

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

«He summoned those He wanted and they came to Him» (Mk 3,13)

ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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Rome, 25 March 2009
Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord

Dear Confreres,

In these past three months, after the last letter I wrote to you there have been some events very significant for the life of the Congregation. In addition to the work of the General Council in the winter plenary session of 2008-2009, we have had the celebration of the International Congress on the “Preventive System and Human Rights,” the Spirituality Days of the Salesian Family and in a more limited but no less important context, my visit to three of the Provinces in southern India: Chennai, Tiruchy and Bangalore.

Through ANS you have been promptly and extensively informed so I will make no further comment. I am also sure that those from the Provinces who attended the first two events will have informed the confreres in their own Provinces about what took place, the reflections made and the proposals and guidelines which emerged.

I am pleased to be able to be in touch with you once again and this on the day of the Annunciation of the Lord, which shows us that our life is vocation. It is very enlightening to notice how in the Scriptures the way of being and the significant relationships of a person are defined by his condition as a creature, which does not indicate inferiority or dependence but gratuitous and creative love on God’s part. This is

due to the fact that man does not have in himself the reason for his existence nor for his own fulfilment. It is all gift.

It finds its place in a relationship with God to be responded to. His life has no meaning outside such a relationship. The other-one he perceives and vaguely desires is the absolute, not a foreign and abstract absolute but the source of his life who is calling him to himself. The whole history of the choice of the people of God and of individual vocations needs to be seen in these terms: the loving initiative of God, man's place in his presence, the unfolding of life as an invitation and a response, as an appeal that is accepted. The category of being a creature is therefore linked to that of someone in a dialogue with God: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word," Mary replies to the Angel. The gift of life contains a plan: this gradually unfolds in a dialogue with oneself, with history, with God, and demands a personal response. It is this which determines man's place in relation to the world and to all the creatures within it.

These cannot satisfy his desires and therefore man is not submissive to them. The key to this life situation is the alliance between God and his people. This is the renewed and gratuitous choice God makes. Man has to become aware of it and take it up as his plan of life, guided by the Word which challenges him and forces him to choose.

The Christian vocation therefore is not an optional extra, something tagged on externally leading to his fulfilment as a man. Rather it is purely and simply the defining element, the indispensable condition for his authenticity and completeness, the satisfaction of his most radical needs - those which are an essential part of his being a creature. In the same way, freely entering into the dynamics of the Kingdom to which Jesus invites the disciples is the only way of living that corresponds to man's destiny in this world and the next. In this way life is lived entirely as a gift, a call, a plan.

Dear Confreres, I wanted to begin this letter taking my cue from the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, almost by way of a commentary on the verse from Mark's Gospel which I have put in the title of this letter. It is a text which in scarcely a single verse in very schematic form reports the decision Jesus has reached to call a group of men to stay with Him and to make sharers in his own mission on behalf of mankind.

In the episode, central to Mark's account since it records the foundation of the group of the Twelve, Jesus is already the missionary of the kingdom of God in the villages of Galilee; unlike the first call which was a pressing invitation given to two sets of brothers (cf. *Mk* 1,17.20), this is a straightforward command the result of a personal decision: Jesus calls those whom he wants and he calls them to be with him, on the mountain; in order to go to him "and be his companions" (*Mk* 3,14) they have to leave the crowd and follow him. The group is formed with very precise tasks: to be with him so as then to be sent by him. The twelve therefore are among those first called whom he wants to be always with him: living with him is their first occupation, then will come the mission. For the apostle living together comes before the mission: only the companions of Jesus, his close friends, will be his representatives. Jesus does not share his mission with someone who has not shared his life (cf. *Acts* 1,21-22).

It seems to me that this is an introduction which helps us to understand well the significance and the consequences of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Salesian Congregation. "In fact before the authorised foundation there was the real foundation of his Society which bears the date of the period in which he laid the foundations of his tiny Oratory of St. Francis of Sales. On this point his idea never changes nor for that matter that of his first collaborators."¹

What Don Bosco did calling together a group of his boys from the Oratory at Valdocco and their response is indeed a real gospel experience of considerable symbolic

¹ F. DESRAMAUT, 'Don Bosco fondatore', in M. MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco Fondatore della Famiglia Salesiana*. Atti del Simposio (Roma, 22-26 gennaio 1989), p. 125.

and paradigmatic significance: like Jesus, Don Bosco called some youths who were close to him to share with them his life, dreams and mission; like Jesus, Don Bosco found his co-workers among those near to him; being with him, even though they were still so young, was the natural basis for being invited.

1. “AN ACT OF GREAT SIGNIFICANCE”²

Dear confreres, I should very much like this jubilee year to bring us to praise and thank the Lord who has been so very good and generous to us, and who urges us to deeply renew our life and mission as we recall once again what happened on that 18 December 1859, the day on which Don Bosco, in the intimacy of his room began what would come to be called the Society of St. Francis of Sales, bringing to life a project he had nurtured in his heart for so long,³ since 1841 – the year of his ordination and of his going to the Ecclesiastical College – as he was himself to write on a number of occasions.⁴ The Congregation was not founded to begin a work but to maintain and develop one; and it began among those young men to whom Don Bosco was dedicated and with them.

We have a fine history to remember, and in recounting it, we have a significant history still to be accomplished.

1.1 A start is made in the name of Our Lady

On 8 December 1859 at Don Bosco’s Oratory in Valdocco, the feast of Mary Immaculate was celebrated with great solemnity. The 184 boys who lived as boarders in Don Bosco’s House were the soul of the thousand boys in the festive oratory who crowded into the courtyards and the surrounding fields. They had sung, prayed and received Communion during Don Bosco’s Mass. Then, having eaten the plentiful feastday breakfast, they noisily joined in a hundred games, they came together in groups for catechism. Many of them had managed to talk to Don Bosco about their work, their families, their problems, their future.

In the evening after the tuneful and peaceful songs of “till we meet again,” in the usual ‘Good night’ Don Bosco, tired but radiant, thanked Our Lady and everyone for the splendid day. Then to the boarders and their assistants-leaders (who as was then the custom wore the clerical habit) he made a short announcement which made the hearts of a score of them beat faster. “That evening Don Bosco announced that the next day he would hold a special conference in his room after the boys had retired to bed. Those concerned – priests, clerics and laymen who shared Don Bosco’s work at the Oratory and enjoyed his intimacy – understood that they were invited to attend and sensed that this meeting was to be an important one.”⁵

² F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1996), p. 571.

³ Already in 1850 “Don Bosco was not losing sight of the religious congregation he was destined to found... Occasionally he would speak about the advantages of community life... But his approach to this topic was always indirect, he would not specifically allude to the religious life.” (BM IV pp. 294).

⁴ “Our Society really began in 1841” (BM X p. 298; cf. BM VIII p. 346). His ‘Memorandum regarding the Pious Society of St. Francis of Sales, on 23 February 1874’, begins: “This Pious Society has existed for 33 years,” cf. P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per i giovani: L’ “Oratorio”. Una “Congregazione degli oratori”*. Documenti (Roma: LAS, 1988) p. 147.

⁵ BM VI p.180. Cf. *Documenti* VII p. 35.

On the evening of the 9th, after the usual busy day of prayer-study-work-joy, nineteen young people crowded into Don Bosco's room. The chronicle of Fr Lemoyne and the minutes written by the biographer A. Amadei, record that Don Bosco first invoked the light of the Holy Spirit and the assistance of Our Blessed Lady, then he briefly summarised what he had told everyone in previous talks.

Then "visibly moved he declared that the time had come to start that congregation which he had long been planning and for which he had been mainly working. He disclosed that Pius IX had praised his resolve and encouraged him to go ahead and that in fact this congregation already existed through the observance of the traditional Oratory rules, even though they were not binding in conscience and that the large majority of them already belonged to it at least in spirit, and a few by promise or temporary vows. Therefore the moment had come to state whether or not they wished to join the Pious Society, which would be named – or would continue to be named – after Saint Francis of Sales".⁶

In this congregation, which would be the main support of the Oratory, only those would be enrolled who after serious reflection had the intention of consecrating themselves to God, in due time making the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, so as to dedicate their lives to youth abandoned and in danger. "Therefore to the next conference only those should come who intend to join."⁷ Don Bosco's plan arising from the urgent need to have collaborators he could rely on, did not start from nothing; it was the next step in a process of education that had been going ahead well for about a decade and which from the previous year was following a written project the first *Salesian Constitutions* of 1858.⁸ In spite of that, Fr Lemoyne adds Don Bosco "was giving them all a week's time to reflect and meditate on this important decision with God," and "the meeting broke up in profound silence."⁹

1.2 Days of waiting

The following days appeared to be filled with the ordinary work, but in the hearts and minds of those twenty people there were also indications of an unusual tension.

The first to pray hard and to wait was Don Bosco. For a number of years he had discretely invited to stay with him the best of his boys, in whom he clearly saw God's call. Many gave him their promise; but then had second thoughts. Fr Lemoyne writes: "We ourselves heard Don Bosco say. "No one can realize what hardships I went through in the first twenty years or so of the Oratory because of rebuffs, antagonism, discouragement, apprehensions, disappointments, aggravation and ingratitude. Sometimes boys promised to stay and help me only so that they would be able to continue their studies comfortably. Later they had a thousand reasons for not keeping their promises. After many other fruitless attempts, we finally had eight boys don the cassock; shortly afterwards they all left the Oratory. There were even some who on the very day of their ordination or on the evening after their first Mass, told me frankly that life in the Oratory was not for them, and then left."¹⁰

The Canon and parish priest Giacinto Ballezio, a pupil of Don Bosco and the tenth witness at his process of beatification, under oath declared: "He was quite sure he had achieved his goal when he saw his boys entering the diocesan seminary or serving God in a parish ... He showed affection and pleasure at their choice. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that many defections were a very bitter disappointment to him. He had been

⁶ A. AMADEI, *Un altro Don Bosco. Il servo di Dio Don Rua* (Torino: SEI, 1934) p. 73.

⁷ A. AMADEI, o.c. p. 73.

⁸ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales (1858-1875)*. Testi critici a cura di F. MOTTO (Roma: LAS, 1982).

⁹ BM VI p. 181-181.

¹⁰ BM V pp. 262.

particularly generous to these boys and had made unusual financial sacrifices through the years to help them get their degrees with at least a tacit agreement... But he did not complain.”¹¹

In a different way, but praying and thinking equally hard were the nineteen who had to respond to Don Bosco’s invitation. The ‘Society’ in which Don Bosco was asking them to be enrolled, promising him ‘generous obedience’, was a religious family, a ‘congregation’, like those which had been closed down by the ‘Rattazzi Laws’ just four years earlier (29 May 1855). From the convents and religious houses had been expelled the ‘*frati*’ who the newspapers, with incessant ruthlessness, continued to call ‘half men’, ‘exploiters of modern society’, with the invitation to ‘stamp on them like lice’. Now Don Bosco, in order to keep his Oratory going, was asking these young men to join a religious family and be obedient to him, with the prospect (as time passed) of consecrating themselves to God with the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Some of them (privately, and in agreement with Don Bosco) had already made them some years before.

They were all very young and it was a question of putting one’s whole life on the line with one throw of the dice: trusting in Don Bosco; until that point they were only committed by a promise or a vow to stay with Don Bosco and help him in the work of the oratories. Some were quite shocked.. Fr Lemoyne writes: “More than one whispered: «Don Bosco wants to make monks of us all!»”.¹²

Joseph Buzzetti (27 years of age), was a young brick-layer from Caronno, one of Don Bosco’s very first boys. For him his whole world and his life was the Oratory. Don Bosco was everything for him: following his invitation, for a year he had even worn the clerical habit and he wouldn’t have minded becoming a priest. But “monk” no. He certainly didn’t want to do that. (He would become a Salesian only in 1877).

Michael Rua (22 years of age) had no doubts. Don Bosco had issued an invitation. For him, as always, it was a command. So much so that the next day he went to the Mission House to begin a retreat, and received the minor orders (11 December) and the subdiaconate (17 December).

John Cagliero (21 years of age) on the other hand had many doubts. Lemoyne writes (and Cagliero was very much alive in 1907, when Lemoyne published these words): “He paced up and down the portico for a long time various thoughts crossing his mind. Finally turning to a companion, he exclaimed: I am determined and always have been never to leave Don Bosco. Monk or not it’s all the same to me!” Later he wrote a note to Don Bosco declaring that he deferred completely to his advice and decision. Don Bosco, meeting him afterwards smilingly told him: ‘Come. This is your life!’¹³

1.3 The boys from the ‘black belt’

But Don Bosco was not asking them to wager their whole lives just for his sake. He was asking them to make the decision to consecrate their lives to God for “youth abandoned and in danger” who without help were being lost there under their own eyes, and who knows in how many other places in the world; “he saw in them the ideal workers he had dreamed about for the work of his constantly expanding oratories.”¹⁴

In those years the city of Turin was experiencing a turbulent expansion. In the northern part of the city a tightly packed “black belt” was being formed of overcrowded hovels full of the poorest immigrants. Larger and larger waves of poor peasant families and youngsters on their own were leaving the country-side seeking work and their fortune in the city, crowding into the shacks that sprouted among the swamps of the

¹¹ BM V p. 263-264.

