the province. Albera met the Salesians and the sisters individually to speak with them. Civil and church officials showed appreciation and gratitude for the activity of the confreres and sisters. Father Gusmano wrote to Father Rua:

They do incredible things for Father Albera: the principal people of each place where he arrives come to meet him, considering themselves fortunate to make his personal acquaintance. These include journalists, members of the Supreme Court of Justice, and bishops. The bishops visit and want him to bless the people and themselves in the public church, because Father Albera, they say, is the representative of Father Rua, and Father Rua has inherited the whole spirit of Don Bosco.¹

The splendid work of the Salesians impressed Father Albera. He confided to Father Barberis:

Both in Montevideo and here in Buenos Aires we've seen extraordinary things. Providence has used our humble Congregation to do amazing things. I'm bearing in mind everything I see and understand, reserving the right to give my poor opinion later. ...

In general, the practices of piety are well attended, and they work with a lot of enthusiasm. ... This doesn't mean that everything here is pure gold. There are the inevitable miseries of poor children of Adam, but the good is also so great that it amply compensates for them. ...

I believe my task will be rather to see with my own eyes how much good is done and encourage people always to do much good in the future. Pray

¹ BS 1900, p. 338/cf. Eng SB Jan. 1901, p. 144.

that I correspond to Father Rua's intentions in sending me to America.²

He immediately noted what the key points were:

Here I'm more and more amazed at the good that is being done: but the abundance of the harvest and the scarcity of labourers frightens me. It is difficult to convey to the members of the [superior] chapter an adequate idea of the reality. There are important houses without a prefect, with a poorly qualified catechist, busy trying to manage the school; houses with hundreds of young people with a poor teaching staff and not even a coadjutor brother; all the servants are hired employees and lack a spirit of piety; parishes with few priests to hear confessions, preach, teach: these are ordinary things. The need for personnel is extreme.³

On 12 October they left for Patagonia and were welcomed in Bahía Blanca with full honours. Albera inaugurated the past pupils section there. In the following days, he moved on to Fortín Mercedes, Patagones, and Viedma, traveling partly by train, partly by uncomfortable means of transport or on horseback. They returned to Buenos Aires on 8 November, where the visitor took part in the second American Congress of Salesian Cooperators. The feast of the Immaculate Conception was spent at San Nicolas de los Arroyos, where he dedicated the new boarding school and church. He preached to the many *quinteros*, landowning peasants who took part in the rites with their families.

On 20 December they returned to Montevideo. They stayed three weeks in Uruguay. These were days of tireless work: sermons, confessions, talks with each confrere from early morning to late evening. Here, as in all the places he visited during that long journey, Albera met with the Cooperators, benefactors, and people connected to the local community. He wanted to visit the pupils in their classrooms, in the workshops, and in the oratory premises. The spiritual charm that breathed from his person captivated young people; they surrounded him with affection and admiration. Many asked to go to confession, and he was happy to accommodate them. His secretary noted: "It is amazing how Father Albera knows how to earn the affection of the boys. I never had the occasion in Turin to observe this because he never went down to recreation. ... Many young people go to Father Albera's room, begging him to hear their confessions. They talk

² L 78.

³ L 106.

about him with enthusiasm. When he goes down to recreation, almost all these youngsters surround him.⁴ The same happened during his visit to the works of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He aroused veneration and confidence among the sisters and girls, both boarders and day pupils.

Between 26 and 28 January 1901, the first South American chapter of Salesian directors took place in Buenos Aires. Father Albera encouraged them to be an example and guide in fidelity to the spirit of Don Bosco. In the preface to the Acts he writes:

As I am visiting the Salesian houses in America one by one, I feel the esteem and affection that I already felt for you grow. While I admire Don Bosco's work more and more and pride myself on being his son, I also admire the virtues with which many Salesians in America are gifted, and I am edified by the sacrifices that they impose on themselves for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The number of these loyal sons of Don Bosco will continue to increase. The fruits of their labours will be immense if they scrupulously observe the Constitutions that Don Bosco gave us and the deliberations of the general chapters. With the grace of the Lord, the recommendations of the First American Chapter will also do some good.⁵

On 31 January the visitor and Father Gusmano sailed for Tierra del Fuego. He stopped first at Montevideo and arrived in Punta Arenas on 10 February after a furious storm. He stayed for five days and then went on to Dawson Island and the Candelaria mission. He remained there eighteen days and preached a retreat to the missionaries and the sisters. He returned to Punta Arenas in mid-March. Then he visited the missions of Mercedes and Paysandú in Uruguay. He spent Holy Week there preaching and hearing confessions. In April he returned to Buenos Aires, and then he embarked for Brazil in the company of Father Anthony Malan.

Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Peru

The journey took twenty-two days on packed, uncomfortable boats. On 7 May 1901 he arrived in Cuiabá, capital of the state of Mato Grosso. A

⁴ L 82.

⁵ Garneri 185.

crowd of people and 500 boys, past pupils of both sexes of the Salesian works, were waiting for him on the port's dock, to the sound of the Salesian marching band and that of the navy. They accompanied him to the boarding school. The bishop, the president of the state, and other officials called on him.

His forty days' stay in Mato Grosso was full of meetings and priestly ministry. At the feast of Mary Help of Christians, he received the religious profession of four new local Salesians and some sisters and blessed the habit of five novices. He also met with a group of indigenous Bororos, who got permission from the president of the state to be detached from the military dependency and entrusted to the Salesian missionaries. He also visited the Corumbá mission. Father Gusmano wrote:

What a friendly spirit ever reigns in this province! Nowhere have I found so much harmony, so much submission to superiors, so much Salesian spirit, the Salesians so loved by the Cooperators. ... Father Malan is a true Salesian, most qualified to be a provincial, much attached to his superiors. How Father Louis Nai and Father [Joseph] Bertello would be consoled if they saw the coadjutors of this house: they are models of piety and work.⁶

At that time there was no rail link with São Paulo. Therefore Father Albera had to go back down the Paraguay River on "a steamboat 14 meters long amid 122 cows and millions of mosquitoes that devoured us," notes the secretary.⁷ He visited Concepcion, and on 29 June he arrived in Asuncion, where he celebrated Mass in the bishop's presence, with 140 first Communions. In the following days he continued to Buenos Aires. From there he could embark for Montevideo and return to Brazil.

He landed in Santos on 14 July, welcomed by the provincial, Father Charles Peretto. By train, he reached São Paulo, about eighty kilometres away, and then Lorena, whence he began a visit to the Brazilian Province that lasted four months. Father Albera reached all the Salesian houses and missions. After the official meetings with authorities and groups of people, he devoted all his time to receiving the confreres and to the ministry of preaching and hearing confessions. Everywhere he was welcomed with enthusiasm, but those trips were appalling because of the heat and dust. He visited Guaratinguetá and Juiz de Fora, the site of the accident that had

⁶ L 188.

⁷ L 191.

killed Bishop Lasagna, some sisters, and two priests. He went to Ouro Preto, Cachoeira do Campo, Araras, Ponte Nova, Niteroi, Ipiranga, Campinas, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Jaboatão, and Pernambuco. Despite the problems discovered, he had a very positive impression. He wrote to Barberis:

I'm now visiting the houses of Brazil. I'm convinced that Don Bosco in spirit knew the soil and the hearts of the inhabitants. We attend very moving shows. What a mission the Salesians have here! A great deal of good is done, however little organisation there may be. ... Father [Louis] Zanchetta here in Niteroi works wonders. You can see the order in the house and an edifying piety. They overload the confreres with work, yet they don't complain.⁸

From Pernambuco he proceeded to Niteroi on 26 October aboard the *Alagoas*. On the trip he suffered excruciating pain. He could not continue to São Paulo, where he was expected for the blessing of the monumental statue of the Sacred Heart. He stayed in Niteroi for nine days for treatment. On 9 November he sailed for Montevideo, and from there he went to Buenos Aires, where he stayed for about ten days.

From the Argentine capital, Bishop James Costamagna accompanied him through the Andes to Chile. They left on 25 November. It was an exhausting journey for Father Albera, who was not used to riding. They stopped for a few days in Mendoza to preach retreats to young people, confreres, and sisters. After visiting Rodeo del Medio, they arrived in Santiago, Chile, on 5 December. Father Gusmano penned the program of visits to Father Barberis:

We're already on the Pacific side. We passed over the Cordillera in excellent shape. ... Father Albera endured the crossing and the ride well. Here we spend two days for each house to see them in their regular operation. We've already visited the two of Santiago and Melipilla. Tomorrow we'll go to Talca, on the 13th to Concepcion, on the 18th to Valparaiso, on the 20th to La Serena, and after Christmas we'll see Macul. The retreats for the confreres will begin in the first week of January; perhaps we'll have to offer two for them and one for the sisters. After visiting the houses of Chile, we'll go to Bolivia, but we'll probably skip Sucre both because it is too far away and because it will be rainy weather and therefore very difficult to get there. From Bolivia, we'll

⁸ L 212-213.

descend to Peru, where perhaps we'll still find ourselves in April.⁹

After a few days of rest in Santiago, in three months Father Albera visited the Salesians and the sisters of Milipilla, Talca, Concepcion, Valparaiso, La Serena, Iquique, and Macul. He was grieved to realize that in the province of Chile, there were tensions because of the characters of some directors, but above all, because of the impetuous character of Bishop Costamagna, who was serving as superior there while he was waiting [to be allowed] to enter his missionary vicariate in Ecuador. Disconcerted, Gusmano wrote to Barberis, in a notably strong tone:

No one in the province likes the bishop ... because he scolds continuously and in public. He's not liked because he shows that his heart's not here but beyond the Andes. He's not liked because he constantly repeats that he has no esteem for Chileans. ... You speak sincerely to him but choose your words carefully and always afraid of being scolded. So, generally, one leaves his room more annoyed and less persuaded. ... Here everyone cries for the bishop to go to Ecuador, for a good provincial to come who is prudent ... who listens to the needs of the houses without scolding and making a snap decision, who has some tact and doesn't make defects known and cast blame in public.

Then he concluded:

No doubt, he's a saint; but the others would have to be saints, too, to tolerate his way of dealing with them. They should have more faith and see in their superior only the authority he represents and not his style... Everyone knows that in all his zeal, he works continually, and it can be said that there are no Confirmations in Santiago and outside it that he doesn't carry out. He's tireless, but he's always out, and he can't draw you to his heart.¹⁰

On 14 February 1902, after preaching retreats to his confreres, Father Albera left Santiago with his secretary. They stopped for a couple of days in Valparaiso for the dedication of new workshops there and arrived in Iquique on the 28th. They left after ten days for Arequipa, Peru: "It is a true Salesian house; order, work, Salesian spirit reign here. ... The little agricultural community is a real jewel, a scientific one, a real model in

⁹ L 243-244.

¹⁰ L 256-257.

everything,” notes Father Gusmano. “Father Albera is not doing well; his stomach is worn out. I ask him to take care of himself; now he accepts it, but previously he would refuse.”¹¹

On 24 March they reached La Paz, where they found an orderly house and excellent Salesian spirit. They stayed throughout Holy Week. On 1 April they left for Peru. They stayed in Lima until 26 May. They visited the places of Saint Rose, and Father Albera celebrated Mass at her tomb. He wanted to leave for Ecuador and visit the vicariate apostolic of Mendez and Gualaquiza, but the Peruvian provincial advised against the trip because bad weather made the roads inaccessible. He stayed in Lima for the whole month of Mary and made his own retreat. Father Gusmano writes:

For two years he had spent almost all his days and often a great part of the night, in listening to and comforting his brethren, encouraging them in the practice of virtue, and suggesting means of ever growing in the spirit of Don Bosco; in holding conferences and giving [retreats] twelve times in the course of a few months; but after all this labour he did not hold himself dispensed from the annual retreat prescribed by our rules. For eight days we beheld him occupied in profound meditation, spending long hours before the Blessed Sacrament, thinking only of his own soul.¹²

In those days, Albera wrote in his diary:

Today I begin the retreat: I really feel the need of it. After twenty-one months of travel, my mind is dissipated, my heart is cold. I wish to go into myself and beg for the dew of Heaven. ... I propose to do this retreat as if it were the last of my life. My age and the constant travels inspire me to do this retreat really well. ... Examining my conscience, I found that the causes of my defects are three: 1. lack of humility; 2. lack of mortification; 3. lack of devotion. Now that I know my enemies, I propose to fight them.¹³

After his personal retreat, he preached those of the students, the confreres, and the sisters. He also visited all the religious congregations of the city and concluded his stay in Lima with the feast of Mary Help of Christians. On the 26th, he sailed from Callao. They stopped at Paita, the

¹¹ L 285-286.

¹² Eng SB Feb. 1905, p. 608.

¹³ ASC B0320106, *Notes useful*, 2.05.1902.

last Peruvian port, where they took part in the Corpus Christi procession.

Ecuador

On 30 May they landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador. They stayed for two days, and then set out on the journey to the Eastern Region. The biographer describes in detail their adventuresome route. They travelled by rail to Huigra, where they slept in tents. At night, the excessive humidity gave Father Albera an annoying stiff neck. In the morning, changing their clothes, they began a journey on horseback that would last five weeks, with rides of ten and often fourteen hours a day. They had to draw their cassocks up at the hips, tightened by a leather belt, put on a poncho that covered their whole bodies, goatskin pants, large handkerchiefs around the neck, and large straw hats covered with oilcloth.

They stopped in Guatasí in the house of a Cooperator, where they met the provincial, Father Anthony Fusarini, who had come from Riobamba. He particularized the dangers of Ecuador's East and the difficulties of the mission, perhaps to discourage the superior from continuing his dangerous journey, but Albera was all the more resolved to continue, trusting himself to Providence. He absolutely wanted to meet the missionary confreres to strengthen them in their work. The provincial accompanied them for a while and then had to go back to his office. They began long, never-ending rides through a beautiful but dangerous forest, over steep mountains, between precipices, deep fords, and swamps with water up to their knees.

Father Gusmano writes:

No one who knows Father Albera will be surprised if a man of his age, in precarious health, frail, sometimes on reaching the *tambo* (a hut for missionaries) had to be taken off his horse and placed on a chair because his legs refused to support him and his limp body was helpless. At the *tambo*, they alerted the Indian in charge of it, something warm was found, the only comforting thing that his stomach imperiously called for; either plain water with salt or mixed with a little cornmeal, potato or yucca flour; everything is good as long as it is hot. How many times the only flavourful dish was a little corn, not always seasoned enough with salt! Moreover, if you come unexpectedly, you wait for hours and hours for that meagre refreshment. ...

The *tambo* or rancho is a space of three or four square meters, covered

by a roof of palm leaves, supported by poles. ... The floor, usually suspended a few meters above the damp ground, is also covered with dry leaves or mats. With both of us huddled in the narrow space, sometimes at a slight movement I would wake up with a start, looking anxiously at Father Albera for fear if he should turn over on his hard and, often enough, smelly pallet, he might roll over the unprotected edge, with obvious danger to his life. The hut shelters one from the water, but not from the air. ...

In the eternal and monotonous days spent on the back of those poor animals, riding behind Father Albera, I often saw him agitated, unable to find a comfortable position on the horse. He hung on for life as he was forced to cross precipices that at any moment might imperil his valued life. I confess that repeatedly I felt tempted to urge him to turn back.¹⁴

On the Azuay ridge, all rocks and ravines, Albera fell from his horse and almost fell over a precipice. Before they arrived in Cañar, many notables came to meet him, including the brother of the former President of the Republic, Dr. Louis Cordero, accompanied by Father Francis Mattana, an indefatigable missionary to the Jivaros. The next day they resumed their journey to Cuenca, where they arrived on Sunday, 8 June. There, too, about fifty horsemen came to welcome the visitor a few hours from the city; they wanted him to change his mount. As he rode, he fell badly and his foot swelled. He had to rest for three days, hosted by the Redemptorist Fathers. They resumed their journey on the 11th, and after thirteen hours, they reached Sigsig, the last stop before the eastern forests. They continued the ride the next day. It was three days of riding in uninterrupted rain. Finally, on Sunday, 15 June, they arrived in Gualaquiza, where they stayed for eight days. The secretary penned the account of the trip to Father Barberis:

I'm writing to you while the Jivaros in front of my door dance and sing coarsely, according to their custom, to celebrate Father Albera. Some are like Adam before sin; men, even adults, are dressed with the bare minimum, women with a little more; yet here it makes no impression. Amid all this shouting, though, my thoughts run to Turin. ...

Our trip to Gualaquiza was discreet. In Sigsig, the last Christian people, they welcomed us with the sound of bells. ... As we passed through the intermediate villages, wherever we went we found the image of Mary Help of Christians. The parish priest of San Bartolomé narrated

¹⁴ BS 1904, p. 109/cf. Eng SB April 1905, p. 661.

dozens of graces received through her intercession, and if what they say is true, we cannot help but admit the miracle. It is precisely our Lady who opens the way for Don Bosco's work. After all, one wouldn't know how to explain so much enthusiasm for Don Bosco's sons in so many countries where they have done no other benefit than that of asking alms for the mission. ...

Between Sigsig to Gualaquiza there's no village, and we had three days of riding over precipices, horrible descents, climbs as steep as walls. The rains accompanied us for two days, with mud reaching up to the animal's belly and splashing up into our hair. In some places, it was necessary to duck to the level of the mule to pass certain arches that the trees, uprooted by the rain, had made. Elsewhere, the passage was so narrow that we had to lift our feet because they wouldn't pass through astride.

The worst for Father Albera were the somersaults that the mule sometimes made when it encountered muddy footing. We recommended he remain firmly in the saddle. At some descents they held the mule's bridle; but it was impossible to control it, and horse, rider, and guide took a tumble. When we arrived in the evening, soaked after twelve hours of riding as I've described, there was only an outdoor reed mat for bed, placed several meters high on poles with other reeds. Father Albera was in the middle, and I had to be careful not to move because otherwise I wouldn't get up again.¹⁵

The missionary residence was a very simple building: a chapel with two wings flanking it. All was built of wood, plastered with mud, and the windows had no shutters. Father Albera sang the *Te Deum* of thanksgiving in the chapel. When he came out, the Jivaros presented him with yucca and bananas. He was very sorry to find the missionaries utterly worn out due to fatigue, the climate, and lack of nutrition. He spoke to each one individually, comforting them. During the week, he visited the Jivaro settlements in the area to get an idea of their life. On Sunday the 22nd, he celebrated the feast of Mary Help of Christians, with a high Mass and procession.

He left the next day. The Salesians and the natives accompanied him for a good distance. The return trip "was much worse than the outward journey and took ten days on horseback with three rest days. Up to Cuenca there was nothing extraordinary. We slept as usual in the open air and on

¹⁵ L 307-308.

dangerous beds, ate dry food, which always contributed to upsetting more Father Albera's already upset stomach." They arrived in Riobamba on 5 July. In the following days, the provincial council met the extraordinary visitor, who was able to report on the progress and difficulties.¹⁶

On 14 July they stopped at Ambato, the novitiate house. From there, they arrived in Quito, where the Salesians had built a little church and a small boarding school. Father Albera blessed the buildings and the new leather-making workshop.

Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States

On the 26th, they headed to Guayaquil. From there they sailed for Colombia, which was suffering a civil war. They could not land at Panama City, because of a yellow fever epidemic. Passing through Colon and Cartagena, they arrived at Barranquilla on 8 August.

Their navigation up the Magdalena River towards Honda took seventeen days, amid swarms of mosquitoes that tormented them. In Puerto Berrio a general who wanted to seize the boat for his troops blocked them. After long negotiations, he contented himself with requisitioning almost all the food supplies. The involuntary stop allowed Father Albera and his secretary to assist several soldiers dying of yellow fever. Finally, on 24 August, they landed at Honda. From here, accompanied by Salesian Brother Angelo Colombo, they went on horseback to Bogotá without an escort, "because," Gusmano writes, "an escort can be even more dangerous: the revolutionaries might attack them."

At the first railway station, they found confreres and pupils waiting for them with a special train made available by the government, and in two hours they reached the capital. "We thought we would find peace in Colombia, and instead things were as they have been. The guerrillas, especially, were fiercer than before. Along our journey we beheld the sad sight of people burned out, villages destroyed, travellers robbed and killed." They stayed for twelve days and visited the Salesian centres in the city and its environs. Despite the dangers, Father Albera also wanted to meet the Salesians who worked in the two leper colonies of Contratacion and Agua de Dios.¹⁷

¹⁶ L 310-312.

¹⁷ L 318.

They left Bogotá on 9 September. In ten days they travelled 290 kilometres on horseback, crossing a high mountainous area in intense cold. Three and a half hours from Contratación, Father Albera fainted, overcome by fatigue. So they were forced to spend the night in a hut. The next day he wanted to continue his journey fasting in order to be able to celebrate Mass. They reached the leper colony around 11:00 A.M.

The first meeting with the lepers was moving. The extraordinary visitor spoke a word of comfort to each and distributed money and food that benefactors had offered. Over the next few days, he preached an eight-day mission, which all who could stand attended. During the first sermon, he fainted because of the lack of air in the overcrowded church. Even on the last day, he fainted when a leper with the flesh of his legs in shreds appeared in the confessional.

Back in Bogotá for a few days, on 8 October he left for Agua de Dios, where he arrived by walking for three days. He began by preaching a mission to the lepers. The church was packed: “You suffer so much in the body. At least stop suffering in your souls, reconciling yourselves with the Lord since this depends on you. We can’t cure your bodies of leprosy; allow us to treat your spiritual illness.”¹⁸

Father Albera preached every day, although the hour was inconvenient (1:00 P.M.) and the heat oppressive. Everyone listened attentively. By the third day, confessions engaged five priests until 11:00 P.M. Father Albera went from house to house to visit families, distributing financial aid and words of comfort. The mission ended on 19 October with general Communion. Even the most reluctant people, who had not received the sacraments for years, approached them with devotion; it was truly a miracle of grace. The day ended with a procession in honour of Mary Help of Christians.

Back in Bogotá he met with the apostolic delegate, the archbishop, and the principal benefactors. The President of the Republic also wanted to meet him before he left. The trip back to the coast was terrible. After two hours by train, they used horses, under the scorching sun and amid the dangers of guerrillas. When he arrived at Honda on 29 October, Albera was exhausted. They had to wait five days before being able to board a hospital ship with no comfort at all. On 12 November they landed in Barranquilla. They stopped for a few hours and left for Venezuela aboard the steamship *Montevideo*.

¹⁸ Garneri 215-216.

On Sunday, 16 November, they landed in La Guaira, the principal port of Venezuela. The next day they headed to Caracas, where there was “a pleasant house, but almost empty.” On the 21st, after a trip of 150 kilometres, they were in Valencia. They found the Salesian work in better condition, thanks to the restorative ministry of Father Michael Foglino. They returned to Caracas on Saturday, 29 November, and then headed to San Rafael and Santa Rosa, two small, poor works. The night crossing of Lake Maracaibo was uncomfortable for Father Albera because of the strong wind, intense cold, and the stench of rotten fish that permeated the boat. On 5 December they sailed for Curaçao and thence for La Guaira. Foreign military vessels occupied the port, present to protect the interests of their respective nations. On 15 December British ships bombed Puerto Cabello, located 200 kilometres from Caracas. Because of that Father Albera left as soon as possible. He took a ship bound for Puerto Rico.

After five days’ quarantine on Miraflores Island, they docked in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on 22 December. They stayed in a hotel. Their itinerary included a visit to Jamaica, but due to transportation problems and Albera’s wretched health, Father Gusmano convinced him to proceed directly for Mexico. After celebrating Christmas Mass in the church of the Vincentian Fathers, they sailed on the Spanish steamer *Leon XIII*. On board they had the joy of finding a group of Salesian missionaries and sisters. Father Albera welcomed everyone for a chat. The journey, generally smooth, lasted ten days, but the superior’s health did not improve. He had stomach problems and could not eat much.

They landed in Veracruz on 8 January 1903. At the port, the provincial of Mexico, Father Louis Grandis, and other confreres welcomed them. In Mexico City they found a fine boarding school. They visited the Salesian centres in Morelia and Puebla. On the 31st they celebrated the Eucharist in the shrine of Guadalupe. The visit to the Mexican houses was a great consolation. Father Albera noted the favourable regard of the authorities and the people towards the Salesian work. The provincial presented him with twenty-two applications for the opening of houses that had come to him from the major cities of the nation, which he had to turn down because he lacked the necessary personnel.

On 9 February they left for California. They stopped in Los Angeles and reached San Francisco on Saturday the 14th. Father Albera preached and heard confessions for long hours in the parishes, Saints Peter and Paul and Corpus Christi, entrusted to the Salesians, exhorting the Italian immigrants to remain faithful to the faith of their fathers. But after thirty

months of travel, he felt very weak and exhausted. He wanted to return to Turin as soon as possible. They left on Sunday, 1 March. They made a stop in Chicago and reached New York on Sunday, 8 February. After ten days of intense pastoral ministry,¹⁹ they embarked for England.

The crossing took a week. In Great Britain, Father Albera visited the Salesian houses in London, the Burwash novitiate, directed by young, cordial Father William Brown, the Farnborough institute, where an orphanage for abandoned boys and military orphans had opened two years earlier, and the school and parish of Wandsworth. He was particularly pleased with the flourishing development of English works and the friendly spirit that animated the confreres.

On 1 April the two travellers reached Paris. They found a precarious situation, as the law on associations in force since 1901 obliged religious orders and congregations to choose between secularisation or government authorisation. The provincial, Father Joseph Bologna, had preferred the second option, a choice that proved fatal. Authorisation was refused, and during 1903 almost all the works had to be abandoned. The provincial of Marseille had chosen the path of secularisation and was more fortunate.

Father Albera left Paris on the evening of Good Friday, 10 April, and returned to Valdocco in the afternoon of the following day, exhausted but happy. Before going to rest, he wrote in his diary: "How happy I feel to return to this dear Oratory which has been my home during the loveliest years. Today was a real alleluia for me! The superiors welcomed me with ardent affection, especially Father Rua." Twenty years later, Father James Ressico narrated:

When he returned from this long journey, my fourth-year classmates from the Oratory and I welcomed him. Seeing him at Father Rua's side, I deeply admired his sweet, fatherly figure. ... My admiration for him peaked when from the balcony on the second floor, to us boys who wanted to hear a word from him, he said gently and humbly, "The representative in the presence of the person he represents is no longer anyone," and pointing to Father Rua with a bow, he withdrew.²⁰

In the following days, he gave Father Rua a detailed report on the

¹⁹ Editor's note: See Michael Mendl, "Salesian Beginnings in New York: The extraordinary visitation of Father Paul Albera in March 1903," *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* XVI (1997), 57-114, esp. 85-104.

²⁰ Garneri 222.

works and the confreres in the Americas. After Father Albera died, Father Gusmano wrote his own synthesis of the visit:

What Father Albera did in the three years (from 7 August 1900 to 11 April 1903) spent visiting the 215 houses of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, traveling through the republics of Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Central America, Mexico, and North America, was reported extensively in the Salesian Bulletin; I cannot, however, fail to make a few more important remarks.

A characteristic note of his trip was, above all, the enthusiasm aroused by his visit to each locality. The receptions he got everywhere were extraordinary. Church, civil, and military authorities met him at the head of their people and showered him with honours like a celebrity. As the visit progressed, an expression was common on everyone's lips: "They could not have chosen anyone who better represented Don Bosco!" Father Albera always spoke of Don Bosco, at whose side he had lived for so many years. Don Bosco naturally came into any of his speeches or advice – his thoughts, his words. That explains the persuasive power that Father Albera's words exercised on souls.

The Cooperators and the people who approached him did not know how to detach themselves from him, so much did he captivate them with his smiling appearance, his elegant bearing, his charming humility, and above all his penetrating speech that made souls docile to his zeal and charity.

The blessing of Mary Help of Christians was in his hands an instrument of graces and wonders, sometimes extraordinary, for the souls who received it devoutly. Father Albera's dedication to the poor lepers of the leper colonies of Colombia was incredible. ... There was no work he did not care about. He wanted to visit all the sick who could not leave their beds, listening with deep compassion to the story of their sufferings, the episodes of their life, and with motherly words, comforting them and encouraging them to suffer with Christian resignation.

Visiting the houses was another sort of work, no less demanding. Father Albera's practice was to leave the confreres the greatest freedom to speak to him as much as they wanted. If the day was not enough, he devoted a good part of the night to it, but he wished that everyone could have this satisfaction. He said, "One doesn't come from Italy and face so many hardships, and then leave his confreres not fully satisfied!"

Undoubtedly, it is because of the special help of the Holy Virgin that Father Albera could sustain for three years such intense, constant work

without getting sick, he who was of such delicate health. He spent entire days on horseback, travelled in torrential rain for fifteen days, sometimes slept in an abandoned stable or on a mat raised a meter off the ground, ate poorly on just boiled cornbread, found himself with stiff legs, almost frozen on the Cordillera heights: these are some of the innumerable hardships he had to face, supported by a secret power.²¹

Those thirty-two months of traveling in uncomfortable conditions had severely tested him physically. They also freed him from the melancholy of the previous years. His visit was providential for the confreres, the sisters, and the institutions. The detailed reports he sent to Father Rua highlight the concrete reality of the Salesian work in the New World. Lights and shadows, heroism and misery, successes and failures inspired his well-balanced choices, which reveal his thoughtful critical judgement, a prudence imbued with charity, a discernment respectful of persons and local situations, but also a great strength of character and a quick decision-making ability, peculiar gifts of an intelligent and balanced religious superior. The confreres and sisters had taken advantage of this, nourished by his substantial preaching, comforted and heartened by his amiable fatherliness in personal conversations. He had benefited from it himself. His knowledge of the human heart and of the Salesian charism had grown. He had broadened his vision by observing the fruitfulness of Don Bosco's spirit grafted into different cultures. He was aware of the providential urgency of the Salesian educational mission. He also understood how necessary it was to start more solid formation programs to shape balanced, virtuous Salesians. Undoubtedly, the Lord was preparing him for his future mission.

²¹ Garneri 223-225.

Chapter 6

**ALONGSIDE FATHER RUA
FROM 1903 TO 1910****1903-1907**

Back in Turin, he resumed work after a few days' rest. In May he took part in the third Congress of Cooperators. He conveyed greetings from the Cooperators of America and described his long journey. The Salesian Bulletin summarised his speech:

[Father Albera] greeted the assembly in the name of the Co-operators of America. He spoke [sic] of his journeys in twelve Republics and of what he had seen with his own eyes beyond the Ocean.

He described some of the things that happened to him whilst crossing those immense lands to visit the Salesian Houses, the abundant fruit that was being reaped in those far away regions to the glory of Don Bosco's immortal name. ...

In simple but effective words he depicted the victorious march of the Salesian work....

He spoke of the effects produced among these people, the revival of christian spirit, even among the Indians, who, abandoning their native fierceness, under the direction of the Sisters of Mary, Help of Christians, learn the trades of civilized peoples; among the lepers, at Agua de Dios, the city of sorrow, where the people witness the decomposition of their own body before death.

He related many touching anecdotes, and acts of heroism which only a supernatural grace could inspire, and which even prompts some to ask as a great favour to be allowed to live and die among those lepers.¹

A loud ovation received his allusion to the Missionary Fr. Evasius Rabagliati, who has devoted his life to this work on behalf of the lepers.

Albera wrote in his diary on 17 May 1903 about the rite of crowning the statue of Mary the Help of Christians: "Great day! ... It was truly the triumph of the devotion of Mary Help of Christians. I attended church services and had a really delightful time." In the next days he represented Father Rua in Lombriasco and Lanzo Torinese for celebrations in honour of Mary Most Holy.

Then came the months of retreats: "As spiritual director of our Pious Society, I have a particular duty to pray for the success of the retreats," he wrote.² He made himself totally available for long hours of conversation with the retreatants, so that his health suffered. In December, he was forced to retire to the Salesian house at Mathi to recoup his strength.

Canonical visits resumed in February 1904. First, he visited the houses of Piedmont, then he went to Rome, where on 11 April he took part in the Mass of Pope Pius X, enhanced by a choir of a thousand seminarians. Visits to Caserta, Naples, and Messina followed. He stayed for a month in

¹ BS 1903, p. 165/Eng SB July 1903, pp. 153-154.

² ASC B0320106, *Notes useful*, 17.05.1903; 9.08.1903.

Sicily, visiting all the works of the Salesians and the sisters. Father Argeo Mancini, who was a novice that year, says:

At that time I formed a very good impression of Father Albera. A terrible bout of rheumatism had seized his right arm, causing great pain and immobilising his arm. I admired his patience on that occasion. He wanted to leave San Gregorio, where he was, however, to continue his tour of the houses; but his arm continued to hurt terribly. ... In this circumstance and in others I perceived that his devotion, which made him look severe – such was my first impression – did not impede the familiarity of his conversation and a display of his usual goodness!³

From San Gregorio he visited Bronte, Randazzo, Syracuse, Palermo, San Joseph Jato, Marsala. From there he went to Tunis and finally to Marseille. He returned to Turin on 1 July.

In August he was at Sampierdarena to welcome Bishop Cagliari and accompany him to Turin for the Tenth General Chapter. At that time Father Rua was not well. Father Albera wrote in the diary: “Our superior Father Rua is sick. I offer my life for his good health.” The superior recovered and participated in the chapter, which took place in Valsalice from 23 August to 13 September 1904. On 24 August, Father Albera was confirmed in the office of spiritual director general. That evening he noted: “I’ve been re-elected spiritual director as before. I can’t enjoy this election, however; on the contrary, I regret it because I feel entirely my inadequacy.”⁴

After the general chapter, he was sent to France because there was fear that the government would confiscate more Salesian works. On his return, he resumed the canonical visit of the Salesian houses. He visited Verona, Gorizia, Austria, and Poland. He returned to Turin on 10 December.

His health had worsened so far that in early February 1905, on Father Rua’s order, he had to spend over a month in the mild climate of Marseille. He returned in mid-March, slightly relieved. A painful stomachache always weighed him down. Out of obedience, he agreed to treatment in Recoaro. From there he visited the houses of Veneto. Back in Piedmont, in the second half of September he returned to Mathi to continue his therapies. This obligatory inactivity weighed on him. He wrote to Mrs. Olive: “Thank you for the prayers for my health. Now I feel better. But I need God to grant me the grace to work a little for his glory and the good of souls. I’ve done

³ Garneri 229.

⁴ ASC B0320106, *Notes useful*, 24.08.1904.

nothing so far. What could I present at his tribunal?"

On 6 January 1906 he accompanied departing missionaries to Sampierdarena. Among them was the past pupil of Marseille Father Louis Olive. Then he proceeded to France, where he stayed until mid-March. Between August and September, thanks to an improvement in his physical health, he was able to give some retreats. At the conclusion of the Lanzo retreat on 23 August, he left these three "souvenirs" to his confreres "1. Love for your vocation and for the Congregation. 2. Care for our perfection. 3. Zeal for the salvation of souls." At the end of the directors' retreat, on 1 September, he recommended: "Remember we are religious; we are priests; we are sons of Don Bosco."⁵

In the second half of that month he was sent to Paris to assist Father Bologna in resolving that province's problems. He also visited the works in Belgium. He spent the last months of the year in Turin and lent himself to pastoral ministry for the benefit of the boys of Valdocco and other houses.

These last three years as spiritual director general were his hardest. His health continued to torment him, so much that he thought he was about to die. On 1 January 1907 he wrote in his diary:

This year, which may be the last of my life, should be used in doing good for the glory of God and the salvation of my soul. For this, I've taken the following resolutions: 1. I will consecrate this year especially to the Sacred Heart. 2. I will continually keep the thought of death in my mind. 3. As of today, I accept the death that the Lord wishes to send me. 4. I accept the sufferings that the Lord wishes to send me and all the pains that He will believe useful for me. 5. I promise to practice better humility, charity, mortification, and all the virtues that are appropriate for a religious and a priest.⁶

He also suffered from the deaths of people he especially loved. The first was Father Bologna, who passed away suddenly on 4 January during a visit to Valdocco: "I suffered very much," Albera wrote, "because I loved this confrere very much, having spent many years with him in France." A few days later, a woman from the Olive family passed away whose spiritual director he had been. At the beginning of March, two of Father Gusmano's brothers died a few hours apart. One was the director of the boarding school of Messina. On 27 March it was the turn of Father Celestine Durando, a

⁵ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 23.08.1906.

⁶ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 1.01.1907.

member of the superior chapter and his companion from boyhood. He was deeply moved: "I believe the next burial to take place at the Oratory will be mine!"⁷

Meanwhile, Father Rua entrusted him with writing a circular letter on poverty. He set to work inspired by the book of Bishop Charles Louis Gay, *Considerations on the Christian life and virtues of the religious*. He finished the draft on 27 January and presented it to the rector major. "Father Rua was very generous towards my little work. He accepted it with satisfaction and thanked me. But I knew how paltry my conference was in substance, form, and sentiment. Others would have known how to write it better than I."⁸ The letter on poverty, signed by Father Rua on 31 January 1907, was sent to the confreres on 13 February.⁹ It is one of his most important circular letters.

This assignment had consoled him, since he had gotten the idea that Father Rua was not happy with his service. We do not know the reason for this perception, perhaps because of a simple misunderstanding, increased by his weak physical condition. He confided in Father Barberis, who convinced him that there was no reason to be distressed. He persistently prayed to God to dispel the misunderstanding. The matter was resolved. It was a really hard period for Albera. He considered it a purification from the Lord.