¹² BM VI p. 181

¹³ BM VI p. 181.

¹⁴ R. ALBERDI, ‘Don Bosco fondatore dei salesiani’, in M. MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco Fondatore della Famiglia Salesiana*. Atti del Simposio (Roma, 22-26 gennaio 1989) p. 171.

Dora, where the sewage of the city, without a sewage system, overflowed. They were absorbed by the large construction sites in the area to the south, by the factories, spinning mills, tanneries, brick-works, building sites. However, not all the youngsters were up to the rigours of the work (most of them died before they were 18-19 years of age). They were also thrown out for not working hard enough and ended up on the streets. In the exhausting and often desperate search for survival they formed gangs of vagabonds, who lived by stealing from the market stalls, snatching house-wives purses, relieving the merchants of their fat wallets, in constant conflict with the police who chased them and as soon as they could threw them into prison.

To bring practical help to these boys (and to the girls and to the weak) in that 'black belt' four great Christians spread themselves out: Fr John Cocchi, Canon Joseph Cottolengo, the Marquess Julia Barolo, Don Bosco.¹⁵

The Oratory of the exceedingly poor Don Bosco, begun thirteen years before with a lean-to building, had witnessed the start of a night-school, work-shops, a house for young workers and students. In that year 1859 the house was home to 184 very poor youngsters, and the following year to 355.¹⁶ On Sundays the Oratory provided an experience of Christian life, joy, instruction and friendship with Don Bosco for more than a thousand youngsters. It was to help these very real boys, noisy, with mixed-up lives, hungry for bread and for God that Don Bosco was inviting then to 'create the Society of St Francis of Sales'.

2. FOR THE YOUNG AND WITH THE YOUNG, DON BOSCO FOUNDER

"With a religious society eventually in mind, Don Bosco was not able and did not want to bring a significant nucleus of adult collaborators together choosing them from among those who were already working in the three oratories."¹⁷ He realised that rather than have a group of volunteers who were here today and gone tomorrow it was more effective to found a stable Society of people consecrated to God for ever to be of service to him among those young people in serious difficulty. And to succeed he finally thought of his young men, those who "had spent the previous years, some for more time some for less, at the Oratory with Don Bosco."¹⁸

2.1 The event

That year 1859 18 December was a Sunday. Don Bosco concluded the busy feast day spent among a thousand youngsters, as on the feast of the Immaculate Conception and every Sunday. Then he called together those who had decided to be part of the Pious Society of Saint Francis of Sales.

It was 21.00, after evening prayers. They were to meet in Don Bosco's room. In a few minutes there were 18 of them there including Don Bosco. Only two had not come. The seventeen assembled around Don Bosco: a priest (47 years of age), a deacon (24 years of

¹⁵ A short and useful description of the situation in Turin in the 1840s can be found in A. J. LENTI, *Don Bosco. History and Spirit. II: Birth and Early Development of Don Bosco's Oratory*. Edited by A. GIRAUDDO (Roma: LAS, 2007) p. 6-26.

¹⁶ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1879)* (Roma: LAS, 1980) p. 175.

¹⁷ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I (Roma: LAS, 2003) p. 439.

¹⁸ P. STELLA, *Ivi* p. 295.

age), a subdeacon (22 years of age), thirteen clerics (between 21 and 15 years of age), a very young student.

The precise set of minutes, signed by Fr Alasonatti and with Don Bosco's signature attached,¹⁹ "is a document of delightful simplicity, which contains the first official record of the Salesian Society"²⁰; in it one reads:

"All [present were] united in one and the same spirit with the sole purpose of preserving and promoting the spirit of true charity needed for the work of the Oratories on behalf of neglected young people at risk. For in these disastrous times of ours such young people are liable to be corrupted and plunged into godlessness and irreligion to the detriment of the whole of society.

"The Gathered group then decided to form a society or congregation with the aim of promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls, especially of those most in need of instruction and education, while providing the members with mutual help toward their own sanctification. The project met with unanimous approval. Hence, after a short prayer and the invocation of the light of the Holy Spirit, the group proceeded to elect the members that would make up the central body of the Society and would lead this and future communities, if it should please God to grant increase.

"The group then unanimously requested Him [Don Bosco] who has been the initiator and promoter [of the work] to accept the office of Major Superior, as is becoming in every respect. He accepted the office on condition that he should have the power to choose for the office of prefect (*Vicar and Administrator*) the present writer [*Fr Alasonatti*], who has held that office in the house up to the present.

"The group then considered the method to be followed in electing the other members of the central governing body, and it was decided to hold the election by secret ballot. This was deemed the speediest way of setting up the council, which was to consist of a spiritual director, of a financial administrator, and three councillors, in addition to the two already mentioned officers (*the Major Superior and the Prefect*).

"[...]the Seminarian, the Subdeacon Michael Rua was unanimously elected spiritual director, and he accepted [the appointment]. The same procedure was followed for the financial administrator, with the result that Deacon Angelo Savio was elected. He also accepted, pledging to discharge the duties of that office.

"Three councillors remained to be elected. The balloting for the first of these resulted in the election of the Seminarian John Cagliero. The second councillor to be elected was John Bonetti. The balloting for the third and last [*councillor*] resulted in a tie between seminarians Charles Ghivarello and Francis Provera. A second balloting produced a majority favouring Seminarian Ghivarello. Thus the central administrative body of our Society was definitively established. (*which was later called the "Superior Chapter"*)

¹⁹ Cf. J. G. GONZÁLEZ, 'Acta de fundación de la Sociedad de S. Francisco de Sales. 18 Diciembre de 1859', RSS 52 (2008) pp. 335-336.

²⁰ E. CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana, dalle origini alla morte di S. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1961) p. 33.

“The report of these proceedings, as summarily described herein, was read before the assembly of all the members and elected officers and was approved as true to fact. It was then unanimously resolved that this original document should be kept on file, and to guarantee its authenticity the Major Superior and the Secretary affixed their signatures

*Sac. Bosco Gio.
Alasonatti Vittorio Sac. Prefetto.”*

2.2 Our young ‘founding fathers’

So the Salesian Congregation came into existence. So we came into existence. Those eighteen are our ‘founding fathers’, most of them extremely young; with the exception of Fr Alasonatti, 47 years of age, and Don Bosco, 44 years of age; Fr Rua, spiritual director was 22 years of age; Fr Savio, the economist, 24; the councillors, still clerics, were all in their twenties.

It seems to me useful to give at least a sketch of them to preserve them in our minds and hearts as our co-founders with Don Bosco. They are part of Don Bosco’s life and of the history of the Congregation, and therefore of ours.

Victor Alasonatti, 47 years of age

The only one older than Don Bosco. An amiable yet stern priest, for 19 years he had been a teacher of the children in the elementary school in Avigliana, where he had been born on 15 November 1812. Joking and pulling his leg (they had been companions at the Ecclesiastical College), Don Bosco persuaded him to come to the Oratory to ‘help him to say the Breviary’ among the two hundred boys in the house and the thousand in the Oratory (‘Not a bit like your little school!’ joked Don Bosco). He arrived the evening before the feast of the Assumption in 1854, keeping up the joke with Don Bosco: “Where do I go to say the Breviary?” Don Bosco put onto his shoulders all the administration of his house, until then managed by Joseph Buzzetti and Mamma Margaret (worn out by now: she was to die two years later). In 1855, after Michael Rua, he was the first to take private religious vows into the hands of Don Bosco. He was professed as a Salesian on 14 May 1862. He worked ceaselessly and quietly for Don Bosco and the Salesian Society, as the first Prefect, until his death at Lanzo on 7 October 1865 when he was 53 years of age.

Michael Rua, 22 years of age

Born in Turin on 9 June 1837 into a working class family, he lost his father at eight years of age. He became fascinated by Don Bosco while attending the first schools of the De La Salle Brothers. He declared under oath: “I remember that when Don Bosco came to say Mass for us [...], something like an electric shock seemed to run through all the children. They would jump to their feet and leave their places to mill about him [...] It took quite some time before he could get through to the sacristy. There was nothing the good Brothers could do to prevent this apparent disorder, and so we had our way. Nothing of this sort happened when other priests came, even pious and renowned ones ... The secret of this attachment could only be explained by their awareness of the spiritual and untiring love he felt for their souls.”²¹ Sometimes Don Bosco gave everyone a little medal. When it was Michael’s turn, Don Bosco made a strange gesture: holding out his right hand he pretended to cut it with his left while saying to him: “Take it Michael take it.” Michael didn’t understand but Don Bosco explained it for him: “We two

²¹ BM II p. 247-248.

we'll go halves in everything." He entered the Oratory on 25 September 1852 and put on the clerical habit at the Becchi, on 3 October 1852; he really became Don Bosco's right hand man: on 26 January 1854 he took part in the meeting where the close-knit group of collaborators received the same of 'Salesians'. On 25 March 1855 (at 18 years of age) he became the first Salesian taking private vows in the hands of Don Bosco. As a student of theology he helped Don Bosco in the St Aloysius Oratory; in 1858 he accompanied him to Rome to meet the Pope, to whom Don Bosco presents his Congregation. Still only a subdeacon he is elected Spiritual Director of the Society just begun. Ordained a priest on 29 July 1860, he makes his perpetual profession on 15 November 1865. At 26 years of age (1863), he obtains his diploma as a secondary school teacher and is sent by Don Bosco to direct the first Salesian house outside Turin, at Mirabello Monferrato. Having returned to Turin in 1865 he is "the second Don Bosco" in the Salesian Work which is continuing to expand. Don Bosco will say one day: "If God had said to me: 'Choose a boy endowed with all the virtues and talents you would like him to have, and I will give him to you', I would never have imagined anyone as gifted as Fr Rua".²² Appointed by Leo XIII Vicar of Don Bosco in 1884, he becomes, on the death of the Founder, his first Successor and spends his life travelling in order to keep the great family of Don Bosco united and faithful, as it was really exploding in every part of the world. On Don Bosco's death he received 64 Salesian houses, 22 years later when he died the foundations had risen to 341. In 1910, the year of his death, the first biography, written by Eliseo Battaglia appears; the title, hitting the mark, describes him well: "A Prince of Kindness."

Angelo Savio, 24 years of age.

A fellow country man of Don Bosco, he was 15 when he arrived at the Oratory on 4 November 1850. He had already known the little saint Dominic Savio (a few years younger than him) since they lived in neighbouring villages. He used to recall: "In the holidays I was at home feeling not very well; he came to cheer me up with his pleasant manner and kind words. Sometimes he came hand in hand with his two little brothers. Before he left the Oratory for the last time (1857) he came to give me a final hug." Elected Economer General for the first time in 1859 while still a deacon he was re-elected in 1869, the year of his perpetual profession, and again in 1873. At that time Don Bosco entrusted him with responsibility for the houses being built on the Ligurian coast and on the Cote d'Azur: Alassio, Vallecrosia, Marseille. Then he sent him to Rome to oversee the work of the construction of the Church and the House of the Sacred Heart. At 50 years of age (1885) he asked Don Bosco to let him finish with walls and money and left as a missionary for Patagonia, which he traversed on long apostolic/missionary journeys. Tireless and zealous he founded Salesian houses in Chile, in Perú, in Paraguay and in Brazil. He died on 17 May 1893 while on a journey of exploration in Ecuador, where a new mission had been entrusted to the Salesians. In the dream of the wheel (4 May 1861) Don Bosco saw him in distant parts. His co-workers remembered him as a deeply prayerful consecrated religious.

John Cagliero, 21 years of age.

Born on 11 January 1838, he came from the same place as Don Bosco whom he knew having served his Mass in the parish church of Castelnuovo d'Asti. His father having died, Don Bosco saw him a boy as pure as crystal, intelligent and pleasant mannered. Meeting his mother, Don Bosco asked her jokingly if she would "sell" him her son. She replied in the same humorous manner that sons are not sold though they can be "given as a gift." John accompanied Don Bosco on foot from Castelnuovo to Turin running, shouting and jumping about and confiding to Don Bosco all his thoughts, memories and hopes. "From that moment I never had any secrets from him." When Don

²² BM IV p. 338.

Bosco brought him to Mamma Margaret, she complained that there was no more room. "But he is so small," said Don Bosco laughing, "we'll put him in the bread basket and haul him up to the ceiling." And all three of them laughed. And so in this way in 1851 Cagliero began his extraordinary Salesian life. One of the first four to go along with Don Bosco's idea of founding a Society, he made his profession in 1862, the same year he was ordained a priest. A graduate professor of theology, incomparable music composer, Don Bosco's first missionary, he was the first Salesian Bishop and Cardinal. Rua and Cagliero were the two columns on which Don Bosco established his great work. Don Bosco had 'seen' his bright future when he lay dying during the cholera of 1854. He was preparing to give him Holy Communion as viaticum when he saw the room filled with light, a dove come down on him and a circle of Indians surround his bed. So he took the eucharist away telling him: "You're not going to die and you will go far far away ...". He died in Rome on 28 February 1926: buried in Campo Verano, his remains were transferred in 1964 to Argentina, and he lies at rest in the Cathedral of Viedma.