On 23 July 1907, the Pope proclaimed Don Bosco venerable. The joy of the Salesians was great but short-lived. A few days later, in fact, a slanderous scandal broke out against the boarding school of Varazze. Father Ceria spoke of it as a diabolical manoeuvre, aimed at demolishing the Salesian Congregation. There were very serious accusations of immorality, totally fabricated. The anticlerical newspapers maliciously inflated the news of the "facts of Varazze." A court ordered the closure of the work for some time.

At first, the Salesians were shocked. Then, supported by past pupils and friends, they reacted, denounced the slander, and demanded justice. The court recognized the total inconsistency of the charges, but in the meantime, difficult months had passed. Father Albera's diary reflects Father Rua's pain, everyone's dismay and anxiety, the firmness and energy of the major superiors for protecting the Salesians' good name. Precau-

⁷ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 4.01.1907; 27.03.1907.

⁸ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 27.03.1907.

⁹ LCR 360-377.

tionary measures were taken. On 12 August the rector major charged him to communicate to the provincials the decisions of the superior chapter to avoid any occasion for such attacks in the future.

Despite those stormy days, Father Albera took part in all the usual summer and autumn retreats. For a year he had also replaced Father Charles Baratta, superior of the Subalpine Province, who was on sick leave. Therefore, he took part in the meetings of the provincials at Valsalice. In October, he went to France to preach retreats. He then went on to Spain, where grand feasts were celebrated in honour of Venerable Don Bosco.

1908-1910

He began 1908 still in precarious health. Yet he carried out all the tasks Father Rua entrusted to him. He wrote the circular announcing the next extraordinary canonical visit to all the houses of the Congregation by delegates of the rector major. He presided in France at the feasts in honour of Venerable Don Bosco. He visited some houses in Piedmont and the institutes of Parma, Bologna, and Pisa. He preached retreats in Lanzo, Valsalice, and Lombriasco.

On 18 October, he wrote in his diary: "Today is fifty years since my arrival at the Oratory. I think with regret that I've not taken advantage of God's graces for 50 years!" That day Father Rua fell ill: "Father Rua is sick. I pray a lot to the good Lord to give him better health for the good of our Pious Society."¹⁰

On 12 November he went to his hometown to visit his brothers and pray at his parents' grave: "I'm seeing my brothers. This may be the last time I see my entire family."¹¹ The thought of his approaching death returned to him, especially when he was assailed by the stomachache that tormented him a lot in the afternoon and night hours.

On 28 December 1908, a terrible earthquake devastated the cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria in a few seconds, killing over 100,000 people. Nine confreres, thirty-nine boys, and four workers died in the Salesian boarding school of Messina. Father Albera's diary reflects the dismay and anxieties of those days: the departure of Father Gusmano and Father Bertello for Sicily, the extent of the disaster, the number of dead.

¹⁰ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 18.10.1908.

¹¹ ASC B0320107, *Notes useful*, 12.11.1908.

Father Rua immediately sent a telegram to the bishops and government prefects of the two devastated cities:

Trembling for the fate of my confreres and pupils in Calabria and Sicily, I call upon God's goodness toward them. I am opening the doors of my institutes again to young orphans because of the earthquake. I telegraphed the Salesian provincial in Catania, Father Bartholomew Fascie, so that he would make himself available to Your Eminence and Your Excellency the Prefect to provide for the most urgent needs of the suffering youngsters.¹²

All the Salesian boarding schools in Italy were organised immediately to take in orphans. On the evening of 31 December, despite poor health, Father Rua went down to the Valdocco theatre to speak to his confreres. Amid the general reaction, he read the telegram that had arrived a few hours earlier that reported the exact number killed in the Messina institute. He then presented the annual strenna. The tone of his voice, the trembling of his hands and of his whole person, the deep pain he felt in his heart, made a profound impression on Albera and on everyone present.

Between 4-5 January 1909, in the shrine of Mary Help of Christians, funeral services were celebrated in suffrage for the Salesians, the pupils, the deceased Cooperators, and the many other victims. Father Rua was too weak to sing the solemn Mass, as he would have liked. During the rites, he remained on his knees, with his body and face marked by suffering. He was about to turn seventy-two, and people could see that his end was imminent.

In the following months Father Albera remained in Valdocco, next to sick Father Rua, to help the prefect general Father Philip Rinaldi manage the most urgent business. As soon as the superior recovered, Albera went to Rome. On 21 April he represented the rector major in the ceremony at which the new parish priest of the basilica of Santa Maria Liberatrice at Testaccio was installed. He took part in the beatification of John Eudes, apostle of devotion to the Sacred Heart. He attended the consistory in which Pius X appointed Salesian John Marengo bishop of Massa. On 1st May the Pope received him in private audience, and he reported on Father Rua's health and the state of the Congregation.

Then he travelled to Naples and Sicily. On the 19th, he embarked from Palermo for Tunis, where he remained until 9 June. From there he moved

¹² BS 1909, p. 35.

to Marseille for a quick visit to the French Salesian houses. He returned to Turin on 23 June in time to take part in the traditional “feast of gratitude” in honour of the rector major. Then he devoted himself, as usual, to preaching retreats.

On 22 November 1909, he was in San Benigno Canavese for the meetings of the superior chapter. He wrote in his diary: “Father Rua’s health is weakening.” He accompanied him back to Turin. “Father Rua is obliged to stay in bed,” he noted on 14 December. “My God, please give our father health.” On the last day of the year, he noted: “I’ve spent some time examining my conduct. I’m quite ashamed to recognize that my piety is always at the same point. I feel that my charity is imperfect. I also lack humility. Last year’s resolutions were unsuccessful. My God, have mercy on me!”¹³

The health of Don Bosco’s first successor gradually got worse. It seemed to improve in January 1910. But in February it declined again. All the letters of Father Albera in that period ask for prayers for the superior: “He’s seriously ill,” he wrote on 28 February to the provincial of Brazil. “There was a slight improvement today, but it’s not all that our affection desires. I hope you have received the last monthly circular in which news of Father Rua’s sickness is communicated. We’ll send more information, and God willing we can give better news. Father Rua is calm. In his illness he conducts himself like a saint.”¹⁴ The doctors diagnosed “senile myocarditis,” which unavoidably depletes bodily strength. But he remained alert and always amiable towards those who visited him. On 14 March, feeling that the end was approaching, he asked that an inventory be made of the shelves and drawers of his desk.

On Palm Sunday Father Rua’s face and hands began to swell. Three days later he asked for Viaticum for the next day. The prefect general Father Rinaldi brought the Eucharist to him on Holy Thursday, preceded in procession by other Salesians. Before receiving the Host, Father Rua spoke to those present:

In this circumstance I feel the duty to address a few words to you. The first is of thanks for your continuous prayers: many thanks; may the Lord reward you also, for those you will yet do. ... I will always pray to Jesus for you. ... It is important to me we all become and remain worthy sons

¹³ ASC B0320108, *Notes useful*, 14.12.1909.

¹⁴ Garneri 241-242.

of Don Bosco. Don Bosco on his deathbed gave us an appointment: see you in Paradise! This is the memory he left us. Don Bosco wanted us all to be his sons. For this reason, I recommend three things to you: great love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; lively devotion to Mary Help of Christians; great respect, obedience, and affection for the pastors of the Church and especially for the Supreme Pontiff. This is the memory I leave you. Try to make yourselves worthy of being Don Bosco's sons. I will never fail to pray for you.¹⁵

In those days Father Albera was at San Benigno for the conclusion of a retreat. He returned to Turin and on 29 March administered the Anointing of the Sick to the dying superior. Several times a day, he went to his bedside to comfort him. On 2 April Father Rua asked him, "After my death, where will you put me?" Overwhelmed, he replied: "Oh! Father Rua, let's not think about these things! Let's even hope you'll get better and still do much good." Father Rua replied, joking: "You know, I was asking this question because on Judgement Day I wouldn't want to go looking for my poor bones in one place while they're in another, and I have to run all over to look for them!"

On the evening of 4 April, Father Rua sent for his confessor, Father Francesia, who immediately grasped the situation: "Take the ritual and read the prayers of the soul's commendation." On the 5th he received Communion, the last of his life. The recollection and devotion with which he received it struck the bystanders.¹⁶

He died on the morning of Wednesday, 6 April 1910, after a few hours of agony. Father Albera noted in the diary: "Today is a day like 31 January 1888: we're orphans again!"¹⁷ The funeral was celebrated on Saturday, with a huge crowd participating. The next day Albera wrote to Father Charles Peretto: "We're right to mourn such a good and holy superior. His death and his funeral made us know what a great treasure he was, and therefore how much we've lost with his death." On Sunday, 1 May, he commented in a letter to Father Joseph Vespignani: "This loss should have been expected, but we were not prepared to suffer it. The more we go on, the more we'll feel how much we've lost."

On 10 June with Father Philip Rinaldi, prefect general of the Salesians,

¹⁵ LCR 534.

¹⁶ Garneri 242-243.

¹⁷ ASC B0320109, *Notes useful*, 6.04.1910.

Albera was received in audience by Pope Pius X. He “had words of grief and of precious esteem for our deceased rector major, and precious, fatherly expressions of encouragement for the whole Salesian Family.”¹⁸

¹⁸ BS 1910, p. 205.

Chapter 7

THE FIRST YEARS AS RECTOR MAJOR (1910-1913)

Father Paul Albera with new cardinal John Cagliero and Father Peter Ricaldone (Rome, December 1916)

Second successor of Don Bosco – 1910

On 15 August 1910 the Eleventh General Chapter began at Valsalice, its retreat preached by Father Albera, as Father Rua himself had planned. At

the beginning of the work, a letter from Pius X in his own handwriting urged the participants to elect the rector major whom “they judged in Domino the most suitable to maintain the true spirit of the Rule, to encourage and direct all the members of your religious institute to perfection, and to make the many works of charity and religion flourish” to which the Salesians are consecrated. Then the message of Cardinal Mariano Rampolla was read, wishing the choice of “a worthy successor of Don Bosco and Father Rua, who knows how to preserve their work wisely, indeed increase it with new growth.” The next day, 16 August, the vote took place. As we read in the *Salesian Bulletin*, they elected Father Albera with a large majority on the first ballot:

Amid applause all arose to render homage to the Second Successor of Don Bosco, while the newly elected Superior burst into tears. ...

“I thank you for the profession of confidence and esteem which you have made towards me, but I fear you’ll soon have to make another election!”

The applause was renewed at this humble declaration by the new Superior, but became enthusiastic when Fr. Rinaldi, taking out a sealed manuscript, observed that it contained some precious memories. He related that on Nov. 22nd 1877 he was at our house at Borgo San Martino on the feast of St. Charles. He was then a young man of twenty, and while Bishop Ferré and Don Bosco and a few guests were at table, he heard them mention the difficulties which a young cleric, Paul Albera, had in getting permission from his parish-priest and his Archbishop to become a Salesian, and [Bishop] Ferré having asked Don Bosco if his new disciple would be able to overcome the opposition, Don Bosco answered! [Fr.] *Albera has not only overcome those difficulties, but he will overcome many others and will be my second* ... without completing the phrase aloud he passed his hand over his forehead, remaining an instant in a sort of far away vision of the future, and then added: *Oh! yes, [Fr.] Albera will be a great help to us.*

Fr. Rinaldi finished his account, declaring that he had never forgotten the day, that moreover he had been all along convinced that [Fr.] Albera, and none other, would be Don Bosco’s Second Successor. When [Fr.] Rua’s death was imminent, he had recalled the conversation, mentioning it to various Salesians, among them Fr. Lemoyne the General Secretary, so that this prophetic announcement should not be lost by any chance.¹

¹ BS 1910, pp. 267-268/Eng SB Oct. 1910, p. 499.

This envelope with Father Rinaldi's handwritten text about Don Bosco's "prophecy" is still preserved, dated 27 February 1910.² In reality, the capitulars' choice deeply disturbed Father Albera. He did not think he was up to the responsibility. That evening he wrote in his notebook: "This is a very unhappy day for me. They elected me rector major of the Pious Society of Saint Francis de Sales. What a responsibility on my shoulders! Now more than ever I have to shout, *Deus in adiutorium meum intende!* [O God, come to my assistance!] I cried a lot especially in front of Don Bosco's tomb."³

The press featured the event prominently and lauded the new rector major's skills.

"A man of mild soul, but with a firm hand, he has the same gentleness in his eyes and his voice as his predecessor. ... He rarely laughs but always smiles. And in his smile, his look, and his slow gestures, the great goodness of his heart shines through" (*Il Momento*)

"The office of spiritual director had surrounded Father Albera with a special mystical physical appearance; but the details of his work in France and America show that he will know how to guide the great Salesian Family in the footsteps left by Don Bosco and Father Rua with equal competence, serenity, and broad views" (*La Stampa*)

"Father Paul Albera is one of the oldest pupils and was among the most appreciated by Don Bosco. ... He is a man of broad, modern views, somewhat thin, of medium height and with an ascetical face" (*Il Corriere della Sera*)

"In the environment in which he lives and carries out his very active work, Father Albera is judged a person of uncommon intelligence and tireless industry" (*La Gazzetta del Popolo*)

"The great kindness, combined with a precise vision of what concerns the spiritual life and a very delicate tact in the formation of souls is one of the main characteristics of the venerable priest who, however, has showed great competence and ability in dealing with difficult practical matters concerning the Society's development, which were entrusted to him by Father Rua and Don Bosco" (*L'Unione*)

"According to all those who have the happiness of approaching him, Don Bosco transfused a great part of his spirit into Father Albera. It is enough to say that in France they referred to him as *le petit Don Bosco* [Little Don Bosco]! The Salesian Society will continue under his direction in paths of

² ASC B0250218, ms. F. Rinaldi.

³ ASC B0320109, *Notes useful*, 16.08.1910.

victory for the Church and our country” (*L'Osservatore Romano*)

In the following days the Pope sent his blessing. Father Albera wrote this program on a piece of paper that he constantly kept with him: “I will always have God in view, Jesus Christ as my model, the Help of Christians as my help, and myself as a sacrifice.”

On 17 August, the other members of the superior chapter were elected: prefect general, Philip Rinaldi; spiritual director general, Julius Barberis; treasurer, Joseph Bertello; councillor for studies, Francis Cerruti; councillor for trade schools, Joseph Vespignani (who eventually declined his election); and general councillor, Louis Piscetta.

In a circular letter to the Salesians, Father Albera expressed his sentiments at the time of the election:

I felt like I was being crushed under the weight of so much responsibility. I would have liked to escape a position that I knew was far superior to my very weak physical, intellectual, and moral strengths. I saw around me many others better prepared to take over the government of our Pious Society, better equipped with virtue and knowledge. ...

But for fear of resisting the will of God, which in that instant seemed to manifest itself, albeit with immense sacrifice, I bowed my head and submitted. But God knows what anguish tortured my heart at that juncture, how many tears were shed, what sense of discouragement assailed me.

As soon as I was allowed, I ran to throw myself at the feet of our venerable Father. ... To him, more with tears than with words, I laid out my anxieties, my fears, my extreme weakness, and since it was necessary for me to carry the very heavy cross which had been placed on my shaking shoulders, I begged him with all my fervour to come to my aid.

I got up from that sacred tomb at Valsalice, if not completely reassured, at least more trusting and reconciled. I need not add that I promised Don Bosco and Father Rua that I would spare nothing to preserve in our humble Congregation the spirit and traditions we learned from them.⁴

At the conclusion of the general chapter, his service began: visits to the various works, trips in Italy and the rest of Europe, public meetings; the less conspicuous but particular work of inspiring and governing the Congregation through meetings of the superior chapter, meetings with

⁴ LC 13.

provincials and directors, personal conversations, extensive correspondence, and circular letters.

He kept the model of government instated by Father Rua, gradually improving it. He promoted collegial management by sharing responsibilities with the members of the superior chapter, and he guaranteed to individual councillors ample room for action in their areas of competence as established by the Constitutions and by general chapter deliberations. The prefect general, Father Philip Rinaldi, who acted as vicar of the rector major, was entrusted with responsibility for ordinary business, general administration, disciplinary interventions, support of missionaries, relations with past pupils and Cooperators, and management of the Salesian Bulletin. The spiritual director general Father Julius Barberis was “especially entrusted with the care of novices,” the promotion of vocations, “the moral and spiritual advantage of the Pious Society and its members,” the spread of the devotion of Mary Help of Christians, and supervision of the festive oratories. The treasurer general, Father Clement Bretto, supervised the “material state of the entire Society” and carried out “purchases, sales, and construction.” To the schools councillor, Father Francis Cerruti, was “delegated the general care of literary, scientific, philosophical, and theological teaching in the houses of the Pious Society, regarding both the members and the students.” The vocational training councillor, Father Peter Ricaldone (who replaced Father Vespignani in May 1911), handled the “training of the personnel assigned to trade and agricultural schools, housekeeping, and the instruction of the pupils.”

The first part of Father Albera’s rectorate was the most dynamic, full of long journeys, meetings and important events. After the general chapter, he went to Rome to receive the Pope’s blessing and introduce himself to the cardinals of the Roman curia. At the beginning of September he took part in the catechetical congress held in Milan. Back in Turin, he followed the preparations for the annual missionary expedition. The new missionaries were sent forth on 11 October 1910 from the church of Mary Help of Christians. He embraced each of the hundred missionaries, leaving each one a personal remembrance.

Then he prepared a volume collecting Father Rua’s circular letters. In its presentation, he wrote:

Father Rua’s life was a continuous striving to imitate Venerable Don Bosco. Because of that, he made incessant progress in perfection, which anyone who approached him had to admire. Among the virtues that

shone most vividly in the life of our venerable Father and Master, our lamented Father Rua said that none had struck him so much as the tireless zeal that inflamed his heart, and this zeal seemed especially to urge him to copy it in himself. Therefore, all his thoughts, words, and actions were aimed to procure the glory of God everywhere and always, and to save the greatest possible number of souls. This was the only goal, the only aspiration of his whole laborious life.

Albera then invited all the Salesians to be “eager to take a few steps towards perfection every day” and to reread and meditate on Father Rua’s circulars: “They are like the quintessence of the religious spirit, a compendium of ascetical treatises, masterpieces of Salesian pedagogy.”⁵

1911-1912

In his first circular letter, dated 25 January 1911, the new rector major declared he did not want to introduce himself “using the language of a superior and a teacher, but the simplicity and affection of a brother and a friend.” His only intention was to help everyone “to be worthy sons of our venerable Founder and Father.”

He recalled the virtues and the work of his predecessor and thanked the prefect Father Rinaldi for having guided the Congregation during the illness and after the death of Father Rua: “During Father Rinaldi’s government, everything proceeded with order and regularity both internally and in relations with outsiders. ... All the provincials and delegates who came from the most distant shores to take part in the Eleventh General Chapter found in him a good superior, an affectionate brother.”

Then he synthesised the chapter’s work, expressed his feelings and sense of inadequacy for the office to which he had been elected, and reported on his audience with Pope Pius X and the program set out by the Pope: “Remind your Salesians that the One they serve, Dominus est (is the Lord). May the thought of God’s presence always be fixed in their minds. Let them be guided in everything by the spirit of faith, fervently carry out their practices of piety, and offer God their works and sacrifices. May God always be in their minds and in their hearts.”

Finally, after having mentioned the sad consequences of the revo-

⁵ LCR 5.

lution in Portugal and Macao, he concluded by announcing his immediate program: in the face of the great, providential development of the Salesian work around the world, he believed that for the moment no other works should be undertaken. "It would be best and very advantageous to souls" as far as possible to "consolidate the works that were left to us by Don Bosco and Father Rua."⁶

His primary concern, motivated by the experience accumulated in previous years, was to help the confreres to maintain a proper balance between action and contemplation. That had been his program as spiritual director general. Now he felt the urgency more intensely. Thus he dedicated his second circular letter (15 May 1911) to "The Spirit of Prayer," a characteristic note that explains why Don Bosco's activity was able to produce so much wonderful fruit. Prayer constitutes "the foundation of the Preventive System." Salesians must understand how necessary this "spirit" is to sanctify their daily activity, to counteract the "sickness of turmoil," and to live fervently in the spirit.⁷

On 20 February 1911, at Novara he took part in inaugurating the cause for the beatification of Father Andrew Beltrami. On 6 May he visited the Committee of Salesian Works in Milan and made a profound impression on those present. The newspaper *L'Unione* commented:

By paying homage to him [Albera], we seemed to see before us the venerable figures of his predecessors. ... [He possesses] largeness of views, great practical wisdom, and marvellous firmness of purpose combined with profound piety and exemplary modesty; in him also one senses, one feels the true man of God. ... No gesture, no pose, no high-sounding word ..., but without pretensions, an aura of holiness that captivates you, a serene word that seeks the most hidden fibres of the heart.

Between 10 and 12 May he was in Sampierdarena, the house he had founded and directed from 1871 to 1882. He actively took part in the fifth Congress of Festive Oratories and Schools of Religion on 17-18 May. After the feast of Mary Help of Christians, he visited the Salesian works in the Veneto region: Trieste, Gorizia, Mogliano, and Schio.

In June, he began a journey to Spain in the company of Father Peter Ricaldone, former provincial in that country, who had been chosen general

⁶ LC 9-21.

⁷ LC 25-39.

councillor for trade schools a few months earlier. After brief stops in the Salesian houses of France, they arrived in Barcelona on 10 June. They were guests in the school at Sarrià. On Saturday the 17th, they took part in the blessing of the crypt of the shrine dedicated to the Sacred Heart on Tibidabo.

Returning to Turin, he presided over the first International Congress of Salesian Past Pupils, held at Valsalice in September. A thousand alumni of different nationalities participated. In his closing address, he said that they seemed to have assisted today at a new Pentecost. All the languages that we have heard have had but one topic ..., the extollation of the Ven. Don Bosco. This is surely the realisation of what he used to say when we thought him mad. He had not even a square yard of ground where he might build his first Oratory, and yet he declared that he would one day have a House in every part of the world. His dream has come into actuality. We see here the representatives of the pupils educated in those Houses and we have heard them declare their loyal sentiments.⁸

In October, after the farewell ceremony for fifty missionaries being sent especially to China and Congo, Father Albera left for Austria, Poland, and Ukraine. He visited Oswiecim, Lviv, Daszawa, Przemysl, Tarnow, and Krakow. On 28 October the Cooperators and dignitaries of the clergy and civic institutions welcomed him to Vienna with grand honors. He continued to Ljubljana and returned to Turin in mid-November.

He dedicated the circular letter of 25 December 1911 to "Religious Discipline." He explained the meaning that Don Bosco attributed to discipline for "the formation of the interior man." As he had observed in every part of the world, in disciplined religious communities "the most perfect order" reigns: minds and hearts are united in the bond of charity. Where discipline is lacking, fervour, unity, and harmony are lacking also, and piety and pastoral ardour gradually fade. Without discipline, everything collapses, while observance of the Constitutions and regulations, and fervent and joyful obedience to superiors transform the community into a paradise and make the Salesian mission fruitful.⁹

In the circular to the Cooperators of January 1912, after having listed the foundations and the achievements of the previous year, Albera proposed an intense operational program: promotion of vocations, opening of festive oratories, help to emigrants, and love for the Pope. He recommended to the

⁸ BS 1911, p. 316/Eng SB Nov. 1911, p. 735.

⁹ LC 55-62.

charity of the Cooperators two large churches under construction, Holy Family in Florence and Saint Augustine in Milan.¹⁰

To support the development of the Congregation and its consolidation, he gathered the provincials of Europe from 18 to 22 March in Turin. In April, he set out for Great Britain. He visited Paris for two days to meet friends and benefactors. He stopped for a few days on the island of Guernsey, where the Salesians administered three parishes, and arrived at Battersea in London on the evening of the 17th. He devoted most of his time to the confreres and pupils of the three Salesian houses in London. He visited church authorities and friends linked to the Salesian houses. He spent two days with the novices of Burwash in East Sussex, he then moved on to Farnborough College in Hampshire and the Chertsey schools entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

On 27 April he proceeded to Belgium, visiting Tournai, Melle, Antoing, and Brussels, where he met Cardinal Mercier, the nuncio, the foreign minister, and the minister of colonial affairs to discuss matters relating to the Salesian presences in the Congo. He visited Groot-Bijgaarden and Sint-Denijs-Westrem. On 10 May he reached Liege to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the orphanage, inaugurate the expo of the Salesian trade schools in Belgium, and crown the statue of Mary Help of Christians. From Liege he wrote to Mother Eulalia Bosco, niece of the saint: "Wherever I go, I hear praises of Don Bosco with much enthusiasm. At every step I take, I find proofs of his holiness. I enjoy it no less than you who are his family would. If he's your uncle, to me Don Bosco is a father. I owe everything to him, and how much I enjoy his glorification!"

Having visited the institute of Hechtel, he returned to Valdocco on the morning of 23 May. After the feast of Mary Help of Christians, he offered hospitality in Salesian institutes to the children of Italians recently expelled from Turkey. On the 29th he left for Emilia. He stopped in Bologna, Faenza, Lugo di Romagna, Ravenna, Ferrara, and Modena. He returned temporarily to Turin on 9 June to celebrate the golden jubilee of priestly ordination of Bishop Cagliari and Father Francesia. Then he visited the Salesian houses in Parma, Florence, Pisa, Livorno, and La Spezia.

On 24 June he was in Turin for the annual Thanksgiving celebration (also called the rector major's names day). The affection displayed by the confreres and young people consoled him, but he felt uneasy when his qualities and virtues were praised. On that occasion, responding to a letter

¹⁰ BS 1912, pp. 6-8/Eng SB Jan. 1912, pp. 5-7.

from Father John Branda, he wrote:

You remember very many things of the past, very pleasing to my heart. You also talk about ascensions! Were they the same ones of which David spoke, actual progress in piety and virtue! Unfortunately, I have so many reasons to humble myself. At the same celebrations, the things that were said about me and read to me, give me much to reflect on for the good of my soul. Help me with prayer and offering to the Lord the sacrifices you make for the good of souls.¹¹

In October 1912, he greeted and blessed the new missionary expedition. Among the missionaries was young Ignatius Canazei, who would succeed Bishop Versiglia as vicar apostolic of Shiuchow (Shaoguan). He related in 1929:

Before we left for China, Father Albera invited us to attend the Holy Mass that he would celebrate in Don Bosco's chapel. Afterward, he paternally addressed us by saying: "You are now leaving for the missions. At the beginning you'll find many difficulties, but over time you'll get acquainted with the language and customs, you'll meet many people, and after about ten years, your new country will become a second home for you; you won't even want to return to your native country. ... The words spoken to us by our venerable major superior were verified to the letter. The greater the difficulties of the first years, the more I felt attached to this great and distant country of China, where the Lord sent me a missionary. Even before ten years had gone by, I no longer felt any need to go back to my homeland."¹²

After a visit to the houses in Liguria, a circular letter "On the Life of Faith," dated 21 November 1912, was sent to the Salesians. It was a little doctrinal treatise that concluded with the memory of Don Bosco's most lively faith, the inspiration of all his activity. It was an exhortation to his confreres to revive their faith, to make themselves effective instruments in the hands of the Lord, and to light the torch of faith in the new generations "for the restoration of God's Kingdom in souls."¹³

¹¹ Garneri 276.

¹² Garneri 278-279.

¹³ LC 82-100.

1913 - A very intense year

At the beginning of 1913 he embarked on a five-month trip to Spain which – as the chronicler of *the Salesian Bulletin* wrote –

was a magnificent and solemn triumph, of almost fabulous proportions, which in several places emulated the enthusiasm for Don Bosco in Paris (in 1883) and Barcelona (1886). The press took an interest in his visit as a very important event. ..., while diligent committees of distinguished benefactors worked hard to honour Don Bosco's successor. Thousands and thousands of people greeted him on arrival and departure, and throughout the time of his stay, there was continuous incredible crowding of people at the Salesian institute, led by the church, civil, and military authorities. We saw entire villages rushing to the stations where Father Albera was only passing through, just to see him and be blessed by him in the name of Mary Help of Christians. Wherever he stopped, in several places they forced him to cross the streets of the city in uncovered cars, to the festive sound of the bells, amid shouts of joy.¹⁴

Even though the trip seemed journalistic, Father Albera's visit was in fact an occasion for the mobilisation of Spanish Catholics in the bubbling social and political climate of those years. He felt consoled and at the same time overwhelmed: "Here in Spain I'm crushed by the intensity of these celebrations. There's no time for peace and rest. The thought that I have to go on like this for three more months scares me." Despite the enormous effort entailed, he was deeply moved by the desire that everyone had to hear him speak of Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians.

He arrived in Barcelona on Saturday, 11 January 1913; after a week, he went to the island of Minorca, and on the 24th he was back in Barcelona, where he stayed for a few days. On the 30th, he went on to Alicante and Campello. He was welcomed at the Valencia station on 6 February and accompanied to the Salesian house in a procession with marching bands. On Monday the 10th, he resumed his journey, proceeding to Cordoba. Then he stopped at Montilla, Malaga, Ronda, Ecija, Utrera, Seville, Cadiz, Jerez de la Frontera, San José del Valle, Caramona, Madrid, and Carabanchel Alto. On 3 April he reached Salamanca. He stayed for ten days, also visiting Avila and Bejar. On Sunday the 13th he left for Orense and Vigo. Then he went to Pontevedra, Santiago de Compostela, La Coruña,

¹⁴ BS 1913, pp. 131-132/cf. Eng SB May 1913, p. 115.

Santander, Baracaldo, Bilbao, Huesca, Saragossa, and Gerona, whence a benefactor drove him to the monastery of Montserrat. On 15 May he left Spain, and after a two-day stop in Marseille he reached Turin on the evening of Monday, 19 May.

At the end of the month, he sent a letter on “The Festive Oratories” to the confreres. The oratory, he wrote, is the “cornerstone” of the whole Salesian work. It makes itself available for everyone without distinction from the age of seven onwards. Family status or the presentation of the young person by relatives is not required. The only condition for admission is to come with the good will to have fun, be instructed, and fulfil one’s religious duties together with all the others.

All young people, even the most marginalized and wretched, must feel that the oratory is their family home, their refuge, their ark of salvation, their sure means of becoming better, under the transforming action of the director’s more than fatherly affection

“Around every Salesian house,” he wrote, quoting Father Rua, “we must build a festive oratory” entrusted to a zealous confrere who knows how to find and train his helpers among the young people themselves and other good lay people.

Give me a director full of the spirit of our Venerable Father, thirsty for souls, rich in good will, ardent with affection and interest in young people, and the oratory will flourish wonderfully even if it lacks many things

That is exactly how it is: the sincere affection of the director and his helpers makes up for many things. Let us not believe we have made the oratory the way Don Bosco wanted it when we have set up a recreation room where a few hundred boys are gathered.

Although it is desirable that the oratory be abundantly equipped with every kind of comforts and entertainment in order to increase the number of pupils, yet all this must never be apart from the most diligent concern to make them good and well formed in religion and virtue.¹⁵

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart, Father Albera stayed in Rome for fifteen days. The Pope received him in audience on 9 June 1913, and he met various persons. He was accompanied by Father Barberis, who wrote to a friend:

¹⁵ LC 112-118.

We spoke for a long time, especially with Cardinal Francis Cassetta (prefect of the Congregation for Studies), about the theology school of Foglizzo, and now the procedures are moving forward: There's every hope of success. Up till today, Father Albera has visited ten cardinals, dealing with them about the Congregation's business. Always accompanying him, I saw how much they all appreciate and love our Pious Society, and how well known are our works and Father Albera's prudent guidance in everything.

On 14 June a visit to the Salesian works of the Roman and Neapolitan provinces began: Frascati, Genzano, Macerata, Gualdo Tadino, Trevi, Caserta, Naples, and Castellammare di Stabia. On his return, he stopped in Milan, where he met the Cooperators, the priest past pupils of the Salesians, and the workmen who were completing the church of Saint Augustine. On 29 June he was in Turin for the Thanksgiving feast and the program in his honour. In the following days he spoke to the executive committee for the monument to Don Bosco, which selected from among the many proposals presented the one designed by sculptor Cajetan Cellini.

In September, as a delegate from the Holy See, he presided over the Seventh General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He told the sisters:

I was fortunate enough to be present at the meeting of the superior chapter in which our venerable Father Don Bosco for the first time (1871) spoke decisively about the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and, after hearing it then from his lips, I later realized that your institute is really a work willed by God and Mary Help of Christians. I was also persuaded of this in my visits to your houses, and now I am fortunate to affirm it to each of you gathered here as representatives of the entire Congregation. . . .

You could have found, even among the Salesians, people who are more familiar with your institute than I am, more capable than I of giving you advice and help; but perhaps not someone else who loves you more than I and appreciates your work. I thank you for having called me to such a significant task.

With divine help we'll do everything possible so that what is done in the chapter is really for the glory of God and for the good of souls, as Mary Most Holy, the Help of Christians, wants.¹⁶

¹⁶ Garneri 292.

When the sisters of the chapter came to discussing on how to apply the Preventive System in their institutes, he made an intervention that helps us to understand his vision of Salesian pedagogy:

The Preventive System has been highly praised by all the best educators, even Protestants, for its eminently educational aspect, for its maximum effectiveness in moral education. We must admire it, however, especially in its religious aspect. Don Bosco's system prevents offenses against God. What do we gain by punishing evil after we've committed it? ... If we prevent it, we gain everything, for the soul, the body, the family, society. Vigilance, therefore, maternal not military help, prompt and full of affection.

Another characteristic of Don Bosco, and it is embodied in his system, is what won him so many hearts and so much veneration. His first pupils became men who have occupied very important positions in society, and after 55 years retain a memory of him that is striking. His many past pupils are eloquent proof of the miracles obtained by Don Bosco's system. He divinized pedagogy, it was said, and it is true, because he always aimed at God. And this he sought above all: to lead souls to God.¹⁷

In October 1913, his health declined again: "I suffered a lot of stomach pain. ... The doctor has me on heavy medications. I'm very disturbed." Still, he did not stop devoting himself to the animation of the Salesian Family, driven by his fervent desire for activity that would produce good. In his annual letter to the Cooperators of January 1914 he wrote:

We are careful not to begin new works blindly and out of human considerations. ... We would like to put the brakes on any new activity, to restrict ourselves to what is already far too vast a field of action. But when faced with evil that is spreading and good that urgently needs doing, and it becomes clear to us that the invitation to take up new works for the glory of God and the salvation of souls comes from above, we do not hesitate, following the example of Don Bosco, to be even a little bit reckless in a holy fashion. Therefore our hostels, although devoid of any income, are always crowded with youngsters, many of whom are totally poor and marginalized.¹⁸

¹⁷ Garneri 293-294.

¹⁸ BS 1914, p. 7.

Despite his physical distress, on 30 January he left to visit the Salesian works in Sicily. It was a tiring but rewarding journey. He stopped in Massa Carrara, Rome, and Naples, whence he embarked for Palermo. He remained in Sicily for two months. Everywhere he was welcomed as he had been in Spain: in Palermo, Mazzara del Vallo, Marsala, Messina, Catania, Ali Marina, Taormina, Acireale, Pedara, Bronte, Randazzo, Modica, and Caltagirone. He also visited Malta. Back in Catania, he took part in the convention of the past pupils of Sicily and Calabria. On 24 March he left the island for Bova Marina, where the Salesians directed the diocesan seminary and the festive oratory. He made a two-day stop in Soverato. He ascended the plateau to visit the oratory of Borgia and then continued to Reggio Calabria. On 2 April he reached Rome. On Thursday the 16th, Pius X received him in private audience and left him a reminder for the Salesians and their pupils: “Tell them that they always live in the presence of God!”¹⁹

¹⁹ BS 1914, p. 129.

Chapter 8

THE DRAMA OF WAR (1914-1918)

Father Albera with a group of Salesian soldiers gathered in Valdocco for retreat (Turin, 13 October 1916)

The outbreak of war

At the end of July 1914 the terrible First World War broke out. It soon involved the major world powers and ended only in November 1918, with the horrendous toll of 9,000,000 dead soldiers and 7,000,000 civilian victims. On 20 August, while the first battles were taking place on the Belgian and French front, Pius X, who had not succeeded in preventing the conflict, died struck down by grief. After the election of his successor, Benedict XV, Father Albera went to Rome. The Pope received him with

great affection in an audience on 14 October. Meanwhile, as the war went on disastrously, the superior chapter decided to postpone the celebrations planned for the centenary of Don Bosco's birth in 1915 and the general chapter that should have convened in August 1916.

In his annual message to the Cooperators of January 1915, Albera encouraged them to pray earnestly.

A horrendous war threatens to plunge into blood the prosperity of many nations towards which the Salesian Family has powerful bonds of gratitude. The consequences of the enormous conflict impede the vitality of so many other peoples. ...

Many confreres are caught up in the war's vortex, therefore exposed to tragic death (and we have cried for many dead). Various institutes, once happy and flourishing, are now depopulated of youths or reduced to a miserable life. Terrified by the news of the vast conflagration, as long ago as 2 August we began fervent prayers for peace before the altar of Mary Help of Christians. We will continue to raise our humble supplications every day, and with ever-increasing fervour, until it pleases the divine clemency to hear them. ...

The moment is serious: it is time for a great social expiation. God wants to make the nations understand that their temporal and eternal happiness lies in practising the teachings of the Holy Gospel. When they have understood that, the day of the restoration of all things in Jesus Christ will come quickly. ...

So let us be on guard, dear, devout Cooperators, not to yield to fear or despair; rather, let us intensify our humble efforts so that Jesus Christ may reign in modern society.¹

The conflict was only beginning. The rector major could not foresee what would happen in the following years, the horrors of the battlefields, and the losses that would convulse the Salesian Family.

On 13 January a powerful earthquake struck Abruzzo. The many victims included two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Father Albera wrote to the confreres: "Let us bow before God's will and pray also for the many victims of this cataclysm. My heart tells me that Don Bosco and Father Rua would not be content with this only, and therefore I am ready to take in, within the limits of the charity which the Lord sends us, some of

¹ BS 1915, pp. 1-2.

the orphans who have survived.”² Moved by his invitation, the Salesians acted at once and welcomed 172 orphans into their various houses in Italy.

At the end of January, the Director’s Manual was printed, on which Father Albera had been working for years, containing the norms to help each director “preserve the spirit of Don Bosco” in his own house. He addressed the directors in the introduction:

This Manual will not only be of great use because, putting aside the theoretical disquisitions, it gets down to practical life and reminds you of everything you need to do to do your duty in the most advantageous way for yourself and all those who depend on you. But you will also appreciate it and, I hope, it will bear fruit, because the exhortations, advice, and warnings it contains are drawn from precious sources.

In fact, these are indications deduced from “what Don Bosco and Father Rua left us as written norms for the directors” and from some directives of Father Albera himself, suggested “by the need of the times and the new conditions” of the Salesian institutes.³

The volume is divided into two parts. The first lists the qualities that must characterize the director according to the spirit of Don Bosco. These include commitment to perfect oneself; study and observance of the Constitutions; obedience to superiors; the spirit of discipline and sacrifice; love of poverty; pursuit of sacred studies; the life of faith and zeal. The second part applies those qualities by presenting the duties of the director towards the confreres, the young people, and outsiders. The text was sent to the Salesian directors with a personal handwritten letter from Father Albera. To one he wrote:

As director of Viedma you’ll have the opportunity to work hard and also to contribute to preserving the spirit of Don Bosco ever better. Try to reproduce in yourself the virtues and way of governing that Don Bosco and Father Rua taught us by example and word. The whole smooth running of a house depends on the director. If some houses aren’t doing well, it is because the director doesn’t have the calm, the charity, the gentleness, and the patience of our fathers. With certain actions he breaks down instead of helping, with an abrupt and uneven zeal he alienates souls. By wanting the confreres to be too perfect, he

² LC 171.

³ *Manual* 4-5.

makes them nervous and discourages them.⁴

He dedicated April, May, and June to visiting the Salesian houses in Piedmont, Lombardy, and Veneto. When he finished, he was exhausted and was forced to take fifteen days off at Oulx in Val di Susa. Meanwhile, on 24 May 1915, Italy had entered the war alongside the Triple Entente. The government began mass military recruitment. Hundreds of young Salesians were immediately called up.

In a meeting of the provincials of Europe at the end of July, they decided to reopen the schools despite the difficulties of the war. They considered how to assist Salesians in the service and discussed mobilizing the Co-operators to support works that were in serious economic difficulties.

The celebrations planned for the centenary of Don Bosco's birth were downsized. On 15 August in front of his tomb in Valsalice's courtyard, a Mass was celebrated with many participants. In the afternoon, the civic commemoration took place. The next day, next to Don Bosco's house at Becchi, after the celebration of the Eucharist, Father Albera blessed the first stone of the little shrine of Mary Help of Christians, which he wanted to erect as a votive offering to implore peace.

Six months into the war, the situation worsened. Albera's circular letter of 21 November reads:

An overwhelming number of our dear Salesians, including many young priests, found themselves in the dire need to lay aside their religious habits and put on military uniforms. They had to leave their beloved books to wield sword and rifle. They were rushed from their peaceful academic and trade schools to go to live in barracks and trenches, or as nurses were employed in care of the sick and the wounded. We also have quite a few at the front, where some have already given up their lives, and others have returned horribly injured.

Despite everything, Father Albera encouraged all of them to continue their mission with confidence:

We would be men of little faith if we let ourselves be discouraged. We would show that we are ignorant of the history of our Pious Society if, faced with the difficulties that seem to block our path, we halted, disheartened. What would our most gentle Father say from heaven, whence he looks lovingly upon us, if he saw us weak and discouraged

⁴ Garneri 314.

at seeing ourselves fewer to cultivate that field which Providence has assigned as our mission? Oh, remember, dear sons, that Don Bosco will recognize us as his true sons only when our courage and strength are equal to the serious difficulties we have to overcome. This courage and this energy that are necessary for us, we must draw first of all from our piety.⁵

At the beginning of 1916, the conflict escalated. Father Albera communicated the consequences to the Cooperators.

From day to day the long lists of the dead are increasing, and while industry and international commerce are becoming paralysed, and perhaps nearing extinction ... the sentiment of christian charity and brotherhood, which ought to unite the nations, is weakening more and more. ...

My heart is profoundly moved at the sorrow of so many parents, widows and orphan children; but at the same time our own anxieties are heavy in the extreme.

On the outbreak of war ... large numbers of our own Society had to join the ranks of the army. ... perhaps to find themselves on opposing fronts in the various fields of action. ...

All of them are bearing the great discomforts in the best of spirits, and are able to find scope for their apostolic work among the soldiers, or among their own companions; and they are doing this in the barracks and hospitals, in the camps at the front, and in the trenches, and on the field of battle.

The Salesian works experienced heavy repercussions:

... the many works on behalf of society, to which [Salesian military personnel] had consecrated their lives in the Congregation founded by Don Bosco must necessarily suffer; while some would be quite brought to a standstill, if those that remained behind had not undertaken double burdens; and not only are they bearing this, but there is also a great strain upon the necessaries of life, on account of being cut off from so many of our Co-operators, and from the usual sources of supply. May the sacrifices that are so generously made, whether by our Co-operators, or by those in the war hasten the return of peace. When that glad day arrives, ... we shall continue our efforts to render more proficient and

⁵ LC 182-183.

lasting the blessings of peace. Oh! that these aspirations might enkindle the hearts of all our Co-operators and encourage them earnestly to work more intensely for a more christian restoration in all things in harmony with the spirit of the Venerable Don Bosco.

Father Albera concluded: “Dear Co-operators ... all should take courage ...; in our times there are many occasions for works of generous charity particularly towards the young who may be in need; and much more can be accomplished by working under the standard of Don Bosco. Almighty God Himself will be your reward.”⁶

The care of Salesian soldiers

As the months passed, the army drafted an increasing number of confreres and sent them to the front. Once the illusion of a short-lived war had faded, besides the initiatives launched the previous year to support, accompany, and help “morally and materially” those called to war, on 15 February 1916 Father Albera proposed more coordinated action by the Congregation’s leaders, the provincials, and the directors for the care of the Salesians called up. They invited the servicemen to maintain regular correspondence with their superiors and confreres, to forward a detailed personal account to their director every two months. Each received the *Salesian Bulletin* every month, accompanied by a letter from the rector major. The first of these monthly circulars is dated 19 March 1916. It contains a program that is constantly referred to in subsequent letters:

In your holy and fruitful battles as teachers you were tireless. ... Now your country also asks you for physical efforts, and you have answered with your customary enthusiasm and cheerfulness, ready to make any sacrifice. So much noble purpose, so much vigorous virtue has been allotted to you in a very high degree and gives you a very lofty dignity, from which additional duties derive in you. It is these duties that I recommend that you keep constantly before your eyes, to keep yourselves always and in every circumstance worthy of being Don Bosco’s sons.

Therefore, my beloved sons, try to sanctify all your actions by living in

⁶ BS 1916, pp. 2-3/Eng SB Jan.-Feb. 1916, pp. 202-203, 206-207.

union with God. Constantly direct your thoughts and affections to him, and he will keep you steadfast in virtue, will infuse you with strength and courage in the hours of prostration and discomfort, nor will he let you lack for a single moment the strength necessary to honour all your duties. Perhaps you cannot have much time for prayer, but for this you must dedicate everything, so that your piety is an active one encompassing and pervading, I will say, every moment of your life.

Do not get disturbed by the clamour of arms, nor let the newness and variety of life distract you or the constant sacrifices you have to face weaken your character. Let them be a means to fortify yourself more and more in the faith, and to conquer any danger that could undermine your perseverance in goodness.

May the goodness and gentleness of your soul shine forth in all your actions. This must be your habitual character; in this character you have been formed; in this you must persevere. This must be the sign that makes you known as sons of Don Bosco. Therefore, continuing the tradition of your life, always be ready for any service for your comrades, rush to help them in all their needs, always see a burning flame of charity shining in your heart that makes you tireless for every good work. There will be no shortage of opportunities, and you will not allow yourself to shirk them. Indeed, take them all, and you will ensure the blessings of heaven and the love of your brothers. In this way you will be bright beacons of good example, and almost unconsciously, you will do great good, imitating the Apostle, who made himself all things for all in order to win all to Jesus Christ.⁷

The extensive correspondence of Salesian soldiers preserved in the archives displays the effectiveness of his initiative. The letters of the rector major united them in spirit to the Congregation and its mission. They were supported morally and spiritually, encouraged to remain faithful to their consecration, to show themselves everywhere as worthy sons of Don Bosco, models of virtue to their fellow soldiers, tireless apostles for the good of souls. A cleric wrote to Father Albera:

How lucky I am, when in quiet moments I scroll through your precious circulars. They are a gold mine of advice, strength, and stimulus to fight. What an ardent desire to persevere, to hold high and honour the banner around which Don Bosco called us! What a joy to feel a clear

⁷ Lm n. 1.

conscience, a heart fervent with all his kind words. Thus our lives are revived. Falling asleep in the evening with your circulars in my hands and being able to dream of my dear distant confreres is a happiness amid so much nostalgia.⁸

Others trusted their hard work:

Yesterday I received your very dear letter. I read it affectionately, and the more I examine it, the more I know myself far from possessing the same spirit. Oh, how much we lose when we've been removed from the source! I'm sorry to hurt you, but to be honest, it is so. For the comfort of your abundantly good heart, I assure you that your advice and exhortations are of great help to me in the work of suppressing my infinite evil inclinations. With great anxiety I await your treasured letters, which are for me the *stella maris*, and I try to practice them. But given the poor soil and the great inconveniences, almost everything soon vanishes. When I'm at rest, I make use of the means of our holy religion, and I seem to revive, but on the line it is sterile. Oh, what dryness!⁹

Many declared that they felt confirmed in their vocation among the daily dismays.

The priest often blesses bodies massacred by machine guns, slaughtered bodies. My most common prayer is the countless requiems I recite for the dear departed who are around me, cut down by enemy bullets. They say that military life is a great danger for the religious vocation. Thanks be to God, I can say that I've never felt it so rooted, never have I felt the need to return to my Congregation, among my dear young people, among my dear confreres. I always remember the dear solemnities, the noisy playgrounds, the unforgettable, prayerful, sorrowful hours of the morning in church, beautifully praying at the foot of the altar! I read avidly the Bulletin that comes to me regularly, even more than your circulars, beloved father, which always give me a new perspective on life, even if I have to read them a hundred times.¹⁰

Beloved father, it is not custom but sincere affection and gratitude that

⁸ ASC B0421101, P. Di Cola, 04.01.1918.

⁹ ASC B0410679, G. Conti, 20.02.1918

¹⁰ ASC B0420502, E. De Angelis, 28.06.1917.

makes me write to you. Oh, if it were possible for me to be near you, to open my heart to you, to tell you so many things, that I love you so much, that for you, for the Congregation, for what is good, I suffer and do my duty as best I can. The situation is terrible, but so far, with God's help, everything has gone well. Courage, beloved superior, in the terrible present trial. May it comfort you to know that your distant sons increasingly appreciate their beautiful vocation and feel more and more attached to the Congregation and yearn for the day when they will return to their precious occupations.¹¹

Even in the most dramatic moments, the Salesians on the front line felt comforted by faith, assisted by Divine Providence, ready to offer their sufferings for the good of the Congregation. After the military disaster at Caporetto, a priest confrere wrote:

Sperabundo gaudio in omni tribulatione mea [With all our affliction, I am overjoyed – 2 Cor 7:4]. I sincerely thank the Lord who has made me suffer so much. For me this is the best sign that not only does the Lord not forget me, but he loves me very much. I'm very grateful to him for that. In moments when my exhaustion has reached the point that I can't swallow a piece of bread ... and while tens of thousands of people, crammed into the streets and squares of a small village were looking for how to feed themselves, Providence sent me a cup of hot soup in a way that was really strange. I'm eager to assure you I never forget that I'm Don Bosco's son; that as a Salesian I suffer willingly, happy to fulfil the Lord's will in everything, convinced that my sufferings will also benefit my dear Society, which I love as my family.¹²

The enormous loss of life multiplied the number of orphans. On 6 April 1916, Father Albera communicated to Italy's prime minister the decision to establish a house at Pinerolo to take in war orphans.

Notwithstanding the fact that twenty-five per cent of the masters and assistants of our Houses in Italy have been called to the colours, and also that the demands upon public generosity have been so many and so urgent, yet, relying on the Providence of God and the co-operation of the public I have decided to open an Institute wholly for boys between the ages of eight and twelve who have become homeless through the war. ...

¹¹ ASC B0440538, E. Provera, 20.04.1916.

¹² ASC B0440224, P. Osenga, 15.11.1917.

I do so with the confidence that you will lend it the weight of your authority, since it has no other end than to serve ... to many a boy the opportunity of becoming an upright, capable citizen.¹³

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians showed the same availability.

The last year of the war

The few confreres left in the houses were overburdened with work. The rector major constantly exhorted them to be heroic in the service of the young. Their sufferings and hardships could become instruments of purification and spiritual perfection. In such situations, it was necessary for directors and provincials to become teachers and models of religious life, of a spirit of piety, observance, charity, and zeal.

In August 1917 he communicated the worsening of the war: "The call for a review of those exempted from service will take away many other confreres. Our clerics, who previously bore most of the burden of assistance, can no longer do so because now almost all of them are serving in the military." A shortage of the personnel indispensable for the normal functioning of the works was beginning to appear.

In November 1917 Father Albera appealed to the prime minister for an exemption of about twenty Salesians "indispensable and irreplaceable as directors and administrators of institutes," so that seventeen works would not be forced to close, "leaving 4,000 pupils on the street, most of whom need shelter."¹⁴

The defeat at Caporetto on 24 October 1917 was an immense drama for Italy, with thousands of refugees. Father Albera wrote to the Salesian soldiers on 24 November:

In these days we are witnessing the grievous spectacle of many poor refugees flocking to our cities and villages from the regions where the battle is raging, arriving in such conditions that they cannot meet even the most urgent necessities of life. I immediately arranged for almost a hundred refugee boys aged 12 to 14 to be housed in the Oratory; at the same time I appealed to all the directors of our houses in Italy to

¹³ BS 1916, p. 131/Eng SB May-June 1916, p. 256.

¹⁴ ASC E443, A. Conelli, 14.11.1917.

welcome as many boys as possible.¹⁵

In those days, over 400 boys were sheltered in various boarding schools. The Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians welcomed others, over 1,000, free of charge in the following months and years. Where the situation permitted, the Salesians of France, Belgium, Great Britain, Poland, Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia did the same.

In his January 1918 letter to the Cooperators, Father Albera wrote:

Notwithstanding these abnormal and difficult circumstances, our Festive Oratories, our Homes, our Colleges and other Institutes were never so full of boys and never doing better work. If that statement is a matter of surprise in regard to neutral countries, it must be considered even more surprising where the belligerent countries are concerned. ... To this special care on the part of Divine Providence, we must join the continued esteem and favour in which the memory of the Venerable Don Bosco is held. ...

There is none of our Houses which has not received within it the children of those who have fallen, whose homes have been ruined by the war, or in many cases, they have given hospitality to numbers of the soldiers themselves.

He exhorted the Cooperators to imitate Don Bosco's zeal in devotion to Mary Help of Christians, to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and in the commitment to make Salesian vocations and works flourish.¹⁶

That year, 1918, was the golden jubilee of Father Albera's priestly ordination. There were various celebrations in his honour. The Salesian soldiers offered him a gold chalice. He thanked them in his circular of 24 January, urging them to remain faithful to the spirit of the Society's origins.

Like water, the farther it moves away from its source, the more it loses its natural clarity and becomes a muddy flow. Thus, the spirit of a religious institute, the more it moves away from the Founder and from those who were blessed to live with him for many years, the more it loses its early integrity. ... How many extraneous things, if we are not careful, will infiltrate among us a little at a time! How many practices proper to the spirit of the venerable Don Bosco, do we allow to fall out of use here and there! Having had the great fortune to live with our venerable Father for

¹⁵ Lm n. 20.

¹⁶ BS 1918, pp. 1-2/Eng SB Jan.-March 1918, pp. 2-3.

many years, and to enjoy the intimacy of his trust, I can say that I drank deep of the spirit that animated him. ...

Don Bosco chose Saint Francis de Sales as patron of his work, because he wanted his sons always to imitate his great activity in doing good, his ardent love of God, and his unalterable gentleness with his neighbour. To make this model more effective, Don Bosco practised it first in himself, making it as modern as our times required. Therefore, if we want to say that we are truly Salesians, we must not only try to possess these three constitutive elements of Don Bosco's spirit – activity, love of God, and gentleness towards our neighbour – but we must also try to possess them harmoniously, joined as they were in him.¹⁷

On 24 May 1918, the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of the shrine of Mary Help of Christians was celebrated. There were special celebrations and pilgrimages from various parts of Piedmont. After the festivities, Father Albera was exhausted and had to retire to Oulx for a brief rest. On 1 August he had the joy of attending the blessing of the church of Mary Help of Christians at Becchi, in front of Don Bosco's little home. The following day he celebrated Mass there, in the presence of the superior chapter, the general council of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and a representation of war orphans and pupils of Salesian institutes.

On 11 November 1918, with the surrender of Austria, the “immense slaughter” of the war ended. The Salesians counted their losses: out of 2,000 European Salesians called to arms, about eighty confreres died in the war; many more were wounded. Some others, psychologically and spiritually damaged, had to leave the Congregation. But most of the veterans returned strengthened in spirit and character, animated by generous intentions. Many of them in the following decade formed the backbone of missionary expeditions to Asia, Africa, and the Americas, showing incredible adaptability and generosity. They all left testimonies of apostolic charity and holiness. Among the many, we recall the future bishops Cajetan Pasotti, Stephen Ferrando, Louis Mathias, John Lucato, and John Baptist Couturon; and Fathers Peter Gimbert, Joseph August Arribat, Constantine Vendrame, Charles Crespi, Charles Braga, Anthony Cavoli, John Tanguy, Louis Albisetti, Sante Garelli, and dozens of others.

¹⁷ Lm n. 22.

Chapter 9

TOWARDS A PEACEFUL END (1919-1921)**1919-1920**

After the war, in January 1919 Father Albera invited the Cooperators to pray for “a just and lasting peace.” He remembered what had been done

the previous year, in particular the reception of 300 war orphans and 500 refugees. He listed the new foundations: the Turin oratories in Borgo San Paolo and the Monte Rosa district, the institute of Livorno, the agricultural school of Mandrione at Rome, the oratory and boarding school at Fiume, the house for young workers at Würzburg, Bavaria, the Kielce orphanage and the Krakow studentate in Poland, the Cold Spring novitiate and the Williamsbridge aspirantate in New York. He also recalled the many additional works of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Finally, he presented the program for the new year, especially in mission countries, and exhorted the Cooperators to multiply their zeal in the education of young people “for the Christian restoration of society.” Respected Cooperators, he addressed them:

You believe that the truly Christian education of the rising generations is the simplest and most practical method of christianising society as a whole. But to secure this it is necessary to multiply the number of zealous and capable labourers and of valiant warriors, all filled with enthusiasm for the same ideal. If the Salesian Co-operators, who in Italy alone number a hundred thousand, would endeavour to exercise their holy apostolate, what greater benefit could be rendered to the rising generations.¹

On 15 March, while celebrating the month’s mind Mass for the repose of the soul of the treasurer general, Father Clement Bretto, Father Albera suffered a slight heart attack. It forced him to rest a little more in the morning and to walk a little in the afternoon. As soon as he felt better, he resumed his usual rhythm, with a carefully articulated schedule, rising at 5:00 A.M.; meditation at 5:30; Mass at 6:00; from 7:00 to 9:00 in the office for correspondence; followed by receiving visitors until noon. In the afternoon, after a quarter of an hour of rest, he worked in the office from 2:30 P.M. until spiritual reading and Benediction in the evening.

On 20 April, he sent a circular to provincials and directors on the *gentleness to be practised in the exercise of authority*, proposing as models Jesus Christ, Saint Francis de Sales, and Don Bosco. On 7 May, he left for Florence and Faenza. He returned to Valdocco for the novena of the Help of Christians. In June, he took part in the special convention of the Turin past pupils. His health, however, was declining steadily. In July, he wrote to a superior of the Salesian sisters:

¹ BS 1919, pp. 2-7/Eng SB Jan.-March 1919, pp. 6-9.

On Monday, eight days ago, I felt uncomfortable again. For the entire week, I could hardly write. In great pain, I could sign only a few important papers. Today is the first time I'm trying to write, and I'm writing to you. As you can see, I don't handle the pen well, but slowly and with effort. I'm writing to tell you that you mustn't believe I'm very ill. Maybe a brief rest will set me right. On the doctor's instruction, tomorrow, God willing, I will go to Cuorgné and stay there for eight or ten days; I hope the mountain air will do me good. I have no appetite and can hardly sleep. I have no shortage of troubles, and they are often very serious. ... I hope very much in your prayers. God's will be done in everything.²

After a few days of rest, he went to Pinerolo for the award ceremony for the orphans. Then he was in Nizza Monferrato for the retreat of the sisters' local superiors. He was getting ever weaker. The doctor ordered him to rest for four weeks in Cuorgné, but fifteen days later, he was back in Turin. At the end of September, he went again to Nizza Monferrato to preach.

In the circular letter of 24 September, he recommended the care of vocations to the Salesians. With great pain, he wrote, many foundation proposals had to be rejected due to lack of personnel: "When will we see again the consolation of every house, every festive oratory making its contribution of Salesian vocations? ... We do not work completely according to the spirit of our venerable Father Don Bosco, if we do not put all our effort into cultivating vocations."³

After he came back to Turin, Cardinal Cagliero invited him to spend a few peaceful days at Castelnuovo. He found no benefit; the partial paralysis of his right arm even got worse. In the second half of November, he went to Rome on the Congregation's business. On 30 November the Pope received him. He wrote to the provincials:

I cannot fully express to you the personal satisfaction I felt when I could tell the Holy Father that the Salesians had carried out his urgent appeal to the entire world on behalf of poor children in Central Europe through his fatherly encyclical ten days earlier. Indeed, it was precisely in these same regions that during this year 1919 we had opened spacious new institutes to shelter the greatest number of boys in need.⁴

² Garneri 373.

³ Garneri 375.

⁴ Garneri 376.

He was referring to the encyclical *Paterno iam diu* of 24 November, in which the Pontiff presented to the Catholic episcopate the dramatic situation of the children of Central Europe, who lived in conditions of extreme poverty and hunger, and invited them to mobilize their charity. The Salesians had already done so by organising orphanages and support centres in all the nations most affected by the war. But Father Albera wanted to do something more to respond to the papal appeal and designated another institute in Piedmont, that of Perosa Argentina, to receive and care for the orphans of central Europe.

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, in the basilica of the Sacred Heart at Rome, Cardinal Cagliero celebrated his thirty-fifth anniversary of episcopal ordination. Father Albera wanted to return to Turin for Christmas but was delayed in the capital until early February.

In the letter to the Cooperators of January 1920, he described his papal audience and announced that the dedication of the monument to Don Bosco at Turin had been set for May, at the same time as the international congresses of the Cooperators and the male and female past pupils associations. He presented the works opened in 1919: six in Italy, four in Bavaria, two in Vienna, one in Hungary, one in Yugoslavia, and one in Ireland. He reported that most of the Salesian houses in Europe had been geared up to relieve the extraordinary hardships of so many poor young people in Central Europe, whose grave needs were the subject of the Holy Father's latest encyclical." Then he added:

Poland now re-established brought the Salesians to six centres to take up various schemes of assistance and education; at *Rozanystok* a large parish and an immense place capable of taking 700 boys in trade schools and in agricultural training; at *Aleksandrow* another parish and a public school for 300 boys; at [Warsaw] the public church, the parish schools and schools of Arts and Trades; at Crakow another parish and Festive Oratory; at *Przemysl* a school for homeless and destitute boys, of whom the war has made many and at *Dolna* a House of Studies for the formation of personnel. May God bless the ancient faith and relieve the sufferings of the generous Polish people.

Other houses had opened in the Americas, and new missionary residences in the vicariate of Shiu-Chow, China, and in Chaco Paraguayo. He also listed the twenty-one recent works of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.⁵

⁵ BS 1920, pp. 3-6/Eng SB Jan.-Feb. 1920, pp. 4-10.

Back in Turin in February he wrote a circular letter in which, after speaking of the monument to Don Bosco that the past pupils wanted to sponsor, he exhorted the Salesians to be *living monuments* of the Founder, “to revive in themselves his virtues, his educational system, the whole of his spirit, so as to pass it on always fruitful and vital from generation to generation.” Above all, he invited them to imitate “that affectionate concern for young people, which was the secret of his wonderful influence over them,” following the guidance offered in the letter from Rome of 10 May 1884.⁶

The dedication of the monument in the piazza of Mary Help of Christians was linked with a series of events aimed at revitalising the Salesian Family after the upheavals of the war. On 19 May an exhibition of the programs of the Salesian vocational and agricultural schools opened, which was intended to “give a precise, organic idea of what the Salesians intend to do in the future, to show where they are directing their efforts and what perfection they want to achieve” to respond to additional needs and “to cooperate in the formation of a technically perfect workforce and citizens of Christian sentiments.”⁷

The three international congresses of Cooperators and past pupils took place simultaneously between 20 and 22 May in separate meetings with some common events. The final general assembly was held in the Valdocco theatre with 3,000 participants. Father Albera moved from one congress to another. He made brief speeches, but created a fine impression by presenting everywhere the relevance of the spirit of Don Bosco and his work.

The dedication ceremony of the monument took place on 23 May, the solemnity of Pentecost, in the presence of 6,000 Salesian pupils, 3,000 congress attendees, and religious, civil, and military authorities. The following day the feast of Mary Help of Christians was celebrated with an extraordinary participation of devotees and pilgrims.

At that point, Father Albera wanted to go to Milan for the consecration of the church of Saint Augustine. He also went to Verona. It was an uncomfortable journey because of the strikes and violent worker unrest of that period, which historians called “the two-year red period” (1919-1920).

One hundred boys from Central Europe arrived in Valdocco on 28 June to meet the rector major. Fifty were about to return to their homelands after spending a few months in the Perosa Argentina house to improve their

⁶ BS 1920, pp. 3-6/Eng SB Jan.-Feb. 1920, pp. 4-10.

⁷ BS 1920, p. 191.

health. Another fifty had arrived from Vienna to replace them. The event is documented in the *Salesian Bulletin* with a group photo:

The hundred little Viennese socialised for several days with the boys of the Oratory and, before the first caravan returned to Vienna and the second left for Perosa Argentina, where they spent the summer months, they wanted to be around their benefactor, the successor of Don Bosco. We note how much Father Albera's heart rejoiced in seeing the frank, intense, and moving gratitude of the little beneficiaries.⁸

In June, the first issue of the *Acts of the Superior Chapter* was published, the official publication of Salesian General Headquarters. On 4 October the monument to Dominic Savio was blessed in Mondonio, with the participation of the rector major and Cardinal Cagliero.

On the 18th, a strong circular was published, in which Albera proposed Don Bosco to the Salesians as the model for "acquiring our religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all." In it, we find very passionate autobiographical testimonies on the interior life of the Founder, on his affective power, on his extraordinary ability to instil God's love in the hearts of young people, on his apostolic and educational ardour. Further down, he wrote:

The animating concept of Don Bosco's entire life was to work for souls until he had totally immolated himself, and that is what he wanted his sons to do. But he always carried out this work calmly, always even-tempered, always imperturbable, whether in joy or in sorrow; because, from the day when he was called to the apostolate, *he had thrown himself completely into God's arms!* If always working until death is the first article of the Salesian code, he wrote more by his example than with the pen, throwing himself into God's arms and never straying from him was his most perfect act. He did it daily, and we must imitate him in the best way possible, to sanctify our work and our souls.⁹

On 24 October, in the company of Cardinal Cagliero, he presided over the departure ceremony for the missionaries. On 8 December he left for Rome. He met with the Pope, to whom he presented the new edition of the *Life of the Venerable Servant of God John Bosco* in two volumes by the late Father John Baptist Lemoyne.

⁸ BS 1920, p. 198/Eng SB Aug.-Sept. 1920, p. 89 (photo only).

⁹ LC 335.

In the course of his rectorate, he had often reaffirmed the importance of formation for the Salesians. He returned to this theme in a long circular letter sent only to the provincials in November 1920. He reminded them of their responsibility to care for the young confreres, both clerics and coadjutors. Otherwise, they cannot acquire that religious and Salesian formation so necessary for doing good among the young. It is up to the directors, above all, to practice every diligence to act like fathers, and I would even say as mothers, around their little children, to form in them hearts and minds like Don Bosco's heart and mind. ...

We must thank wholeheartedly Mary Most Holy, the Help of Christians, for the visible protection she has strewn upon these good children of hers during the terrible trial of the war. ...

Now let it be our duty to nurture them with ecclesiastical spirit and hearty and healthy ecclesiastical learning.

Then he added a note that, in the context of the efforts he had made to provide the Congregation with well organized formation houses, is strong:

Now, fortunately, almost all the clerics can be brought together in studentates of philosophy, and most of those who are studying theology, notwithstanding the great scarcity of personnel. ...

Take the greatest care to select confreres expert in the ecclesiastical disciplines that they must teach, establish a schedule sufficient for the normal presentation of the subject matter, rigorously demand that all who can attend the various courses do so, and really attend them with faithful regularity, and from time to time inform yourselves of how these schools are going, how diligently the professors do their teaching, and what profit the clerics get from their studies.

1921

Further, he recommended that particular attention be given to the teaching of dogmatic and moral theology and, since "our priests, besides becoming good teachers, good educators, must also be skilled confessors and preachers, but they cannot be either the one or the other if they do not study these two fundamental subjects in depth."¹⁰

¹⁰ ASC E223, typescript signed by Fr. Albera, 4.11.1920.

His strength waning, his health problems increased day by day, foreshadowing the end. Compared to previous years, though, a profound serenity filled his heart. In the letter to the Cooperators of January 1921, he felt the need to recall his first providential meeting with the Founder:

When I look back to the day, when as a child of thirteen, I was received by Don Bosco with so much charity at the Oratory, I am filled with emotion, and I seem to realise quite distinctly the almost innumerable graces which were reserved to me by God, under the guidance of our most loving father. And, indeed, how many there are who can assert the same thing – that they owe all they are to the Venerable Don Bosco! Our education, our training, our very vocation – we owe all to the fatherly sollicitude of that Man of God, who bore towards his spiritual sons a holy and indefatigable affection. It is for this reason that the remembrance of him is dearer to us than that of all others, and united with that remembrance is our admiration for his extraordinary sanctity, and for the greatness of his Mission, which no one could possibly doubt to be heaven-sent. With every year that passes, his gentle and fatherly aspect, instead of losing somewhat of its charming radiance, which makes it so revered, appears ever more luminous, and renders yet more vivid within us the conviction of his heroic virtues; while his Work, ever being consolidated and extended through the support of the generous and noble-minded, makes us repeat ever more confidently: *The Finger of God is here!* The Work of Don Bosco was clearly willed by God and he continues to assist it with constant benedictions.¹¹

The last year of his life was packed with activity. At the end of January, he went to France. He visited Nice, La Navarre, and Saint-Cyr. Here two extraordinary events took place. They introduced him to a pupil of the sisters who had to have a throat operation; he blessed her, and the following morning she was perfectly healed. A sister of Mary Help of Christians who had a leg ulcer applied the cotton used to rub Albera's aching hand on the wound, and gradually the wound healed.

From Saint-Cyr, Don Bosco's successor moved to Marseille, where he met hundreds of Cooperators who wanted his blessing. In Montpellier, Cardinal Anatole de Cabrieres received him with great cordiality. After visiting Savigny and Morges, he would have liked to continue to Paris, but his health deteriorated. A specialist visited him and diagnosed circu-

¹¹ BS 1921, p. 1/Eng SB Aug. 1921, p. 3.

latory disorders: “It is a cerebral arteriosclerosis, which however has left his mental faculties intact. Memory, intelligence, and clarity of mind have remained the same as before; indeed, it is surprising to see how you remember things of thirty years ago.”¹² He had to return to Turin.

In March he wrote a great circular, “Don Bosco, Model of the Salesian Priest.” He invited the confreres to be, like the Founder, “always priests all the time,” engaged “in an assiduous and loving study of the moral character” to be reproduced in themselves. He exhorted them to strive “towards ever higher perfection” in the observance of the Constitutions, in prayer, in the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance, to entrust themselves to spiritual direction, to practise the daily examination of conscience in order to grow in the exercise of virtues and in holiness.¹³

On 10 March he wrote to the director of San Nicolas de los Arroyos, Argentina:

The Lord confides to you the most delicate and dearest ministry to his divine heart! Therefore, respond with love and gratitude by doubling your zeal. First, deepen yourself in the knowledge of how to direct souls, which is called *ars artium* because of its difficulty, so that you can then say to Jesus, “As many strays as you have sent me, all, thanks to your help, I have put onto the right path!” Advise prayer as an indispensable means of self-correction, and avail yourself of it a lot, mindful of those words: *Sine me, nihil potestis facere* [Apart from me you can do nothing – John 15:5].¹⁴

From April, his health deteriorated, and he had to limit his activity. In mid-May he wrote to one person: “I feel out of energy. Everything about my office weighs on me. It is partly a physical malaise, coming also from the many inevitable pains in my responsibility.” He had a bit of peace during the feast of Mary Help of Christians. Therefore, every evening he was able to go to the shrine for long, devout visits.

On 31 May he visited the international theological studentate of Foglizzo and was welcomed by clerics of seventeen nationalities. During the entertainment program, overwhelmed by emotion, he was compelled to retire. On 2 June at Parma, he gave a conference to the confreres and the patronesses: everyone saw that he was exhausted. He continued to Modena,

¹² ASC B0250605, typewritten copy.

¹³ ACS 2, no. 2 (March 1921), 134-172.

¹⁴ Garneri 396-397.

where his seventy-sixth birthday was celebrated. During the party, he did not have the strength to speak publicly and had to make significant efforts to stay awake.

On 12 June 10,000 youths from Catholic associations gathered in the piazza of Mary Help of Christians for the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the first Catholic youth club in Turin. “Before the bronze statue of Don Bosco,” they paid “homage to the most modern apostle of youth . . ., the saviour of many generations, who is and will be over time the luminous beacon of youths who believe and work for good!” and expressed their own “ardent desire for the good and the love that Christian youth would produce for the future.” Father Albera watched the ceremony from the Oratory windows. He was recognised and acclaimed several times. He was deeply moved.¹⁵ That evening he wrote: “I’m very weak. . . . Father Gusmano always continues to assist me and help me as a son towards his father. God reward him!”

On 19 June he attended the laying of the cornerstone of the church of the Michael Rua Oratory in the Monterosa district. On 2 July he took part in the titular feast in the new Oratory of Borgo San Paolo. He had expressly desired these two works on the outskirts where immigrant workers lived. He himself had chosen the Salesians to lead them, men gifted with great energy and creativity, animated by a genuine Salesian spirit. Those two new oratories served as a stimulus for the smart, creative revitalisation of the oratorian spirit, method, and mission, reformulated in the restless socio-economic context of those years. They served as a model for the new Salesian generations.

Despite the great summer heat, he wanted to stay in Turin so as not to interrupt his correspondence work. On 10 September he received the news of the death of Bishop Costamagna. In the bishop’s obituary he wrote:

Of the many losses suffered by the Congregation in these years of my rectorate, this afflicts me particularly, because with Bishop Costamagna one of the dearest companions of my life as a student here at the Oratory disappears, and therefore also one of the very rare confreres who were for a long time most closely associated with approached our venerable Father and practised his teachings.¹⁶

On 22 October Bishop John Marengo also passed away. “This death,”

¹⁵ BS 1921, pp. 170-171.

¹⁶ ACS 2, no. 7 (Oct. 1921), 274.

he wrote to a sister, “has deeply grieved me. I cried a lot. God’s will be done!” He felt that these were the last days of his life.

On 23 October he greeted the missionaries leaving for Assam. On the 24th, he attended Bishop Marengo’s funeral. On the 27th, he took part in the funeral commemoration of Bishop Costamagna. In the evening, he took a carriage ride to the Madonna di Campagna. The 28th was a day of relative well-being. He celebrated Mass at 6:00 A.M., and then received visitors all morning. He suggested to Father Rinaldi that Foglizzo’s international theological studentate be transferred to Turin.