John Bonetti, 21 years of age.

He arrived at the Oratory in 1855 from Caramagna, a small village in the Province of Cuneo. He was 17. He immediately became a friend of Dominic Savio, four years younger than he was. Don Bosco sent him with Rua, Cagliero, Savio and others to the school of Prof. Bonzanino. Every morning they had to go along via Garibaldi. He remembered doing so with Dominic Savio during a very hard winter with the snow blowing about. He made his first profession on 14 May 1862 and three years later his perpetual profession. He graduated at the Royal University in Turin. He became a priest at 26 years of age. Seeing his goodness and his special journalistic skills, Don Bosco made him the first editor of the *Salesian Bulletin*, begun in 1877. In the pages of the *Bulletin* Fr Bonetti published for the first time in instalments the 'History of Don Bosco's Oratory', using the manuscript (then private) of Don Bosco's *Memoirs*. Those instalments (together with the missionaries' letters 'from the frontiers') made the *Bulletin* extremely popular. However, in 1875/76 Don Bosco had left the *Memoirs* unfinished. Fr Bonetti persistently urged him on. We owe to that persistence the fact that Don Bosco [in spite of the huge commitments occupying him] took up his pen again and continued to write. He then collected and completed the instalments in the *Bulletin*. As a result the book entitled *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio S. Francesco di Sales* ["St John Bosco's Early Apostolate"] came out, the first documented biography of Don Bosco and much sought after. When Fr Cagliero was made a Bishop, in 1886 Fr Bonetti was elected to succeed him as: 'Spiritual Director' of the Salesians and 'General Director' of the FMA. He died at just 53 years of age on 5 June 1891. Of him Don Rua wrote: "Tireless apostolic worker, brave champion in promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls, for his support and advice an affectionate councillor."

Charles Ghivarello, 24 years of age.

He was already 20 when he met Don Bosco at Pino Torinese and decided to enter his Oratory (1855). He knew and was a friend of Dominic Savio for a whole year. He made his first profession in 1862. On the day of his priestly ordination in 1864 Don Bosco told him: "You will have to hear many confessions during your life." In fact, even though he was admired by everyone as a hard worker, builder and cultivator, it was in the sacrament of confession (to which he devoted hours every day) that he had a field in which to pour out as well as God's grace all his faith and his fatherly kindness. Secretary and General Councillor, in 1876 he was appointed Economist General. It was he who built the small gallery and the small chapel next to Don Bosco's room. Four years later in 1880, Don Bosco sent him to direct the orphanage of Saint-Cyr in France. From here he went Mathi, where he had the first buildings of the paper-mill put up. He spent his last 25 years at San Benigno Canavese, where he started a large mechanics work-shop. At

San Benigno (as wherever he had been) he brought an enthusiasm for agriculture and fruit-farming; he died on 28 February 1913. Fr Albera, the second successor of Don Bosco, wrote of him: "His extraordinary workload was nourished and supported by his spirit of faith."

John Baptist Francesia, 21 years of age.

Born at San Giorgio Canavese on 3 October 1838, he left for Turin with his parents looking for work. While as a twelve year old he was working in terrible conditions in a factory he met Don Bosco in his festive Oratory. After two year in 1852, Don Bosco took him into his house and *Battistin*, as everyone called him, began to study to become a priest. United to Don Bosco for ever and without any doubts he was the first Salesian to obtain a degree in literature ("While many after getting their degree left Don Bosco, I stayed!"). Very young he was Dominic Savio's teacher, in a class crowded with 70 pupils (the usual number in those days). He had a great facility for writing prose and verse. He made his first profession in 1862 and was ordained a priest the following year. Between 1878 and 1902 he was Provincial. Don Bosco gave him the task of revising the Catholic Readings and the series of the Latin and Italian Classics. After having revised and published *Cinque lustri di storia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* (1892) the work of Fr Bonetti (who had died unexpectedly) he himself wrote a "Popular Life of Don Bosco" (1902) with 414 pages which went through many editions and translations. Valuable for a history of the Congregation are also the many short biographies of the first Salesians to die. He lived at Don Bosco's side for 38 years. His words and his many writings were a continuous record of memories small and great of Don Bosco. He lived until he was 92 and died in Turin on 17 January 1930. Many times in his dreams Don Bosco saw him as a white-haired old man, the last survivor of the first generation.

Francis Provera, 23 years of age.

Born at Mirabello Monferrato on 4 December 1836, he got to know Don Bosco rather late in life. At 22 (after having been a shop keeper with his father) he introduced himself to Don Bosco because 'he had always wanted to become a priest.' Don Bosco immediately replied: "Those who want to come to me must let themselves be cooked." Francis was quite taken aback. Don Bosco continued: "That means you must let me have full control of your heart." "But I'm not looking for anything else. That's really why I have come." While he was studying as a cleric, in the Festive Oratory he was carrying out such an successful apostolate that Don Bosco used to say to his clerics: "Learn from him. He is a great hunter of souls." While he was studying second year philosophy, Don Bosco made him the teacher of the first year secondary school with 150 pupils! He took his religious vows in 1862. The following year, still a cleric, he went with Don Rua to found the first Salesian house outside Turin in his hometown of Mirabello Monferrato. He was such a competent prefect (i.e. administrator) that the following year Don Bosco sent him to the College of Lanzo, which needed a very able administrator. In that year, on 25 December 1864, he became a priest. In the following years Don Bosco considered him the 'perpetual prefect', sending him to all the newly founded houses which needed an expert economist to get things under way well. Then Don Bosco recalled him to Turin, by now the centre of operations ever more onerous. Fr Provera combined his work of administration with a very full priestly apostolate: he taught philosophy to the clerics, making them really think. He was greatly appreciated for the clarity of his ideas and his facility in speaking. Few people knew that while he was administrator and teacher he was offering up for his clerics a silent and very painful illness: from 1866 an incurable ulcer on his foot was wearing him out. He died in 1874 just 38 years of age. Don Bosco said: "Our Society has lost one of its best members."

Joseph Lazzero, 22 years of age.

He arrived at the Oratory as a twenty year old from Pino Torinese with Charles Ghivarello who was also from there (1857). He wanted to become a priest and Don Bosco recognising in him good material put him studying Latin at the side of a very lively lad from Carmagnola, Michael Magone. Michael was eight years younger but they immediately became good friends. He decided to stay with Don Bosco forever and at 28 was ordained priest on 10 June 1865. When Fr Provera died, Don Bosco called him to take his place as a Councillor on the Superior Council a responsibility he held until 1898. When at Valdocco Fr Rua became 'the second Don Bosco', Fr Lazzero was appointed Rector of the House of the Oratory. Then when the boarders numbered 800, and a single Rector was not sufficient, Don Bosco entrusted to Fr Francesia direction of the students and to Fr Lazzero that of the artisans. Also in the Superior Chapter he became 'Councillor for Arts and Trades'. In 1885 Don Bosco entrusted him with the very delicate task of 'contact and correspondence' with the missionaries, who were multiplying the works in America. In 1897 (at 60 years of age, worn out by the huge amount of work, he had a collapse from which he never recovered. He lived the last 13 years (withdrawn in the house at Mathi) in patience, prayer and conformity with the will of God. He died on 7 March 1910.

Francis Cerruti, 15 years of age.

Having lost his father and being very attached to his mother he was accepted into the oratory by Don Bosco in 1856. Arriving in November from Saluggia (Vercelli), he felt lost and was very homesick. But he met Dominic Savio, who was two years older than he was, became very friendly with him and life once again seemed to smile on him. Dominic died scarcely five months later leaving him in tears. Francis (whose holiness Don Bosco put on the same level as that of Dominic) was one of the first four Salesians sent by Don Bosco to attend Turin University where he showed a lively and profound intelligence. When a case of pneumonia that had been neglected seemed about to carry him off in 1865 (as he testified under oath), Don Bosco assured him that he would live and still work for a long time. While very young, on Don Bosco's orders, he composed an *Italian Dictionary* which had a lot of success in schools and then a *History of Italian Literature* and a *History of Pedagogy*. At 26 years of age he was sent by Don Bosco to open and to direct the large work at Alassio (Savona). When he was 41, in 1885, Don Bosco wanted him at his side and made him the Director General of Salesian Schools and Salesian Publications. With a firm and secure hand he helped Don Bosco organise the young Congregation. He worked effectively to ensure the unity in teaching and approach of Salesian schools, every year providing educative-didactic norms. While working he also wrote. He published books, which quickly had a wide circulation on Don Bosco's pedagogy from *Elements of pedagogy* (1897) to *The moral issue of education* (1916). Of him Don Bosco said: "God has given us only one Fr Cerruti, unfortunately." He died at Alassio on 25 March 1917.

Celestine Durando, 19 years of age.

He arrived at the Oratory from Farigliano di Mondovì (Cuneo) in 1856, a sixteen year old. From the first evening he made the acquaintance of Dominic Savio, who, like the other members of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, used to welcome the newcomers and help them get over any problems settling in. The two immediately got on well together. It was a great blessing from God for which Celestine could never be grateful enough. A year later he received the clerical habit from the hands of Don Bosco, and immediately entered fully into the life of the house. Professed in 1862, he was ordained priest two years later. He studied on his own and also taught. Don Bosco, to whom he gave himself totally, at once entrusted him (1858) with the first year secondary with 96 pupils and encouraged him to write the books his students needed. So Durando wrote some very simple text-books perfectly adapted to the capacity of his pupils who came

from the countryside and the factories. His *Latin Grammar* and his *Elementary approach to Literature* had a very wide circulation. His most demanding work was his *Latin-Italian and Italian-Latin Dictionary* with 936 pages, which he finished (while continuing to teach and carry out his priestly ministry) when he was 35. Don Bosco was so pleased with this work that in 1876 (Durando was 36) he wanted to take the author to meet Pope Pius IX and present him with a copy. A Councillor of the Superior Chapter from 1865, Fr Durando was permanently responsible for the procedures for the opening of new Salesian houses. The frequent requests for foundations which arrived for Don Bosco and later Don Rua, were handed on to him for a first response, further negotiations and the necessary formal procedural matters. Among his books and dry legal matters Fr Durando was always a priest. He was chaplain to the *Generala*, the youth detention centre where the boys were always very affectionate towards him. He also spent long hours in the confessional, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and in other Institutions in Turin. On his death 27 March 1907, Fr Rua said of him: "Without making a fuss, his life was filled with good works. Wherever he went he left traces of his spirit which was truly priestly and Salesian."

Joseph Bongiovanni, 23 years of age.

Born in Turin on 15 December 1836. When Don Bosco published the 5th edition of the *Life of Dominic Savio* (1878), he added a page with a brief account of Joseph Bongiovanni. This is what Don Bosco wrote:

"One of the members who was most helpful to Dominic in setting up the *Immaculate Conception Sodality*, and in drawing up the rules, was Giuseppe Bongioanni. Both his mother and his father having died, he had been recommended to the Rector of the Oratory by his Aunt. The Rector took him in in November 1854. He was 17, most unhappy because of the circumstances he had experienced, full of worldliness and prejudice against religion. But one could see the workings of divine grace in him since he very quickly became fond of the House, its rules and the Superiors. He changed his thinking and gave himself over to acquiring virtue and to his prayers. He was a gifted young man and a fast learner... Furnished with a great imagination he showed real ability as a poet both in Italian and dialect. In ordinary conversation amongst his friends he could improvise lots of fun material in dialect but when it came to serious writing at the desk he wrote many poems which were published... He set out on an ecclesiastical career marked throughout those early years as a cleric by piety and faithful observance of the rules and zeal in doing good to his Companions. He was ordained priest in 1863, and you can imagine with what zeal he dedicated himself to exercising the sacred ministry.... After he had helped Dominic Savio, with whom he was united in holy friendship, to set up the Immaculate Conception Sodality, since he was only a cleric at the time, with the Superior's permission he founded another sodality in honour of the Blessed Sacrament. Its aim was to further worship amongst the youngsters and to prepare students who were well-known for virtue as altar servers, thus setting up an altar servers group which gave much dignity and ability to this role. He carried this on with excellent results when he was a priest. One could say truthfully that if the Congregation of St Francis de Sales was able to give a good number of Ministers of the Altar to the Church, it is owed in great measure to the efforts of Fr Bongiovanni with the Altar Servers Society. In 1868 when it was time for the consecration of the Church built at Valdocco in honour of Mary Help of Christians, Fr Bongiovanni set to to organise what was needed for the ceremony to be carried out, especially in preparing the Altar Servers to do their part ...He spared no effort care or sweat, especially for the Vigil on

8th June that year. ..He had done so much to prepare for the Feast that on the 9th June, the day of the consecration, he was ill and could not get out of bed. His illness continued for some days. Wanting to celebrate the divine mysteries at least once in the new church, he implored the Blessed Virgin in prayer and gained the grace to do so. On the Sunday in the octave he felt sufficiently improved to be able to prepare himself then approach the altar to celebrate Mass with immense consolation. After Mass he told some of his friends that he felt so happy he could now easily intone the *Nunc dimittis*. And so it was to be.”²³

He soon felt unwell again and went back to bed. The following Wednesday, 17 June 1868, surrounded by his dearest friends he died in the name of the Lord. He was only 32 years of age.