He told the treasurer general, Father Arthur Conelli:

We must try to multiply vocations, not only for our Pious Society, but also for the dioceses. This is a great need of the Church in the present hour. If Don Bosco were alive, if Father Rua were alive, they would not give themselves peace until they had provided for this need with all their strength. We must do the same. Unfortunately, donations have been decreasing considerably for some months; still, we hold firm. ... If we receive some generous offer, let us try to dedicate it for this purpose.¹⁷

Then he agreed with the prefect general, Father Rinaldi, on how to celebrate the third centenary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales in 1922.

Father Barberis recounts: “In the evening I walked with him, and he joked cheerfully at my side, reminding me of an adventure that happened years before.” A quiet night passed. But at 4:00 A.M., he was overcome with breathing trouble. He got up and called his secretary, Father Gusmano. The doctor was summoned, who assessed the gravity of the situation. Father Rinaldi anointed him. While the confreres gathered around his bed praying for him, Father Albera passed away. It was 5:15 A.M. on 29 October 1921.

That afternoon Father Albera’s body, dressed in surplice and stole, was placed in the supplementary church in the piazza of Mary Help of Christians. A multitude of Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, past pupils, Cooperators, pupils, religious and civil authorities, friends of the Salesian work, and people of every class paid their respects.

The funeral rites began on the afternoon of 30 October. The imposing funeral procession travelled the streets of Turin for two and a half hours. Cardinal Cagliero blessed the coffin that remained all night in the church of Mary Help of Christians. On the 31st, the solemn funeral Mass was celebrated. Then the body was transported to Valsalice and buried near

¹⁷ Garneri 415.

Don Bosco's tomb.

In the *Salesian Bulletin*, Father Rinaldi drew a very effective portrait of Father Albera:

Endowed with a solid and profound genius and a strong and precise memory, from an early age he turned all his activity to form the spirit in the solid and enlightened piety that was to be his life. He was trained first and always at Don Bosco's school, all of whose teachings he eagerly studied. ... Even his other studies (he was an diligent scholar and lover of every healthy culture) he directed to this; they nourished his piety and were stamped by piety. Piety was the secret of his success. ...

So many works, performed by a man so sparing in his words, so sober in his gesture, so measured in his movement, almost surprise us, but they gain greater value and effectiveness when their root is considered, which is the interior life of piety, which took up his whole life, and received from it that imprint of simplicity and composure which was so characteristic in him. The saying of Saint Paul, *pietas ad omnia utilis est* [Devotion is valuable in every respect – 1 Tim 4:8 NAB], was fully evident in him, revealed at every moment in the reality of his life. ... His moral figure was imposing. As rector major of the Salesians, Father Albera was firmly intent on walking faithfully in the footsteps of Don Bosco and Father Rua, without restriction or mental reservation. This is the true glory of the eleven years of his rectorate.¹⁸

Father Rinaldi also wrote a long obituary for the Salesians in which he presented the relevant features of the person and work of Father Albera. He highlighted his commitment to keeping intact how Don Bosco had formed the Salesian work, his spirit of prayer, his ardent Eucharistic and Marian devotion, his love for the Pope and the Church, and his constant promotion of festive oratories, missions, and vocations. He concluded with an assessment of his rectorate:

The Lord gave him the consolation of seeing his labours blessed: the number of members increased during his rectorate by 705, despite the losses caused by the war; the number of houses increased by 103; new missions opened in Africa (in the Belgian Congo), in Asia (in China and Assam), in Chaco Paraguay; new novitiate houses and the new and flourishing festive oratories. ...

¹⁸ BS 1921, pp. 314/cf. Eng SB Jan.-Feb. 1922, pp. 3-14.

He saw his confreres honoured by the Holy See, with Bishop Cagliero named cardinal, with the episcopal dignity conferred on five residential bishops, three vicars apostolic, a prelate nullius, with the appointment of a nuncio and two prefects apostolic.

The modesty of his virtue was recognised and honoured by the world, with various titles and honours coming to him from academia, business, cities, associations, and the Italian government.

The Lord finally granted him the grace to overcome the arduous test of the war and to see our Pious Society resume the rhythm of its life, to arrive where neither Don Bosco nor Father Rua was able to arrive – at the celebration of its golden anniversary – and thus to close his truly blessed life – *in senectute bona* [at a ripe old age].

This last providential circumstance leads us to reflect that Father Rua and Father Albera must not be thought of as simply successors of Don Bosco, but as the continuers of his life, which in them pursues, develops, and reaches its fulfilment.¹⁹

Father Louis Cartier offered this beautiful profile of him:

He was marvellously provided by God with excellent gifts: lively and penetrating intelligence, a tenacious and faithful memory in the smallest details as a whole, a strong will in the service of an unchanging gentleness of tone and manner, a very sensitive, affectionate, and compassionate heart. The development of these natural talents with assiduous work made him a master in the secular and religious fields of learning and earned him that deep knowledge of the human heart, that discernment of spirits, and that mastery of men which rightly won him the sympathy, respect, and affection of high church and secular persons. Observant in spirit, refined and delicate, he was aware of even the slightest nuances. His lowered and half-open eyes, seeming to see nothing yet missing nothing, helped him to have a clear and profound understanding of things.²⁰

¹⁹ ACS 2, no. 9 (Nov. 1921), 310-311.

²⁰ *L'Adoption*, December 1921.

Second part

CONTRIBUTION TO SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY



1. The magisterium of life

On receiving the news of Father Albera's death, Father Joseph Vespignani commented from Argentina: "We believe that the late rector major was the continuation of the life, spirit, and activity of Don Bosco and Father Rua; and that all three of them formed a splendid triad, enormously providential and commendable in our Congregation."¹ It is true. We can say that without the dedication and charisma of these disciples, collaborators, and successors of Don Bosco, after the death of the Founder, the Salesian Society probably would quickly have spent its charismatic identity.

Don Bosco chose Father Rua as vicar specifically to structure the nascent Salesian Society, to organise it, to guarantee its organic development and disciplinary solidarity. Subsequently, in naming Father Albera as spiritual director of the Congregation, Father Rua entrusted to him the consolidation of the confreres' spiritual life: to instil in them the "spirit" inherited from the Founder and to guarantee a linear path of formation for the younger generations. Like subsequent rectors major, Rua and Albera showed a keen responsibility to maintain and develop the spiritual and pedagogical patrimony of Don Bosco. They committed themselves in word and action, but above all in the witness of their lives.

Father Albera was aware of the mission he had received. He agonized about it because he felt he was not up to the task. His personal diaries attest to his constant spiritual tension, his relentless asceticism aimed at nurturing the fire of charity that Don Bosco had kindled in his heart starting in his adolescence, and at achieving the competence and holiness required of his governance. The intimacy of his life and work alongside the Founder had convinced him that the best way to maintain his spirit over time and assimilate his charism was to imitate in himself Don Bosco's virtues, zeal, and holiness. The Founder was his constant point of reference. Throughout his life, he tried to model himself on the teachings, example, and actions of the Congregation's Father, and to help the Salesians do the same.

In the circular letter he sent when the monument to Don Bosco was dedicated, Albera recalls his youthful years lived alongside the Founder, "breathing almost his very soul." He recalls the time he spent in Valdocco after his ordination, thus having been able to "enjoy his intimacy and draw from his great heart those precious teachings." He writes:

¹ Garneri 431.

During those years mainly, and even later, on those occasions, always desired, when I had to be with him or accompany him on his travels, I persuaded myself that the only thing necessary to become his worthy son was to imitate him in everything. Therefore, following the example of numerous elder brothers who had already copied in themselves the way of thinking, speaking, and acting of their Father, I tried to do the same.

And today, after more than half a century, I repeat also to you that you are sons like me, and that he has entrusted you to me, as the eldest son. Let us imitate Don Bosco in acquiring our religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all.²

He insisted that his confreres get to know the Founder, study his life and writings with love, and speak often of him to young people and the Cooperators. He also had a profound veneration for Father Rua, especially regarding his concern for perfection even in little things. He wanted the Salesians to regard Father Rua as having been entirely united to Don Bosco.

“Why was Don Bosco loved so much? Why were all hearts united with him?” he asked the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians during their Seventh General Chapter. “It was because he was blessed to have a Father Rua at his side, who handled all the unpleasant tasks. ... When he was elected rector major, some were afraid of a rigorous government. Instead, we saw how good his heart was. This will remain one of the most beautiful pages of Father Rua’s life, and you will see how much he contributed to the halo around Don Bosco.”³

According to Father Louis Terrone, “the key idea that people had of Father Albera was that he was an authentic man of God, an exemplary priest, a totally interior soul.” This spiritual dimension was clear in him: his demeanour, his gaze, and his way of speaking and preaching revealed the religious constantly concerned about the things of heaven.⁴ He had the gift of great natural goodness, which he perfected by working on himself to the point of becoming a man of impressive, exquisite courtesy. He constantly insisted on the importance that Don Bosco attributed to kindness and propriety in dealing with others, without distinction of condition and

² LC 331.

³ Garneri 437-438.

⁴ Garneri 485.

temperament. He quoted Saint Francis de Sales to support the value and effectiveness of good manners as an expression of Christian charity, since they “serve admirably to avoid friction, smooth out the rough edges of one’s character, and preserve peace, mutual understanding, and a certain interior cheerfulness and good domestic relationships.”⁵ He was the first to give an example with his friendliness, which won over young people and adults.

The confreres who lived with him testify to the wealth of his virtues: he was prudent in words and decisions, humble and patient. He showed a constant spirit of self-denial. Despite his frail health, he never shied away from his duties and remained extremely temperate in everything.⁶ His intimate notes reveal his efforts to correct and perfect his own humanity and to nourish his interior life. He also had an exceptional ability to listen, an empathy that attracted confidence.

Through his practical experience in hearing confessions and giving spiritual direction, he had become an expert on the human heart. But he felt a constant need to deepen his knowledge of the spiritual life through the study of and meditation on spiritual authors. As Father Francis Scaloni testifies, the French and Belgian confreres were convinced that he had read “every ascetical work of any value,” and that he knew how to make a thoughtful judgement in spiritual matters. He did not read superficially; he accompanied his reading with meditation “to nourish his mind and heart.”⁷ From these readings and reflections, he drew material for the ministry of preaching and spiritual accompaniment. Father John Baptist Grosso, his close collaborator during his years in Marseille, says that “amid the various concerns of being provincial and director of Saint Leo Oratory... he found time to read a great deal, and almost only ascetical books. Eagerly and carefully, he procured every new book of asceticism that the best French authors published. Not only did he read and annotate them, but he made summaries or excerpts from them, which later helped him considerably in his monthly conferences to his confreres, and in those which he often gladly gave in the various houses.”⁸

⁵ Garneri 467.

⁶ Garneri 475-484.

⁷ Garneri 452-453. In Father Albera’s spiritual diary and in his preaching notes there are references to about eighty authors, according to Joseph Boenzi, “Reconstructing Father Albera’s Reading List,” in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 33 (2014) 203-272.

⁸ ASC B0330314, *D. Paolo Albera. Personal memories*, ms G.B. Grosso, 1.

This taste for the spiritual life, this desire to understand it in depth, must be connected with his personal admiration for Don Bosco's holiness and profound piety. Since boyhood, he had tried to imitate in himself the saint's spirit of prayer and constant union with God. Over the years, he too assimilated the gift of prayer and contemplation. He imposed nothing, but his sincere piety impressed those who saw him praying or celebrating the Eucharist. Fully immersed in adoration, he assumed an attitude of great kindness, a concentration so intense as to move observers. "He made a special commitment to do meditation and thanksgiving after Mass and often recommended the practice of the examination of conscience."⁹ His piety was tender, affective, and intensely communicative, sustained especially with meditation on the Gospel and the letters of Saint Paul.¹⁰

His predominant tendency to divine intimacy and taste for piety did not diminish; rather, they constantly nourished his spirit of initiative, pastoral service, and fervour in his work. He was convinced that authentic piety generates apostolic zeal, illuminates educational activity, inspires it and makes it fruitful, as was the case with Don Bosco.

In his dynamic concern to follow the examples of the Founder and of Father Rua, to "preserve in our Congregation the spirit and traditions we have learned from them," he wrote in his first circular letter, presenting the commitment he had assumed at his election, Albera felt the need to stress some themes that he considered basic, together with others related to his sensitivity or required by historical contingencies, by the context in which his readers worked, and by his intimate knowledge of the confreres. His weighty circular letters are of an exhortative, sapiential, not doctrinal or systematic character, but they reveal a thorough familiarity with the theology of consecrated life and Christian spirituality. In them, some recurring thematic nuclei emerge, which we intend to highlight.

2. Spirit of prayer

It is significant that the first theme Father Albera addressed in order to stimulate the confreres to appropriate the "spirit of our venerable Founder and Father Don Bosco" was the spirit of piety, which he considered a fundamental connotative element of the Salesian identity. His circular

⁹ ASC B0330109, *Per le memorie di D. Paolo Albera* [1923], ms G. Barberis.

¹⁰ Louis Cartier in *L'Adoption*, 20 (1921) n. 214.

letter of 15 May 1911¹¹ affirmed that the universal esteem that the Salesians enjoyed for their resourcefulness and activity in the education was because of the abundant fruits that resulted from the tireless productivity of Don Bosco, Father Rua, and many other confreres, and the “rapid spread of Salesian works in Europe and America.” Undoubtedly, so much ardour and so much work were a reason for honour, apparent proofs of the vitality of the Salesian Society and of the special protection of the Help of Christians. Nevertheless, he felt obliged to remind the confreres “that this over-hyped activity of the Salesians, this zeal,” “this warm enthusiasm” could one day fail if “they had not been fertilised, purified, and sanctified by a true and solid piety.”¹²

Starting from this concern, he discoursed on the practical necessity of the “spirit of piety,” placing it in a solid doctrinal framework inspired by the teachings of Saint Francis de Sales: “It is piety that wisely regulates our relations with God, that sanctifies our relations with our neighbour. Truly pious souls have wings to lift them up to God in prayer, and have feet to walk among human beings by a loving and holy life.” This metaphor used by the Salesians’ patron saint helps them to distinguish daily religious practices from “the spirit of piety, which must accompany us at every moment, whose purpose is to sanctify our every thought, word, and action, although it is not a direct part of the worship that we give to God.” The acquisition of this spirit preserves the fervour of the Salesians’ work from sterile superficiality, dispersion, and fragmentation.

The exercises of piety are an indispensable means for achieving the primary goal, which is the spirit of prayer. It is in them that “that intimate relationship, that ineffable kinship that Jesus Christ wants to establish between himself and souls through the sacrament of Baptism” is nourished. Without the spirit of prayer “that spirit of faith would also weaken, by which we are so convinced of the truths of our holy religion that we always preserve its lively memory, so as to feel its salutary influence in every circumstance of life.” Without it, we would no longer pay attention to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to his consolations and his gifts.

“If it is well cultivated, on the contrary, this spirit ensures that our union with God is never interrupted. It communicates an intimately religious character to every activity, even a profane one, and it raises every activity to supernatural merit” and transforms it into worship pleasing to God.

¹¹ LC 24-40.

¹² LC 26.

Only in this way is it possible to transform work into prayer. This is a law of the spiritual life valid for every Christian, but above all, for those who by professing vows have given themselves without reserve to Jesus Christ, who have consecrated their faculties, their senses, and their entire lives to him. The religious should possess the spirit of piety to such a degree “as to communicate it to those around him.”¹³

“By the grace of God,” notes Father Albera, “we can count many confreres – priests, clerics, and coadjutors – who in terms of the spirit of piety are true models and arouse the admiration of all.”

Unfortunately, this is not the case with every Salesian. There are some who consider the practices of piety a burden and try in every way to exempt themselves from them. Thus they gradually become relaxed and cold, and “unfortunately vegetate in a most deplorable mediocrity and will never bear fruit.”

It is a contradiction: they are consecrated; they live and work in a religious community, but without an interior spirit, making no progress in perfection, exposed to a thousand temptations and in constant danger of “succumbing to the seductions of creatures and the assaults of our passions.” The only defence, the essential strength of religious, is true piety, which helps to “restore our spirit, correspond to God’s grace, and reach the level of perfection that God expects of us.”¹⁴

Father Albera is pragmatic. Since the Salesians “are entrusted with the choicest portion of the flock of Jesus Christ,” the young, and their educational commitment bears good fruit, enemies will assail them: “We have to be ready for the fight. ... Let us be persuaded that only from the spirit of piety will we be able to draw strength and comfort.” We also know that “the whole system of education taught by Don Bosco is based on piety”; therefore, if we were not “abundantly provided” with this spirit, we would offer our students an incomplete education. “If a Salesian is not firmly devout, he will never be fit for the role of educator,” as Don Bosco showed, an excellent model of piety and an incomparable Christian educator. A characteristic note of his whole life and the secret of his educational efficacy was “a fervent piety” combined with a sincere Marian devotion: “One would have said that the life of the Servant of God was a continuous prayer, an uninterrupted union with God. ... Whenever we resorted to him for advice, he seemed to interrupt his conversation with God to listen to us,

¹³ LC 29-30.

¹⁴ LC 30-31.

and it seemed that God inspired the thoughts and encouragement he gave us. How edifying for us to hear him recite the Our Father or the Angelus!”¹⁵

From these spiritual premises, Father Albera draws three working suggestions:

1. “Let us make a resolution to be faithful and exact in our practices of piety.” Since those that the Rule requires of us are few and easy, “all the more reason to carry them out with greater diligence.”

2. “Let us promise to sanctify our daily actions” with frequent “acts of love, praise, and thanksgiving,” with purity of intention, with “a holy obedience to all that God, through our superiors, orders us,” with the generous acceptance of the sufferings of life. This is the active piety suggested by Saint Francis de Sales, which allows us to implement “the precept of continuous prayer” and helps us to avoid “the great illness of many employed in God’s service, which is agitation and the excessive ardour with which they deal with external things.” Therefore: “May the Salesians continue to give the example of a spirit of initiative and great activity, but may this always and in everything be the expansion of a true, prudent, constant zeal and firm piety.”

3. “Let us do our utmost to make our piety fervent,” characterised by “an ardent desire and a generous will to please God in everything. ... We are vigilant because we are not victims of that spiritual laziness which is horrified by anything that requires sacrifice.” At the school of Saint Francis de Sales, “let us try to season our work with an elevation of the mind to God, with outbursts of affection, so as not to be discouraged.”¹⁶

3. Life of faith

Faith is indispensable for obtaining the spirit of prayer. Experience teaches that “if faith is alive in a religious, even when he deploras some defect in his conduct, he will not be long in correcting it; he will make giant steps in the path of perfection and will become an instrument capable of procuring the salvation of many souls.” This was the theme of the circular of 21 November 1912, elaborated as an instruction, with its first part doctrinal (on the necessity of the life of faith, its different degrees, its fruits, the value it gives to human activity, its inseparable link to prayer

¹⁵ LC 31-34.

¹⁶ LC 35-39.

and vocation); and its second part practical, in which, after recalling Don Bosco's ardent faith, Albera encourages the confreres to "revive" their faith to render their ministry effective.¹⁷

Faith illuminates the intelligence and allows humanity to "walk safely despite the darkness and dangers of this vale of tears." It makes us understand "the purpose for which God created us and the marvellous work accomplished by Jesus Christ." It reveals to us "the beauty of virtue and the preciousness of divine grace. It inspires a horror of sin and provides us with the holy sacraments as so many means of holiness." It makes us consider the religious vocation a special gift, an act of God's predilection for us. One lives by faith who "resolutely" believes in all revealed truths, with joy "welcomes the light of divine revelation and adheres completely to the teachings of Jesus Christ, transmitted to him by the Church, to which he entrusts himself with the simplicity of a child."¹⁸

The Salesian is a man of faith when he constantly keeps himself in the presence of God and in this way "informs and sanctifies his entire life." Faith illuminates his mind and heart and attracts the blessings of the Lord to him. It helps him overcome temptations and face with strength and constancy life's trials and the difficulties one meets in the mission of education. "It is only with the light of faith and with the intuition of Christian charity that in the wretched figure of poor and marginalized young people we recognise the very person of the One who was called the man of sorrows. It is the word of faith that echoes our ears: 'What you have done for one of these least brothers of mine, you have done for me' [Matt 25:40]." Faith also helps us overcome weariness, discouragement, and ingratitude, "reminding us that we work for the Lord." He alone infuses in our hearts "a calm and unalterable peace" and makes us "always equal to the continuous succession of events, happy or sad."¹⁹

Father Albera follows these deliberations with some practical spiritual indications:

Those who live by faith are pleased to contemplate Jesus living in their own hearts, now glorious as in heaven, now hidden in the Holy Eucharist, and in this contemplation the desire is kindled in him to make this dwelling more pleasing to Jesus by adorning it with the choicest

¹⁷ LC 82-100.

¹⁸ LC 88.

¹⁹ LC 88-93.

virtues.

He begins by emptying his heart of any sentiment of self-love, vainglory, and pride, so that Jesus alone may be his absolute master. He considers his heart a living temple of the Holy Spirit; therefore, he will take care that the slightest unclean affection does not profane this temple.

He will consider himself happy to lack not only what is superfluous, but even what is necessary, so as not to be an unworthy disciple of the One who wanted poverty as his inseparable companion. ...

Above all, then he will strive to keep alive the sacred fire of charity, a virtue that makes us resemble God himself.

He nourishes the spirit of faith with fervent and confident prayer, with meditation and spiritual reading, with the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance, with visits to Jesus present in the tabernacle, with attention to the smallest details when celebrating the divine mysteries.²⁰

Father Albera goes on to illustrate the consequences of the life of faith in one's work. Animated by faith, Salesians feel in their hearts increasing gratitude to God for having been called to be part of the Congregation. They will consider the house where obedience has placed them "as the house of God himself" and the task entrusted to them "as the portion of the vineyard that the owner has given us to cultivate."

They will see in the superiors "the representatives of God himself"; they will recognise "the Constitutions, the Regulations, and the schedule as so many manifestations of God's will." They will welcome young people "as a sacred deposit for which the Lord will hold us accountable." They will look at their confreres "as so many living images of God himself whom he has charged to edify us with their virtues, now to make us practise charity and patience with their defects."

Oh! When will that day come when we, according to the imaginative expression of Saint Francis de Sales, will allow ourselves to be carried by our Lord like a child in the arms of his mother? When, dear confreres, will we habitually see God in everything, in every event, which we will consider as a sacramental species under which he hides? Thus we will be persuaded that faith is a ray of heavenly light that makes us see God in all things and all things in God.²¹

²⁰ LC 93-95.

²¹ LC 95-96.

Like every intervention by Father Albera, the circular letter ends with a reference to the example of faith in Don Bosco, which inspired and nourished his inexhaustible dedication to the Christian education of young people, his concrete and passionate preaching, “his admirable Preventive System,” his constant presence among the boys, his tireless assistance.

Finally, he invites his confreres to apostolic activity, considering “the state of today’s society,” where even in those who proclaim themselves Christians, we see “the torch of faith has dimmed so much that it threatens to go out at any moment.” We see “an endless number of young people attend the so-called secular schools in which it is often a crime to speak the name of God.” Perhaps in the future “we will have a generation entirely devoid of the vital breath of faith.” This thought must make Don Bosco’s disciples tremble: “The Lord who usually chooses the most miserable means to accomplish his greatest works” has called us to cooperate in the restoration of his kingdom in souls and relies “on our will and our humble cooperation. ... So let us get to work immediately; from today let our life be truly a life of faith.”²²

4. Don Bosco a model for Salesians

Father Paul Albera’s fundamental concern, as it had been for Father Rua, was to preserve intact the “spirit of the Founder” in the Salesian Congregation. He constantly returned to this point in dealing with issues related to identity and the Salesian charism: piety, discipline, faith, festive oratories, missions, vocations, vows, Marian devotion, kindness, love for young people, the application of the Preventive System, etc.

In the circular letter of 23 April 1917, he proposed to the provincials and directors a series of “counsels and advice to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco in all our houses.”²³ First, he recalled the duty of a superior to be a model and teacher of the confreres, to give them good example with his own virtuous conduct and to take care of their formation and spiritual progress.

He follows up with a list of areas and virtues, which in practice seemed to him to make concrete the spirit of Don Bosco. In the first place is the spirit of piety and the exact observance of the Constitutions. Then he reviewed the

²² LC 97-100.

²³ Cf. LC 214-230.

three vows, taking up the essential points proposed in previous circulars. Finally, he listed some duties linked to the ministry of the Salesian superior: fraternal correction made at an opportune time and in camera caritatis; the exercise of loving, patient, and kind fatherhood; humble, serene, and polite conduct among the confreres. Above all, he highlighted the importance of being zealous in pursuing the Salesian mission: “The director, more than all the other sons of Don Bosco, must take as the subject of his meditations the words that our good father adopted as the motto of our Pious Society: *Da mihi animas.*”

The zeal of the Salesian superior must be expressed above all in the areas in which Don Bosco was most involved. 1) To help the confreres “to persevere in their vocation and to progress every day on the path of perfection.” 2) To love young people “with a holy and intense love,” to make them upright citizens, “but especially good Christians,” and keep them united also in subsequent years with the past pupils association. 3) To promote every year vocations for the Congregation and for the Church, “if need be also to implore this grace from the Heart of Jesus with many sacrifices and prayers.” 4) To increase the Salesian Cooperators “so that the number of those who participate in the spirit of Don Bosco continues to grow and they become promoters with material and spiritual means.”²⁴

In the mind and words of Father Albera, the captivating figure of Don Bosco, the example of his life, and the fascination exercised by his virtues was always the first point of reference and the most effective stimulus. The older he got, the more he felt the need to insist on imitating the Founder, as the circulars of his last two years show.

He emphasised Don Bosco’s paternal kindness, his familiarity and confidence with young people, his love for souls, his abandonment to God, the example of his pastoral care. Convinced that Don Bosco “was sent by God to restore today’s society,” to bring it back to the pure sources “of Christian love and peace,” Father Albera never ceased to invite the Salesians to show themselves worthy of their father. “We are his sons, and if sons, also heirs of this sacred heritage which must not become sterile in us; and to show ourselves his worthy sons and up to our task in the present time, first we must be firm in our vocation.”²⁵

On 18 October 1920 he sent a circular letter on Don Bosco as a “model of acquiring religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing

²⁴ LC 228-229.

²⁵ LC 323-324.

with others, and doing good to all.”²⁶ He took his cue from the unforgettable experience of his own intimate life with the Founder. They are pages of great evocative power, a charismatic document among the most important of the Salesian tradition, which must be regarded as Father Albera’s spiritual testament, the synthesis of his thought.

In fact, we find expressed in it all the dynamic points of Don Bosco as an example: apostolic activity as a means for one’s holiness, “because the apostolate is nothing other than a continuous outpouring of sanctifying virtues for the salvation of souls”; the total gift of oneself to the Lord “to the point of reaching intimate, habitual union with God amid uninterrupted and very diverse occupations”; the practice of the Salesian virtues represented by the Founder in the Dream of the Ten Diamonds characterises “religious perfection as the foundation of the apostolate”; placing the holiness of one’s life as the basis for the education and sanctification of youth; love of predilection for the young, which “is a gift from God, is the Salesian vocation itself,” but which needs to be continuously developed and perfected; a constant concern to prevent sin, to help the young live in the presence of God, and to save their souls; the trait of “kindness and courtesy with everyone,” combined with the availability for self-sacrifice in order to do good to one’s neighbour.

Don Bosco’s most perfect act

According to Father Albera, the fundamental dynamism of Don Bosco’s life was his most lively awareness of having been called to “work for souls to the point of total self-immolation.”²⁷ So too his sons must do, but first trying to achieve his calmness of spirit, his evenness of character, and the serenity that characterised him in every happy or sad circumstance. This serenity was the fruit of that radical interior process of handing himself over to God, of that trusting abandonment into the hands of Providence which characterised Don Bosco’s spiritual life from the very first steps of his vocational journey.

As is clear from his biography, writes Father Albera, “he threw himself upon God from his earliest childhood, and then for the rest of his life did nothing other than increase this trust, until he reached habitual, intimate

²⁶ LC 329-350.

²⁷ LC 335.

union with God amid uninterrupted and disparate occupations.” An obvious indication of this state of continual communion with God was his “unalterable evenness of temperament, which shone forth from his invariably smiling face.” Habitual union with God was in him a source of light and inspiration; it gave his words such depth and strength that those who listened to him felt “improved and elevated to God.” Love for God was so ardent in him “that he could not help talking about him.”²⁸

Recalling Don Bosco’s ardent charity inspired a series of practical conclusions in Albera. First, he invited the Salesians to entrust themselves confidently “into God’s arms, as our good Father did. Then the sweet need to speak of him will take shape also in us, and we will no longer know how to speak at all without starting or ending with him.” In this way, the fire of divine love will fertilise not only thoughts and words but also actions. You will feel the need for the “ordinary exercises of religious perfection,” and you will have the desire not to omit any of them. In fact, while others use the practices of piety to reach perfection, the disciples of Don Bosco, for example, live them “as natural acts of divine love”: “For us they must be not only the wood that serves to kindle and feed the divine fire in our hearts, but the very flames of this fire.”²⁹

The Salesian who confidently entrusts himself to the arms of God will easily keep away from sin and eliminate evil inclinations and habits from his heart. He will know and love God better and better; he will joyfully practise the holy law and the evangelical counsels; he will bind himself more closely to him with prayer and recollection of spirit, with the continual desire to “please God” and to conform to his will in everything.

Thus God will become “the direct goal of his activity,” and he will submit in every circumstance of life to the divine will, as Don Bosco did, with a “cheerful face” and with courage, without being troubled, without complaint, sadness, fears, or anxiety: “Let nothing disturb you: whoever has God has everything.” Father Albera writes, “How many times did I witness this total submission of his to the divine dispositions!”

If we imitate Don Bosco by entrusting ourselves to God, like him we will attain “great recollection in prayer.”

When we saw him pray, we remained as if enraptured and almost ecstatic. There was nothing affected in him, nothing singular; but whoever was close to him and observed him could not help but pray well too,

²⁸ LC 335-336.

²⁹ LC 337.

perceiving an unusual splendour in his face, a reflection of his living faith and his ardent love of God.

The impression I felt in seeing him give the blessing of Mary Help of Christians to the sick will never be erased from my memory. As he recited the Hail Mary and the words of the blessing, you could say that his face was transfigured: his eyes filled with tears, and his voice trembled. For me, those were indications that *virtus de illo exibat* (“power came forth from him” [Luke 6:19]). So I was not surprised by the miraculous effects that followed the blessing, that the afflicted were comforted and the sick healed.³⁰

Love for the young

When the monument to Don Bosco in the piazza in front of the church of Mary Help of Christians was dedicated, Father Albera wrote to the Salesians that they could not be satisfied with an external sign. Don Bosco wants another monument from his sons, that they “revive in themselves his virtues, his educational system, the whole of his spirit, so as to pass it on always fruitful and vital from generation to generation.”

Bringing Don Bosco to life in us is the only way to honour his memory and make it fruitful over time.³¹ We must imitate him “in his ardent, disinterested zeal for the salvation of souls, his love, and his boundless devotion to the Church and to the Pope, in all the virtues of which he left us so many glorious examples.” We must treasure his teachings, which were certainly the fruit of his genius and experience, but also “a fruit ... of the supernatural light for which he prayed insistently” and which was granted to him “as a reward for his constant fidelity as he worked in the field entrusted to him by the Lord.” Above all, we have the duty to study and apply his educational system, which for us is a “divine intervention in the creation and development of his work, ... a heavenly pedagogy.”³²

Father Albera recalls the central dynamism of Don Bosco’s Preventive System: it was “that love, that affectionate concern for young people, which was the secret of his wonderful influence over them.” In addition, to give a

³⁰ LC 337-338.

³¹ LC 308-318 (April 6, 1920).

³² LC 311-312.

solid foundation to the educational love that Don Bosco recommended to the Salesians, he gives an ample quotation from the letter Don Bosco wrote to the Salesians and the boys of Valdocco on 10 May 1884:

Closeness leads to love, and love brings confidence. It is this that opens hearts, and the young people express everything without fear to the teachers, to the assistants, and to the superiors. They become frank both in the confessional and out of it, and they will do everything they are asked by one who they know loves them. The youngsters should not only be loved, but they themselves should know that they are loved. By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study, and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love. Break down this barrier of mistrust by a friendly informal relationship with the boys, especially in recreation. You cannot have love without this familiarity, and where this is not evident there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love.³³

Paul Albera, who had experienced in adolescence the generative power of Don Bosco's educational love, describes and characterises it with great effectiveness, especially in the circular letter of 18 October 1920.³⁴ Don Bosco's predilection for young people, he writes, was a gift from God linked to his specific vocation, but it was also the fruit of his intelligence, which he developed by reflecting on "the greatness of the ministry of teaching the young and forming them in true virtue," and he perfected it in the exercise of charity. "Dearest confreres, we must love the young people whom Providence entrusts to our care, as Don Bosco knew how to love them." It is difficult, admits Father Albera, recalling as "unique, all his own" this predilection of the saint for him, "but here lies the whole secret of the expansive vitality of our Congregation."³⁵

The experience that young people had of Don Bosco's love was unique and quite intense: "It enveloped us all, as if in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness, from which sorrow, sadness, and melancholy were banished. It penetrated our bodies and souls." A singular affection, Father Albera recalls, "attracted, conquered, and transformed our hearts,"

³³ LC 312-314.

³⁴ LC 329-350.

³⁵ LC 340-341.

because from his every word and act emanated the holiness of union with God, which is perfect charity. He attracted us to himself through the fullness of supernatural love that flared up in his heart and with his flames absorbed and unified the little sparks of the same love, aroused by the hand of God in our hearts.

We were his, because each of us was certain that he was truly the man of God.

This fascination exercised by Don Bosco's love, made supernatural by the holiness of his life, was the starting point for a wise work of formation and transformation: "As soon as he had captured our hearts, he moulded them as he wished them with his system (entirely his own in the way of practising it), which he wanted to call preventive." It "was nothing other than charity, that is, the love of God which expands to embrace all human creatures, especially the youngest and least experienced, to instil in them the holy fear of God."³⁶

Therefore, the fundamental dynamism of Don Bosco's Preventive System is twofold: first, it is animated by charity, understood as love of God and neighbour "brought to the perfection desired by our vocation"; then it is oriented by the intelligence that creatively uses all means and the hard work with which charity is rich. In this markedly spiritual perspective, Father Albera expresses a synthetic definition of the Preventive System, which must be understood within the perspective in which he places it.

Ponder seriously and analyse as closely as you can this Magna Carta of our Congregation, the Preventive System, appealing to reason, religion, and loving kindness, but ultimately you will have to agree with me that everything boils down to instilling in hearts the holy fear of God: to instil it, I say, that is to root it so that it always remains there, even amid the raging tempests and storms of human passions and events.³⁷

Don Bosco's Madonna

Fifty years after the consecration of the basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Father Albera wrote a circular to commemorate that "memorable date in the history of our Pious Society." He spoke "of our most sweet

³⁶ LC 341-342.

³⁷ LC 343.

Mother, Mary Help of Christians,” to whom all Salesians owe gratitude “for the great and innumerable benefits that she wanted so generously to give us during these fifty years.” Despite the dramatic circumstances of the moment and the serious mourning caused by the war, Albera considered the celebration a duty: “Our feasts will therefore be all devotion and recollection.”³⁸

He began by recalling that “the prodigious enterprises conceived and carried out” by Don Bosco, the son of a humble peasant without access to wealth, hampered in his path by a thousand obstacles, may seem an “inexplicable enigma” to those who do not have faith in the action of divine Providence. The biography of Don Bosco shows that he never had any “doubts regarding the continuous intervention of God and the Most Holy Virgin Help of Christians in the various events of his very busy life.” From the moment when she was given to him as guide and teacher in his dream at age nine, Mary guided him in all the most important events of his calling, made him a learned and zealous priest, prepared him to be the father of orphans, the teacher of countless ministers of the altar, one of the greatest educators of youth, and finally the founder of a new religious society, which was to have the mission of spreading everywhere its spirit and devotion to her under the beautiful title of Mary Help of Christians.³⁹

Don Bosco always recognised the inspiration and support of the Help of Christians. For this reason he did not let himself be discouraged by the opposition and difficulties he met. He had confided this to his first disciples on 8 May 1864, summarising the history of the Oratory. Those were the days when the foundations of the shrine of the Help of Christians were being laid: a daring undertaking for those who, like him, lacked any kind of financial backing. “Thus he showed himself,” comments Father Albera, “to be a true disciple of our Saint Francis de Sales, who had written, ‘I fully understand how blessed it is to be the son, however unworthy, of so glorious a Mother. Entrust yourself to her protection. Let us put our hand to great things: if we love her with ardent affection, she will obtain for us everything we desire.’”⁴⁰

Don Bosco celebrated the rite of consecration of the church on 9 June 1868, and its first celebration of the Eucharist. “I remember as if it were

³⁸ LC 258-273 (31 March 1918; Easter Sunday), at 258-259.

³⁹ LC 259-260.