Five have second thoughts

In the group of 18 December 1859 there are five other names: John Anfossi, Aloysius Marcellino, Secondo Pettiva, Anthony Rovetto, Aloysius Chiapale. They too, “were enrolled in the Pious Society after mature reflection.” But life’s ups and downs and the way they kept changing their minds ended with them sooner or later being far from the Pious Salesian Society. I give a few details about these five too, since they were also among the first to believe in Don Bosco’s dream.

John Anfossi, 19 years of age.

Born at Vigone, Turin, he was the same age as Dominic Savio, and was his companion and close friend all the time Dominic spent at the Oratory. Every morning he walked with him and with Rua, Cagliero, Bonetti to Prof. Bonzanino’s school. After being one of those “enrolled” in the Pious Salesian Society, he made his novitiate and took the usual triennial vows. But then he preferred to continue his studies at the Seminary; he left the Congregation in 1864, two years after having made his first temporary profession. He was an excellent priest, Canon, Professor and Monsignor. He very often went to the Oratory and was a good friend of Fr Rua, Fr Cagliero and Fr Cerruti. He was the 20th sworn witness at Don Bosco’s process of beatification and the 7th in that of Dominic Savio. His testimonies (hand-written copies preserved) are extensive and very beautiful. He died in Turin on 15 February 1913.

Aloysius Marcellino, 22 years of age.

Born in 1837, at the Oratory he was a companion and friend of Dominic Savio. He was among the first to be part of the Immaculate Conception Sodality. His name does not appear among the first professed. He decided to continue his priestly studies at the Seminary and became the Curate in the Parish of the Holy Martyrs in Turin.

Secondo Pettiva (or Petiva), 23 years of age.

On the feast for the opening of the church of St. Francis of Sales (1852) a boy called Secondo Pettiva – born in Turin in 1836 – sang a solo, to great applause. He became a very talented musician and at 20 years of age, with John Cagliero, the director of music at the Oratory. For a number of years he was responsible for the feasts and the collective joyful celebrations at the Oratory. When he was 24 he decided that staying with Don Bosco was not his vocation. The following year (1864) he asked his companion and friend Fr Rua to let him stay at the new house in Mirabello. From here he returned to Turin, but was struck down by a serious form of tuberculosis. Don Bosco went to visit

²³ G. BOSCO, ‘Vita di Domenico Savio’, in *Biografie edificanti* (Roma: UPS, 2007) p. 76.

him several times at the Saint Aloysius Hospital and prepared him for his meeting with the Lord. He breathed his last in 1868 just over 30 years of age.

Anthony Rovetto, 17 years of age.

Born at Castelnuovo d'Asti in 1842, he entered the Oratory in 1855. A companion of Dominic Savio, he was in the founding group of the Pious Society, and the following year signed with Don Bosco and all those enrolled the letter sent to Archbishop Aloysius Fransoni seeking approval of the first Rules. In the minutes of the Superior Chapter it is written that Anthony Rovetto made triennial vows into Don Bosco's hands on 18 January 1863. He left the Oratory in 1865. Unfortunately there is no further information about him.

Aloysius Chiapale, 16 years of age.

Born at Costigliole Asti on 13 January 1843, he entered the Oratory in 1857. He was one of the boys who accompanied Don Bosco to the Becchi for the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. A companion and friend of Dominic Savio, Michael Rua, John Cagliero... he was part of the group of the 'enrolled' which began the Pious Society, but a confidential note from Don Bosco warned him: "You do not yet know what obedience means."²⁴ He made his first profession in 1862, which he renewed five years later. Having returned to the diocese of Saluzzo and become a priest he was an accomplished preacher and became Chaplain of Fornaca Saluzzo (Cuneo).

Canon Anfossi, one of those who left the Oratory to enter the Diocesan clergy, declared that Don Bosco never took offense at these desertions, "he gave his blessing to those who left him so that they could persevere in holiness of life and succeed in helping souls ." And Canon Ballesio added: "From my contacts with Don Bosco even after my departure from the Oratory, I can safely say that he (...) never lessened his sincere love for them; he invited them to the Oratory, and still helped them when necessary."²⁵

2.3 Involving today's young people

One thing is certain: the Salesian Congregation was founded and expanded drawing in young men who were convinced by the apostolic passion of Don Bosco and by his dream of life. We need to **tell young people** the story of the beginnings of the Congregation, of which the young men were 'co-founders.' Most of them (Rua, Cagliero, Bonetti, Durando, Marcellino, Bongiovanni, Francesia, Lazzero, Savio) were companions of Dominuc Savio and members of the Immaculate Conception Sodality; and twelve remained faithful to Don Bosco until death.

It is to be hoped that this fact 'about the foundation' helps us to involve the young people of today more and more in the apostolic work of the salvation of other young people. Being involved means becoming the soil in which the consecrated Salesian vocation grows naturally. Let us have the courage to propose to our young people the consecrated Salesian vocation!

To help you in this great undertaking I share with you my three convictions so that they may help you [together with everything I have so far told you] to 'tell the story' of our beginnings.

a) *Don Bosco had the intuition that for his Congregation the right path was that of youth.*

²⁴ BM VII p. 6.

²⁵ BM V p. 263-4.

Our Lady showed him this **in two prophetic dreams**, and he was not afraid to give the greatest of responsibilities to the young and the very young men who had grown up in the atmosphere of his Oratory.

The first of the two dreams is remembered in Salesian tradition as '**the dream of the three stops**'. It was written down by Don Bosco himself in pages 49-50 of his 'Memoirs of the Oratory' in his own shaky handwriting.

"On the second Sunday in October 1844, I had to tell my boys that the Oratory would be moving to Valdocco. But the uncertainty of place, means, and personnel had me really worried. The previous evening I had gone to bed with an uneasy heart. That night I had another dream, which seems to be an appendix to the one I had at Becchi when I was nine years old...

I dreamt that I was standing in the middle of a multitude of wolves, goats and kids, lambs, ewes, rams, dogs, even birds. All together they made a din, a racket, or better, a bedlam to frighten the stoutest heart. I wanted to run away, when a lady very handsomely dressed as a shepherdess signaled me to follow her and accompany that strange flock while she went ahead. We wandered from place to place, making three stations or stops. Each time we stopped, many of the animals were turned into lambs, and their number continually grew. After we had walked a long way, I found myself in a field where all the animals grazed and gamboled together and none made attacks on the others.

Worn out, I wanted to sit down beside a nearby road, but the shepherdess invited me to continue the trip. After another short journey, I found myself in a large courtyard with porticoes all round. At one end was a church. I then saw that four-fifths of the animals had been changed into lambs and their number greatly increased. Just then, several shepherds came along to take care of the flock; but they stayed only a very short time and promptly went away.

Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds.. who as they grew took care of the others. As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds. (...)

I wanted to ask the shepherdess (...)the meaning of that journey with its halts, (...)"You will understand everything when you see in fact with your bodily eyes what you are looking at now with the eyes of your mind."²⁶

"Through the imaginative language of the dream," Fr Stella comments, "Don Bosco felt that he was destined to be responsible for many young people some of whom would become shepherds and help him with his work of education."²⁷

The second dream, recorded in Salesian tradition as '**the dream of the pergola of roses**', Don Bosco described in 1864. As told by Fr Lemoine, it was published in 1903, while Fr Rua, Bishop Cagliero and Fr Barberis were still alive.

"In 1864 one night after prayers as was his custom at times, he gathered the members of his Congregation in his anteroom for a conference. Among those present were...Fr Michael Rua, Fr John Cagliero...and Fr Julius Berberis ... «I have already told you of several things I saw as in a dream. From them we can infer how much Our Lady loves and helps us. But now that we are altogether alone, I am going to tell you not just another dream, but *something that Our Lady*

²⁶ J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855. The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, tr. by Daniel Lyons, SDB, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, SDB, Lawrence Castelvechhi, SDB and Michael Mendl, SDB (New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Publications, 1989) pp. 49-50. The italics are mine.

²⁷ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco in the history of Catholic Religious thought and practice*. Vol. I: Vita e Opere [Roma: LAS, 1979²] p. 140.

herself graciously showed me. I am doing this that *each of us may be convinced that it is Our Lady Herself who wants our Congregation.* This should spur us to work ever harder for God's greater glory. She wants us to place all our trust in her
....

« One day in 1847, after I had spent much time reflecting on how I might help others, especially the young, the *Queen of Heaven* appeared to me. She led me into a beautiful garden. There stood there a rustic but wide and charming portico built as a vestibule. Its pillars were dressed with climbing vines whose tendrils, thick with leaves and flowers, stretched upward together and knitted a graceful awning. The portico opened on a lovely walk that soon became as far as the eye could see a breathtakingly beautiful pergola whose sides were lined with enchanting roses in full bloom.(...) The ground too was covered with roses.. The Blessed Virgin said to me: – (...) This is the path you must take.

I gladly removed my shoes because it would have been a pity to step on such gorgeous roses. I took but a few steps and immediately felt very sharp thorns piercing my feet and making them bleed. I had to stop and turn back.

– “I had better wear my shoes,” I told my guide..

– “Yes indeed,” She replied, “sturdy ones.”

So I put my shoes on again and returned to the rose pergola, *followed by a number of helpers who had just showed up and asked to go along with me.*

Many of the branches were draped like festoons ...There were roses about me, roses above me, and roses under my feet.(...) My lacerated legs though kept getting entangled in the lower branches. Whenever I pushed aside a bough barring my way ...the thorns dug into me and made me bleed all over. The roses were thick with thorns.. Notwithstanding I went forward encouraged by the Blessed Virgin...(...) Those who were watching me passed comments: " Don Bosco's path is forever strewn with roses. He hasn't a worry in the world!" But they couldn't see the thorns that were piercing my poor legs.

I called on many priests, clerics and laymen to follow me, and they did so joyfully, enthralled by the beauty of the flowers. When however they discovered that they had to walk over sharp thorns and that there was no way to avoid them, they loudly began complaining: "We have been fooled!"

Many turned back ... I went after them and call them back but it was useless. Then I broke into tears as I asked myself: "Must I walk this painful path alone?"

But I was soon comforted. *I saw a group of priests, clerics and laymen coming towards me:* – “Here we are,” they said. “We are all yours and ready to follow you. So I led them forward. Only a few lost heart and quit; *most of them followed me through.*

After walking the whole length of the pergola I found myself in another enchanting garden, and my followers gathered around me. They were exhausted, ragged and bleeding, but a cool breeze healed them all. Another gust of wind came and like magic *I found myself surrounded by a vast crowd of boys, young clerics, coadjutor brothers and even priests who began helping me care for all those boys.* Many of these helpers I knew, but many more were strangers ... The Blessed Virgin who had been my guide all along, now asked me:

– Do you grasp the meaning of what you now see and what you saw before?

– No.

– The path strewn with roses and thorns is an image of your mission among boys. You must wear shoes, a symbol of mortification. The thorns ... stand for the obstacles, sufferings and disappointments you will experience. But you must not lose heart. Charity and mortification will enable you to overcome all difficulties and lead you to the roses without thorns.

As soon as the Mother of God finished speaking, I awoke and found myself in my room.”²⁸

As one can see reading between the lines of these two dreams and as we know from the history of the first Oratory, Don Bosco did not find long-term helpers among his fellow priests, nor did he look for them there, as the other beneficent institutions which grew up near him (the Rosminians, the Cottolengo Priests) normally did. He soon realised that he had to find the ‘shepherds’ among ‘his flock’ as Rua, Cagliero, Francesia, Cerruti, Bonetti called themselves... And to them young as they were he entrusted the greatest responsibilities for his Congregation as it was coming to birth.

One day he expressed his idea in this way: *«It is to our great advantage that most of our Salesians came to our schools when they were young boys. Unconsciously, our pupils grow up accustomed to a laborious life, they get to know the inner workings of our Congregation, and they pick up experience in many tasks. They are ready-made assistants and teachers with one spirit and method. No one has to teach them what to do, because they learned as students ... I believe that up to now there has not been a congregation or religious order as fortunate as ours in the choice of suitable candidates ... Those who have lived with us will instil our spirit into others.»*²⁹

b) Don Bosco was not afraid to engage his boys in activities that were courageous and humanly speaking imprudent.

The first example I want to remind you about is the time of the cholera which broke out at the beginning of summer 1854. It was a time of great fear in the city of Turin: by the end of the summer the dead numbered 1248 (the city had 117,000 inhabitants); Borgo Dora was particularly hard hit: “the parish of Sts. Simon and Jude, the parish of the Oratory had 53 % of the total of those who died.”³⁰ Fear caused “the closing of shops, flight from the stricken area on the part of many. What was worse, in some places as soon as someone was infected their neighbours and even their relatives were so terrified that they left them on their own without any help.”³¹ An improvised isolation hospital was set up to the west of Valdocco. But there were few brave enough to offer to care for the sick. Don Bosco turned to the older ones among his boys.