⁴⁰ LC 261-262.

today the solemn moment in which Don Bosco, radiant with joy, his eyes veiled with tears of deep emotion, was the first to go up to the high altar to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass, under the compassionate gaze of his great Help of Christians.” He described Don Bosco’s “almost transfigured” face and his ardour “in speaking of his Madonna” and “the wonders that Mary Help of Christians would work on behalf of her devotees. How it consoles us now to see his predictions have come true!”

He also recalled that, besides the material monument, he wanted to “raise another living, spiritual one to her by establishing the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. To them he gave the mission of forming young girls in piety and virtue and of spreading devotion to their powerful patroness throughout the world.”

After the consecration of the shrine, vocations multiplied in the Salesian Society and many boarding schools, oratories, and trade schools were erected, “as if by magic.” Difficulties concerning the approval of the Congregation were resolved, and many missionary expeditions to America were sent out. “Thus the prediction of Mary Most Holy was coming true that her glory would go forth from that shrine: *inde gloria mea*.” The fifty years that have passed since that day have been a never-ending series of “wonders wrought by Mary Help of Christians on behalf of her devotees,” as evidenced by the “marvellous spread” of the Salesian Family.⁴¹

Father Albera then summarises the Founder’s Mariology.

We all remember how Don Bosco often repeated to us the motto *ad Jesum per Mariam*, thus wanting to teach us that our devotion to Mary is in vain if it does not lead us to Jesus, if it does not obtain for us the strength to overcome the enemies of our soul and to walk in the footsteps of her divine Son. To enliven our trust in Mary, he had the saying of Saint Bernard engraved on the medals commemorating the church’s consecration: *totum nos habere voluit (Deus) per Mariam*: all that is necessary for our salvation, God wanted us to have through Mary. In the same sense, he explained to us the affirmation of the Doctors of the Church, that devotion to Mary is a sign of predestination.⁴²

By “consecrating ourselves to Jesus through the hand of Mary,” we honour our Heavenly Mother better than by any other pious practice. With other devotions, we offer to the Virgin a part of our time, our works, and

⁴¹ LC 262-363.

⁴² LC 266.

our mortifications: with this radical offering, instead, “we give them all at once.” We are convinced that by passing through the hands of Mary, our actions “will be purified from every stain with which our pride and concupiscence have contaminated them.” Our Lord will not reject our poor gifts “if his most sweet Mother presents them to him,” as Saint Bernard assures him. He adds, “If she protects you, you have nothing to fear; if she leads you, you do not tire; if she favours you, you will reach the gates of salvation.”⁴³

Don Bosco recommended wearing the medal of the Help of Christians on one’s chest as an expression of love for Mary, as a recognition of her maternity and royalty, as a defence against the infernal enemy, and as a reminder “of our belonging to an institute that she loves and has destined to make her known and honoured everywhere under the glorious title of Help of Christians.”⁴⁴

Father Albera concludes by recalling the reasons for gratitude that Don Bosco’s sons have towards Mary and their duty, in as much as they are disciples of that great educator of youth – “who considered devotion to our Lady as a most effective means of preserving his pupils from vice” – to “ask Mary for the grace to think rightly and worthily of her.” Don Bosco constantly thought of honouring Mary, of speaking about her, of having recourse to her, of celebrating her feasts with joy. This is what we must do, loving her intensely, always living under her gaze, “like the child who cannot stand separation from his mother even for a moment,” but above all by doing “something more concrete,” as Don Bosco exhorted: “More facts and fewer words.”

This implies, Father Albera recalls, the commitment to conform ourselves to the image of her Son: “It is, therefore, our duty to follow in the footsteps of our divine model Jesus.” The most suitable means is to imitate Mary, “who was the most faithful and perfect copy of that divine example.” It is the best proof of love we can give to our heavenly Mother. Her life was continuous progress. We cannot say that we are imitating Mary and Jesus if we are satisfied with not committing mortal sins; we must, rather, try to “advance in perfection.”⁴⁵

⁴³ LC 266-267

⁴⁴ LC 267.

⁴⁵ LC 268-272.

5. The virtues of the Salesian

From personal experience and direct knowledge of the Salesian world, Father Albera was convinced that the vitality and apostolic effectiveness of the Congregation, nourished by the spirit of prayer and the faith of the individual confreres, are stronger and longer lasting the more they are regulated even as a matter of discipline. This was the second thematic point he offered for the meditation of the Salesians on 25 December 1911: “religious discipline,” understood as a prompt and joyful observance of what is required of those who are consecrated to the service of God and of souls in a religious congregation.⁴⁶

Disciplined life

To illustrate the particular meaning and practical implications of Salesian discipline, he found inspiration in how Don Bosco had trained his first disciples. He recalled the evening meetings in the Founder’s little room and the annual retreats: privileged moments in which “our good father with his instructions, so packed with holy thoughts and put forth with ineffable fervour, continually opened new horizons to our astonished minds, made our intentions ever more generous and our will firmer to remain with him always and to follow him everywhere, without reservation and at the cost of any sacrifice.”

In those early years, Don Bosco never mentioned discipline, but he taught its substantial meaning. Only in 1873 – “when the Pious Salesian Society already had seven houses in Italy” – did he write a circular letter on discipline, which he defined as “a way of life that conforms to the rules and customs of an institute.” Since the purpose of the Salesian Society, set out in the first article of the Constitutions, is “the perfection of its members, and the means to achieve it, especially the apostolate on behalf of poor and marginalized youth,” discipline is all that contributes to the interior and external perfection “of the individual members and of the whole society.” “It is not a perfection that might be common to any religious family whatever; rather, one adapted to the special character” of the Salesian Society and “the rules that govern it.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ LC 53-70.

⁴⁷ LC 55-56.

Taking inspiration from Don Bosco, Albera drew an effective comparison between an exemplary community and an undisciplined community. In the disciplined religious house, “the most perfect order reigns in all things and persons”; regularity contributes “to keeping the spirit recollected and making effective the work” of the confreres. In such a house each religious lives his vocation with simplicity and spontaneous joy, without criticism, murmuring, or complaints, and the superiors have no regrets in fulfilling their mission, since they find cordial collaboration. “Charity is the bond that holds minds and hearts together; completely uniform are thoughts, feelings, and even words.”

On the other hand, in an undisciplined religious community, where “rules and constitutions are a dead letter and family traditions are forgotten or entirely transformed,” common life becomes an unbearable burden, duties are neglected, discontented people gradually lose “the sacred fire of piety.” In addition, if the undisciplined religious should also be an educator, the consequences could be dramatic: “perhaps the youngsters entrusted to his care will grow in ignorance and vice, and instead of a father, a friend, a teacher, they will find an obstacle in him, a danger to their innocence.”⁴⁸

From this contrast, Father Albera deduces the need for “a set of rules governing duties and rights” within a Salesian house, and he invites the confreres to observe them, overcoming themselves, taming their passions, and making more solid their communion with God. Only in this way can we build the family life desired by Don Bosco, characterised by an interpersonal climate. Thanks to such a climate, “the members have towards their superiors the affections and relationships that sons have towards their father; with fellow workers, bonds of genuine brotherhood,” sharing joys and sorrows, prayer and work.

In the Salesian Society, “everyone has the obligation of solidarity. Anyone who loves and respects his Congregation must be a man of discipline and is bound to observe even the smallest details of common life.” In fact, adds Father Albera, “it would be enough that even one member of a community let himself go to a deplorable relaxation in discipline for the entire body to suffer sad consequences,” as Don Bosco affirmed. “A Salesian who is a model in regular life, even if he is of mediocre talent, little knowledge or skill, will be the support of our Pious Society.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ LC 57-60.

⁴⁹ LC 60-62.

Father Albera then comes to the practice: the good Salesian observes the laws of the Church and practises exactly the Constitutions of our Pious Society, the regulations, and the prescriptions of the superiors. The custodian of Salesian discipline in a community is the director, who – as Don Bosco and Father Rua taught – must be the first to observe the Rule – must be “the living rule, the personification of virtue, a kind of morality in action, so that he can in everything serve as a model for those who depend on him.” He has the task of “ensuring that no abuses are introduced among his subordinates, that neither the spirit of the Founder nor the purpose of the institute entrusted to his care be in the least altered.” He must correct the faults of the confreres, with prudence, meekness, and gentleness, following the example of the Founder.⁵⁰

Obedience

In Father Albera’s mind, insistence on religious discipline is more than a means to achieving the apostolic goals of the Salesian mission. In fact, he starts from a vision of consecrated life characterised by a love for God that is so all-encompassing that it generates in the heart of the religious the desire for a perfect communion of his will with God’s, a “more intimate and more active” obedience than is required of everyone, because it is intentionally modelled on Jesus’ “perfect obedience even to death on a cross.” [Phil 2:8]

This is what Albera wanted to illustrate in his circular letter on obedience of 31 January 1914.⁵¹ The Salesian, he wrote, consecrates himself to make his conduct more and more “similar to that of Jesus.” In this process of being conformed, the soul is progressively freed “from everything that hinders its generosity” in order to achieve perfect obedience and thus be united with God. “He may make his own the words of Saint Paul which express the true formula of the highest holiness: *Vivo autem, iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus*: it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. [Gal 2:2] To obey is to destroy in our own person all that is selfish and capricious in us in order to replace it with the divine will itself.” Obedience is a virtue that “establishes an intimate, secure and never interrupted commu-

⁵⁰ LC 62-67.

⁵¹ LC 134-153.

nication between God and us.”⁵²

In this meaning of consecrated life, Albera envisions the mission and responsibility of the Salesian superior, invested by God “with the power to represent him to us, to speak to us in his name,” and endowed with the necessary graces for this purpose. Jesus’ words to the apostles can apply to the superior: “Whoever listens to you, listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me” (Luke 10:16). Everyone must consider these words in order to fulfil religious obedience. What matters is the mission entrusted by the Lord, not the qualities of the person.

Just as the unworthiness of the celebrating priest does not alter the real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacred Host, just as the meanness and, worse still, the wickedness of the poor man does not prevent him from representing Jesus Christ, so the defects of the superior, even if they be real ... will never be enough to invalidate the assurance given to us by our divine Redeemer, that whoever listens to the superior listens to God himself.

This is not figurative language, says Father Albera, a rhetorical expression to say that superiors are the representatives of God, the instruments the Lord uses to guide us. Those who live by faith understand this and can overcome love of themselves and avoid the danger of rebellion.⁵³

The religious who is animated by love and motivated by faith “submits himself entirely to his superior, acquires the true freedom that only the children of God can enjoy,” and sets out on the path that leads him “to that golden indifference which Saint Vincent de Paul compares to the state of the angels, by which one is always ready to carry out the divine will at the first sign given to them, whatever duty may be given to them.” In this perspective, we understand what the spiritual authors teach: that the vow of obedience is the most excellent vow and “includes the other two.” In fact, as Saint Francis de Sales wrote, the virtue of obedience “is like the salt that gives taste and flavour to all our actions. It makes all the minor acts that we do during the day praiseworthy,” to the point that “the obedient person also has the merit of the good he would like to do but has put aside in order to obey.”⁵⁴

To those considerations drawn from the classics of consecrated life,

⁵² LC 138.

⁵³ LC 139-140.

⁵⁴ LC 141-143.

Father Albera adds a series of personal considerations. What sustains the obedience of the Salesian, besides faith, is “fraternal charity and love for our Congregation.” When “all the members, make their superior’s will their own, they will be one in heart and soul, they will be so united as to form a compact and invincible legion against the assaults of their enemies. Our Pious Society, ever young and robust, will make its mission ever more expansive; it will fight victoriously against any abuse and relaxation and will remain faithful to the spirit of its venerable founder.”⁵⁵

The Salesian must look to Don Bosco, “a model of obedience from his childhood” and throughout his life submissive to the pastors of the Church, even when “to remain subject to them, he had to impose on himself grave sacrifices and profound humiliations.” Meditate on what he wrote in the third chapter of the Salesian Constitutions, in the introduction to the Constitutions, and in his “spiritual testament.”⁵⁶

From Don Bosco’s teachings come four practical signs that distinguish Salesian obedience. First, it must be “whole or without reserve,” not only materially exact, but accompanied by the “sacrifice of the will” and the “sacrifice of the intellect,” overcoming pretexts invented by pride. Don Bosco said in a conference at Varazze on 1 January 1872: “Obedience should be practised, but not the kind that discusses and examines the things that are imposed, but true obedience, that which makes us embrace the things that are commanded of us and makes us embrace them as virtuous because they are imposed on us by the Lord.”

Second, Salesian obedience must be practised “willingly, promptly, and docilely,” because faith animates it.

The third quality of Salesian obedience is cheerfulness, which means we must carry it out with a joyful spirit: “This quality is so important,” writes Father Albera, “that without it one cannot be said really to possess this virtue.” If there is no joy, it means that “one obeys only because one cannot do otherwise” and the spirit of faith is lacking. “Woe to him who in God’s service is guided by sadness and necessity.”

The fourth characteristic of Salesian obedience is humility, because the Salesian “knows that it is his duty to be a humble instrument in the hands of his superiors; his conduct is the uninterrupted practice of the maxim of our patron saint: ask for nothing, refuse nothing.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ LC 144.

⁵⁶ LC 145-146.

⁵⁷ LC 147-152.

Chastity

On 14 April 1916 Father Albera sent the Salesians a letter “to inculcate the practice of a virtue that more than any other was dear to Don Bosco, which he declared indispensable for anyone wishing to enlist under his banner ... the angelic virtue of chastity.”⁵⁸

As in other circulars, he first outlines the doctrinal framework. He begins with the exhortation of Saint Paul, who invites believers to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). It is a teaching that can be understood well only by “those fortunate persons who, illuminated by mystical light, have their soul and body consecrated to the service of God ... fully intent on religious practices, engaged solely in the exercise of charity towards their neighbour, always ready for sacrifice.”

He quotes Saint Basil, according to whom chastity communicates to a person “an almost heavenly incorruptibility,” so that he “seems to walk like others on earth, but in heart and spirit he is always elevated to the point of conversing with God.” Father Albera exclaims: “What a joy for us to be Salesians! We must live in perfect purity. ... Through this virtue called ‘angelic,’ we who have made a vow before the altar draw closer than anyone else to the celestial spirits.”⁵⁹

Remember that Don Bosco considered the virtue of chastity as the source of all other virtues. In fact, the Salesian “truly jealous of keeping himself chaste” lives by faith, aspires to heaven, “loves no one but God, and God alone is enough for his happiness.” He is happy everywhere; he knows how to endure the defects of his confreres; he generously faces any hardship and sacrifice for the glory of God and the salvation of his neighbour. “The Salesian faithful to his vows loves his work and study, and he finds his delights in the practices of piety, which are for him a source of courage, strength, and life.”

Don Bosco cultivated the love of chastity by showing Jesus’ predilection for pure souls and remembering that the Lord entrusted to our care “the choicest part of the souls whom he redeemed with his most precious blood, that is, those who have preserved their innocence still intact, and who give hope of enlisting under the banner of virginity raised by Jesus and his most pure Mother.” Only those who love and practise chastity can effectively accomplish this mission.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ LC 194-213, at 195.

⁵⁹ LC 194-197.

⁶⁰ LC 197-199.

Father Albera also takes up another assertion dear to the Founder: “The purer the spirit and the more mortified the body, the more we will be capable of intellectual work.” It is a fact confirmed by Christian experience and tradition; Saint Thomas Aquinas, Peter Lombard, Francisco Suarez, and Saint Alphonsus de’ Liguori are outstanding examples of this virtue. The practice of chastity helps “to gain the knowledge necessary to instruct the young people whom Providence sends to our institutes.”

But Salesians must love chastity above all by contemplating the examples and teachings of Don Bosco, who always had a demeanour worthy of a minister of God, correct in speaking and writing, a teacher who won the hearts of the young without ever having recourse “to sweet embraces or worldly expressions.” He was most reserved in dealing with others. “Woe to the Pious Salesian Society, if it were to lose that reputation which it has gained in the area of morality!”⁶¹

Finally, he suggests the means proposed by the masters of spiritual life to preserve and increase the virtue of chastity: prayer, weekly confession, daily Communion, Marian devotion, and mortification of the senses. Father Albera also presents some “negative means” useful for remaining faithful to one’s religious profession: avoid pride and practise humility, shun idleness and cultivate industriousness, avoid reading that is “too free or frivolous,” do not allow excessive familiarity with “persons of the opposite sex,” especially avoid “particular friendships with the boys who are entrusted to your care.” “Oh! how many are the miserable victims the devil reaps from particular friendships in educational institutions.”⁶²

Poverty

We do not find a letter on poverty among Father Albera’s circulars, probably because he had already written on that topic in 1907 at Father Michael Rua’s invitation.⁶³ It seems useful, therefore, to refer to the key points of this letter, which expresses Albera’s vision of Salesian poverty.

It began with an instruction on the value and necessity of religious poverty. He opened by saying that poverty itself is not a virtue. It becomes

⁶¹ LC 199-200.

⁶² LC 202-209.

⁶³ *Lettere circolari di don Michele Rua ai Salesiani* (Turin: SAID “Buona Stampa,” 1910), 360-377 (31 January 1907).

such only “when it is voluntarily embraced out of love for God.” But even in this case it does not cease to be wearisome, because it imposes many sacrifices. It certainly remains “the most important and the most delicate point of religious life”; in fact, through poverty one can “distinguish a thriving community from a lax one, a zealous religious from a negligent one.” It is the first of the evangelical counsels because it is the first act that those who are called to follow and imitate the Lord more closely must carry out. Jesus hurled terrible threats against the rich; he proclaimed the poor blessed. He declared that whoever does not renounce everything he possesses is not worthy of him, and when the rich man asked what he had to do to be perfect, Jesus replied, “Go, sell what you have and come follow me” [Mark 10:21]. All the disciples of Jesus and all the saints down the centuries “practised this voluntary stripping of all the goods of the earth.”⁶⁴

Therefore, the value of poverty derives essentially from its being a privileged means of following and conforming to Christ. Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that “the first foundation for reaching the perfection of charity is voluntary poverty, whereby one lives possessing nothing of his own.” Saint Francis de Sales, who had “a holy fear” of riches, showed this and asked those who wanted to become religious “to have a naked spirit, stripped of all desire and inclination except from the desire to love God.”

Don Bosco practised it; he lived poor until the end of his life, nurtured a heroic love for voluntary poverty, was detached from possessions, and despite “having had immense sums of money in his hands” never sought the slightest satisfaction from money. He told the Salesians, “You must have poverty in your heart to practise it,” and in the circular of 21 November 1886, he wrote, “The well-being of our Pious Society and the advantage of our soul for the most part depend on this observance.”⁶⁵

Albera lists the principal reasons for the scrupulous practice of poverty. In the first place is the obligation assumed with one’s first profession, which entails the duty to respect the rules of the Salesian Society and to live its spirit faithfully. Second, we must consider “the intimate relationship between the practice of this virtue and our individual progress in perfection.” If we live detached from the possessions of the world, “we remove from vices all their sustenance and means of expansion,” since poverty separates us from the principal sources of sin, which are pride and concupiscence. Moreover, as Saint Ambrose teaches, poverty “mothers

⁶⁴ LCR 362-363.

⁶⁵ LCR 363-366.

and nurtures virtues.” When the religious empties his heart of all affection for earthly things, God fills it with his gifts.

Poverty is the first evangelical beatitude. “It is the foundation on which rest the other seven steps by which one reaches the summit of perfection.” The history of the Church shows that the people most detached from the goods of the world “stood out for their faith, hope, and charity,” and their lives “were a fabric of good works and a series of wonders for the glory of God and the salvation of one’s neighbour.”⁶⁶

As Salesians, then, we must consider that we are called for the salvation of poor and marginalized young people. “We would work in vain if the world did not see and was not convinced that we are not looking for riches and comfort, that we are faithful to Don Bosco’s motto: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle!* “In fact – as Saint Francis de Sales taught – “not only the poor are evangelised, but it is the poor themselves who evangelise.” In one’s ministry for the salvation of souls, he who “does not trample earthly things under his feet does not get any results. Those Salesians who undertook truly fruitful works among the forest tribes of Mato Grosso or the indigenous people of Tierra del Fuego or who put themselves at the service of wretched lepers certainly were not looking for a comfortable life. This will always be the pride of those who generously observe poverty.”

Finally, it is necessary “to consider that Don Bosco’s works are the fruit of charity.” In undertaking his enterprises, he relied solely on Providence, represented by his Cooperators. Now, it is necessary to know “that many of our benefactors, themselves poor or just modestly well-off, practise very serious sacrifices in order to help us.” Therefore, “we must love poverty and practise economy. ... Wasting the fruit of so many sacrifices, even just spending it inconsiderately, is truly ingratitude towards God and our benefactors.” “Anyone who does not live according to the spirit of poverty, who in food, clothing, lodging, travel, and the comforts of life crosses the limits that our state imposes on us, should feel remorse for having stolen money from the Congregation that had been meant to give bread to orphans, foster vocations, and extend the kingdom of Jesus Christ. He will have to render an account at God’s tribunal.”⁶⁷

In conclusion, the circular composed by Father Albera for Father Rua lists practical expressions of Salesian poverty: carrying out what the Constitutions and general chapter deliberations prescribe; living the common life,

⁶⁶ LCR 366-368.

⁶⁷ LCR 369-371.

adapted to one's needs; avoiding exceptions and abuses in using money.

Three indispensable attitudes are then recalled: a) not limiting oneself to formal observance of the vow, but practising virtue, detaching the heart from things; b) being satisfied with what is necessary and avoiding what is superfluous; c) accepting those privations and inconveniences that are inevitable in common life, generously choosing for one's own use less beautiful and less comfortable things.

Father Albera took up some of these reflections in his circular of 23 April 1917, in which he offered provincials and directors some "advice on how to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco in all the houses." At the conclusion of the part concerning the spirit of poverty, he wrote:

So let those who exercise some authority be concerned: 1) to love poverty and make it loved, and not to be ashamed to practise it even when their own house might lack something necessary; 2) to accept willingly and generously the consequences of poverty in a spirit of penance; 3) not to grant permissions that open the way to abuses contrary to poverty, and that go beyond the faculties granted by the major superiors; 4) not to take themselves those liberties that would be denied to those who depend on them.⁶⁸

Care for perfection

We should not forget that the aim of Father Albera's circulars was not simply to outline the profile of the Salesian according to a homogeneous doctrine or to offer a series of instructions in the manner of a manual. Above all, he intended to encourage the confreres to be generous towards God, "to walk with great strides in the path of perfection," to "fight energetically that systematic mediocrity of conduct," that purely external form of legalism, through which the religious limits himself to observing what is strictly demanded, tries to avoid serious failings, "but does not strive to progress every day in the perfection proper to his state."⁶⁹

Those who, like Albera, had been trained by Don Bosco to give themselves totally, always to do more and to correspond better with the divine call and the Salesian mission, considered with dismay the spread in the

⁶⁸ LC 221.

⁶⁹ LC 231-232.

younger generations of a certain mediocrity, of a merely external observance. On 25 June 1917, he wrote a circular letter against the danger of a reprehensible “legalism.”⁷⁰

He evoked the revelations of the Sacred Heart to Margaret Mary Alacoque. The thorns that surround the divine heart are a symbol of those consecrated to his service, who, “however, do not show due diligence in correcting their defects and therefore fall easily into grave faults, nor do they try to repair with the sanctity of their lives the outrages with which so many unhappy sinners afflict that Sacred Heart.”⁷¹

Therefore he exhorted the confreres to consider the Lord’s inexhaustible generosity towards them, both in the order of nature and in that of grace: in the face of such infinite love, how can a religious “put limits on his gratitude? How can he turn the manifestation of his love into a business deal?” Yet this is how the Salesian behaves “who in his practices of piety settles into a disgraceful mediocrity,” who avoids doing the least thing that is not imposed by the rules and the schedule.⁷²

He invited us to reflect that, besides the duty to respond with the utmost generosity to God’s love, the religious has the mission to intercede for his neighbour. Don Bosco obtained graces and healings, even extraordinary ones, precisely because he could refuse nothing to God and to Mary Most Holy. In fact, his prayers “were accompanied by many generous sacrifices and frequent acts of virtue, which infused them with an irresistible effectiveness,” especially in the formation of the young. He showed his disciples that “in the teaching and education of youth, he relied more on our prayers and the goodness of our lives, on conduct pleasing to God, than on our work for our pupils’ progress.”⁷³

Above all, Father Albera insists on the precept of Jesus to the disciples, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” [Matt 5:48]. The only one who will progress on the path of perfection is one who “keeps alive in his heart this desire, which helps overcome difficulties, reduce obstacles, increase our strength, and enable us to persevere in virtue until death.” On the other hand, religious profession does not guarantee us salvation. “As long as we live, we remain subject to the law of battle,” since the old man is always alive in us. No one can win the victory if he ceases to fight, if he

⁷⁰ LC 231-241.

⁷¹ LC 232.

⁷² LC 234.

⁷³ LC 235-236.

“does not maintain his balance with the commitment to progress every day in perfection,” if he tires of the battle and says, “Enough.”⁷⁴

We recall the Gospel passage of the miraculous catch of fish. After a night of useless toil, Jesus said to his disciples: “Duc in altum: thrust the boat out to sea.” Despite their weariness, they obeyed and were rewarded. Thus, writes Father Albera, the Lord repeats to us too:

Get the boat out to sea, hurl yourself eagerly into the vast field of perfection, do not limit your efforts to what is strictly necessary, aspire mightily for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Get away from the seashore that so narrows your horizons, and you will see how abundant the fishing of souls will be, and how much consolation your heart will come to experience.

This is the ideal of a good Salesian, even when he is “buckled under the weight of crosses, tribulations, and sacrifices”: to remain generous and absolute in the gift of himself, keeping his eyes fixed on the perfections of the Heavenly Father and on the example of Don Bosco, who “never stopped in the way of perfection and the conquest of souls!”⁷⁵

Two powerful dynamisms characterised Don Bosco’s life, recalls Father Albera: “an incessant, very laborious apostolate,” combined with the ardent desire to gain perfection. “In him religious perfection and the apostolate were one.” He taught his disciples that pure observance of the rule is not enough: “We must, dear confreres, be like him, tireless workers in the field entrusted to us, fruitful initiators of the most suitable and opportune works for the greater good of the youth of every country, to preserve our Congregation in a spirit of healthy modernity proper to it, never forgetting that all this still would not give us the right to proclaim ourselves true sons of Don Bosco. To be his true sons, we must grow every day in the perfection proper to our Salesian vocation, striving with all our attention to imitate the spirit of our Venerable Father’s interior life.”⁷⁶

Salesian gentleness

Salesian gentleness expresses charity and educational loving kindness.

⁷⁴ LC 236-237.

⁷⁵ LC 238-240.

⁷⁶ LC 334-335.

Father Albera spoke of it explicitly in a letter addressed to the provincials and directors,⁷⁷ but his considerations are valid for all those who have educational and pastoral responsibilities. Gentleness, he wrote, is not simply a compliant character “through which one yields to the will of others with a certain courtesy and without resentment.” It involves a continuous effort “to dominate one’s lively character, to repress every tendency towards impatience and also towards the indignation that sometimes seems holy, justified by zeal and allowed by the gravity of the fault.” It requires the virtuous attitude of restraining language and avoiding every slightest word “that might displease the person with whom one is dealing,” implies “that serene gaze full of goodness which is the true and clear mirror of a sincerely kind soul, one eager only to make happy everyone who approaches him.”⁷⁸

This virtue is above all the fruit of ascetical practice and the expression of that detachment from oneself “whereby the spirit remains always the same, in honour and contempt, in suffering and enjoyment.” It is, therefore, an attitude attained day by day under the impulse of charity, which helps one remain humble, calm, gentle, and always in control of himself in dealing with his neighbours, in correcting their defects, in bearing their weaknesses. It is kindness in words and gentleness in manner. Saint Francis de Sales called it “the most excellent of moral virtues, because it is the complement of charity, which is perfect precisely when it is kind and at the same time helpful to our neighbour.”⁷⁹

Gentleness is a necessary virtue above all for those who have the responsibility of directing souls or educating young people: a task that entails the duty “always to maintain equanimity of character and be in full possession of oneself,” free from any form of resentment, stripped of all self-love, moved only by the love of God and of souls. Sharp words, rude behaviour, and impatience always have sad consequences. “An affable welcome, an open and smiling face, a kind word, a renewed assurance of esteem and affection inspire many good thoughts and wise intentions!”⁸⁰

Experience teaches that “however much a superior (and we can say it of every educator) is esteemed for his knowledge, skill, and prudence, however much he makes his dependents love him for his generosity, it is enough that he treat them harshly or haughtily just once in their daily

⁷⁷ LC 280-294 (20 April 1919).

⁷⁸ LC 280-281.

⁷⁹ LC 282-283.

⁸⁰ LC 283.

relationships ... for that esteem and benevolence that he had gained with so much effort to be lost for ever.” With meekness and with gentleness, instead, we win hearts, dissipate prejudices, overcome repugnance, and correct defects.⁸¹

Jesus is the model of every pastor and superior: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart [Matt 11:29]. With these words our divine Saviour points out to us gentleness and humility as the most outstanding and characteristic qualities of his most Sacred Heart, therefore also as the qualities in which those who follow him must stand out most; and finally as the most effective means to please God and win the hearts of people.”

Whoever wants to see the people entrusted to his care “grow every day in virtue” should always show himself to be lovable and make them content and happy. He needs “always and everywhere to practise that gentleness which Jesus wishes us to learn from his gentle Heart.” Thus, the family spirit will reign. In fact, what made Jesus Christ’s school effective was his example, the patience and gentleness with which he treated everyone. Even at the present time, he prefers to invite “sinners to penance with the assurance of his mercy rather than to frighten them with the lightning bolts of his justice.” In the sacrament of the Eucharist, “he continues to give us proof of his goodness, despite the many serious sins that are committed; and until the consummation of the ages, he will offer himself to the Eternal Father as an expiatory victim for our sins.”⁸²

Francis de Sales was chosen as protector of the Salesian Society precisely because of his exemplary gentleness, and Don Bosco, who profoundly understood human nature, grasped from the beginning that “to do good it was necessary to find the way to speak the language of the heart.” Therefore, “he studied with particular commitment and love the works and examples of that teacher and model of meekness and strove to follow his ways by practising gentleness.”⁸³

Here, Father Albera concludes, is our unsurpassed model of the gentleness that conquers the heart:

Of an intimately good nature, he showed esteem and affection towards all his pupils, overlooked their defects, spoke of them with praise, so that each of them imagined himself to be his close friend – even, I

⁸¹ LC 284-285.

⁸² LC 286-288.

⁸³ LC 288-289.

would say, his favourite. In order to approach him, it was not necessary to choose the most favourable moment, nor was it necessary to resort to some influential person to be introduced. He listened to everyone patiently, without interrupting and without showing haste and boredom, so much that many believed he had nothing else to do.

When he had to correct a confrere, he used the kindest and most encouraging words. When he proposed some task, even a painful and repugnant one, he did it with “so much grace and humility” that no one dared to say no.⁸⁴

Therefore, in order to know how to measure gentleness and firmness in the exercise of his ministry, Father Albera concludes, “Let each study his own character well, and if he finds it is naturally gentle, let him strive to be firm. If, on the contrary, he should see that he is naturally firm, let him strive to practise gentleness. In this way, the two extremes will be avoided, and he will arrive at that truly desirable right balance of an authority that is gentle and firm at the same time,” like Don Bosco’s.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ LC 289-291.

⁸⁵ LC 293.

Third part

SELECTED TEXTS



1. The spirit of prayer¹

Who of us has not heard a thousand times about the Salesians' spirit of initiative and action? It may have been sincere praise that portrayed us as benevolent people in order to stimulate us even more towards doing good. Or they might have been the malicious insinuations of some envious person, and perhaps even a satanic artifice of our adversaries meant to obstruct our providential mission on behalf of youth. Whatever it may have been, everyone everywhere talks about us, even with exaggeration.

This should not surprise us. Divine Providence has given us a vast field to cultivate, which everyone may observe, and from the beginning our field has produced most abundant fruit. It did not take long for rather indifferent people to notice.

After the grace of God and the protection of Mary Help of Christians, the rapid spread of Salesian works in Europe and America is due to the tireless efforts and admirable energy of Don Bosco, Father Rua, Bishop Cagliero, and many of their other sons. It was their indefatigable zeal and their holy hard labours that in every age have caused many vocations to blossom on their path, given rise to so many and such varied institutes, and caused people to consider our humble Society a true prodigy.

There is no doubt that this spirit of initiative, this ardour, and this never interrupted work has given great honour to our Pious Society and attracted the admiration and praise of all good people. Even now, this is the most consoling proof of the vitality of our Society, or rather of the singular protection and assistance of the powerful Help of Christians over it. Considering this, who of us does not feel in his heart the happiest hopes for the future?

Speaking to you from my heart, however, I confess I cannot avoid the painful thought and fear that this over-hyped activity of the Salesians, this zeal which till now seemed that no discouragement could touch, this warm enthusiasm which till now has been sustained by constant happy success, that the day may come when it may not bear fruit, purified and sanctified

¹ From the circular letter "On the spirit of piety" (May 15, 1911), in Paolo Albera, *Lettere Circolari ai Salesiani* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1922) (cited from now on as LC), pp. 24-40, at 25-35. [Editor's note: This collection includes 42 letters and runs 504 pages, beginning with a January 1911 summary of General Chapter 11 and ending with the September 1921 convocation of GC12 and notes on the revision of the Constitutions and the 300th anniversary of the death of St. Francis de Sales.].

by a true and solid piety.

Let us first try to have the right idea of piety. The word in Latin (*pietas*) means the love, veneration, and help that a child owes to those who brought him into existence. It was the most beautiful praise that one could give a young person that he had great piety towards his parents.

But this word took on an immensely nobler and more sublime meaning in the language of the Church. It signifies the complexity of those acts by which a Christian honours God by considering him as Father. Hence you can easily see the difference between the virtue of religion and piety. Religion is a virtue that inclines us to perform all the acts that belong to the honour and worship of God, who, having created us, ought to be recognised by us and worshipped as the supreme Lord and ruler of the universe.

Piety makes us honour God not only as Creator but also as the kindest of Fathers who *voluntarie genuit nos verbo veritatis* (“of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth” [James 1:18]),² voluntarily gave us life through his omnipotent word, which is the word of truth. Because of piety we are no longer satisfied with only the worship, I would call almost official, that religion imposes on us, but we feel the duty to serve God with that tender affection, with that attentive delicacy, with that profound devotion, which is the essence of religion, one of the most precious gifts of the Holy Spirit, and, according to Saint Paul, the source of all grace and blessings for the present life and the future one.

Therefore, Bishop Louis Gaston de Ségur was right when he wrote: “Christian piety is the union of our thoughts, our affections, and our whole life with the thoughts, feelings, and spirit of Jesus. It is Jesus living with us.” It is piety that wisely regulates our relations with God, that sanctifies all our relations with our neighbour, according to the saying of Saint Francis de Sales that “truly pious souls have wings to lift them up to God in prayer, and have feet to walk among human beings by a loving and holy life.”

This imaginative concept of our holy Doctor teaches us to distinguish between religious practices, which we usually do at certain hours of the day, and the spirit of piety, which must accompany us at every moment, whose purpose is to sanctify our every thought, word, and action, although it is not a direct part of the worship we give to God. It is precisely this spirit of piety that I would like to instil in myself and in all my dear confreres, not limiting this circular to dealing with each religious practice that the

² Editor’s note: Except as noted, Scripture quotations come from the Revised Standard Version. When the citation is in brackets, it is not given in Fr. Albera’s text.]

Constitutions prescribe for us.

The spirit of piety must be considered as the end; the exercises of piety are but the means to achieve and preserve it. Happy is he who possesses it, since in everything he will have no other aim than God, he will strive to love him more and more ardently, he will seek nothing other than to please him. How deplorable, on the other hand, is the condition of those who lack it! Even when one performs various acts of piety during the day, according to the testimony of Saint Francis de Sales he would be nothing more than “an image, a ghost of true piety.”

In saying this, I do not mean in the least to diminish the high esteem that we must have of the various external forms that piety takes, which are necessary to our soul like wood to keep the fire alive, like water to flowers. But I want to say that the spirit of piety is its basis and foundation, and that it can still be a means of compensation for those souls to whom unexpected labours or the particular needs of their condition do not allow them to perform entirely the religious practices that the Rule imposes.

But there is more. If we let a considerable time pass without manifesting this spirit of piety, if unfortunately we allow it to die out in us, how could that intimate relationship exist, that ineffable kinship that Jesus Christ wants to establish between himself and souls through the sacrament of Baptism? There would no longer be any relationship between that God whom we call by the sweet name of Father, and us who have the good fortune to be named and really be his sons.

Furthermore, is it not true that that spirit of faith would also weaken, by which we are so convinced of the truths of our holy religion that we always preserve its lively memory, so as to feel its salutary influence in every circumstance of life? Without this spirit, we no longer pay attention to the Holy Spirit who often visits us, instructs us, even consoles us and helps us in our infirmities: *adiuvat infirmitatem nostrum* (“he helps in our weakness” [Rom 8:26]).