Among these were the very best of his future Salesians. To four of these (including Rua and Cagliero) on 26 January in 1854 he had made the first suggestion that “with the help of the Lord and St Francis of Sales we should first test ourselves by performing deeds of charity towards our neighbour, then bind ourselves by a promise and later, if possible and desirable make a formal vow to God. From that evening on, those who agreed - or would later agree - to this were called “Salesians”.³² Yet he wasn’t afraid that the first fruits might be destroyed by the imprudent act of charity. He told them that the Mayor of Turin was appealing to the best people in the city that they might become nurses and helpers of those with cholera. If anyone wanted to join him in that charitable work he would thank them in God’s name. Fourteen volunteered, “and then another thirty, who devoted themselves with such zeal, self-sacrifice and courage that they attracted public admiration”.³³ On 5 August, feast of Our Lady of the Snow, speaking to the boarders Don Bosco said: “We should place ourselves body and soul in the hands of

²⁸ BM III pp. 25-27. The italics are mine.

²⁹ BM XII, p. 215-216. The italics are mine.

³⁰ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo della libertà*. Vol. I (Roma: LAS, 2003), 263.

³¹ G. BONETTI, *Cinque Lustri di Storia dell’Oratorio Salesiano fondato dal sacerdote D. Giovanni Bosco* (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1892), pp. 420-421.

³² BM V p.8. Cf. ASC 9.132 Rua.

³³ G. B. FRANCESIA, *Vita breve e popolare di D. Giovanni Bosco* (San Benigno Canavese: Libreria Salesiana, 1912) p. 183.

the Blessed Virgin (...) If you all put yourselves in the state of grace and not commit mortal sin, I promise that not one of you will be stricken.”³⁴

They were days of scorching heat, fatigue, dangers, nauseating smells. Michael Rua (17 years of age) had stones thrown at him by an angry crowd when he entered the isolation hospital; the ordinary folk thought that inside they were killing the sick. John B. Francesia (16 years of age) recalled: “How often, young as I was, I had to persuade the old people to go to the isolation hospital. – But they’ll kill me. – Whatever are you talking about? In fact you’ll feel better. And then I’m here. – Yes? Then take me wherever you want.” John Cagliero (16 years of age) was looking after the sick in the isolation hospital with Don Bosco. A doctor saw him and shouted: “This boy has no business being here! This is a very imprudent move on your part” “Don’t worry, doctor,” Don Bosco replied. “Neither of us is afraid and nothing will happen.”³⁵ John B. Anfossi at the process of beatification of Don Bosco wrote: “I was lucky enough to accompany Don Bosco on several visits to cholera patients. I was only 14 then, and I remember that I was calm and completely confident that I would not catch the disease as I nursed the sick. That’s how much we trusted Don Bosco’s word. His ardent spirit of sacrifice encouraged me.”³⁶

With the autumn rains the epidemic came to an end. Among Don Bosco’s very young volunteers not one contracted cholera.

The second example I want to remind you of is the first missionary expedition departure which happened on 11 November 1875. At the end of January Don Bosco had told the Salesians and the boys that the first missionaries would soon be leaving for the missions in southern Argentina; and on 5 February, in a circular letter he announced it officially, asking the Salesians to make themselves available.³⁷ It aroused an irresistible enthusiasm.³⁸

But among the not-so-young it caused fear and perplexity about an enterprise that seemed fool-hardy. “We have to take ourselves back to those times,” – Fr Ceria writes – “when the Oratory did not yet have one might say an international atmosphere and the Congregation still had the air of a family gathered very closely around its Head.”³⁹ On the day of the solemn announcement “a few of the Superiors at the sight of such elaborate display had been reluctant to take their seat on the dais. They feared that when the time came to carry out the plan it would fail for lack of personnel or means.”⁴⁰ The houses opened in Italy were already numerous and the personnel the indispensable minimum. With the departure of ten missionaries (and Don Bosco did not want to send the ‘rejects’, but the best of the Congregation) the main works would be bled dry.

It was difficult to imagine the huge work of Valdocco (700 boys, about sixty Salesians) without John Cagliero. At 37 he had become one of the two young columns of the Congregation: Rua, Don Bosco’s silent and faithful shadow, Cagliero, Don Bosco’s sharp mind and strong arm. With a degree in theology he taught the clerics. He was an incomparable director of music and composer, Spiritual Director of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians scarcely two years old. It was also difficult to take away from the fragile Salesian structure of the house at Varazze the graduate priest Joseph Fagnano. So it was with all the others who setting out for the missions undermined the Salesian forces in different works. And yet Don Bosco sent that group of Salesians to the other side of the ocean. “Who knows,” – he said – “this departure, this

³⁴ BM V pp. 53.54.

³⁵ BM V p. 64.

³⁶ BM V p. 64-65.

³⁷ Lett. 5 February 1875, E II p. 451.

³⁸ Cf. G. BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, quad. 3, pp. 3-25: ASC A 001.

³⁹ E. CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana dalle origini alla morte di S. Giovanni Bosco (1841-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1941) p. 249.

⁴⁰ BM XI p. 130.

humble beginning may be the seed that will grow into a mighty tree? It might be like a tiny grain of millet or of mustard seed that will grow little by little and accomplish great things?”⁴¹ They set out for an unknown land having as their only security Don Bosco’s word. And those ten, with an act of supreme confidence in him, gave rise to the great Salesian Missions.

My heart is filled with joy looking at the Salesian world and seeing that also today we are not afraid to commit ourselves to enterprises that are courageous and humanly speaking fool-hardy/imprudent. On the wretchedly poor outskirts of so many large cities where there is the danger of losing one’s health and one’s life among the poor youngsters there are the Sons of Don Bosco. In distant out-of-the-way places, forgotten by everyone, in villages in the Andes, in forests where threatened aboriginal tribes are living, in the endless African bush there are the joyful sounds of the Salesian oratories. If we were to forget this courage and this imprudence, if in some places we were opting for an easy life and being lazy, it is Don Bosco who calls us back to “go to them [the young] where they are to be found and provide adequate forms of service in the context of their own life style” (C. 41): “following his example, we want to meet up with them, convinced that the best way to respond to their poverty is, in fact, through preventive action.”⁴²

c) *The Sodality of Mary Immaculate founded by Saint Dominic Savio, was the small field in which the first seeds of the Salesian crop germinated*

Dominic arrived at the Oratory in the autumn of 1854, at the end of the deadly plague which decimated the city of Turin. He immediately became friends with Michael Rua, John Cagliero, John Bonetti, Joseph Bongiovanni who he used to accompany on the way to school in the city. With all probability he didn’t know anything about the ‘Salesian Society’ Don Bosco had begun to talk about with some of his boys in January of that year. But in the following spring he had an idea that he confided to Joseph Bongiovanni. In the Oratory there were some marvellous boys, but there were also ruffians who behaved badly, and there were boys who were suffering, having difficulty with their studies and feeling homesick. Each one on his own tried to help them. Why couldn’t the more willing boys join together, in a ‘secret society,’ and become a tight group of small apostles in the middle of the others? Joseph agreed. They spoke to some others about it. They liked the idea. It was decided to call the group the “Immaculate Conception Sodality”. Don Bosco gave his consent: they should try, draw up a small set of rules. He himself wrote: “One of the members who was most helpful to Dominic in setting up the *Immaculate Conception Sodality*, and in drawing up the rules, was Joseph Bongioanni.”⁴³

From the minutes of the Sodality preserved in the Salesian Archives we know that the members who met together once a week were a dozen: Michael Rua (who was elected President), Dominic Savio, Joseph Bongiovanni (elected Secretary), Celestine Durando, John B. Francesia, John Bonetti, Angelo Savio a cleric, Joseph Rocchietti, John Turchi, Aloysius Marcellino, Joseph Reano, Francis Vaschetti. John Cagliero was missing because he was recovering from a serious illness and was living in his mother’s house.

The final article of the Regulations which were approved by everyone including Don Bosco, said: “A sincere, filial, unlimited trust in Mary, a special love for her, a constant devotion will enable us to overcome every obstacle, strong in our resolve, hard on ourselves, gentle towards our neighbour, exact in everything.”

The members of the Sodality decided to “look after” two kinds of boys, who in the secret language of the minutes were called ‘clients’. The first category was made up of

⁴¹ BM XI p. 360.

⁴² GC 26, 98.

⁴³ G. BOSCO, ‘Life of Dominic Savio’, in *Edifying Biographies* (Rome: UPS, 2007) p. 76.

the indisciplined, those who easily swore and were not slow to use their fists. Each member took responsibility for one of them and became his “guardian angel” for as long as necessary (Michael Magone had a persevering ‘guardian angel!’).

The second category was made up of the new arrivals. They helped them to enjoy their first few days when as yet they didn’t know anybody, didn’t know how to play, spoke only the dialect where they came from and were homesick. (Francis Cerruti had Dominic Savio as his “guardian angel”, and he speaks glowingly of their first meetings).

In the minutes one can see the way each meeting unfolded: a prayer moment, a few minutes of spiritual reading, an exhortation to each other to go to Confession and Communion; “there was some talk about the clients entrusted to them. They were encouraged to be patient and trust in God for those who seemed deaf and closed to all appeals; prudence and sweetness towards those who seem more easily persuaded.”⁴⁴

Comparing the names of the members of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception Sodality with the names of the first ‘*ascritti*’ (those enrolled) in the Pious Society, one has the moving impression that the ‘Sodality’ had been ‘proving ground’ for the Congregation which Don Bosco was preparing to found. It was the small field in which the first seeds of the Salesian harvest began to sprout.

The ‘Sodality’ became the yeast in the Oratory. It transformed ordinary boys into little apostles with the simplest of formulas: a weekly meeting with a prayer, a short spiritual reading, mutual encouragement to receive the Sacraments, a practical plan of how and who to help in the place where they were living, a spontaneous chat about their recent successes or failures.

Don Bosco was very happy with it. He wanted it to be transplanted in every Salesian house that was starting so that there too there might be a nucleus of committed boys and of future Salesian and priestly vocations.

In the four pages of advice that Don Bosco gave Michael Rua when he was going to found the first Salesian house outside Turin, at Mirabello (they are one of the best summaries of his educational system, and would be given to every new Salesian Rector) the following two lines can be read: “Seek to establish the Immaculate Conception Sodality. Promote it but do not act as its director. It must appear as the pupils’ initiative.”⁴⁵

In every Salesian house a group of committed boys called whatever we think best but a copy of the old ‘Immaculate Conception Sodality’! Might not this be the secret that Don Bosco is entrusting to us once again to make Salesian and priestly vocations flourish?

3. CONSECRATED TO GOD IN THE YOUNG

That “the option for the young made by Don Bosco at scarcely 30 years of age (1844-1846), in order to become the ‘mission’ of the Salesians, was necessarily based on the ‘*humus*’ of consecration”⁴⁶ had been his conviction after a long and painful apprenticeship. From the start he tried to gather round him a group of collaborators, ecclesiastics and lay people; however, no one among those first helpers will enter the Congregation. In the absence of collaborators, he tried to recruit from his own nursery; in July 1849 he set on the path to the ecclesiastical state a group of four young men, who had been helping him in the Oratory; the four clerics (Joseph Buzzetti, Charles

⁴⁴ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)* (Roma: LAS, 1980) p. 481.

⁴⁵ BM VII p. 319.

⁴⁶ Cf. F. MOTTO, *Ripartire da Don Bosco. Dalla Storia alla vita oggi* (Torino-Leumann: Elledici, 2007) p. 83.

Gastini, James Bellia, Felix Reviglio) “always remained attached to Don Bosco and to his work all their lives, but they were never Salesian priests,”⁴⁷ only Buzzetti will become a Brother and die a Salesian.

Who knows, perhaps it was from this experience of his that Don Bosco came to understand and defend the inseparable connection between consecration and mission in Salesian life. The diocesan priest was thus becoming “gradually... a religious, master and former of communities of consecrated persons.”⁴⁸ It is clear from even the first article of the Constitutions, constantly being more clarified, that Don Bosco placed the mission to youth as the aim of the Congregation.⁴⁹ He was convinced, and it is the characteristic feature of his spirituality, that “progress towards ‘holiness’ is realised in the activity of service, especially for the most needy young people,”⁵⁰ giving oneself to God was for him a necessary requirement for giving oneself to the young. “We consecrated ourselves to God,” Don Bosco wrote to the Salesians in 1884, “to practise charity towards our neighbour solely for the love of God in order that we might not become attached to His creatures.”⁵¹

3.1 Sons of Consecrated Founders

The group which constituted the ‘Society of St. Francis of Sales’ the evening of 18 December 1859, contained eighteen people, including Don Bosco; they called themselves ‘enrolled’.⁵² Two of them (Cagliero and Rua) had been among those who five years earlier, on 26 January 1854,⁵³ determined to “with the help of the Lord and St Francis of Sales [...]test ourselves by performing deeds of charity towards our neighbour, then bind ourselves by a promise, and later, if possible and desirable, make a formal vow to God.”⁵⁴ About three years after that 18 December, on 14 May 1862, now twenty-two in number they became consecrated persons, the first ‘Salesians’, making the first official vows,⁵⁵ while Don Bosco himself offered himself “in sacrifice to the Lord, ready to bear anything for His greater glory and the welfare of souls.”⁵⁶

In the minutes of the ‘Superior Chapter’, dated 14 May 1862, we can read:

“The members of the Society of St. Francis of Sales were called together by their superior. Most of them (*who had completed the year of novitiate*) confirmed their

⁴⁷ F. DESRAMAUT, ‘Don Bosco fondatore’, in M. MIDALI (a cura di), *Don Bosco Fondatore della Famiglia Salesiana*. Atti del Simposio (Roma, 22-26 gennaio 1989) p. 129. Cf. MB III pp. 549-550.

⁴⁸ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I (Roma: LAS, 2003) p. 435.

⁴⁹ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di F. MOTTO [Roma: LAS 1982] pp. 72-73.

⁵⁰ F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1996) p. 573.

⁵¹ BM XVII p. 3.

⁵² Of the eighteen two were priests, Don Bosco and Don Alasonatti, one a lay man (Giuseppe Gaia) and the rest, clerics, whose average age was under twenty one (Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)* [Roma: LAS, 1980] p. 295

⁵³ This year was to be the “watershed” between the times of the Oratory and those of the Salesian Society, according to A. J. LENTI, *Don Bosco. History and Spirit*. III: Don Bosco Educator, Spiritual Master, Writer and Founder of the Salesian Society. Edited by A. GIRAUDDO (Roma: LAS, 2008) pp. 312.316-319.

⁵⁴ BM V p. 8. The other two involved on that day 26 January 1854, with Cagliero and Rua, were Rocchietti and Artiglia. Rocchietti, while not being among those called together on 18 December 1859, is in the group of those professed 14 May 1862. Cf. also E. CERIA, *Vita del servo di Dio Don Michele Rua*, primo successore di San Giovanni Bosco (Torino: SEI, 1949) p. 29.

⁵⁵ Of those called together on 18 December 1859 three do not arrive at the first profession on 14 May 1862: Marcellino Aloysius, Pettiva Secondo and Rovetto Anthony. Eight others join during the three year period: Albera Paul, Boggero John, Gaia Joseph, Garino John, Jarac Aloysius, Oreglia Frederick, Rocchetti Joseph, Ruffino Dominic.

⁵⁶ BM VII p. 102. Cf. FDB 1873, *Epistolario* 5-6.

allegiance to the fledgling Society by formally pronouncing triennial vows. The ceremony took place as follows:

“Wearing a surplice, Don Bosco, our superior, asked us to kneel; then kneeling himself, he began to recite the *Veni Creator* (...), there followed Our Lady’s Litany. (...) These prayers over, all the members loudly and clearly pronounced their vows together according to the formulary (...) ... and signed their names in a special register, as follows (*in sacris* (with holy orders) Fr. Alasonatti Victor, Fr. Rua Michael, Fr. Savio Angelo, Fr. Rocchietti Joseph, Fr. Cagliari John, Fr. Francesca John, Bapt., Fr Ruffino Dominic; the clerics Durando Celestine, Anfossi John, Bapt., Boggero John, Bonetti John, Ghivarello Charles, Cerruti Francis, Chiapale Aloysius, Bongiovanni Joseph, Lazzerio Joseph, Provera Francis, Garino John, Jarac Aloysius, Albera Paul; and the lay members Chevalier Oreglia Frederick of S. Stefano, and Gaia Joseph.”⁵⁷

Fr Bonetti, in his chronicle, continues: “Twenty-two of us, besides Don Bosco, who was kneeling by the table on which the crucifix stood, took vows as prescribed by our rules, repeating the formulary, phrase by phrase as Fr Rua read it. Afterwards Don Bosco alone stood up and gave us a few comforting words of encouragement ... Among other things he said: « (...) One may wonder: – Did Don Bosco make these vows too? – Well: as you were making your vows before me, I too was making them in perpetuity before this crucifix; I offered myself in sacrifice to the Lord, ready to bear anything for His greater glory and the welfare of souls, particularly the souls of the young. May the Lord help us to be faithful to our vows (...). My dear sons, we live in troubled times (...) I *have sound reasons – not mere probable ones – that it is God’s will that our Society be born and grow.* (...) Everything leads us to believe that *God is with us* (...) Who knows but that the Lord may wish to use this Society to achieve much 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, may count a thousand members *in different countries.*”⁵⁸

In the list of the 22 mentioned in the minutes there are eight new names all young or very young, from twenty-two year old Dominic Ruffino to the seventeen year olds Paul Albera and John Garino.

Don Bosco only allowed his sons to make the first perpetual vows, with which one consecrates oneself to God for the whole of life, after having completed triennial vows. The minutes record: “On November 10 1865, in the presence of Father John Bosco, rector, Father John Cagliari and Father Charles Ghivarello, witnesses, and all the members of the Society of St. Francis of Sales, Father John Baptist Lemoyne (*26 years of age, a priest for three years in the diocese of Genoa, who had come ‘to help Don Bosco’*) made the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in perpetuity in accordance with the prescribed ritual.”

“On November 15 – again the minutes record – in the presence of all the members of the Salesian Society, Fathers: Michael Rua, John Cagliari, John Baptist Francesca, Charles Ghivarello, John Bonetti, the clerics Henry Bonetti and Peter Racca, and the laymen Joseph Gaia and Dominic Rossi took perpetual vows in the presence of Father John Bosco, rector.”⁵⁹

On 6 December added to the list of the ‘perpetually consecrated’ were Father Celestine Durando, layman Frederick Oreglia and the clerics Aloysius Jarach, Joseph Mazzarello and Joachim Berto.⁶⁰ As Don Bosco had explained many times in his conferences in preparation for the vows ‘consecrated’ means “someone belonging to God,” “vowed to God.” In Don Bosco’s way of speaking ‘consecration’, ‘profession’, ‘holy vows’ become synonymous.

⁵⁷ BM VII p. 101.

⁵⁸ BM VII pp. 102-103. Cf. FDB 992, *Epistolario* 10. – The italics are mine.

⁵⁹ BM VIII p. 126.

⁶⁰ Cf. BM VIII p. 127

John Bosco always considered himself 'consecrated'

John Bosco had always thought of himself as 'belonging to God'. On fine summer nights, Mamma Margaret and her children would go outside their little house and sit down to enjoy the fresh air on the door step (which is still there worn down with time but still a silent witness). They would look up at the only 'video' there was in those days: the sky full of stars. His mamma would say quietly: "It's God who has created everything, and put so many stars up there." And John felt surrounded by the mysterious presence of that great invisible Person, who had given life to everything, including himself. And his mother taught him to discover him everywhere: in the heavens, in the beautiful fields, in the face of the poor, in his conscience which speaks with his voice and tells him: "You have done well, you have done wrong." He felt he was 'immersed in God' and to be 'God's'.

This is the greatest gift his holy mother gave him. John Bosco made his 'consecration to God,' quite unconsciously as a little boy, holding his mother's hand.

John Bosco didn't need to kneel down to pray. He prayed in the early morning when his mother got him up on his knees on the floor in the kitchen beside his brothers and his mother. Then 'he spoke to God,' prayed, therefore, everywhere: on the grass in the hay, rounding up a cow that had strayed, looking up at the heavens: at the Moglia farm Mrs Dorothy and her brother-in-law John one day found him kneeling "a book dangling from his hands; his eyes were closed his face turned towards the sky"⁶¹, and they had to shake him so absorbed he was in his meditation. The years when he was a young country boy were years "in which the sense of God became more deeply rooted in him, as did contemplation to which he became accustomed in solitude and in speaking to God during his work in the fields."⁶²

Little by little prayer became for John Bosco (country-boy, student, seminarian, priest) the atmosphere that surrounded every activity without breaking its rhythm. Pope Pius XI, who as a young priest had spent only two days with the sixty-eight year old, noticed it: it was an atmosphere that filled Don Bosco's every action. And he described it in five words: "Don Bosco *was with God*".

The Pope requests consecration with vows

In 1857 Don Bosco confided to his spiritual director Fr Cafasso the difficulties he was encountering in trying to make his Work stable and secure. He had thought that a serious promise on the part of the best of his collaborators to stay and work with him would have been sufficient. But the facts did not bear this out; he did not succeed in holding on to the boys and clerics to help him with his enterprise. Fr Cafasso after only a brief period of reflection replied: «What you absolutely need is a religious congregation (...) What you need is a society with vows approved by the Holy See. Only then could you have control of its members ».⁶³

Not convinced, Don Bosco also consulted Bishop Losana of Biella. Then he wrote a letter to his archbishop exiled in Lyon, Archbishop Fansonì. The reply to this was "to go to Rome to receive the advice and instructions of Pius IX".⁶⁴

⁶¹ BM I p. 147.

⁶² P. STELLA, *Don Bosco in the history of Catholic Religious thought and practice*. Vol. I: Life and Works [Roma: LAS, 1979²] p. 36.

⁶³ BM V p. 452.

⁶⁴ BM V p. 463.

Don Bosco obeyed his archbishop and in the introductory part of the *Rules of the Society of St. Francis of Sales*, 1877 Edition,⁶⁵ he wrote: “The first time the supreme Pontiff spoke of the Salesian Society, he said: «In a religious congregation or society vows are necessary, so that all its members may be united by a tie of conscience to their superior, and the superior holds himself united with the Head of the Church, and as a consequence with God Himself.»”⁶⁶

Practically everyone told him that “the seed cannot sprout upwards (*mission*) unless at the same time its roots spread downwards” (*consecration*).

Don Bosco did not hesitate any further. He was convinced that his helpers too in addition to staying with him and becoming like him needed ‘to be God’s’ in order to be able to devote their whole lives to the salvation of youth: “In young people who felt drawn to remain with Don Bosco, the idea of giving oneself to God early was translated into an attraction to the priestly or religious state.”⁶⁷

3.2 Don Bosco’s teaching to his Salesians

To the Salesians, “Don Bosco speaks about the Salesian Society as a seer and prophet (...) The person joining Don Bosco becomes part of a divine plan. Like Don Bosco, individual Salesians are chosen and predestined to be instruments of God’s glory and the salvation of souls.”⁶⁸

At the beginning of the book of the Rules, Don Bosco writes a long letter ‘To the Salesian Confreres’, forty page which the Salesian novices read and studied for a hundred years. Don Bosco extensively presents the gospel principles and his thoughts on religious life, consecration, the vows, Salesian life. At the end he writes: “Receive these thoughts as a memento which I leave you before departing for eternity towards which I feel myself rapidly drawing close.”⁶⁹

Here then the “core” and at the same time the jewel in the crown of these pages on our consecration and our vows. With veneration let us listen to this ‘testament’ of our Founder.

The consecrated person

With our vows “we consecrate ourselves to God and place our will, our possessions and our physical and moral faculties in the power of the Superior so that we may all form but one heart and one soul in order to promote in accordance with our Constitutions the greater glory of God. (...) The vows are a generous offering. (...) The Doctors of the Church are also wont to compare the religious vows to martyrdom, saying that what the vows fall short of in respect of intensity is made up for by duration.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ In this Introduction, “in the writing of which D. Bosco got the help of Fr D. Barberis and others”, “the gospel and spiritual principles of religious life were highlighted” (G. BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di F. MOTTO [Roma: LAS 1982] p. 20).

⁶⁶ *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales* secondo il Decreto di Approvazione del 3 aprile 1874 (Ed. Torino 1877) ‘Ai Soci Salesiani’, p. 19.

⁶⁷ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco in the history of Catholic Religious thought and practice*. Vol. II: Religious outlook and Spirituality [New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1996] p. 399.

⁶⁸ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco in the history of Catholic Religious thought and practice*. Vol. II: Religious outlook and Spirituality [New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1996] p. 409.

⁶⁹ *Rules or Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales* according to the Decree of Approval 3 April 1874 (Ed. Torino 1875) ‘To Salesian confreres,’ p. XLI.

⁷⁰ *Rules or Constitutions of the Society of St Francis of Sales* according to the Decree of Approval 3 April 1874 (Ed. Torino 1875) ‘To Salesian confreres,’ p. 25.