If it is well cultivated, on the contrary, this spirit ensures that our union with God is never interrupted. It communicates an intimately religious character to every action, even a profane one, and it raises every action to supernatural merit, so that like fragrant incense it is part of that uninterrupted worship that we must lend to God. When we practise piety, according to Saint Gregory the Great, our life becomes a beginning of that happiness which the blessed inhabitants of heaven enjoy: *inchoatio vitae aeternae* (“the sparking of eternal life”).

But the bonds that bind the Christian soul to God become much more

solemn for those who have had the good fortune to make religious profession. By this act the soul is married to Jesus Christ, to him it dedicates itself without reserve, to him it consecrates its faculties, senses, and entire life. It really becomes entirely a thing of God. Precisely for this reason, if there is someone who must possess the spirit of piety, it is the religious. He must be so endowed with this piety as to communicate it to those around him.

By the grace of God, we can count many confreres – priests, clerics and coadjutors – who in terms of the spirit of piety are true models and arouse the admiration of all.

But unfortunately I must add, *et flens dico* (“I tell you with tears” [Phil 3:18]), that there are also Salesians who on this point leave much to desire. Unfortunately, some lack piety who, when they were novices, had edified all their companions with their fervour.

I would call some no longer sons of Don Bosco, who consider religious practices an unbearable burden, use every effort to excuse themselves from them, and everywhere give the sad spectacle of their laxity and indifference. They are delicate plants that the frost has frozen; they are flowers that the wind has beaten to the ground; or they are branches that, if not yet completely detached from the vine, unfortunately vegetate in a most deplorable mediocrity and will never bear fruit. ...

Without a spirit of piety, the religious will have no means of shaking from his soul that worldly dust which, unfortunately, will come to settle daily on him who is always in contact with the world, as Saint Leo the Great warns us. Despite our profession, despite even our sacred ordination, we do not cease to be children of Adam, to be exposed to a thousand temptations; we could at any moment succumb to the seductions of creatures and the assaults of our passions.

We will be safe only under the shield of true piety; only with religious practices will we be able to restore our spirit, correspond to God’s grace, and reach the level of perfection that God expects of us. This is why those who were raised up by God to reform religious congregations that had fallen from their primitive fervour first turned all their attention to make piety flourish in their hearts. Any attempt would have been in vain if the ground had not been prepared first.

But on the day of trial we will be more convinced how necessary is the spirit of piety. Precisely because we work tirelessly, precisely because the choicest portion of the flock of Jesus Christ is entrusted to us, and because we reap some fruit among them, the arrows of our enemies will be directed against us.

Unfortunately, the hour of the storm will come. We have to be ready for the fight. We might see ourselves abandoned by those who professed to be our friends; we will see around us only adversaries or the indifferent. Who knows that, God permitting, we too do not have to pass through *ignem et aquam* (“fire and water” [Psalm 66:12]), amid severe physical or moral sufferings?

In such a painful circumstance, let us persuade ourselves that only from the spirit of piety will we be able to draw strength and comfort. This was the source from which the Venerable Don Bosco³ drew that unalterable evenness of character and that pure joy which, like a resplendent halo, seemed to adorn his forehead more richly in the days of his greatest sorrows.

Lack of piety on our part would make barren our ministry on behalf of souls, and even our grand solemnities would be thrown back in our faces like filthy mud, as the Lord protested through the mouth of the prophet Malachi (2:3).

On this topic I may not pass over in silence an argument that more than any other should be effective for Salesians. The whole system of education taught by Don Bosco is based on piety. If this were not practised as it ought, every ornament, every prestige to our institutions would become much inferior to lay institutes.

Well, we could not instil piety in our pupils if we ourselves were not abundantly equipped with it. The education that we would give our students would be incomplete, since the slightest breath of impiety and immorality would erase in them those principles that, with so much sweat and long years of work, we have tried to imprint on their hearts. If a Salesian is not firmly devout, he will never be fit for the role of educator. The best method to teach piety is to model it.

Let us remember that no better praise could be given to a Salesian than to say that he is truly devout. For this reason, in the exercise of our apostolate we should always have before our eyes our Venerable Don Bosco, who first shows himself to us as a model of piety.

Those who knew him remember the devout manner with which Don Bosco celebrated Holy Mass. So it was not surprising if the faithful crowded around the altar to watch him. Often, even without knowing who he was, they went away saying that priest must be a saint.

One would have said that the life of the Servant of God was a continuous prayer, an uninterrupted union with God. The unalterable

³ Editor’s note: Don Bosco had been declared Venerable in 1907.

evenness of temperament that shone on his invariably smiling face showed this. Whenever we resorted to him for advice, he seemed to interrupt his conversation with God to listen to us, and it seemed that God inspired the thoughts and encouragement he gave us. How edifying for us to hear him recite the Our Father or the Angelus!

The impression he made as he gave the blessing of Mary Help of Christians to the sick will never be erased from my memory. As he pronounced the Hail Mary and the words of the blessing, you could say that his face was transfigured; his eyes filled with tears and his voice trembled on his lip. For me they were clues that *virtus de illo exibat* (“power came forth from him” [Luke 6:19]); therefore, I was not surprised that miraculous effects followed his blessing, if the afflicted were comforted, the sick healed.

Let us therefore make some practical resolutions: 1. Let us make a resolution to be faithful and exact in our practices of piety.

2. Let us promise to sanctify our daily actions. May the Salesians continue to give the example of a spirit of initiative and great activity, but may this always and in everything be the expansion of a true, prudent, constant zeal and firm piety.

3. Let us do our utmost to make our piety fervent, and our fervour be an ardent desire and a generous will to please God in everything.

2. At Don Bosco’s school⁴

The oldest confreres remember the holy efforts by which Don Bosco prepared us to become his collaborators. He used to gather us from time to time in his humble little room after night prayers, when all the others had already gone to bed, and there he would give us a short but very interesting conference.

We were few who heard him, but precisely because of this we considered ourselves happy to have his trust, to be part of the grandiose designs of our most gentle teacher.

It was not hard for us to understand that he was called to fulfil a providential mission on behalf of youth, and it was no small glory to see that he was choosing us as instruments to carry out his marvellous ideals.

So little by little, we were trained at his school, especially since his

⁴ From the circular letter “On religious discipline” (25 December 1911), in LC pp. 53-77, at 54-56.

teachings had an irresistible attraction on our souls enamoured by the splendour of his virtues.

From 1866 onwards, when he began to gather us for retreats, Don Bosco's activity would be exercised on a much larger scale. Every year on the auspicious occasion [of the retreat] we were given the opportunity to gather and to count ourselves, and it was a great comfort for us to see there were ever more of us.

Our good Father with his instructions, so packed with holy thoughts and put forth with ineffable fervour, continually opened new horizons to our astonished minds, made our intentions ever more generous and our will firmer to remain with him always and to follow him everywhere, without reservation and at the cost of any sacrifice.

Over fifty years have already passed since those happy times, but the time passed has not been enough to erase from our hearts the impression that Don Bosco's word left on us.

Often some articles of the Constitutions, which he read from a manuscript, formed the subject of his conference and gave him the opportunity to come to practical considerations, truly precious for our spiritual formation.

I do not remember his ever saying the word *discipline*; we would not have understood it. But beautifully he taught us what it means, he traced the path for us to walk, and finally he watched attentively so that our conduct conformed to his teachings.

Not infrequently from his lips came clear allusions to the rapid and extraordinary development that the nascent Congregation would take, to the immense crowd of children who would populate his houses. It was this that most excited our amazement as we knew the innumerable and very serious difficulties that had to be overcome to support the one little house of the Oratory.

Only on 15 November 1873, when the Pious Salesian Society already had seven houses in Italy, did Don Bosco direct a circular to his sons on the subject of discipline.

It occurred to me to find a copy, and I keep it on my desk for my guidance while I am writing these few pages. He defined discipline: a way of life that conforms to the rules and customs of an institute. This institute – it is easy to understand – in Don Bosco's mind was the Pious Salesian Society. Its purpose, as we deduce from the first article of the Constitutions, was the perfection of its members, and the means to achieve it especially the apostolate on behalf of poor and marginalized youth.

Therefore, the perfection of the individual members and of the entire

Society had to be the effect of the discipline that Don Bosco instilled in his sons, but not a perfection that might be common to any religious family whatever; rather, one adapted to its own special character and the rules which governed it. What wonder, therefore, that under the escort of a teacher so expert and furnished with so many supernatural lights, many of those first disciples of Don Bosco made giant steps in piety, in virtue, in the spirit of sacrifice, and in the exercise of zeal? Certainly, no one will be surprised if those were called the heroic times of our Pious Society.

3. Living by Faith⁵

If we have the good fortune to live by faith, we will feel the deepest gratitude to God for having called us to the Pious Salesian Society, so providently founded by Don Bosco. We will consider her the ark of salvation and our refuge, and we will love her as our sweetest mother. We will look at the house where obedience has sent us to work as the house of God himself; our office, whatever it may be, as the portion of the vineyard that the owner has given us to cultivate.

In the person of the superiors we will see the representatives of God himself, on whose forehead faith will make us read those words: *qui vos audit, me audit; qui vos spernit, me spernit*: he who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me [Luke 10:16]. Therefore we will keep their commands as commands of God himself, and we will take care to carry them out, being careful not to judge them ill-advised and criticise them.

We will recognise the Constitutions, the Regulations, and the schedule as so many manifestations of God's will in our regard, and we will take care that they are never transgressed. With eyes of faith, we will regard the young people of our oratories and institutes as a sacred deposit for which the Lord will hold us accountable.

Our confreres who share sorrows and joys with us, with whom we pray and work, will be so many living images of God himself, whom he has charged now to edify us with their virtues, now to make us practise charity and patience with their defects.

Oh! When will that day come when we, according to the imaginative

⁵ From the circular letter "On the life of faith" (21 November 1912), in LC, pp. 82-106, at 95-99.

expression of Saint Francis de Sales, will allow ourselves to be carried by our Lord like a child in the arms of his mother? When, dear confreres, will we habitually see God in everything, in every event, which we will consider as a sacramental species under which he hides? Thus we will be persuaded that faith is a ray of heavenly light that makes us see God in all things and all things in God.

This is precisely what we admire in the life of our Venerable Founder. As a youth, why did he work so hard to attract to himself the children of the humble hamlet of Becchi? We all know: it was to instruct them and keep them away from sin. What was the purpose that he set himself in embracing the priestly calling, overcoming numberless obstacles? His motto tells us clearly: *da mihi animas*. He wanted to save the souls that faith showed him to have been redeemed at the price of the very blood of Jesus Christ.

Ordained a priest, he consecrated himself to the care of poor children, because he saw them abandoned by everyone, growing in ignorance and vice. How edifying for us to contemplate him busy for many hours hearing the confessions of so many young people, without ever giving the slightest sign of being tired in his ministry! This happened because his most lively faith made him contemplate the confessor as the healer of the wounds of souls, breaking the chains by which they were bound, and setting them on the path of piety and virtue.

Nor would he have wanted the youngsters entrusted to him to remain even for a few hours with sin on their souls. Therefore with very effective words he exhorted them if they had fallen into some fault, to confess to it as soon as possible, even if they had to get up from bed during the night.

What did faith not suggest to Don Bosco to make his preaching more effective? He made it a rule to avoid any word or phrase that his young listeners would not perfectly understand, however elegant it might be. He avoided any abstract expression that was difficult to understand, and thus got used to a language I would almost call concrete, with which he appealed to the senses of the children, grabbed their attention, and governed their will. The singular efficacy of his word was due to this art and to his holiness.

It was likewise the spirit of faith that inspired in him his admirable Preventive System, which, while earning him a most honoured place among the educators of youth in the judgement of the learned, is for us the most convincing proof of his most ardent zeal to prevent sin.

Why would he have wanted his pupils to be put in the moral impossibility of committing faults? Solely for the desire that offences against God

be avoided.

He himself showed how much assistance would cost those who want to follow the Preventive System, and as long as his strength held up, he preceded his sons with his example and encouraged them with his warm exhortations. I remember that he said emphatically to someone who, because he was tired, had left the boys of the Oratory alone one Sunday in August: "When there are so many boys in recreation, we must assist them at any cost. We will rest some other time."

He had no scruple about having a conversation or writing a letter with some religious thought. He knew how to do this with such grace and finesse that no one ever felt put off by it. It was therefore possible to bear witness of him that no one ever approached him without feeling some improvement. Faith taught him that a priest would fail in his duty if he did otherwise.

Several times I was in his company aboard ship when he bade farewell to his missionaries, and it was in those precious moments that I was able to witness the best proof of his living faith and most ardent zeal. To one he would say, "I hope you will save many souls." He whispered in another's ear, "You will have a lot to suffer, but remember that paradise will be your reward." To those who would have to assume the care of parishes, he recommended taking special care of children, the poor, and the sick.

He repeated to everyone, "We are not looking for money; we are looking for souls." He wished one priest on the day of his first Mass that he would be most fervent in faith and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. He impressed upon another that he should give no sermon without talking about Mary. He himself set us an example.

Having entered the Oratory as a youngster, I remember that from the very first days on hearing the Good Night talk in the evening, I could not refrain from saying to myself how much Don Bosco must have loved the Madonna!

Who among the older boys did not notice with what feeling and with what conviction he spoke to us about eternal truths, and how it happened not infrequently that speaking especially of the last things he was so moved that his voice failed?

Nor will we be able to forget with how much faith he celebrated Holy Mass and how diligently he performed the ceremonies; he even always carried the booklet with the rubrics precisely to refresh them in his mind from time to time.

It was also his faith that made him consider his Congregation and its houses the result of the very special protection of Most Blessed Mary Help

of Christians, to whom he professed his deepest gratitude. He was heard to exclaim: "How many wonders has the Lord wrought in our midst! But how many more He might have done had Don Bosco had more faith!" And saying this, his eyes filled with tears. (BM VIII, 418)

4. The oratory is the soul of our Pious Society⁶

From the reading of the first volumes of the life of our Venerable Father, written with so much love and scrupulous accuracy by our beloved Father Lemoyne, it appears crystal-clear that Don Bosco's first work, for many years the only one, was the festive oratory, his festive oratory, as he had already glimpsed it in the mysterious dream he had at the age of nine and in subsequent dreams that progressively illumined his mind about the work that Providence was entrusting to him.

We must never forget, dear confreres, that Don Bosco's festive oratory is an institution all its own that differs from anything similar both for its intended purpose and for the means it uses.

According to Don Bosco, the oratory is not for a given category of young people in preference to others, but for everyone without distinction from the age of seven onwards. Family status or the presentation of the young person by relatives is not required. The only condition for admission is to come with the good will to have fun, be instructed, and fulfil one's religious duties together with all the others.

Causes for a young person's removal from the oratory cannot be liveliness of character, nor occasional insubordination, nor lack of good manners, nor any other youthful defect caused by lightmindedness or natural stubbornness; but only systematic and contagious insubordination, swearing, dirty talk, and scandal. Except in these cases, the tolerance of the superior must be unlimited.

All young people, even the most marginalized and wretched, must feel that the oratory is their family home, their refuge, their ark of salvation, their sure means of becoming better, under the transforming action of the director's more than fatherly affection.

Don Bosco wrote in 1843, almost at the very beginning of his work:

These young people really need a beneficial hand to take care of them,

⁶ From the circular letter "Festive Oratories, Missions, and Vocations" (31 May 1913), in LC, pp. 110-133, at 111-113, 117-119.

and thus train them to virtue and remove them from vice. The difficulty consists in finding out how to gather them, speak to them, and teach them right and wrong.

This was the mission of the Son of God; only his holy religion can do this. But this religion, which is eternal and immortal in itself, which was and always will be the Teacher of humanity, contains such a perfect law that it knows how to bend to the events of the times and adapt to the distinct personalities of humanity.

Festive oratories are among the means to spread the spirit of religion in uneducated and marginalized hearts. ... I intended to work to make good citizens on this earth, *so they might one day be worthy inhabitants of heaven*. May God help me be able to continue in this way until the last breath of my life.

And the Lord helped him not only to continue to the last breath of his life in this apostolic aspiration, but to perpetuate it prodigiously amid various peoples by drawing out of his magnanimous heart the Pious Salesian Society, which was born in his Oratory and for the Oratory. *It cannot live and prosper except for this*.

Therefore, Don Bosco's festive oratory, which is spreading more and more, reproducing itself in a thousand different places and times, but is always unique in its nature, is the soul of our Pious Society. If we are true sons of such a Father, we must keep this precious, vital heritage in its genuine integrity and splendour.

Everywhere Don Bosco's sons are found, his oratory must flourish, *open to all young people, in order to gather them, speak to them, teach them right and wrong, and make them worthy citizens not only of this earth but, above all, worthy inhabitants of heaven*.

Although our Pious Society takes on a variety of works, it is agreed that all aim at producing the precious and natural fruit of the Society itself, which is the festive oratory; by doing otherwise we do not deserve to be regarded as true sons of the Father. ...

Father Rua said one day to a Salesian he was sending to open a festive oratory: "There is nothing there, not even the grounds and the premises to gather boys, but the festive oratory is in you. If you are a true son of Don Bosco, you will do well to find where you can plant it and make it grow into a magnificent tree rich in beautiful fruit." And so it was; in a few months a beautiful and spacious oratory arose, crowded with hundreds of boys, the oldest of whom had quickly become apostles of the smallest.

Of course, the oratory needs staff and help, but these are not the main factors. Give me a director full of the spirit of our Venerable Father, thirsty for souls, rich in good will, ardent with affection and interest in young people, and the oratory will flourish wonderfully even if it lacks many things.

Father Rua himself, after hinting at the abundant healthy fruit that had been garnered in several oratories, continues:

But you might believe that such joyous things can be counted only of those oratories that have a suitable building, an appropriate chapel, a vast playground, a theatre, gymnastic equipment, and many attractive games. These are certainly very effective means for attracting many young people to the oratories, and for the good principles sown in their hearts to take deep roots. Still, I must tell you with the greatest joy that in many places the zeal of the confreres has made up for the lack of these means. Oratories were started in the same way that Don Bosco began at the Rifugio: a school or a pathetic room that served as a chapel, while a small lot without shelter served as a playground, and it seemed to everyone quite impossible to continue. Yet the youngsters, attracted by the fine ways of the Salesians, came in large numbers.

The interest that was shown to them induced them to say: Elsewhere we can find large halls, big playgrounds, beautiful gardens, games of all kinds. But we prefer to come here where there is nothing, because we know that we are loved so much.

That is exactly how it is: the sincere affection of the director and his helpers makes up for many things. Let us not believe we have made the oratory the way Don Bosco wanted it when we have set up a recreation room where a few hundred boys are gathered.

Although it is desirable that the oratory be abundantly equipped with every kind of comforts and entertainment in order to increase the number of pupils, yet all this must never be apart from the most diligent concern to make them good and well formed in religion and virtue.

Do not believe that in preaching it is enough to tell them whatever comes to your mind. Let instructions, explanations of the Gospel, as well as catechism lessons be prepared. Tell the young things tailored to their needs and in the most interesting way that you can, for individual sanctification and the restoration of all things in Christ Jesus.⁷

⁷ Editor's note: An allusion to the motto of Pope Pius X (1903-1910), "To restore all things in Christ."

When a director of a festive oratory has achieved the result that every Sunday there is a certain number of Communion, he can be sure that in his oratory he will no longer have only children, but very devoted young men who will be the backbone of the sodalities and clubs and of all those works of improvement that must embellish the oratory as fruits does a plant. These are treated extensively in the Report on Festive Oratories and Schools of Religion, a report that I hope each director has received and will re-read from time to time.⁸ I merely mention it to you so as not to dwell on it overmuch in this letter; I would like it to be taken as the theme of discussions in your meetings.

If study and experience suggest some practical modifications or additions, please inform me. In this Report, you will find a vast repertoire of what can be done to attach adults to the oratory. Do not forget, however, that all those works have as their only purpose to be means of attaining the vitality of the oratory, while Holy Communion is its very life.

5. Let us all be missionaries!⁹

The missions were the favourite topic of Don Bosco's speeches, and he knew how to instil in hearts such a keen desire to become missionaries that it seemed to us the most natural thing in the world. When the consul of the Argentine Republic at Savona, amazed at what he saw at the Oratory, asked him for a similar institution for the province of Buenos Aires, he immediately accepted the plan to have the word of God heard all the way to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

Humanly speaking, this thought suggested tremendous rashness, because the missionaries who had previously tried to penetrate those vast, almost unexplored regions had been brutally slaughtered. Nevertheless, for Don Bosco the second aim of his Congregation had to be the missions, and nothing held him back from fully embracing that aim.

His project approved and strongly encouraged by His Holiness Pius IX, Don Bosco prepared the first expedition of some of his sons, under the

⁸ Editor's note: There had recently been a national congress of festive oratories and schools of religion, which became the basis for a report that Fr. Albera had printed and widely distributed (Annali, 4:14-15).

⁹ From the circular letter "Festive Oratories, Missions, and Vocations" (31 May 1913), in LC, pp. 110-133, at 121-124.

leadership of Father John Cagliero, for 11 November 1875. He deprived himself of his best men; he underwent privations of every kind to prepare everything needed. He sketched the itinerary to the last detail and provided for the smallest eventualities, even material ones, for that long journey.

Who can repeat Don Bosco's care and concern for this first expedition, which was soon followed by many others, always bringing a greater number of generous apostles among the uncivilized tribes? Who can tell how supremely content his heart was when he knew that they had reached their destination on American soil? Who can speak of his great jubilation when he saw his sons penetrate the Pampas and Patagonia and go fearlessly through Tierra del Fuego to the southernmost point of the Strait of Magellan?

And when he saw Northern Patagonia erected into a vicariate apostolic with the episcopal consecration of its first bishop [John Cagliero], one whom he cherished, and when Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego became a prefecture apostolic, and when some of those poor uncivilized converts bowed before him to attest their gratitude, he felt such delight as no one will ever be able to describe here below, which consoled him abundantly for all the pains he had suffered!

From then on, the missions were the focus of his heart, and it seemed he lived longer only for them. Not that he neglected his many other works, but his preference was for the poor inhabitants of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. He talked about them with so much enthusiasm that people were amazed and very much edified by his most fervent ardour for souls.

Every beat of his heart repeated, *Da mihi animas!* Charmed by how he spoke of the missions, huge numbers of vocations to this apostolate were instantly aroused in the hearts of his sons, and our benefactors could not fail to cooperate effectively with generous offerings for this work of saving souls: *Divinorum divinissimum est cooperari in salutem animarum* ("The most godly of divine matters is to cooperate in the salvation of souls"), as Dionysius the Areopagite said.

The Lord abundantly blessed his ardent thirst for souls by giving his sons vast, numerous missions, thanks to his prayers, which in short order blossomed with the fruits of holiness and civilization.

In my visit to the houses and missions of America, completed ten years ago, I touched personally the reality I am speaking of. After the missions in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego came those among the Bororos of Mato Grosso in Brazil, then those among the Jivaros in eastern Ecuador, and lately the immense new missions of India and China.

This is the vast field into which our Congregation must pour out the sweat of our apostolic labours, in union with the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ, and, if it may happen as it did previously in Patagonia, also the blood of her sons.

It will not be difficult, therefore, for you, dear confreres, to understand the heavy weight that falls on your Rector Major to provide these missions with secure and zealous personnel and material means. The needs, both of personnel and of means, are seen more readily, and I feel the need to appeal to your hearts, good confreres, for help.

Yes, you too may want to share so great a burden with me, embracing our missions close to your hearts, first with prayer and then with work. May prayer, which puts the power of God into our hands, rise incessantly to implore the grace of the apostolic vocation upon us and upon the young people entrusted to our care. Let us pray with intense faith and devotion for this purpose, beseeching the very powerful intercession of our dear Madonna and of our Venerable Father.

But prayer is not enough; it has to be combined with work. This can be foremost personal, by your making a particular effort to enrich yourselves with missionary virtues, which must include a profound piety and a noble spirit of sacrifice for the whole of your life and not just for a few years.

The enemy of souls seems to have found a way to prevent the missionary apostolate from bearing fruit by placing in the hearts of some of those called for the missions a thousand difficulties and even more to present the missions themselves under the aspect of a scientific and pleasure journey or only of a test: if one succeeds, good; otherwise he goes back. This fatal illusion dries up the missionary apostolate at its source and creates a multitude of mercenaries of souls! When the flame of the apostolate has been lit in a heart, it should no more be extinguished.

May your work, then, extend to others: by always speaking enthusiastically about our missions and never repeating, "*One can be a missionary everywhere*" (this is absolutely false for those who are called to the missionary apostolate among unbelievers); by describing the beauty of this apostolate to the young people of our oratories; by saving money in order to set aside something for the missions; or by collecting the small offerings of our boys or the generous donations of the Cooperators.

Many houses lament not finding more donations. The real reason perhaps does not lie in the lack of benefactors, but in wanting to put all the alms to local needs, without worrying at all about the missions. Let directors who find themselves in this condition think about it a little; may they repair the

situation by reviving in their benefactors the desire to come to the aid of our missions, too; they comprise the greatest glory of our Congregation.

Yes, good confreres, work with these and other means on behalf of our missions. But your work should aim above all to arouse numerous sincere, solid vocations among the young people entrusted to our care.

6. Our Lady and Don Bosco¹⁰

The many works started and completed by our Venerable Father and Founder are admired by those who read their history. But what most strikes the mind of those who carefully examine them is seeing how these prodigious enterprises were conceived and carried out by the son of a humble peasant from Becchi, who not only was without any access to wealth and needed the help of several benefactors to become a priest, but also found himself impeded at every step on his journey by obstacles that seemed insurmountable.

Therefore his life, to those who consider it from a purely human and natural angle, appears to be an inexplicable enigma. It can be understood and relished only by those who know how he was lifted on the wings of faith into the spheres of the supernatural, and who with a Christian spirit see a miserable, deficient human project helped by the omnipotent hand of Divine Providence. That alone is capable of overcoming the difficulties and barriers so often placed in the way by human weakness and malice. Don Bosco could have no doubts regarding the continuous intervention of God and the Most Holy Virgin Help of Christians in the various events of his very busy life. It is enough to look at the large volumes of his biography [the *Biographical Memoirs*] to find countless convincing proofs.

At the age of nine, he saw in a dream a great crowd of poor boys whose ignorance and vice had made them like animals, and he received from a mysterious person, who was Jesus Christ himself, the order to take care of them and form them into good Christians. Protesting himself incapable of carrying out this challenging mandate, he was given as a guide and teacher the august Queen of heaven and earth. It was precisely her precious and sublime teachings that set him on the way to transform those unhappy boys

¹⁰ From the circular letter "On the 50th Anniversary of the Consecration of the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco" (31 March 1918), in LC, pp. 258-274, at 259-265.

into so many docile lambs.

From that day the Mother of God guided him in all the most important events of his calling, made him a learned and zealous priest, prepared him to be the father of orphans, the teacher of countless ministers of the altar, one of the greatest educators of youth, and finally the founder of a new religious society, which was to have the mission of spreading everywhere its spirit and devotion to her under the beautiful title of *Mary Help of Christians*.

Speaking to his spiritual sons, he never tired of repeating that the work to which he had put his hand had been inspired by Mary Most Holy, that Mary was his strong support, and that therefore there was nothing to fear from the opposition of his adversaries.

Let me just remind you of the conference he gave on Sunday, 8 May 1864, to the Salesians in Turin.¹¹

In that meeting he revealed things he had never recounted before, made a summary of the history of the Oratory, of the various painful wanderings carried out before it settled in the house of Valdocco. He narrated how the hand of the Lord had struck down all those who had opposed his undertakings, revealed the dreams in which he had seen his future priests, clerics, and coadjutors, and even the very large number of young people whom Providence would entrust to his care. He also recounted what would be better called a vision, in which a lofty, magnificent church had appeared to his gaze, bearing on its pediment the inscription, *Hic domus mea; inde gloria mea* (“This is my house; from it my glory will go forth”). He listed the difficulties that arose from the beginning and were overcome with the help of God.

He added that he had revealed all of this to the Holy Father Pius IX, who had encouraged him to found our Pious Society. Then proposing to himself the objection that perhaps he should not have manifested such things, which seemed to resound to his own glory, he refuted the objection preemptorily and forcefully, protesting that, far from having anything to boast about, he should even have had to render [to God] an awful account, if he had not done what depended on him to accomplish God’s will. Father Lemoyne says, “This revelation deeply impressed all and engendered tremendous enthusiasm.” (BM VII, 398)

In those same days, we saw the excavations begin by Don Bosco’s order for the foundations of the majestic new shrine with which he intended to

¹¹ BM VII, 397-398.

attest to Mary Help of Christians his deepest gratitude for the graces and favours received from her.

Only those who witnessed it can get the right idea of the labour and sacrifices that our Venerable Father imposed on himself for three years to carry this work to its conclusion. He went knocking like a beggar from door to door, not only in Turin, but also in almost all the main cities of Italy, to collect the funds necessary for that construction, which many considered a rash undertaking, far above the strength of the humble priest who had set out to do it. His marvellous energy was supported by the certainty that what had already been done came from the protection of the Madonna, and that the Salesian Society, just getting started, would see a prodigious development when Mary Most Holy, Help of Christians, had a suitable shrine and throne in the meadows of Valdocco. Thus he showed himself to be a true disciple of our Saint Francis de Sales, who had written: "I fully understand how blessed it is to be the son, however unworthy, of so glorious a Mother. Entrust yourself to her protection. Let us put our hand to great things: if we love her with ardent affection, she will obtain for us everything we desire."

On 9 June 1868, to the amazement of everyone, our majestic basilica was consecrated by Archbishop Alexander Riccardo di Netro of Turin. I remember as if it were today the solemn moment in which Don Bosco, radiant with joy, his eyes veiled with tears of deep emotion, was the first to go up to the high altar to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass, under the compassionate gaze of his great Help of Christians. At those most solemn festivities, which lasted a good eight days, eight bishops increased the splendour with their sublime dignity, celebrating pontifically and proclaiming the divine word eloquently and profitably to the extraordinary crowd of the faithful, who came even from distant towns.

To those of us who were already older, it did not escape how the face of our Venerable Father seemed almost transfigured, and how he was tireless in speaking of his Madonna. We jealously preserved the memory of what he, reading into the future, told us on that occasion about the wonders that Mary Help of Christians would work on behalf of her devotees. How it consoles us now to see his predictions have come true!

Nor was all this enough to satisfy fully his great desire to attest his gratitude to Mary Most Holy, since, besides this inanimate material monument, he wanted to raise another living, spiritual one to her by establishing the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. To them he gave the mission of forming young girls in piety and virtue and

of spreading devotion to their powerful patroness throughout the world. The prodigious development assumed in a short time by this institute, and the great good it wrought everywhere, are the best proofs that it, too, was founded by Don Bosco under heavenly inspiration.

But returning to our dear shrine of Mary Help of Christians, it is a fact that immediately after its consecration, we saw vocations multiply prodigiously in the Salesian Society, and rising at short intervals, as if by magic, many schools, festive oratories, and vocational schools, true arks of safety for many youngsters thus rescued from the danger of corruption and wickedness. The serious difficulties delaying the approval of our humble Congregation by the Holy See disappeared suddenly; and many missionary expeditions were sent to the Americas. Thus the prediction of Mary Most Holy was coming true that her glory would go forth from that shrine: *inde gloria mea*.

We can therefore rightly affirm that its consecration truly marked an epoch in the history of Don Bosco's works; and that our most sweet Mother also wanted in this way to reward her faithful servant for the sacrifices he had made in order to provide for her in Valdocco a dwelling more fitting.

It will soon be fifty years since we witnessed the events briefly mentioned here. Our hearts rejoice that this whole period was nothing but an uninterrupted series of wonders wrought by Mary Help of Christians on behalf of her devotees, just as our Venerable Don Bosco had predicted to us.

Due to the protection of our powerful patroness, the humble Salesian Society crossed mountains and seas, extending over almost the whole earth. This marvellous spread cannot be attributed only to the activity and spirit of initiative of Don Bosco's sons. We who by experience know the weakness of our own powers must be convinced that we are indebted for everything to the Virgin Help of Christians more than to anyone else. So what shall we do to show her our gratitude?

This: The strong desire we have to make known to the entire world, if it be possible, that all Salesian works owe their origin and development solely to the protection of Mary, together with our hope that she will continue to support, guide, and defend us for the future, suggest to us the bold plan of placing in the hand of our most powerful Help of Christians a rich golden sceptre, adorned with precious stones. By this act we intend to proclaim with the greatest possible solemnity that she is our August *Queen*. ...

This external ceremony, it is easy to guess, will be accompanied by the solemn consecration of our Pious Society to our heavenly Queen. The Rector Major will pronounce a prayer before her miraculous image, in

which he will present to her every single Salesian, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Pious Union of Cooperators, and all our institutes, begging her to accept this offering, always to consider all Don Bosco's works as her own, and always to keep them worthy of her protection and affection.

This consecration will be renewed in each of our houses, in the manner that the local superiors will consider most appropriate. I believe I am not mistaken in thinking that this homage will be appreciated more than any other by our Queen, and will make her graces and blessings rain in the greatest abundance on our works.

This will not be a novelty for us, since for a good twenty-five years in each of our houses a most devout prayer entitled "Consecration to Mary Help of Christians" has been recited every morning after meditation. For quite a while everyone felt the need to have, besides the common vocal prayers, a special prayer of the Salesians in which we set forth our particular needs and asked for the graces that best suit our state and mission. In 1894 the unforgettable Father Rua, from whose insight escaped nothing that could prove useful to our souls, thought it appropriate to fill this gap, and he proposed the aforementioned "Consecration", which everyone welcomed enthusiastically and, being short, was easily learned by heart.

How sweet it is for the Salesian, in whatever nation he may be and whatever language he should speak, to hear every morning, at a fixed time in the day, a numerous choir of devout voices repeating this offer to our heavenly Mother, imploring her protection over our houses and our labours! Now, what we are accustomed to do every day in the humble, holy chapels of our communities, it is quite right that on the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of our church it be done with all possible solemnity and fervour before the image of Mary, proclaimed our august Queen, and adorned with the golden sceptre, symbol of her royal dignity and power!

7. Salesian gentleness¹²

This subject, as you well know, has a capital importance and is the characteristic note of Don Bosco's spirit. Preparing to write on it, I threw myself at Jesus' feet, and I thought I heard him say to me: *Discite a me*

¹² From the circular letter "On gentleness" (20 April 1919), in LC, pp. 280-294, at 280-283, 288-291.

quia mitis sum et humilis corde: learn from me to be gentle and lowly of heart [Matt 11:29]. So let us go to his school and consider his teachings and example.

We can get an idea of gentleness somewhat easily, especially when we see it in practice, but we find it very difficult to define. The words with which we would like to clothe our thoughts always have something incomplete and imprecise, so they never end up satisfying us. For example, some define it as an easiness of character through which one yields to the will of others with a certain courtesy and without resentment.

Now, who does not see that in this definition there is not even a mention of that halo I would call divine, that surrounds the face of a person, perhaps lacking in external qualities, but who has the good fortune habitually to practise gentleness? Nothing is said of that effort, which I would like to call heroic, that is frequently necessary to dominate one's lively character, to repress every tendency towards impatience and also towards the indignation that sometimes seems holy, justified by zeal and allowed by the gravity of some fault. Here we are not even hinting at that very rare virtue which curbs the tongue and does not allow it to pronounce even a word that might displease the person with whom one is dealing. So it seems that in a definition of gentleness a hint of that serene gaze full of goodness should not be missing, which is the true and clear mirror of a sincerely kind soul, one eager only to make happy everyone who approaches him.

Much more complete, on the other hand, is the definition of Saint John Climacus (*Grad.* XII), according to which gentleness is that disposition whereby the spirit remains always the same, in honour and contempt, in suffering and enjoyment. With these expressions the Saint very effectively compares the gentle man to a cliff that, soaring high above the sea, resists the raging waves, so that they break at its feet without ever being able to snatch even a grain of the indestructible rock of which it is made.

This is the gentleness and meekness practised by many saints whom God wanted to refine in virtue, making them go through very serious tribulations. Perhaps he will not send painful trials to all of you, dear confreres sent by obedience to the exercise of authority in our houses. But it surely requires you to remain calm, gentle, and always masters of yourselves in directing those who depend on you, correcting their defects, bearing their weaknesses: even more difficult and meritorious in as much as you have to labour at it every day, in fact at every moment.

Human miseries are without number, and it is impossible that they not be felt even in religious communities, even though the members are

animated by the best desire to strive for perfection. But how many could be avoided or at least diminished, if there were always gentleness in the words and mildness in the manners of one who directs!

To be convinced of this truth, it would suffice that we look within ourselves sometimes, asking ourselves how we would like our superiors to be. How good it would be to put ourselves, as they say, in the shoes of our subjects, investing ourselves with their thoughts and feelings! How useful it would be for ourselves and our neighbour to remember and practise that maxim of Christian charity, not to do or say to others what we would not like to be done or said to us; to keep in mind that saying of the Gospel, that the same measure will be used towards us as we have used towards others [cf. Luke 6:38]! This reflection would remove from our mind the temptation of pride, which could arise from the thought of the honourific office with which we are invested. It would save us from the danger of feeling complacency with those manifestations of respect and veneration which our dependents believe are owed to their superiors. In a word, let us be inspired by that charity and gentleness which make so beautiful and joyful the life of brothers together in the same house.

From all this we understand how right was our patron Saint Francis de Sales when he wrote that “gentleness is the most excellent of moral virtues, because it is the complement of charity, which is perfect precisely when it is kind and at the same time helpful to our neighbour.”

Remember, whoever is placed as director of his confreres, to him is especially entrusted the realization of that solemn promise that our Lord Jesus Christ gave to religious, that even in this life they would be given a hundredfold of what they have abandoned in the world in order to follow him [cf. Mark 10:29-30].

It is the superior who, with all the diligence of his inexhaustible, paternal goodness, must ensure that the advantages of religious life, so much promoted in books, do not seem to be pious exaggerations, seductive deceptions aimed at the credulity of simple and innocent souls.

This was undoubtedly the thought of our Venerable Founder and Father when he wrote the golden pages that introduce our Constitutions; and that director or superior would certainly be giving him a painful rejection if, for lack of gentleness, he did not provide the confreres entrusted to his care with the support they expect from him. ...

Speaking of gentleness, can we forget the name “Salesians” that we are blessed to bear? This name, now known all over the world and meeting so much favour, reminds us how our Venerable Founder and Father with

good reason chose Saint Francis de Sales as protector of the Pious Society he was to start. Understanding human nature so well, he saw right from the beginning that to do good in these times it is necessary to win people's hearts. Therefore, he studied with particular diligence and love the works and examples of that master and model of meekness, and strove to follow his steps by practicing gentleness.

Further, a much more authoritative voice had impressed on him the practice of gentleness. In that dream he had at nine, he thought he saw a large crowd of young people contending with each other until they came to blows. They cursed and spoke obscenely. Carried by his quick, sanguine nature, the boy would have liked to prevent so much evil with strong reproaches and even with blows.

But that voice told him this was not the means by which he would succeed in what he intended, and invited him to turn to a great Lady (Mary Most Holy), who would teach him the most effective way to correct those urchins and make them better. We all know this method was nothing but gentleness; and Don Bosco was so convinced that he immediately began to practise it with ardour and became a true model of it. Those who had the good fortune to live by his side attest that his gaze was full of charity and tenderness, and precisely because of this he exercised an irresistible attraction on young people.

A certain archbishop, an eloquent orator, speaking of Don Bosco in Marseille, did not hesitate to compare him to the most famous personages in history, stating that if they had exercised authority over the bodies of their subjects, Don Bosco had done more and better, exercising complete authority over the hearts of his sons.

Of an intimately good nature, he showed esteem and affection towards all his pupils, overlooked their defects, spoke of them with praise, so that each of them imagined himself to be his close friend – even, I would say, his favourite. In order to approach him, it was not necessary to choose the most favourable moment, nor was it necessary to resort to some influential person to be introduced. He listened to everyone patiently, without interrupting and without showing haste and boredom, so much that many believed he had nothing else to do.

When he received the *rendiconto* of some confrere, far from taking this opportunity to reproach him (however well deserved) and make harsh corrections, he had no other aim than to inspire confidence in him and encourage him to improve his conduct for the future.

An excellent companion of ours recounted that, having allowed himself

to be fascinated by the intellectual and external qualities of one of his pupils, he had become so attached to him that he lost his peace, and his conscience was troubled thereby. Finally, not without pain and with great effort to reveal everything to Don Bosco, he came to him, embarrassed and with trembling lip, and revealed the state of his soul. From time to time, he looked at our Venerable Father, fearing that he would show wonder and disgust at what he heard; but he always saw that same smiling face. When he had finished his *rendiconto*, he expected a hard, just rebuke; instead, he heard very kind words which remained forever etched in his heart and memory. He repeated them to me, exalting the goodness of our venerated superior.

“My dear friend”, Don Bosco had told him, “I knew well that you had strayed from the right path, and I really feared for your vocation. But now you have spontaneously come to reveal your troubles to me. Your sincere *rendiconto* drives all such fear from my mind. The confidence with which you have spoken to me makes me forget your whole past, even makes my affection for you stronger. Courage, therefore; God will help you persevere in your good intentions.”

I must say, this truly fatherly language did immense good to that confrere, who up to his death was faithful to his promises and worked very hard for his own sanctification and the salvation of souls. Oh! If the walls of Don Bosco’s modest little room could speak, what miracles would they reveal to us, wrought by his gentleness and affability!

We are used to calling heroic those years in which Don Bosco and his first sons had to suffer and work so much. Well, what was it that made those young clerics and coadjutors so courageous and so constant in their vocation, who also had to overcome so many difficulties in order to remain with Don Bosco? It was the always kind, encouraging word of our Venerable Father. He said he was happy to be surrounded by such sons, and we made it our glory to be called sons and collaborators of such a father.

When he proposed some task to us, even if it was painful and repugnant, who would have dared to say no to him who requested it of us with so much grace and humility?

Let us be thoroughly convinced of this: according to the ideas of our Venerable Don Bosco, the real secret to gaining hearts, the characteristic quality of the Salesian, consists in the practice of gentleness.

8. To bring Don Bosco to life in ourselves¹³

We who out of the goodness of the Lord are called to be sons of such a father and continuers of his mission, what must we do on this memorable occasion of the dedication of the monument to Don Bosco in Valdocco?

I am sure that you have already tried assiduously to register as many pilgrims as possible for the upcoming festivities, through preparatory meetings of your respective past pupils, whom you have made understand the supreme importance of the event; so I will not belabour the point.

But it would be too little if we limited ourselves to this, and to ensuring that the festivities succeed splendidly and are satisfactory in every respect. I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Don Bosco would not be happy with us if it were so. He wants another monument from his sons, an imperishable monument, *aere perennius* (“more lasting than bronze” [Horace]). From this solemn occasion and from the sight of this stone and bronze monument, he wants his sons to find an incentive to revive in themselves his virtues, his educational system, the whole of his spirit, so as to pass it on always fruitful and vital from generation to generation.

Bringing Don Bosco to new life in us is the most beautiful monument with which we can honour his memory and make it precious and beneficial even for the coming centuries. Let us read, let us study his life with tireless love, let us strive to imitate him in his ardent, disinterested zeal for the salvation of souls, his love, and his boundless devotion to the Church and to the Pope, in all the virtues of which he left us so many glorious examples.

And let us treasure his teachings, reminding ourselves that they were a fruit not only of his uncommon genius and the depths of his experience but also of the supernatural light for which he prayed insistently, and which was bestowed upon him as a reward for his constant fidelity as he worked in the field entrusted to him by the Lord.

For us who are persuaded of divine intervention in the creation and development of his work, Don Bosco’s educational system is a heavenly pedagogy. Truly, in the dream he had at nine, were not the fundamental principles of the Preventive System already given to the shepherd boy of Becchi when he was told by the mysterious and Venerable personage: “Not with blows, but with meekness and charity will you have to win these

¹³ From the circular letter “For the Dedication of the Monument to Venerable Don Bosco” (6 April 1920), in LC, pp. 308-328, at 311-315.

friends of yours?”

Of course, I do not intend here to enumerate all the educational norms that our good Father has left us. You can read them in that golden “Treatise on the Preventive System”,¹⁴ which precedes the Regulations for Salesian Houses, which I have now had printed separately in a convenient format and distributed to those who want it. After all, his entire life is nothing more, we may say, than a continuous, admirable application of these rules.

But one thing is particularly close to my heart to recommend to your imitation in this circumstance: that love, that affectionate concern for young people, which was the secret of his wonderful influence over them. Here I think I cannot do better than to let Don Bosco himself speak. Here is what he wrote from Rome on 10 May 1884 to his sons in the Oratory, narrating one of his usual imaginative illustrations to which I alluded above:

Closeness leads to love, and love brings confidence. It is this that opens hearts, and the young people express everything without fear to the teachers, to the assistants, and to the superiors. They become frank both in the confessional and out of it, and they will do everything they are asked by one who they know loves them. ... The youngsters should not only be loved, but they themselves should know that they are loved. ... By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study, and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love. ... Let [the superiors] like what pleases the youngsters, and the youngsters will come to like what pleases the superiors. In this way their work will be made easy. ... Break down this barrier of mistrust by a friendly informal relationship with the boys, especially in recreation. You cannot have love without this familiarity, and where this is not evident there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach.¹⁵

Let us love our young people; let us surround them with the most attentive care; let us not think we have done our whole duty by giving

¹⁴ Editor’s note: “The Preventive System in the Education of the Young”, in *Salesian Sources* (Rome: LAS, 2014), pp. 489-498.

¹⁵ Editor’s note: “Letter from Rome”, 10 May 1884, in *Salesian Sources*, pp. 502, 504, 505, 506 (with minor editing).

them the instruction necessary for the state of life they intend to embrace. But let us try to unite them indissolubly to us with the bond of love. They will then feel an irresistible need to open their hearts to us, to share their aspirations with us, their plans for the future, to turn to us for advice and comfort in difficulties and struggles. We will thus become their confidants and friends, and we will exert a beneficial influence over them, tempering their excessive fervour and reviving their wavering energies when they are discouraged.

We must do all this not only towards the young people of our schools but also towards those of the festive oratories. Anyone who has worked in them, even for a short time, knows what consoling results can be obtained with familiarity and trust.

9. Being worthy of our father Don Bosco¹⁶

Bronze and marble at best are cold and inert elements, very often, even when they are used to represent great men or great deeds of history. But for Don Bosco this is not the case. That bronze and that marble are not inert, cold, and lifeless elements. No! The art and the secret breath that emanates from them take on vital movements; and the love and gratitude that sculpted them impart fresh energies, and I would say mysterious energies, which make them a perennially living symbol: the symbol of love for souls!

Pone me ut signaculum ... quia fortis est ut mors dilectio, it is written in the inspired Canticle (Cant 8:6): “Set me as a seal upon your heart ... for love is strong as death!” And here are two loves that are symbolised and, for this very reason, eternalised: the love of the father towards his sons, and the love which the sons return to their father, in the expression of imperishable gratitude; strong, indestructible, immutable loves, which needed to be moulded into the material most resistant to the destructive forces of time, *quia fortis est ut mors dilectio!*

That crown of children which surrounds Don Bosco, making up the central group of the monument, is the plastic expression of those two loves, and it seems to me that from that group one voice issues to repeat the motto which for Don Bosco was a program: *Da mihi animas!* The souls hear his paternal voice; thirsting for goodness, they gather around the father who

¹⁶ From the circular letter on “Don Bosco’s Monument, Symbol of Love and Synthesis of Our Work” (24 June 1920), in LC, pp. 321-328, at 322-324.

guides them to life, to true life, which is faith!

The whole monument is a magnificent synthesis of Don Bosco's work. It is here that, at a simple glance, my mind is filled with memories. Divine Providence arranged, for my benefit, that I too should be part of the blessed band who first approached Don Bosco and came to love him irrevocably. God wanted to number me among the first sons of such a father, and therefore I see with my mind a whole life, a whole story, and, I would like to say, a whole magnificent epic carved in the monument: epic, because the human element in the life and history of Don Bosco is so intertwined with the divine element that his life and history are more than human; they are divine.

I will not repeat here the immortal pages of this history. You all know them; you are a living and active part of it, because in the midst of the youngsters of our times you perpetuate Don Bosco, with all the ways he did good. I will also dispense myself from describing the unforgettable days both of the International Congresses of the Cooperators and the Salesian Past Pupils, as well as of the dedication of the monument to Don Bosco and the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians. The *Salesian Bulletin* will bring you the chronicle of those days, which will be remembered in the history of our Pious Society.¹⁷

I will tell you only that in those days there was not a discordant voice around Don Bosco, not an improper movement. And this not only among those closest to him but among everyone without exception, from the highest to the humblest; even among those who hold adverse principles and theories; and in everyone, all over the world, because from all sides they acclaimed the great benefactor of humanity. Each person seemed to feel his beneficent influence, the powerful charm of his spirit, good and loving, and to feel drawn to form a crown around him, like the group of children who surround him in the monument.

We must be proud of being Don Bosco's sons! Consider the painful contrast that we still see today in humanity, which suffers and languishes, almost exhausted in strength, after the enormous scourge that has struck it [World War I]. Almost everywhere humanity is struggling, tearing each other apart, and writhing in partisan hatred. The aura of peace, love, and harmony which surrounded all the children and admirers of Don Bosco gathered from all over the world to honour him, deepens the conviction

¹⁷ Editor's note: See BS, vol. 44, June-July 1920, pp. 141-192; The Salesian Bulletin, vol. 12 no. 3, May-July 1920, pp.55-73.

that our Venerable Father was sent by God to regenerate today's society, calling it back to the pure springs of Christian love and peace.

We are his sons, and if sons, also heirs of this sacred heritage, which must not become sterile in us. To show ourselves to be worthy sons, able to meet our task in the present time, first we must be firm in our vocation: *Unusquisque in qua vocatione vocatus est in ea permaneat* ("Every one should remain in the state in which he was called") (1 Cor 7:20).

As the bronze and marble of the monument resist the dissolving action of every adverse element, so let us be steadfast in the face of any difficulty, any unhealthy influence that would tend to separate us from our Father.

Second, by preserving our vocation, let us try to perfect it, so that we may walk in a manner worthy of it: *ut digne ambuletis vocatione, qua vocatis estis* ("lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called") (Eph 4:1). Therefore let us always have in mind Don Bosco's program: *Da mihi animas*, sacrificing our whole being for it, starting with our particular opinions, which, if we cherished or followed them, even though they appeared to be a greater good, could become even unconsciously a disintegrating force rather than an element of union.

And to save souls, perfecting our vocation, let us put on the spirit of our Venerable Father, which is the spirit of faith, spirit of piety, spirit of sacrifice, and constant, tireless work. Only by forming ourselves in the spirit of Don Bosco will we be able to work like Don Bosco and obtain in our work as educators those wonderful results of spiritual rebirth that Don Bosco obtained.

For this, however, we need to know Don Bosco. It must also be said that there are many, even among us, who speak of Don Bosco only what they hear about him. Hence the real, urgent need that his life be read with great love, his teachings be followed with keen interest, and his example imitated with filial affection.

Every Salesian should constantly feel in his soul the profound and effective impulse to become one who would deserve a monument, as our Father deserved it. The ideal is too high, some will say. However high it may be, it is no less true; it is also within everyone's reach, because it is right that sons make themselves like their father. Even if a monument will not be erected for each of us, we ourselves will have sculpted and built the indestructible monument of our own holiness by shaping our entire life with the virtues of Don Bosco.

10. Don Bosco our model¹⁸

Just as Don Bosco, in order to be more certain of copying the divine model within himself, followed in the footsteps of the meek Francis de Sales, whom he later chose as patron of his work, so we in our turn must make our good Father the unique model of our religious life, completely convinced that by doing so we too will reproduce perfectly in ourselves the Divine Exemplar of all holiness. Don Bosco is therefore our model. Let us strive to copy him in ourselves with every perfection, so as to bring him to life again, always fruitful with fresh apostolic energies for his redemptive work for the benefit of poor and marginalized youth.

I would like to point out to you, my dearest sons and confreres, that what I shall write will be very little compared to the vastness of the topic. In fact, it embraces the whole life of Don Bosco, and the spirit that he imprinted on his work, so varied and multifaceted. I can speak to you about it, however, with some knowledge of the matter, since I too belong to the happy band of those who owe all they are to Don Bosco, who have seen him with their own eyes and listened to him with their own ears: *vidimus oculis nostris, audivimus, perspeximus et manus nostrae contrectaverunt* (“we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon and touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1). I assure you that I write with an ineffable joy and with the deepest conviction to tell you only things observed and heard, which I jealously guard in my heart.

When I had the good fortune to be welcomed into the Oratory on 18 October 1858, our Venerable Father had already been exercising his apostolate here in Valdocco for more than fifteen years, with a marvellous crescendo of initiatives and youth ministry projects so brilliant and fruitful that public fame has proclaimed him ever since the modern apostle of poor and marginalized youth. Five years I lived with our good Father, breathing almost his very soul, because, we can say without exaggeration, from that time we young people shared his life entirely, and he possessed in an eminent degree the virtues that conquered and transformed our hearts.

Even the following five years, which I spent in our first boarding school at Borgo San Martino, can be called a continuation of living with him, because that house still formed almost a single family with the Oratory.

¹⁸ From the circular letter on “Don Bosco, our model in acquiring religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all” (18 October 1920), in LC pp. 329-350, at 330-335.

Materially we were separate, but not in spirit, because Don Bosco was always the soul of everything and everyone.

Then, in the year of the consecration of the shrine of Mary Help of Christians [1868], I returned here, and for another four years, I was able to enjoy his intimacy and draw from his great heart those precious teachings which were so much more effective on us because we saw him practising them in his daily conduct.

During those years mainly, and even later, on those occasions, always desired, when I had to be with him or accompany him on his travels, I persuaded myself that the only thing necessary to become his worthy son was to imitate him in everything. Therefore, following the example of numerous elder brothers who had already copied in themselves the way of thinking, speaking, and acting of their Father, I tried to do the same.

And today, after more than half a century, I repeat also to you that you are sons like me, and that he has entrusted you to me, as the eldest son. Let us imitate Don Bosco in acquiring our religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all.

Having been called to be part of the Congregation Don Bosco founded for the continuation of his work in the future, was for all of us an eminently marked grace of the Lord, who in his goodness wanted to take us beyond the life of simple Christians and call us to embrace the state of perfection, which is based on the practice of the evangelical counsels.

Therefore, we must aim all our striving towards the progressive acquisition of the perfection proper to our state, which is contained entirely in the Rule we have professed. This Rule has to be the norm and measure of our holiness; and we must love it, my dearest sons, with the same love that we bear towards Don Bosco, because it is, I dare say, the essence of his soul, or at least the most precious fruit of his ardent charity and charming holiness.

Who can enumerate the studies, prayers, mortifications, and experiments made by our good Father while he was gradually preparing the Rule and practicing it personally? Who can number the pains, setbacks, and difficulties of every kind that he encountered and happily overcame, to have it approved by the supreme authority of the Church?

The germ of the Rule was deep in his heart ever since as a boy and a youth mysterious dreams gave him a glimpse of his future mission; ever since, in order to correspond to the call of the Lord who perceptibly was inviting him to the state of perfection, he planned to enter a religious order; ever since when he began his mission, he saw that mission in his

many visions, vast, unlimited through the coming centuries; which he well understood could not have come true had he not given flesh to that mission, so to speak, in a moral body aptly constituted in the Church to preserve and propagate it from generation to generation.

Those who are moved by heavenly virtue to carry out a new apostolate responding to the spiritual needs of Christian society in their time have usually lived first for years in solitude and prayer, to prepare the Rule to be practised; and then, having sought their first companions, with them they dedicate themselves through observance of the adopted Rule to the apostolate which they foresaw as the aim assigned to them by the Lord.

Our Venerable Founder, as soon as he knew clearly it was God's will that he would become an apostle of poor and marginalized youth, and that in this apostolate he should pursue his own sanctification, immediately set to the work. The Rule and his helpers would come later, like the fruit from the plant. First, he himself wanted to do what he would later ask of his sons: he wanted, so to say, to live his Rule before writing it out and having it approved by the Church.

The founders of religious institutes aim first at personal sanctification, and only after that at the apostolate for the benefit of others. Therefore, whoever wants to embrace the institute must first consecrate many years to becoming holy. This is very reasonable, because no one can give what he does not possess. Don Bosco, however – while keeping the fundamental idea that personal sanctification must precede the apostolate – with a fine intuition of the times and of the modern spirit, was intolerant of certain methodologies not essential to the achievement of his purpose. He understood that with a little good will he could make his own sanctification and the apostolate go forward hand in hand.

He therefore first gained his own experience and then arranged for his sons to do the same, giving the apostolate such a preference that superficial observers might believe he had formed a society of zealous priests and lay volunteers with the sole purpose of devoting themselves to the education of youth.

And it may seem that the first article of our Constitutions insinuates the same thing; in it the primary object of one's own sanctification is declared only with a secondary proposition: "... the members, *while striving to attain Christian perfection*, shall be engaged in every work of charity, etc."

Our Rule, like our Founder's own life, makes both one's own sanctification and the apostolate progress simultaneously. It even makes the apostolate in a certain sense the efficient cause of religious perfection: that is,

because anyone who consecrates himself to the Salesian apostolate necessarily has to back the teachings he imparts and the virtues he inculcates with his own example. Anyone who does not feel such a necessity cannot be an apostle; the apostolate is nothing but a continuous outpouring of sanctifying virtues for the salvation of souls. Any apostolate that does not aim at this sanctifying outpouring does not deserve such a glorious name.

Now the entire life of our Venerable Father was an incessant, most demanding apostolate. At the same time, he strained so ardently to acquire perfection that one would not know how to say whether he thought more about this or about doing good to his dear boys. In him religious perfection and apostolate were one, throughout the whole of his life!

My dear confreres, the more we study this blessed and wonderful life, the better we will convince ourselves that, to be his true sons, we must work like him at our religious perfection in the most active and fruitful exercise of the apostolate laid upon us by our vocation.

The pure and simple observance of the Rule would not be enough to sanctify us, if it were not given life by diligent imitation of what our good Father did. What the Rule determines about the purpose, the form, the vows, and the religious and internal governance of our Society is contained in articles so general that they could very well apply as well to similar congregations.

Now, if we were satisfied with the legal observance of these articles, we could succeed in shaping a beautiful body, but without a soul. This, the spirit that must inform the body, we must draw from the example of our Founder.

We must, my dearest sons, be like him tireless workers in the field entrusted to us, productive initiators of works most adapted and opportune for the greatest good of the youth of every country, in order to preserve for the Congregation that primacy of healthy modernity proper to it. But let us never forget that all this would still not give us the right to proclaim ourselves true sons of Don Bosco: to be such we must grow daily in the perfection proper to our Salesian vocation, striving with every care to copy the interior spiritual life of our Venerable Father.

Following his example, let us become familiar in our occupations with so many expressions that spontaneously blossomed on his lips, true voices of his heart, the sound of which still seems to me a very sweet caress: "Always work for the Lord! – As we work, let us always raise our eyes to God! – May the devil not steal the merit of any action. – Courage! Let us work, let us always work, because in heaven we will have our eternal

rest. – Work and suffer for the love of Jesus Christ, who worked so much and suffered for you. – We will rest in Paradise! – A piece of paradise fixes everything. – We will take our vacation in paradise!” Etc.

Work and paradise were inseparable for him. And he left written in his last recommendations, “When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life whilst working for souls, you can say that the Congregation has registered a great triumph and that on it will descend in abundance the blessings of Heaven.”¹⁹

11. Let us throw ourselves into God’s arms²⁰

The animating concept of Don Bosco’s entire life was to work for souls until he had totally immolated himself, and that is what he wanted his sons to do. But he always carried out this work calmly, always even-tempered, always imperturbable, whether in joy or in sorrow; because, from the day when he was called to the apostolate, *he had thrown himself completely into God’s arms!* If always working until death is the first article of the Salesian code, which he wrote more by his example than with the pen, throwing himself into God’s arms and never straying from him was his most perfect act. He did it daily, and we must imitate him in the best way possible, to sanctify our work and our souls.

Throwing oneself into God’s arms is the first and most natural act of every soul as soon as the mind becomes aware of its Creator. But if all souls feel this initial thrust towards God, not all know how to respond generously to it. Most allow themselves to be dissipated by the attractions of external things, to which they cling as if to their own end, or at least as an indispensable means to reach God gradually.

Our Venerable Father, instead, threw himself upon God from his earliest childhood, and then for the rest of his life did nothing other than increase this trust, until he reached habitual intimate union with God amid uninterrupted and disparate occupations: a union whose evidence was that unalterable evenness of temperament which shone from his invariably smiling face.

¹⁹ Editor’s note: see Salesian Sources (Rome: LAS, 2014), p. 1,112.

²⁰ From the circular letter on “Don Bosco, our model in acquiring religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all” (18 October 1920), in LC pp. 329-350, at 335-338.

Whenever we turned to him for advice, it seemed he was interrupting his colloquies with God to listen to us, and that God was inspiring his thoughts and the encouragement he gave us.

This intimate union imprinted such an emphasis on his words that in listening to him even for brief moments we felt improved and elevated to God, even when (a rare thing) he did not finish his discourse with the thought of God or his benefits. Such was the ardour of his love for God that he could not help talking about him; and not a few times it also shone from the expression on his face and the trembling of his lips.

Let us throw ourselves confidently, beloved confreres, into God's arms, as our good Father did. Then the sweet need to speak of him will take shape also in us, and we will no longer know how to speak at all without starting or ending with him.

Then not only our thoughts and words but also our actions will feel something of the fire of divine love, to the salutary edification of our neighbour. Then, above all, the ordinary exercises of religious perfection will come naturally to us, as they did to Don Bosco, and we will take every care not to neglect any of them.

Others use these same exercises as the means to attain perfection. We sons of Don Bosco, on the other hand, following his example must practise them as natural acts of divine love that is already alive in us, in order to be thrown entirely and lovingly into God's arms. For us they must be not only the wood that serves to kindle and feed the divine fire in our hearts, but the very flames of this fire.

Let us throw ourselves into God's arms, and we will easily succeed in keeping ourselves far away from sin and in eradicating all evil inclinations and habits from our hearts, thus removing the most serious obstacles to religious perfection.

We will know and love him more and more, by practising his holy law and the evangelical counsels. We will attach ourselves more closely to him with prayer and recollection of spirit, by working incessantly to realise in ourselves the *volo placere Deo in omnibus* ("I want to please God in everything"),²¹ conforming ourselves to his holy will.

Then, with the assiduous exercise of the virtues proper to our state, it will not be difficult for us ceaselessly to orient our hearts and spirits

²¹ Editor's note: The phrase is from Francisco Suarez as cited in Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, e.g. in the Abbey of Gethsemani, Ky., translation (1946), p. 200.

towards God, who will thus become the direct goal of our actions.

And we will be, like our good Father, subject always and in every contingency of life to the divine will. In the greatest misfortunes and tribulations, he never complained, nor did he appear sad, fearful, or anxious, but with his cheerful face and gentle words, he instilled courage in others: “*Sicut Domino placuit ... sit nomen Domini benedictum!*” (“As it hath pleased the Lord. ... Blessed be the name of the Lord” [Job 1:21—Old Vulgate/Douay Version]). Let nothing disturb you: whoever has God has everything. The Lord is the master of the house, I am the humble servant. What pleases the master must please me too.” How many times did I witness this total submission of his to divine dispositions!

Like him, we too will have great recollection in prayer. When we saw him pray, we remained as if enraptured and almost ecstatic. There was nothing affected in him, nothing singular; but whoever was close to him and observed him could not help but pray well too, perceiving an unusual splendour in his face, a reflection of his living faith and his ardent love of God.

When he prayed with us (oh! the ineffable memory that still fills my heart with sweetness!), his voice stood out amid ours, so harmonious and with such a singular tone, which moved us to tenderness and excited us powerfully to pray more ardently. The impression I felt in seeing him give the blessing of Mary Help of Christians to the sick will never be erased from my memory. As he recited the Hail Mary and the words of the blessing, you could say that his face was transfigured: his eyes filled with tears, and his voice trembled. For me, those were indications that *virtus de illo exibat* (“power came forth from him” [Luke 6:19]). So I was not surprised by the miraculous effects that followed the blessing, that the afflicted were comforted and the sick healed.

12. How Don Bosco loved us²²

Second, we must imitate Don Bosco in educating and sanctifying youth. Since in him apostolate and religious perfection were, as mentioned above, two simultaneous acts almost merging into one, so it is that in imitating him

²² From the circular letter on “Don Bosco, our model in acquiring religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all” (18 October 1920), in LC pp. 329-350, at 339-346.

the first place is often given to the apostolate among the young, because it is something that most catches the eye.

But let us not forget: religious perfection is the foundation of the apostolate, and if the foundation is missing, our educational edifice will be ruined at the first raging storm. Who knows whether any of you, dearest sons, has not already had to ask himself this question at some point: “Why, even though I toil day and night to offer a good education to the boys entrusted to me, do I get so little result? In studies, by dint of emphasis, so much still goes all right; but I do not manage to form their character, nor to cultivate good vocations. My boys, even before they have finished their studies in the world, easily forget the sound principles I instilled in them! Why?”

I think the answer can be found in these lines. Don Bosco’s outstanding success in the education of youth must be attributed more to the holiness of his life than to the intensity of his work or the wisdom of his teachings and his educational system.

Having established this point well, I will say that in order to copy the apostolate of the Father among the young, it is not enough to feel a certain natural attraction for them, but one must really have a predilection for them. This predilection, in its initial state, is a gift from God. It is the Salesian vocation itself. But it is up to our intelligence and our heart to develop and perfect it.

Intelligence reflects on the ministry received in the Lord, in order to carry it out appropriately: *vide ministerium quod accepisti in Domino, ut illud impleas* (“See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord”) (Col 4:17). It thinks of the greatness of the ministry of teaching the young and forming them in true and solid virtue; that is, of taking the whole man out of the child, as the artist takes the statue out of marble; of making young people pass from a state of intellectual and moral inferiority to a higher state: to form the spirit, heart, will, and conscience by piety, humility, gentleness, strength, justice, self-denial, zeal, and edification, grafted imperceptibly by one’s example onto them too. In short, in the light of the apostolate of youth, intelligence senses, meditates, and understands all the beauty of Don Bosco’s heavenly pedagogy, and inflames one’s heart, so that he can practise it by loving, attracting, conquering, and transforming.

Predilection is the perfection of love. It is therefore above all in the heart that it is formed, and it is formed by loving. Dearest confreres, we must love the young people whom Providence entrusts to our care, as Don

Bosco knew how to love them. I am not telling you it is easy, but here lies the whole secret of the expansive vitality of our Congregation.

It must be said, however, that Don Bosco's predilection for us was unique, all his own. We felt his irresistible charm, but language does not find the vocabulary to make it understood by those who did not themselves experience it. Not even the most fervid imagination knows how to represent it with images that can give the right idea.

Even now I seem to feel all the gentleness of his predilection for me as a youth. I felt like I was held captive by an affectionate power that fed my thoughts, words, and actions, but I do not know how better to describe this state of my mind, which was also that of my companions at that time. I felt I was loved in a way I had never experienced before, which was nothing like even the deepest love that my unforgettable parents had for me.

Don Bosco's love for us was something singularly superior to any other affection. It entirely enveloped us all, as if in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness, from which sorrow, sadness, and melancholy were banished. It penetrated our bodies and souls in such a way that we no longer thought of one or the other; we were sure that our good Father was thinking of us, and this thought made us perfectly happy.

Oh! it was his love that attracted, conquered, and transformed our hearts! What is said about this in his biography is very little compared to reality. Everything about him had a powerful attraction for us: his penetrating gaze, sometimes more effective than a sermon; the simple movement of his head; the smile that bloomed forever on his lips, always new and varied, yet ever calm; the flexion of his mouth, as when one wants to speak without uttering the words; the words themselves rhythmic in one way rather than another; the bearing of his person and his lean and relaxed posture – all these things worked on our youthful hearts like a magnet from which it was impossible to escape; and even if we had been able to, we would not have done it for all the gold in the world, so happy were we with his most singular influence over us, which in him was the most natural thing, with no study or effort.

It could not be otherwise, because from his every word and act emanated the holiness of union with God, which is perfect charity. He attracted us to himself through the fullness of supernatural love that flared up in his heart and with its flames absorbed and unified the little sparks of that same love, aroused by the hand of God in our hearts.

We were his, because each of us was certain that he was truly the man of God, *homo Dei*, in the most telling and comprehensive sense of the word.

From this singular attraction sprang the work that conquered our hearts. Attraction can sometimes also be exercised with simple natural qualities of mind and heart, of trait and bearing, which render those who possess them likeable. But such an attraction fades after a while to the point of disappearing entirely, even if it does not give way to aversions and contrasts that cannot be explained.

Don Bosco did not attract us like that. In him, his many natural gifts were rendered supernatural by the holiness of his life, and in this holiness was the whole secret of that attraction of his which conquered forever and transformed hearts.

Therefore, as soon as he had captured our hearts, he moulded them as he wished with his system (entirely his own in the way of practising it), which he wanted to call *preventive* as opposed to *repressive*. But this system – as he himself declared in the last years of his mortal life – was nothing other than *charity*, that is, the love of God which expands to embrace all human creatures, especially the youngest and least experienced, to instil in them the *holy fear of God*.

Oh! our good Father always went ahead (he himself confessed it with simplicity) as the Lord inspired him and the circumstances demanded, moved solely by his ardent desire to save souls and to instil in hearts the holy fear of God!

His entire pedagogy is inspired by the Lord and is therefore our most precious heritage.

But, beloved confreres, it can be summed up in just two terms: charity and the fear of God. First, charity in us (note that by saying “charity” I mean love of God and love of neighbour brought to the perfection called for by our vocation), and then the use of all the means – and they are without number – and all the holy enterprises of which charity is always fertile to instil in hearts the holy fear of God.

Ponder seriously and analyse as closely as you can this *Magna Carta* of our Congregation, the Preventive System, appealing to reason, religion, and loving kindness; but ultimately you will have to *agree with me that everything boils down to instilling in hearts the holy fear of God: to instil it, I say, that is to root it so that it always remains there*, even amid the raging tempests and storms of human passions and events.

This our Venerable Father did throughout his life. This he wants his sons to make their object in practising the Preventive System. All his effort, all his concern that was more than a mother’s, aimed directly only at preventing offence to God and making us live in God’s presence as if we

had really seen him with our own eyes.

God sees you! was the magic word he frequently whispered into the ears of many. *God sees you!* repeated special posters here and there; *God sees you!* was, we can say, the only coercive means of his system to get discipline, order, application to study, love for work, escape from danger and bad company, recollection in prayer, frequenting the sacraments, exuberant noise and happiness in recreation and entertainment.

To the thought of the divine presence, he joined that of salvation of the soul. *Save souls!* was the watchword that he wanted imprinted on the coat of arms of his Congregation. You can say it is the only reason for its existence. It means to save one's own soul first, and then that of others. Helping him to save our souls was the most precious gift we could give him; it was the grace, the favour, that he asked of us with inexpressible suggestions, because his only aspiration, the sole purpose of his apostolate among us, was to lead all our souls into paradise to see God face to face.

He infused these three thoughts with such sweetness and gentleness that one could not fail to be filled by the same feelings he had; and even the most resistant boys received salutary impressions by which they later were moved to admit their mistakes with sincere repentance and return to goodness, as I many times have been able to see, to the immense consolation of my soul, even during these years of my rectorship.

We too, dearest sons, must aim before all else at instilling these three truths in our young people so that they stand out easily before their eyes, even if we do not make them the specific topic of our conversations.

Nor should we be afraid to talk about them frequently, especially in familiar conversations in the playground, and in those individual and more intimate chats, sometimes necessary to make a soul better.

If we are not on our guard, there is much to fear that some of us, although animated by an excellent will to be zealous for good, will not know how to carry out properly this foremost, essential part of our Salesian education.

There is a danger that some of us will let themselves be too carried away by a passion for classical or professional study, or for games and sports, and that they will reduce the spiritual formation of young people to giving them an occasional, inconstant religious education – one that therefore is neither convincing nor lasting – and to the fulfilment of the few daily and Sunday practices of piety, done hurriedly and out of habit, as if to get rid of a nuisance or a burden.

Not that we must increase the practices of piety. These must be neither more nor less than those prescribed, but we must ensure that they are

animated by that profound conviction that is only obtained when one makes them esteemed and loved by the young, as Don Bosco knew how to do.

Do not believe this danger to be so remote, nor think it is a pious exaggeration of the one who is writing to you. Oh no, unfortunately! There is in the atmosphere that we breathe today such a tendency to be satisfied with external appearances in educating our young people that one easily overlooks the thousand activities that our Don Bosco adopted to instil in souls a holy horror of sin and a singular attraction for spiritual things.

Is not our method of educating all about “putting young people, as far as possible, into the impossibility of offending God?” Now this is not achieved by repressing disorders after they have taken place, because then, Don Bosco said, God has already been offended; nor by seeking all the ways to prevent them, since it is morally impossible to prevent them all, even with the most scrupulous vigilance.

It is necessary that the fear of God be infused into youthful hearts, nourished by the powerful desire to save their souls. Only in this way are the hearts of young people truly conquered and transformed. Only in this way will we be able to say that we educate and sanctify the youths who pour into our festive and daily oratories, schools, hospices, and the other institutes that Providence is gradually entrusting to our care.

This point is the key to applying the Preventive System well. But perhaps you lose sight of it a little too much, not because you lack good will, but because it concerns things that transcend the orbit of our senses, things that can be communicated effectively to others only if you first feel them deep within yourself.

Without this profound sense of the supernatural life, we will strive in vain to be talented instructors, even specialists in the art of teaching; in vain will we assimilate the teachings and educational maxims of our Venerable Father; in vain will we work at copying and reproducing in ourselves his agreeable goodness and prudent firmness. Perhaps it might appear that we have been successful, but the results will not correspond to the efforts: *Hic labor, hoc opus!* (“This is our labour; this is the task!” [Vergil, *Aeneid*, bk. 6, 129])

Therefore, my dear confreres, let us ensure that our educational mission be eminently supernatural, like that of Don Bosco, and we will find the Preventive System very easy and fruitful even in its smallest particularities. In us and around us will reign that loving kindness and familiarity our Venerable Father inculcated so strongly in the letter he wrote from Rome to all his sons of the Oratory, four years before leaving this earth.