“The man who consecrates himself to God in religion... lives with greater purity of heart, of will and of action, and consequently his every action and his every word are spontaneously offered to God with purity of body and of heart.”⁷¹

“Through the observance of the religious vows, occupied with what redounds to the greater glory of God ... (*the consecrated person*) can freely concern himself with the service of the Lord, entrusting every thought about the present and the future in the hands of God and of his Superiors who take His place.”⁷²

“Whoever gives a cup of water for love of the heavenly Father will have his reward. One then who abandons the world, renounces every earthly satisfaction, gives his life and all he possesses to follow the Divine Master, what reward in heaven will he not have?”⁷³

“In all our duties, in all our labours, troubles and afflictions let us never forget that since we are consecrated to God, from Him alone we can expect our reward. Most minute is the account He keeps even of the least thing that is done for His Holy Name, and it is of faith that in His own good time He will reward abundantly. When at the end of life we shall present ourselves at His tribunal he will say to us with a loving countenance: “Well done thou good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will place thee over many; enter into the joy of thy Lord.”⁷⁴

The Holy vows

Obedience

“True obedience which makes us dear unto God and to our Superiors consists in doing cheerfully whatever is commanded us by our Constitutions or by our Superiors themselves, who are the guarantors of a our actions before God ...; it consists in showing ourselves docile even in things that are most difficult and contrary to self-love, and in performing them courageously even when they cost us pain and sacrifice.. In these cases obedience is more difficult but it is also more meritorious and leads us to the possession of the kingdom of Heaven.” The consecrated person “with great confidence can say with St. Augustine: «Lord, give me what you command, and command what you will.»”⁷⁵

Poverty

The consecrated person “is considered as literally possessing nothing, having made oneself poor to become rich with Jesus Christ. He is following the example of our Saviour Who was born in poverty, lived deprived of all things and died stripped of his raiment on the Cross.” (...)

“It is true that at times we shall have to suffer some inconveniences in our journeys and labours, in time of health or of sickness. We shall sometimes have food, clothing and other things which are not to our liking; but it is precisely in these cases that we ought to bear in mind that we have made profession of poverty, and that if we wish to have its merit and reward we ought to bear its consequences. Let us be well on our guard against a sort of poverty highly censured by St Bernard. “There are some,” he says, “who glory in being called poor, but will not bear the consequences of poverty...There are others too who are content to be poor provided they want for nothing.”⁷⁶

Chastity

⁷¹ *Ivi* p. 16.

⁷² *Ivi* p. 17.

⁷³ *Ivi* p. 18.

⁷⁴ *Ivi* p. 53.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 27

⁷⁶ *Ivi* pp. 28.29.

Chastity is “the virtue that is supremely necessary, the great virtue, the angelic virtue to which all the others form the crown ... Our Saviour assures us that those who possess this inestimable treasure become even in this life like to the angels of God.”

“Do not enter into the Salesian Society before you have consulted some prudent person who will judge if you are likely to be able to preserve this virtue.”

And almost at the end of the long letter, Don Bosco concludes: “Whoever consecrates himself to the Lord with the holy vows makes an offering that is most precious and most pleasing to the Divine Majesty.”⁷⁷

The dream of the consecrated Salesian Society

At the end of 1881 Don Bosco (66 years of age) picks up his pen and writes to all the Salesians about a dream he had on the night between 10 and 11 September. It is the famous ‘*dream of the diamonds*’. He was walking with the Rectors of the Salesian houses when

“a man of majestic mien – so majestic that none of us could fix our gaze on him – appeared among us (...) He was clad in a rich mantle (...) The scarf was inscribed in luminous letters: *The Pious Salesian Society in 1881* – and on the ribbon were the words: *What it ought to be*. Ten diamonds of extraordinary size and brilliance adorning that august person kept our gaze from being fixed upon him (...)

“Five diamonds adorn[ed] the back of his cloak (...) the largest and most brilliant sparkled in the very centre and on it was written: *Obedience*. The diamond to its upper right read: *Vow of poverty* (...) On the diamond to the upper left was written: *Vow of chastity* (...) Their rays resembling tongues of fire flickered upward forming various maxims. (...)

On the rays of Obedience: *The foundation of the whole edifice, and a précis of sanctity*. On the rays of Poverty: *Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Riches are thorns. Poverty is not made of words but is in the hearts and deeds. Poverty will open the gates of heaven and enter in*. On the rays of Chastity: *All virtues came with it. The clean of heart will see God’s mysteries and God Himself (...)*.

“A light shone, focusing on a poster which read: “*The Pious Society as it runs the risk of being in the year of salvation 1900*” (...) The same august person appeared again (...) His cape was faded, moth-eaten and threadbare. Where each diamond had previously been set there was now a gaping hole (...) In the place of Obedience there was only a gaping hole and no inscription. In the place of Chastity: *Concupiscence of the eyes and pride of life*. Poverty was replaced by: *Comfort, clothes, drink and money*.

We were now all filled with fear”

Don Bosco continues the account saying that at that moment the gentle voice of a young man addressed them:

“*Servants and instruments of Almighty God, listen and understand. Take heart and be strong. What you have seen and heard is a heavenly warning sent to you and to your confreres. Take it to heart and try to understand it ...*

“*Preach unceasingly in season and out of season. However, make sure that you always practise what you preach, so that your deeds may be a light, which may be passed on to your confreres from generation to generation as a solid tradition.*

“*Take heed and understand. From morning to night ceaselessly meditate on the observance of the Constitutions.*

⁷⁷ Ivi pp. 30.31.41.

“If you do this the hand of the Almighty will never fail you. You will be a model to the world and to the angels and your glory will be the glory of God”(...)

Don Bosco concludes his manuscript with these words: “The dream lasted almost the entire night, so that, come morning I was totally exhausted (...) Our Society is blessed by God but He asks us also to do our share. The evils threatened will be warded off if we preach about the vices and virtues pointed out to us. If we practise what we preach, we shall be able to hand on to our confreres a practical tradition of what we have done and shall do (...) Mary Help of Christians - Pray for us.”⁷⁸

A Salesian historian has said that in this dream there is little dream and a great deal of fatherly exhortation from our Holy Founder. It could well be. This takes away nothing from the force of what is said (taken for the most part from the Bible) which Don Bosco, and the Lord, gives to his sons. It ought to be the guidelines for our life and the subject of our meditation, so as to walk in the spirit of ‘Salesian consecrated persons.’

4. OUR CONSTITUTIONS, THE WAY OF FIDELITY

4.1 The first photograph Don Bosco wanted

In November 1875. Don Bosco was about to fulfil his dream of sending the first Salesian missionaries to South America, to Patagonia. And for the first time in his life he wanted a photograph taken. It was to immortalise the event, to make it widely known, and to serve as a stimulus to the Salesians and to their boys. So he turned to the most distinguished photographer in Turin, Michael Schemboche.⁷⁹ In the photographer’s studio he posed with the ten missionaries in ‘formal dress’. The photograph shows in its details the great importance Don Bosco wanted to give to the event: those about to leave are dressed in the Spanish manner with the characteristic cloak and the missionary crucifix is clearly visible on all of them; the Argentine Consul is in dress uniform; Don Bosco is wearing the cloak and the skull-cap as on those great occasions when he goes to see the Pope, and he is posing as he hands to the head of the expedition Fr Cagliero a book: it is the Rule of the Salesian Society. He wanted to highlight this gesture which for him had a deep significance.

Don Rua, his Successor will write: “When the Venerable Don Bosco sent his first sons to America, he had himself photographed in the act of handing Fr John Cagliero, who headed the expedition the book of the *Constitutions*. How many things Don Bosco was saying with that gesture! It was as though he were saying: «You will cross the seas, you will go to places unknown, you will have to deal with people of different languages and customs, you will perhaps be exposed to great trials. I should like to accompany you myself, to comfort you, console you, protect you. But what I cannot do myself this little book will do. Guard it as a precious treasure »”.⁸⁰

4.2 A long and thorny path

My dear confreres I invite you to trace with me the long and thorny road that that “little book” of our Rules cost our Holy Founder.

After having founded our Society, Don Bosco had to write a Rule (or Constitutions) for it and obtain the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities. It was the norm to obtain

⁷⁸ C. ROMERO, *I Sogni di Don Bosco*. Edizione critica (Torino: Elle Di Ci, 1978) pp. 63-71; cf BM XV, pp 148-151

⁷⁹ G. SOLDÀ, *Don Bosco nella fotografia dell’800*. 1861-1888 (Torino: SEI, 1987) p. 124.

⁸⁰ *Lettere circolari di Don Rua ai Salesiani* (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1910) p. 409.

first diocesan and then eventually pontifical approval. But since in those years the Archbishop of Turin was exiled in Lyon and contacts with him through a third party [not very favourable to Don Bosco] were difficult our Founder considered turning directly to the Pope.

He thought that it was a simple matter that would not take long. In fact, the first draft (1858) was the point of arrival after over a decade of educational experience he had gained in the Oratory. There were 58 articles divided into nine short chapters. They said quite simply that the Society would be composed of ecclesiastics and lay people, united by the vows, wishing to consecrate themselves to the welfare of poor youth and to 'support the Catholic religion' among the ordinary people 'by word and writings'.

The pages reflected an atmosphere a peaceful familiarity, the Superior was the papà of a large family. The spirituality which emerged was simple and rooted in the Gospel. The members consecrated themselves to God, in imitation of Christ, the 'divine Saviour' who 'began to do and to teach'. And their mission was to consist in the practice of charity towards the young, especially the poorest, and towards 'ordinary folk'. This was the extremely simple charism the new religious Society was intending to bring to the Church.

Four years before a law signed by the Minister Rattazzi had suppressed 'religious corporations', that is to say the orders and congregations, and had 'confiscated' their houses and goods. This law, first applied only in Piedmont, was about to be extended to the whole of Italy. So that this would not happen to his Society, Don Bosco (on the advice of the Minister himself, who held him in great esteem) inserted an article in which it was stated that the Salesians would be totally religious before the Church but citizens who retained their civil rights before the State. This formulation (which had in fact pleased Pope Pius IX) was an absolute novelty, which threw open new prospects/opportunities for the Church: by adopting it, Religious would no longer have been subject to harassment on the part of the State.

As regards "a simple matter that would not take long" Don Bosco was mistaken. From a first draft (in 1855) until the definitive approval almost twenty year would pass.⁸¹ Don Bosco suffered greatly as a result. This is how he summed up that painful journey: "Our poor rules were being taken apart and insurmountable difficulties raised with every word. Those who could have done the most for me were determinedly opposed."⁸² This complaint of Don Bosco was not without cause: as can be seen from "the corrections, the additions, the re-castings which alternate throughout the almost twenty years during which the text was being formulated,...those poor notebooks, those simple and tormented pages bear witness to how much the production of certain articles and chapters cost Don Bosco."⁸³

The main criticisms were addressed to two points on which Don Bosco never budged: the distinction in every Salesian between the 'religious' subject to the Church and the 'citizen who preserved his civil rights' (the reference to 'civil laws' caused concern, because it could appear as a recognition of the State which was persecuting the Church); and the faculty of the Superior of the Congregation to admit to sacred orders those Salesians he considered worthy.

On 3 April 1874 the text of the Rule, re-touched in some points was finally approved. But for the final step the personal vote of the Pope Pius IX was required. The historical-spiritual *Proemium* was suppressed and the 'normalisation' of the novitiate and of the studies assimilated; in addition the formula 'civil rights' was changed to 'radical

⁸¹ Cf. M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni*. Tra storia e nuove sfide (Roma: LAS, 2000) p. 145.

⁸² MB IX p. 228. In this last line Don Bosco is referring to the serious obstacles presented by Archbishop Gastaldi, who had become Archbishop of Turin in 1871.

⁸³ G. BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*. Introduzione e testi critici a cura di F. MOTTO [Roma: LAS 1982] p. 15.

control of his own property', and the 'faculty to admit to orders' was granted only as a 'privilege' for ten years.⁸⁴

Don Bosco, with a telegram from Rome, launched the great celebration in Valdocco, where they waited and prayed for the long-desired approval. But he also confessed that, 'if he had known before what it would cost him perhaps his courage would have failed him.'

4.3 Sacred nature of the Rule approved by the Church

Immediately afterwards on Don Bosco's own part there began a feeling of respect faced with the new sacred nature acquired by the Salesian Rule. That little book was no longer a battle field where corrections, additions, changes were made and unmade. It was the exposition (preserved substantially intact in the course of the long fight) of the very simple charism which the new religious Society humbly brought to the Church and which the Church approved.

"Our Constitutions," – he wrote in the letter 'to the Salesian confreres' with which the book of the Rules opens – "were definitively approved by the Holy See on 3 April 1874. This fact ... assures us that in observing our rules we rest upon a firm, secure and I may add, infallible basis, since the judgement of the Supreme Head of the Church sanctioning them is infallible."⁸⁵ With his practical sense Don Bosco immediately continues: "Yet no matter what its inherent value may be this approbation would be of little avail, if the rules were not known, and faithfully observed."⁸⁶

4.4 The constant recurring theme of Don Bosco and of Don Rua

From that moment the observance of the Rule (that is of the consecration and the mission) became Don Bosco's constant theme tune. In the circular Letter of 6 January 1884 he says and repeats, insists and renews this invitation:

"Keep our rules, the rules that Holy Mother the Church condescended to approve for our guidance and the welfare of our souls, for the spiritual and temporal welfare of our beloved pupils. We have read and studied these rules, and now they represent the object of our promises and vows that consecrate us to Our Lord. I, therefore, implore you with my whole soul never to allow any word of regret, or worse yet, of sorrow ever to escape from you for having thus consecrated yourselves to Our Lord (...)