13. The knowledge necessary for the Salesian priest²³

Those who join our Pious Society assume the obligation to live according to the spirit, example, and teachings of its Venerable Founder. But this duty does not oblige everyone to the same extent: it falls more seriously on superiors than on simple priests, and on these more than on clerics and lay confreres.

Only the Salesian priest can bring Don Bosco to life again in himself in all the fullness of his personality, because only those who are priests can fully imitate another priest. But, I repeat, besides having the possibility, he has a strict duty to do so. If the holy Fathers of the Church said that the priest must be another Jesus Christ – *Sacerdos alter Christus* – I do not think I am asking too much by repeating to each of you: “The Salesian priest must be in everything and always another Don Bosco!”

I would add that in order to achieve this goal we must first engrave well in our minds what our good Father used to say when he spoke of priests: “The priest is always a priest, and he must show it in himself all the time!”

Now our Venerable Father by his saying, “The priest is always a priest, and he must show it in himself all the time”, first wanted his priest sons to understand well the greatness and sublimity of their character, of their duties, of their power; because the more one knows and esteems the dignity with which one is clothed, the greater diligence he will apply to keep its splendour intact and pure. Believe me, my dear sons, the first thing we have to do to translate into reality what our Founder said is to make ourselves familiar – I will say daily – with meditation on the supreme dignity of the priest, not to grow proud of it, but to encourage us to behave in a way worthy of it. Let us often repeat to ourselves the beautiful words of Saint Ephrem: “What ineffable power, what depth lies in the formidable and wonderful priesthood of the new law! *O potestas ineffabilis! O quam magnam in se continet profunditatem formidabile et admirabile sacerdotium!*”

This continuous consideration will have the virtue of producing in us little by little, my dear priests, that deep, intimate conviction of our true greatness which is supremely necessary especially in our day ..., so that we can keep ourselves priests, *always priests at every moment*, as was Don Bosco, as was Venerable Father Rua, as were so many of our other

²³ From the circular letter “Don Bosco, model of the Salesian priest” (19 March 1921), in LC pp. 388-433 at 389-400.

confreres who have already preceded us into our blessed homeland.

But this is, so to speak, just the background of the picture, the preliminary condition for the perfect imitation of our model. We must, therefore, not limit ourselves to this, but also give ourselves to a diligent and loving study of the moral features we have to reproduce in ourselves. ...

Labia sacerdotis custodient scientiam, et legem requirent ex ore eius (“The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek law from his mouth”). With these words the prophet Malachi (2:7) admonishes us that one of the qualities of the priest is knowledge. Now, if this is true for all priests in general, it is particularly true for those like us who consecrate themselves to the education and instruction of youth. And since knowledge is not acquired without study, it follows that we must study. Yes, my dear sons, we must study, so that the terrible prophecy of Hosea (4:6) is not brought upon us: *Quia tu scientiam repulisti, repellam te, ne sacerdotio fungaris mihi*: because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. ...

Study is necessary from a moral and supernatural point of view in order to reinforce our piety and to strengthen our apostolate among the young; and from an intellectual point of view, not to allow our minds to grow sluggish, to complement the earliest intellectual formation we received in school, to keep ourselves safe from the betrayals of memory, and to preserve intact the treasures of knowledge already acquired.

We must attend seriously to study with a firm will and steadfastness, fixing it in our daily schedule, according to what is possible and the needs of our office, and not only when we do not know what else to do. More or less, it is better to study every day because sporadic study does not achieve its purpose, and gradually we end up abandoning it altogether.

But we must also avoid the opposite excess: to be so passionate about study that it becomes detrimental to our interior life and the other duties of our ministry.

The study of the Holy Bible, the *liber sacerdotalis* par excellence, must take precedence over all other study, because, as the Apostle says, it is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. *Omnis scriptura divinitus inspirata utilis est ad docendum, ad arguendum, ad corripiendum, ad erudiendum in iustitia* (2 Tim 3:16).

The holy Fathers [of the Church] were trained in the Holy Bible; and the great founders of religious orders always gave their followers the rule to read some passage every day. Don Bosco recommended this to us too, specifically prescribing it in the Constitutions, where we read that priests,

and all the members who aspire to the clerical state, *must commit themselves totally to the Holy Bible as their principal study* (Articles 101-102).

Let the sacred books, then, be our daily nourishment. Let us not read them as a curiosity, simply as literature or history, but with profound religious reverence, as a form of affective meditation, more than simply studying them; let us compel ourselves to penetrate deep into those expressions so enlightening and profound, and perhaps to learn by heart those verses that best serve us in our prayer life and in exercising our ministry.

Attentive study of the Holy Bible must be combined with that of *dogmatic theology*, in our time more necessary than ever, not only to know in depth the truths of the faith, their reasonableness, their necessity for our true temporal and eternal good, but also to know how to reason with opponents: *ut potens sit exhortari in doctrina sana, et eos, qui contradicunt, arguere* (“so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it”) (Tit 1:9), and this in a manner adapted to the condition of each person, either educated or ignorant, for *sapientibus et insipientibus debitor sum* (“I am under obligation both to the wise and to the foolish”) (Rom 1:14), says Saint Paul; and above all to make us more suited to carry out our mission effectively as Christian educators.

Then, how much the study of *moral, pastoral, ascetical, and mystical theology*, as well as *canon law* according to the new Code [1917], needs to be deepened. Since, in the words of Venerable Joseph Cafasso, “In its application, moral theology can be called inexhaustible and limitless, as limitless as the additions and circumstances that can change individual actions and the judgement that must be made of them”; so the priest has to study it all his life.

The same must be said of pastoral, ascetical, and mystical theology, which in certain respects can be said to complement and perfect moral theology. Unfortunately, not everyone suitably appreciates these three branches of theology, or at least they are considered as only the legacy of a few privileged priests. This is an error, on account of which not a few priests, neglecting such study, are incapable of guiding souls and raising them to that level of holiness to which God calls them.

In guiding souls it is necessary to provide them with not just an obligatory minimum, but even with the greatest perfection possible. This also applies to the young entrusted to our care. We must aim to make them saints, even if they do not appear to be so. But we will fail if we are not well versed in ascetical and mystical theology. By mystical, I do not mean the extraordinary facts of the supernatural life, but only Christian perfection

achieved by vocal, meditative, affective, and contemplative prayer, as our gentle Saint Francis de Sales teaches.

Our Venerable Father possessed this knowledge thoroughly, and also had the secret of instilling it into young hearts, even if he did not call it by name. And so he gave us a Dominic Savio, a Francis Besucco, a Michael Magone, and a whole company of holy youths and confreres. But this secret cannot be taught in words. It is a precious treasure that is found only with a diligent, attentive, and loving reading of his life, and blessed are those who dedicate themselves to it! What wonders will they be able to carry out in the field of education!

No less commendable is the study of *history – scriptural, ecclesiastical, and secular* – which will provide us with powerful weapons to defend religion against attacks by adversaries, who often make history “a conspiracy against the truth”, as Joseph De Maistre put it.

Now, if we know history well, we can easily refute these errors and prevent them from spreading among the people. Our Venerable Father did just this, always working to make people know the greatness of the Catholic Church and of the Pope, and we must do so too.

The study of *sacred liturgy* is also indispensable. It is this study that contributes more than any other to nourishing the ecclesial and priestly spirit, that instils in our hearts love and reverence for the Church’s sacred rites and enables us to grasp the intimate meaning of her solemnities as they unfold during the various seasons of the church year. In the liturgy we experience the very life of the Church, our mother.

Because of our special status as educators, we must also cultivate *the natural secular branches of knowledge*. So, by reading works of some masters of contemporary thought and some good Catholic journals, using sound judgement and a wise approach, let us keep up to date with discoveries in the world of science, with the tactics of the Church’s foes, with the new ways in which they present error, with contemporary objections against Christian truths, and so on.

But here too we give preference to the study of those branches of knowledge which more directly help us better achieve the aim that Don Bosco had in founding our Pious Society. We must therefore apply our diligent care to the educational thought of our Venerable Father and strive to deepen our *pedagogical-didactic knowledge*, always inspired by the ideas on which our educational system is based.

In addition, we take a keen and loving interest in classical studies, especially Latin, bringing the Christian classics to life so that their thinking

may sink into young hearts and contravene the ideas of the pagan classics. Let us remember here how many sacrifices Don Bosco made to spread the works of these influential teachers of Christian life and letters. ...

Let us be convinced, my dear sons, that study is absolutely necessary for us to remain priests of Jesus Christ, priests in spirit and habits of thought, priests in our hearts and our ministry – priests as Don Bosco wanted us to be and as he was!

14. Growth in one's spiritual life²⁴

Passion for fostering our intellectual life would not be enough, my beloved sons, for us to be recognised as worthy sons of Don Bosco, if it did not stir us at the same time much more intensely to perfect our moral, religious, and apostolic life.

Of the various aims of study laid out by Saint Bernard, only the last two are worthy of us: *ut aedificentur, et prudentia est; ut aedificent, et hoc caritas est* (“that they might be edified, and that is prudence; that they might edify, and that is charity”). Therefore, prudence now guides us in calling to mind and recognising what we must do *ut aedificemur* (“that we might be edified”), to be made holy. Only when we have provided for our own holiness can we be successful in making others holy. More precisely, if we want our apostolate among young people to be fruitful, our studies must help us acquire an *interior life*.

In his book *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Dom Chautard writes appropriately:

To live with oneself, within oneself, to desire self-control, and not allow oneself to be dominated by external things; to reduce the imagination, feelings, and even the intelligence and memory to the position of servants of the will and to make this will conform without ceasing, with the will of God: all this is a program that is less and less welcome to a century of excitement that has seen the birth of a new ideal: the love of action for action's sake.

... business, family problems, health, good reputation, patriotism, the honor of one's congregation, and the pretended glory of God, all vie with one another in preventing us from living *within ourselves*. This

²⁴ From the circular letter “Don Bosco, model of the Salesian priest” (19 March 1921), in LC, pp. 388-433 at 401-405, 418-421.

sort of frenzy for exterior life finally succeeds in gaining over us an attraction which we can no longer resist.²⁵

I do not intend here to speak of the need for the interior life. Allow me, however, to mention the most important things for the firm formation of our moral and religious life as Salesian priests, to animate me and you to put them into practice. In this formation, my dear sons, we must first always have clear before our minds the purpose of our life, which is only the glory of God through our holiness and salvation.

The vision of our end must then be combined with the supernatural esteem of our priestly vocation, and the constant awareness of the serious duty that it imposes on us to serve souls so as to win them for God, to be mediators between God and humanity, redeemers and sanctifiers in union with Jesus Christ, eternal priest.

Let us not forget, further, that we must reach this essential goal of the priesthood in the obedience assigned to us by our superiors and according to the measure of our talents and the graces we have received. There is no need to accomplish spectacular works or heroic acts of virtue that are not imposed on us by our state. It is enough that we apply ourselves to living and acting in obedience, with a spirit of perfect conformity to God's wishes and an intimate union with Jesus Christ, carrying out in the best possible way all our ordinary actions, by our intention raising even what is smallest and most indifferent to the level of meritorious work for eternal life.

Let us beware, however, of the quite common, very pernicious error of stopping at this practice of ordinary virtues and this fight against evil inclinations, without uniting to our practice a lively desire for an ever higher perfection and the constant effort to achieve it.

The inertia of stopping there usually induces spiritual laziness and even a false idea of what our vocation demands. It is not enough to aim at minimal virtue, a level of morality sufficient only to keep one's soul in sanctifying grace, a mediocre observance of the general norms of priestly life common to all secular priests. Our vocation obliges us not only to strive for holiness: *Haec est enim voluntas Dei, sanctificatio vestra* ("This is the will of God, your sanctification") (1Thes 4:3): *ut essemus sancti et immaculati* ("that we should be holy and blameless") (Eph 1:4), but also to acquire it as perfectly as possible, with horror for every evil and with

²⁵ Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, trans. A monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani (Trappist, Ky., 1946), p. 22.

love for every good, since, as Saint Thomas says, holiness *amovet a malo, facit operari bonum, et disponit ad perfectum* (“inclines us away from evil, causes us to do good, and disposes us towards perfection”).

We have one of the most powerful aids to this work of our holiness in the Constitutions that our Venerable Founder gave us. The Salesian priest who meditates deeply on the Constitutions and then strives to practise them exactly can in a short time rise to perfect union with God, to that union which is the essence of holiness, which Don Bosco practised without interruption, notwithstanding his manifold tasks.

The Rule, however, determines only the general lines regarding our holiness. So it is necessary to integrate and give life to it with genuine Salesian tradition, a tradition we find contained in the Regulations, in the early general chapter deliberations, in the letters and monthly circulars of the major superiors, and in the totality of little particulars and special customs that are handed down orally and are preserved in the motherhouse [the Valdocco Oratory].

We must remain as Don Bosco wanted. We would change the profile that he imprinted on our Pious Society if in our zeal for exterior holiness we should wish to give our life a multiplicity of devotional practices, which, although excellent for other institutes, tend to alter the character of the intimate, plain spirituality that Don Bosco made his own.

It would be worse, though, if one went to the opposite extreme, and, misinterpreting the Founder’s intentions, held that to be his followers it is enough to have a passion for young people and a liking for schools and a noisy life amid a crowd of youngsters. ...

Next to the sacrament of God’s mercy, and almost as a complement to it, both as a remedy and as a comfort amid the multiple difficulties that acquiring religious perfection offers, there is *spiritual direction*; and my dear priests, I intend to speak briefly about it to you as well.

Spiritual direction is the combination of advice and theoretical and practical norms which a wise person experienced in the ways of the spirit gives to a soul who wishes to make progress in the way of perfection.

In the ancient monasteries, this direction consisted of a single usage along with the *rendiconto*: the religious manifested his whole conscience to the superior with filial trust, and he was directed in both the *external and internal forums*.

The Church, however, in order to protect freedom of conscience, has established that the *rendiconto* deals only with external things, as our Constitutions also expressly advise – but not excluding that the religious

can of his free will open himself up entirely with his superior. Therefore, anyone who has complete confidence in his superior and feels he can reveal even the most intimate things of his soul, *may do so*, from which he will draw invaluable benefits.

Those who prefer to limit their monthly *rendiconto* (which no one may ever fail to make each month) to external things should remember that spiritual direction is indispensable even for priests, and therefore should ensure that they receive it from the one who inspires in him the greatest trust.

Naturally, the confessor, being not only a judge but also a doctor and teacher, friend and father, knowing more than any other our spiritual qualities and the whole of our lives, can, in the sacrament or outside it, make himself our guide in the path of religious perfection, all the more so since, in our case, he himself is bound to pursue the same perfection and live the same religious spirit.

I have said, my dear sons, that spiritual direction is indispensable to us, even priests. The priesthood and religious profession give us a greater obligation in this, since, as priests and religious, we are bound to a higher perfection than one might demand of Christian laity.

In fact, without a solid spiritual direction, it is almost impossible to become perfect. This is the unanimous opinion of the Fathers and Doctors of Holy Church, and of a great many spiritual men and women who flourished over the Christian centuries. Those who rely on their own judgement, St. John Cassian asserts, will never come to perfection and cannot escape the snares of the devil (*Conf. II, 14, 15*).

And Saint Vincent Ferrer: “Our Lord, without whom we can do nothing, will never grant his grace to one who has available to him someone capable of instructing and directing him, and disregards this powerful means of holiness, believing that he is sufficient by himself and able with his own strength to seek and find the things that are useful to him for the perfection of his soul.”

Spiritual direction is the route securely guiding people to the top of the mysterious ladder where the Lord is found. It is the path that the saints have travelled: *hanc viam tenuerunt omnes sancti* (“All the saints have followed this path”). Only a few privileged souls, without fault on their part left without a spiritual director, were guided without mediation by God with personal enlightenment; but this is the exception, not the rule. (Ferrer, *De vit. sp.*, II, I)

First, says Saint Gregory the Great, it is necessary to apply oneself to

finding a good guide and master (*Lib. de Virg.*, ch. 13). “It is great pride”, continues Saint Basil, “to believe that one does not need advice.” (*In Ch. I, Isaiah*) “They were badly deluded”, exclaims Saint John Climacus, “who, trusting themselves, believed that they had no need of a guide.” (*I Grado*, ch. 2) “Those who presume to be their own teachers and guides”, says Saint Bernard, “make themselves disciples of a fool.” (*Epist.* 87)

In short, my dear priests, all spiritual writers speak to us in a single voice, agreeing on the necessity of spiritual direction. If we want to go deeper into the spirit of our Rules, spiritual direction is also promoted by Article 18, where we are invited to manifest to our superiors, simply and spontaneously, the external infidelities committed against the Constitutions, as well as our progress in virtue, so that we can receive advice and comfort from them, and if need be, also suitable admonitions. There is no better promotion of spiritual direction than that!

No other words are needed to show the need for this. Still, it is helpful to note that when we hear that someone has left the religious life he had professed, while we mourn such a great misfortune and pray for God’s mercy on the unhappy man, we must think that such mishap surely would not have occurred had he entrusted himself to a good spiritual director and followed his advice and exhortations.

But spiritual direction, my dear priests, must not be something occasional and changeable; rather, a single, constant system of conduct, both theoretical and practical, dedicated to guiding us towards holiness.

The task of the spiritual director is to let us know what God wants from us, the virtues that we must practise, the means to which we must resort, the dangers against which we must guard in order not to fail in our Salesian vocation.

It is he who must stir us when we are relaxed and calm us in any indiscreet passions. It is he who must restrain our imagination and point out to us the right balance in the practice of virtue, the choice of our reading, our relations with our neighbour, the true nature of temptations, and the most appropriate weapons to combat them.

It is he who must teach us the best means of rooting out our defects and acquiring virtues; who must evaluate our fidelity to our practices of piety, the observance of the rules, and the fulfilment of the duties inherent in our vocation. Now we cannot have these things unless we have a stable guide who is thoroughly filled with the Salesian spirit.

Our patron Saint Francis of Sales says most beautiful things about the spiritual director, many of which apply to us. Among other things, in the

Introduction to a Devout Life (bk. I, ch. 4), he says: “Do not consider him a mere man; place not your confidence in his human learning, but in God, whose minister he is and who speaks to you through him; putting in his heart and in his mouth whatever shall be necessary for your happiness. . . . Open your heart to him with all sincerity and faithfulness, manifesting clearly and explicitly the state of your conscience without fiction or dissimulation. By this, your good actions will be examined and approved; your evil ones corrected and remedied; you will be comforted and strengthened in your afflictions and be kept regularly in consolations.”²⁶

15. Vocations and Salesian spirit²⁷

The more one studies the life of Don Bosco, the more freshly the genius of his creation emerges. Seeing the fierce hatred that seethed in his day against our holy religion, and especially against the religious orders and congregations that the revolution was suppressing with wicked laws even in states until then Catholic; and realising that it would not be possible for him to create a new religious family if he modelled it on those already suppressed – he set aside what was purely external form and began his Society with what was strictly necessary for religious perfection.

He replaced the traditional terminology of the congregations of the former age with common, less conspicuous names. His needed only to be a pious society of people dedicated to the education of poor and marginalized youth. Before the civil law, the members had to preserve radical control of their goods, while being bound by vow to the practice of the evangelical counsels, and therefore in practice really poor, unable to carry out any act of ownership without permission. They had to combine the spirit of personal initiative with due submission to the superior. And through this spirit, our Society shows that attractive modernity that enables it to carry out the good demanded by the needs of times and places. Finally, despite having said goodbye to relatives, friends, and the world to follow Jesus Christ, this detachment should not impose a

²⁶ *Introduction to a Devout Life*, ed. by J.M. Lelen (New York: Catholic Book, 1952), p. 33.

²⁷ From the circular letter “On vocations” (15 May 1921), in LC, pp. 439-499, at 457-460, 464-469.

violent separation that almost forces the members to break the bonds of nature and every external relationship, beautifully enabling the will to be perfectly detached from everything and everyone, without requiring material separation.

His entire educational system comes down to forming the will so that one can fulfil his duty and practise the evangelical counsels to a heroic degree, not out of human fear, not by outward coercion, but freely out of love.

His institution is a family formed solely of brothers who have accepted the same duties and rights with the most perfect freedom of choice and with a love for such a way of life.

For this reason, he wanted completely to exclude from his houses laws and disciplinary arrangements that would in any manner limit the freedom that sons enjoy in a family. Each one had to observe the schedule and the rule without the constraint of external force, but spontaneously by the free choice of his own will.

Now this family spirit, in which the authority of the superiors does not feel like a military imposition, and filial love moves the will of the members to curb even their simple desires – this family spirit is the most fertile soil for vocations. Therefore, my dear confreres, we must jealously preserve it and encourage it to grow.

In talking with friends, acquaintances, and strangers, let us make this spirit of ours shine in all its light, with both an ever jovial and cheerful manner and by extolling the happiness of our state of life whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Thus, almost without realising it, we will expand the ground for vocations, because without being aware of it not a few will be encouraged to put aside their prejudices about religious life, and perhaps they may occasionally praise our kind of life, or – may it be so – even advise it to someone who is still doubtful about choosing this state of life. Moreover, is this not indirectly a vocations apostolate?

Above all, my dear confreres, we must preserve this family spirit in the festive oratories, the houses, the schools, and the hospices in which we work, because only where this spirit reigns can vocations flourish.

Therefore, let us engender that family spirit around us which our good Father so warmly and effectively described to us in his letter from Rome of 10 May 1884, which is the most authentic commentary on his Preventive System.

Authentic apostles of vocations act like the sculptor. Before getting

down to the project he has in mind, he searches personally for the finest block of marble and then has it transported to his studio to work on it with loving intelligence.

During these years of my rectorship, I have witnessed with joy the great youthful movement of the students and past pupils of our institutes. And I have several times given heartfelt thanks to the Lord and to our powerful Help of Christians for this marvellous abundance of gallant young men, enthusiastically gathered under the banner that brings to every country in the world our good Father's *Da mihi animas!*

Whenever I have found myself in our houses surrounded by a joyful flock of pupils and observed their fine, innocent faces which clearly indicated the lovely gifts with which they were endowed, I was spontaneously reminded that many of them would consecrate themselves to the Lord if they were well guided and helped to choose what the Lord called "the better part." (*Luke 10:42*)

In the memorable gatherings of past pupils, sparkling with so many beautiful qualities of mind and heart in the fullness of their maturity, I have thought also that perhaps very many of them would have embraced the career of the apostolate of souls if they had been well prepared and cultivated by their superiors and teachers.

My good confreres, these things are not simple assumptions and pious wishes. It is a fact that when the soil, despite being well prepared and fertilised, does not bear fruit, the fault is to be laid on the farmer, who either did not sow, or did not scatter the seed well, or did not watch its growth carefully and see that it was not eaten by birds or choked by weeds.

Of the huge crowd of young people whom Providence sends to our houses, very numerous are those who offer soil well suited to produce the flower of the priestly-religious vocation, that is, who have special qualities for the state of perfection. But, as I said above, they need someone who knows how to give them suitable direction and guidance. And this we must do if we are to show ourselves to be loving sons of Holy Church and of our Congregation.

So, who are the young souls who offer more likely soil for vocations? My dear confreres, we must set our eyes, as did our Venerable Father, a real specialist, upon those who have a particular attraction for purity.

I am not talking about that negative, unconscious purity which is due solely to a balanced and calm temperament, or to a fortunate but short-lived ignorance of certain mysteries of life; but about a positive, conscious, and deliberate purity of the adolescent who already knows or at least begins to

suspect the existence and nature of those pleasures, who perhaps already feels his lower nature pulled towards them and who nevertheless in his reason, in his heart, in his soul feels a disdain, a disgust for such things, and therefore a desire, a need, to keep away from them, to shield his eyes, his imagination, and his life from any contaminating air.

Another characteristic that the young man must have in order to be fertile soil for vocation is that lofty feeling which hates whatever is mediocre, common, and vulgar, and yearns for great things; whom earthly goods and honours cause to say, eyes shining with noble pride: *Excelsior! Ad maiora natus sum!* (“Higher! I was born for greater things!”)

Evidently, the priestly-religious state cannot but have powerful attractions for these young men, because it is a state superior to any other even from a purely human point of view. But such high-mindedness is mostly only embryonic in them, and it is up to us to develop it through education.

Here, my dear confreres, all the skill of the Salesian educator and the goodness of the Preventive System must mainly be shown. This system – which is our most precious legacy – when it is interpreted correctly and applied well, will let us easily distinguish the various characteristics of our young people, and will enable us to improve them all, while raising to greater perfection those who feel called to higher things.

Let me remind you of what I already said when I tried to describe Don Bosco as our model in educating and sanctifying youth. In him we can also find the rule for what we must do to form our young people after his own fatherly example.

By practising our system we will not allow the already good characteristics of nature and family education to be ruined, watching lest their more earthly companions draw them to their ways of thinking, their tastes, their plans for the future; in short, to nothing base, nor even common, such as aspirations to fortune, luxury, well-being, and comfort, to vulgar pleasures, successes, and worldly vanities.

Let us gently force them to raise their sights towards a higher ideal, to goodness and virtue, to the difficult but so much sweeter joys that come with duty accomplished, one’s conscience at peace, towards a serious, useful, and worthy life.

From time to time in school, in talks, in Good Nights, in recreation, let us speak enthusiastically about these noble ideals. And if sometimes in familiar chats during recreation someone should show concerns of self-love or self-interest, let us not fail to condemn such concerns openly

by saying: “This is base, it is petty, it is common, it is not worthy of a generous heart.” It is above all in these chats that we can find opportunity to repeat in a thousand different ways the holy word, *Sursum corda!* (“Lift up your hearts!”)

In the first volumes of our good Father’s life story [*The Biographical Memoirs*], we can find and lovingly read a treasure trove of norms and examples for the practical exercise of this apostolate, wonderfully fruitful of excellent vocations.

Let us treasure all these examples, my beloved confreres, bearing in mind, however, something very important for us, and it is that for Don Bosco, the biggest *birichini* [rascals], as he used to call them, offer good soil for vocations – that is, boys who are restless and lively but have burning hearts so full that they feel the need to surpass themselves, to love, and consequently to give, then to give themselves, and finally to sacrifice themselves totally for the good of others.

His best conquests were among boys of this nature. Many still living can bear true witness to this, and if they should put down on paper the memories of their early years and the genesis of their vocations, how much more vividly would stand out Don Bosco’s art in raising their hearts to desire and pursue perfection!

Let us, too, put all our effort into seeking such young people who have warm and generous hearts: a word, a gesture, an act of kindness or charity on behalf of some companion may be the first manifestation. Because we have encouraged them with wise love, one day or another they will confide in us a hint of their aspiration for the priestly-religious life; the thought will come to them gradually that only in that vocation will they fully satisfy the need they feel to give and sacrifice themselves for others.

I said, “encouraging them with love”, since to our work this is indispensable, both in relentlessly fighting selfishness in them, correcting every little manifestation of it, and in getting them used to performing frequent little acts of generosity, showing them, even with just a simple glance, that we are happy about that and approve of them.

Let us encourage them to give generously to their companions and to the poor, but mainly to give themselves, i.e., to be of active service and engage in a lot of activity for good. Let us make them love study and work as the surest way to achieve good quickly.

Let us begin with the small tasks of the various sodalities, monitoring recreation and games; among others, these are means of doing some good for their companions. Let us encourage them to give advice, to protest

loudly against bad conversations, to spread good morale and devotion in every way, etc.

If in order to give, it will be necessary to deprive oneself, and if to give themselves and to act will require inconvenience, effort, making one overcome his shyness and human respect, and sometimes also to be exposed even to the mockery and scorn of others, then their formation will be better and surer.

Though they may love purity, high-mindedness, and the most generous self-denial, our young people will never be fertile ground for vocations if they do not possess a profoundly supernatural spirit.

We know that all our work as educators must aim, in Don Bosco's footsteps, to form convinced, practising Christians, which we cannot achieve without instilling deeply into them the supernatural. And this spirit is even more necessary in the young people provided by the Lord with the qualities needed for the apostolate of souls.

May it therefore be our effort to give them supernatural ideas: let us imbue their minds with the great truths of the faith, especially those that most closely concern the direction of our life. These ideas are the greatness of God; his blessings and the other multiple claims that give him the absolute right to use us for his service; his infinite love; the sweetness of giving oneself entirely to him; the certainty of death, combined with the uncertainty of its hour and of the divine judgement that will forever determine our happy or unhappy fate; the vanity and fragility of earthly things; the vital importance of the salvation of souls; the infinite malice of sin; the immense excellence of grace; the inestimable value of the soul; the dignity and merits of human efforts to save oneself; the need to follow Jesus as closely as possible.

Let us take suitable opportunities to instil deeply into the souls of our young people these supreme truths, doing so in a natural and persuasive way, more by the luminous example of our faith than by talking.

In *The Companion of Youth*, our Venerable Father suggests that we train them to make a short daily reading in the form of a meditation. How many beautiful, precious readings and reflections he wrote in the first years of his apostolate among young people! In them, he reveals all his ardent love and his educational method entirely inspired toward the supernatural!

With supernatural ideas let us arouse in them similar feelings: a powerful fear of God (Don Bosco's *God sees you!* was so effective!), fear tempered, however, by child-like piety; the horror of all that can offend God, the fear of hell, a keen desire for paradise; contempt for the world, its pleasures, its

pomp, its wisdom, and its spirit.

Let us rouse them, above all, to a manly yet tender love towards our Lord Jesus Christ, the Jesus of the manger, of Calvary, of the Eucharist; to study in the holy Gospel his life, and his sweet, sublime features; to visit him in the tabernacle; to unite themselves to him frequently, every day even, in Holy Communion, at least spiritually; to love Holy Church joyously so that their minds gradually come to learn the wonderful glories of her history, of her magnificent works, of her saints.

More, we must cause supernatural ideas and sentiments to flourish in the young – in a measure compatible with their age – the supernatural virtues: charity, humility, that mortification whose daily exercise is the exact observance of the regulations, self-denial, zeal for souls.

To acquire these virtues, and above all to correct defects – which is the indispensable condition for virtue – let us teach our young people to handle the powerful weapons of the general and particular examen. Thus, we will imperceptibly form in them supernatural tastes for prayer, the word of God, spiritual reading, and the Church's rituals; and they will desire them and be happy to serve Mass every time they are offered the opportunity.

Read, read, my dear confreres, those true jewels that are the biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, Francis Besucco, Louis Colle, and you find that Don Bosco, to get these budding flowers of holiness to grow around him, did precisely what I just told you.

Nor must you think that this supernatural formation of our young people is the sole responsibility of the director, the catechist, the confessor: no, no, it requires the help of everyone, and therefore also that of teachers and shop masters, on whom perhaps it sometimes depends to a greater extent, since they more than anyone else are in contact with the youths.

Teachers, professors, shop masters, and assistants, if they live up to their mission and know how to take advantage of the opportunities they have continually better than anyone else, can infuse the supernatural first into the minds, then into the hearts and interior lives of their pupils.

The Salesian teacher must be well convinced of the need to give his pupils a solid religious instruction; and history, literature, philosophy, the sciences, mathematics, geography, etc., always offer him the chance to work in, at least indirectly, some religious truths.

This is one of the key points of our educational system: if we neglect it, inevitably vocations in our institutions will decrease.

16. Sowers of vocations²⁸

Beloved confreres, if we understand our educational mission well, as Don Bosco wishes, we cannot be content to prepare the fertile soil for vocations, as I have outlined to you so far. We must also sow them and lovingly cultivate them.

First, *to sow them*, to make use of the means at our disposal, so that in that fertile soil the vocation really is born and takes shape. And these means are prayer, exhortations, ascetical readings, the thousand devout activities of which Don Bosco was an incomparable master. “The Salesians will have many vocations through their exemplary conduct”, the mysterious personage of his dream told him.²⁹ So to give birth to numerous vocations among us, we must order our conduct, our entire life, toward the purpose of our Pious Society, which is *to acquire perfection in the exercise of every work of spiritual and material charity towards the young, especially the poorest, and also the education of young clergy.*

Why ever did Don Bosco, in the first article [of the Constitutions], *The purpose of the Salesian Society*, want to specify that members should also deal with the education of young clergy? Not because we should be directly concerned with diocesan seminaries – which article 77 even forbids us to do without the express agreement of the Holy See in individual cases – but because we take *greatest care to cultivate the piety and vocation of those who show themselves especially commendable in study and piety.* (article 5)

The Venerable Don Bosco made the numerous vocations he was forming very dependent on prayer. If we now lack vocations, who knows whether it is not because we do not pray well?

Often, even we pray mechanically, out of habit, without reflection; so how can our prayers achieve their purpose? Therefore, let us put thoughtful intention into our prayers, joined with the greatest possible fervour, so that we will experience their powerful effect on the heart of God.

To these prayers for vocations, let us unite the spirit of mortification because God’s generosity is proportioned to our desires and supplications. Desires consisting of words alone cost little and are worth less. But those which make us strong against ourselves, which make us overcome our aversions, resist our evil inclinations, carry out unpleasant duties, or put up

²⁸ From the circular letter “On vocations” (15 May 1921), in LC, pp. 439-499, at 469-473.

²⁹ Editor’s note: The Dream of St. Francis de Sales: BM XIV, 88-90.

with the defects of our neighbour show God that our aspirations are really alive, and more strongly incline him to hear us.

I do not mean to say that we should do special penances in order to obtain vocations. Our diligent labour and regular observance are already no little mortification in themselves. But certainly those good confreres did greatly meritorious and efficacious work who were unable to do anything else but imitate the example of our Venerable Father. When he needed some very important grace, he imposed special austerities on himself, thus obtaining his intention.

Mortified souls have always exercised an extraordinary influence on God's heart. Therefore, do not mind my assertion that the Salesian who is humble, hidden, and continually intent on his duty – and who from time to time mortifies himself courageously to obtain vocations to our Pious Society – succeeds in arousing the heart of God without even realising it.

But prayers and mortifications would be worth little without the exemplary conduct and personal holiness of every single Salesian. It is an undeniable fact, my beloved sons, that vocations in religious communities are in direct proportion to the fervour and holiness of their members.

Our good Father always inculcated in us this truth through his exhortations, and even more, through the practical example of his holiness, which made vocations flourish everywhere, causing generous hearts to follow him on the rough road that he walked.³⁰

In the days of my youth, we considered it a great honour to be counted among his sons, and we had the firm will to consecrate ourselves entirely to the Lord, not just half-heartedly, not only for temporal advantages, but for the joy of being able like him to lead a whole life of sacrifice, even if it appeared to be ordinary and common.

Our Father's holiness was the efficacious cause of the vocation of all his first sons. We wanted to follow him, because from him emanated a secret virtue that made our hearts more ardent, our spirits more enlightened, our passions calmer, spurring us on at the same time to imitate him in everything.

This secret virtue habitually shone from his serene, ever smiling face and from his entire person, so that we saw him as if already transfigured in God and in full possession of that divine peace and superhuman courage that are proper to the saints; whence our hearts were burning with the

³⁰ Editor's note: Possibly an allusion to the Dream of Roses and Thorns: BM III, 25-27.

desire to be like him and with him, at the cost of any sacrifice.

Well, my dear confreres, with the exact observance of the Rules, with the exercise of the most solid virtues, with love for our vocation, with fraternal charity, with gospel intimacy, and with uninterrupted union with God, we too can acquire this secret virtue of the holiness of our Venerable Father and like him can arouse numerous vocations among us.

Our lifestyle, then, must be so attractive that our young people crave its genial activities, its steady joy. Don Bosco always wanted us cheerful, even amid the greatest labours and the harrowing unpleasantness, even amid privations and sacrifices.

Furthermore, let us often talk about Salesian life, highlighting its countless advantages, the multiple variety of its occupations, adapted to all temperaments and different characters; the large number of our institutes and houses, so that, when one can no longer work fruitfully in one place, he can easily be transferred elsewhere to continue to spend himself usefully; the beauty of our apostolate and the sweetness of spirit that animates it; the modernity and extent of our works.

I am sure, then, that in the presence of his students, no Salesian will ever want to show that he is discontented in his vocation, or to discredit in any way the Congregation that numbers him among her sons.

Everyone who met Father Paul Albera during different periods of his life found him to be a very affable person. Even in old age he retained his youthful face with its permanent smile – only his hair had turned white. His clear eyes looked upon his interlocutors with the kindness and brightness of a child. His slow and intense way of speaking penetrated the heart. He was frail and delicate of health.

When he reflected upon himself, he would become melancholy. He felt inadequate and lacking in the qualities necessary to be Don Bosco's successor, and thought himself far from the perfection required of a religious. In his relations with others, instead, there appeared all the amiability, delicacy and goodness of his humanity. He was gifted with a profound ability to listen and had the gift of discernment.

Looking at his actions, however, and his tireless journeys, his fervent apostolate and the many houses he founded, there appears a person who is completely different and even passionate. It would be unfair to this lovable and indulgent Salesian not to remember his firm, solid and tenacious temperament. He knew how to guide the Salesian Society with clarity of vision and determination in one of the most difficult periods of its history.

The present volume by Aldo Giraudò is divided into three parts. The first is a brief biography of Paul Albera, Don Bosco's second successor. The second part presents the key points of his spiritual teaching. The third part contains an anthology of his most significant writings drawn from his circular letters to his Salesian confreres.