"Some of you may well say that it is hard to observe the rules. Observance of the rules will be hard for anyone who observes them reluctantly or is therein neglectful. But to those who are diligent, who are solicitous for the welfare of their souls, such observance becomes an easy yoke, as Our Divine Saviour said and a light burden only (...)

"Then, too, my dear children, do we then expect to go to Paradise in a riding carriage? (...) We consecrated ourselves to God to obey, not to give orders; [...] to practise charity towards our neighbour solely for the love of God, in order that we

⁸⁴ Cf. M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni. Tra storia e nuove sfide* (Roma: LAS, 2000) pp. 154-155.

⁸⁵ *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales* secondo il Decreto di Approvazione del 3 aprile 1874 (Ed. Torino 1877) 'Ai Soci Salesiani', p. 3. It should be noted that when in 1875 Don Bosco used these expressions in the introduction to the first printed version of the approved Constitutions scarcely five years had passed since the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican Council I.

⁸⁶ *Ivi* p. 3.

might not become attached to His creatures. We did not intend to live a life of ease, but to be poor with Jesus Christ and to suffer here on earth with Jesus Christ, in order to become worthy of His glory in Heaven.”⁸⁷

Don Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco, called ‘the living Rule’ and today Beatified, called the Rule: “The book of life, kernel of the Gospel, hope of our salvation, measure of our perfection, key of heaven. Venerate it as the most beautiful memory and the most precious relic of our beloved Don Bosco!”⁸⁸

4.5 The renewal of the Constitutions

After the Second Vatican Council, a Special General Chapter (1971-1972) was called to entirely re-draft the Constitutions, taking into account the two requirements indicated by the Council: to return to the original charism of the Congregation and to adapt the Constitutions to the needs of the times.

There were about seven months of intense work “in a lively and sometime tense atmosphere between the traditionalists and those in favour of change, between the demands of unity and those of decentralisation, or also between those of a central authority and those of co-responsibility.”⁸⁹

In their contents and in their style the renewed Constitutions became “a Rule of Life less juridical than spiritual, which not only formulated prescriptions, but gave gospel, theological and Salesian motivations.”⁹⁰ The renewed Rules were ‘*ad experimentum*’ for six years and then for another six years.

In 1984 the XXII General Chapter, after further demanding work, approved the definitive text of our renewed Rule. This text, finally, was approved by the Holy See on 25 November 1984. The Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, seventh Successor of Don Bosco, in the closing address of the General Chapter was able to say: “It is a well-structured text, profound, improved, imbued with the Gospel, rich in the authentic spirit of the origins, open to universality and looking towards the future, temperate and dignified, full of well-balanced realism and of the assimilation of the principles of the Council. It is a text that has been re-thought collectively in fidelity to Don Bosco and in response to the challenges of the times.”⁹¹

4.6 The words of the testament

In the last three years of his life Don Bosco wrote in instalments in a little note book his ‘spiritual testament’. The irregular and tortured hand-writing reveal his poor eyesight and his physical tiredness. The style simple, solid, efficient. The person who prepared the critical edition writes: “One can read in it, as in a mirror, Don Bosco’s self-portrait (...) Faced with certain passages, it is difficult not to feel in the presence of a ‘sacred’ text, it is so imbued with words that are not empty nor fleeting.”⁹² In this ‘testament’, Don Bosco devotes five small pages to greeting his Salesians. I give here the essential words:

“My dear and beloved sons in Jesus Christ

⁸⁷ *Lettere circolari di Don Bosco e di Don Rua* ed altri loro scritti ai Salesiani (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1989) pp. 21-22. cf BM XVII, pp 2-3

⁸⁸ *Lettere circolari di Don Rua* ai Salesiani (Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1910) p. 123.

⁸⁹ M. WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni*. Tra storia e nuove sfide (Roma: LAS, 2000) p. 451.

⁹⁰ M. WIRTH, *ivi* p. 452.

⁹¹ CG 22, 134 (ACG 311 (1984) p. 139).

⁹² F. MOTTO, ‘Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6. A’ suoi figliouli salesiani’, in P. BRAIDO (a cura di), *Don Bosco Educatore*. Scritti e testimonianze (Roma: LAS 1992²) p. 391.

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

Do not grieve over my death (...) Instead of weeping make firm and efficacious resolutions to remain staunch in your vocation until death (...)

If you have loved me in the past, *continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions* (...)

Adieu, dear children, adieu. I wait for you in heaven. There we shall speak of God, of Mary, the Mother and support of our Congregation (...); there we shall bless eternally this our Congregation, the observance of whose rules will have powerfully and efficaciously contributed to our salvation."⁹³

This testament contains precious and demanding words for all of us. I believe, that after the Gospel, the Rule Book ought to become the second book in our daily meditation. It will be the constant nourishment of our Salesianity, and the fulfilment of the warning in the 'dream of the diamonds': "let your morning and evening meditation be on the observance of the Constitutions."

5. DON BOSCO FOUNDER OF "AN VAST MOVEMENT OF PERSONS WHO, IN DIFFERENT WAYS WORK FOR THE SALVATION OF THE YOUNG' " (C. 5)

Brought into existence 150 years ago as a Society we have become more aware that our Father had not thought only of us but had always wanted to create "a vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young" (C. 5). We were thought about as evangelisers and as animators of a charismatic Family. The SGC in fact said this: "Don Bosco was supernaturally inspired to create a community of religious from within his family of which the specific function was to act as a life-giving stimulant for the self-same mission. He attained his objective by degrees, establishing bonds of friendship with the better boys, testing them in practical works of charity towards their neighbour, next binding them by promise and finally guiding them on to religious consecration by vows. Thus the first Salesian community came into existence."⁹⁴

5.1 "The Sons of the Oratory scattered all over the earth"

Professor of education Joseph Rayneri, in a short publication in honour of Don Bosco wrote: "On Sunday afternoon in 1851 (*Don Bosco was 36 and it was still eight years before the founding of the Salesian Society*) the Oratory held a lottery drawing. There were many winners and everyone was happy. At the end Don Bosco flung caramels in all directions from the balcony to satisfy many a sweet tooth. Naturally this bountifulness resulted in more and louder shouts and cheers. When Don Bosco finally came down into the playground he was hoisted on their shoulders and carried in triumph with wild enthusiasm. One of the boys who was soon to don the clerical habit said to him: "Don Bosco how wonderful it would be if you could see the whole world studded with oratories!" On hearing that remark (I seem to see him even now) he turned his gaze to the horizon majestically and lovingly, and he answered, "Who knows? The day may come when Oratory boys will really be scattered all over the earth!"⁹⁵

⁹³ F. MOTTO, *ivi*, 410-411. cf. "Constitutions and Regulations 2nd ed. 2003 pp 269.270

⁹⁴ SGC, 496.

⁹⁵ BM IV p. 221.

Today whoever looks at the world sees that Don Bosco was a prophet.

5.2 The vast network of the Salesian Family

Don Bosco was not one to raise hopes that were but false, he was not a peddler in fine but empty words. Don Bosco was a great strong tree. Within him he had the divine life and he gave it. We the Salesians are the finest and richest fruit of his total consecration to God and of his passion to see young people, especially the poorest and those at risk, reach the fullness of human and Christian life.

But we are not the only fruit of this strong and large tree. “The Salesians,” the SGC declared, “cannot fully re-think their vocation in the Church without reference to those who share with them in carrying out their Founder’s will. Consequently they are seeking a greater union of all, whilst preserving the genuine diversity of each,”⁹⁶ this is required by the one shared Salesian vocation, considering that it is a question of the same divine call “to realize in an organic though complex way the salvation of poor and abandoned youth according to the spirit of Don Bosco”.⁹⁷

And Don Bosco sees ‘the sons of the Oratory scattered all over the earth’, a vast network of people who dedicate their lives to young people who are poor and at risk, with the same passion for God and the children of God that he had. This vast network, at the beginning made up of groups Don Bosco himself founded – first the ‘Society of Saint Francis of Sales’, then the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Association of the Salesian Cooperators and the Association of Mary Help of Christians – gradually expanded and formed the great Salesian Family containing today 26 groups.

Other groups have also begun which are waiting for the necessary conditions to be fulfilled in due time to be officially recognised as members of the Salesian Family; in the meantime the ground is being prepared in which other groups could also come to light.

We Salesians, the first-born nucleus bursting into life in the heat of Don Bosco passion, are being called by him to have *a wide heart*, which welcomes and recognises as brothers and sisters all the members of the Salesian Family; *a welcome that is grateful for and rejoices in the diversities*, as manifestations of the Spirit who speaks in many tongues; *the willingness to walk together* towards a shared goal: the Kingdom of God to be brought to the young and the poor.

5.3 What Don Bosco heard and saw

Fr Julius Barberis, appointed by Don Bosco 1874 ‘master of novices’ for the whole Salesian Society, at Don Bosco’s ‘beatification process’ declared under oath that in 1876, when Don Bosco had opened only three houses, he told how in a dream he had seen the Congregation spreading to all parts of the world. “People of every race colour and nation, were gathered there [...] I saw many Salesians leading groups of boys and girls; they were followed by other Salesians with more groups; and more came after them and still more whom I did not know until they became a huge blur. They were numberless.”⁹⁸

A year later in January 1877, in his usual St. Francis of Sales annual conference speaking to “all the Oratory confreres, novices and aspirants” he mentioned a seed that was to be sown the work of the Salesian Cooperators: “It has hardly come into existence and it already numbers many members (...) Soon enough masses of people and entire cities will be united by the Lord into a spiritual bond with the Salesian Congregation (...) We shall live to see the day when entire cities and nations will differ from us Salesians

⁹⁶ SGC, 151.

⁹⁷ SGC, 171.

⁹⁸ BM XII p. 338.

only in the fact that their people will live in their own homes. If the Cooperators now number one hundred they will soon be thousands and thousands, and if they number one thousand, they shall become millions. However we must admit only those who qualify. I hope this is what God wants of us.”⁹⁹

Today we can see before our eyes not as something static but dynamic not stopped but reaching out towards the future what Don Bosco heard and saw in the dreams in which God in a mysterious manner opened up the future to him. “To his Salesians,” comments Fr Stella, the plans Don Bosco gives “are grandiose if not utopian.”¹⁰⁰ The Salesian Family is one of these grandiose plans; that it doesn’t remain utopian will depend on all of us, the members of this Family of Don Bosco.

CONCLUSION

My dear confreres, I have invited you to tell the story of the beginnings of our Congregation. Well then, I have made a first attempt. However, I have done so not just calling to mind what happened but trying to learn from the past; our beginnings are the best guide for us to continue to write Salesian history vigorously and fruitfully. I wanted to identify some elements which to my mind were determining in the success of this marvellous project of God: the young men, their identity as consecrated apostles, fidelity to Don Bosco by means of the Constitutions, the awareness of being an integral part of the Salesian Family, of having an indispensable role of animation within it.

It doesn’t seem to me an exaggeration to affirm that at the beginnings of the Congregation the **young men** were real “co-founders” with Don Bosco; some young men in fact constitute the first nucleus engaged in setting itself up as a Society or Congregation. It is my hope that this anniversary will renew in every Salesian the courage to propose to the young the Salesian consecrated vocation and will open up a period of great vocational fruitfulness.

The celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of our Congregation ought to help us to be conscious of our **identity as consecrated persons**, vowed to the primacy of God, to the following of Christ, obedient, poor and chaste, totally dedicated to the young. We ought to live this identity of ours with joy and manifest it in evangelising zeal and with pastoral passion, inspired by Don Bosco’s plan of life, expressed in the motto “*da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

The realisation that the whole of Don Bosco can be found in the Constitutions and that our fidelity to him passes through fidelity to our Project of Life becomes an appeal to us to study deeply, meditate and pray the **Constitutions**, which show us the path of fidelity to Don Bosco’s charism and to our vocation; indeed I would say that only the Salesian who makes the Constitutions his plan of life becomes the incarnation, the living image, of Don Bosco today. This journey of conversion for an ever more complete living out of the commitment to holiness traced out in the Rule of Life will lead each one of us to renew our religious profession on 18 December, the day of the anniversary, as the starting point for a renewed offering of our lives to God for the young. Just like Don Bosco.

Finally, the growing awareness that Don Bosco was not thinking only of a Congregation, but always wanted to create a “*vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young*” (C. 5), ought to remind us that, as a Congregation, we have within the **Salesian Family** a particular responsibility for unity

⁹⁹ BM XIII p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco in the history of Catholic Religious thought and practice*. Vol. II: Religious outlook and Spirituality [New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1996] p. 373.

of spirit and fraternal collaboration. We cannot live outside what is our family; it cannot grow and multiply without us, its animating heart.

I entrust to Mary Most Holy the Mother of God and the Help of Christians, each and every one of you, while we celebrate the Annunciation of the Lord, and happy and grateful we recall the 75th anniversary of the Canonisation of our beloved Founder and Father Don Bosco. Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco will help us to live joyfully, generously and faithfully our Salesian vocation and to find in it the path of our sanctification.

With affection and best wishes,

Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva
Rector Major