**Devotion to Mary from Don Bosco’s Perspective**

*Fr Stefano Martoglio*

*The Vicar of the Rector Major*

I am happy to speak at this Marian Congress, after what we have have heard and experienced in reaffirming an act of personal and institutional entrustment, according to the heart of Don Bosco and the Faith of the Church. We are closing these days with one of the spiritual aspects that Don Bosco perceived and experienced personally as something important and as a salient aspect of his work: Marian devotion. We entrust ourselves into Mary’s maternal hands. Here now, in this Holy place of Mary’s presence, we ask her to make fruitful in life what we have lived, prayed and listened to here.

So my task, after what we have heard and experienced, is to remember, starting from the beginning. Evoking memories is important: it means recognising that this is not ours; it has been entrusted to us, and we should hand it over to other generations

With great simplicity, I tell myself and tell each one of us about some central aspects of Mary’s presence for Don Bosco, for his and our devotion.

## 1. Mary in the writings of Don Bosco. Let’s start from the beginning.

The lady “of stately appearance. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over”, described in his dream at nine years of age which we have meditated upon and given so much thought to during the Bicentenary of this dream. She is the Madonna so dear to popular tradition and common devotion. Don Bosco emphasises her maternal kindness above all. This representation is the one most suited to his soul, and would accompany him until his life’s final breath.

Many of the aspects and devotions typical of popular religiosity are recalled in the Memoirs of the Oratory: family rosary, Angelus, novenas and triduums, invocations and ejaculatory prayers, dedications, visits to altars and shrines, Marian feasts (her Motherhood, Holy Name of Mary, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Consolation, the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Graces...). But be careful: when we say typical aspects of popular religiosity, we are not saying it is facile or ‘automatic’. Popular religiosity is the quintessence, the distillation of the experience of centuries that is brought to us as a gift; one we must appropriate.

During the time of his studies in Chieri, more elements appear that connect Marian devotion to the young Bosco’s spiritual choices, especially the growth of his vocation and the consolidation of the virtues that form the good seminarian. The Madonna of the seminary was the Immaculate Conception (in all Piedmontese seminaries, and in those influenced by the Vincentian tradition, the chapel was dedicated to the Immaculate since the 16th century).

And so it is this that characterises Marian piety for the young Don Bosco (formed in the school of Saint Alphonsus): *true devotion, expressed above all in a virtuous life, guarantees the most powerful patronage one can have in life and in death.*

If you are his devotees, in addition to being filled with blessings in this world, you will have paradise in the next life. He would also write in *The Companion of Youth* in 1847: *“If you are devoted to her, in addition to being filled with blessings in this world, you will have paradise in the next life.”*[[1]](#footnote-2)

But it is above all in the booklet *The month of May dedicated to Mary Immaculate for the use of the people* (1858), that the saint explicitly and insistently frames popular and youthful Marian devotion in a context aimed at a concrete serious commitment to Christian life lived fervently and lovingly.

*“Three things are to be practised throughout the month: 1. Do what we can to avoid committing any sin during this month: let it be completely dedicated to Mary. 2. Show great diligence in fulfilling the spiritual and temporal duties of our state ... 3. Invite our relatives and friends and all those who depend on us to take part in the practices of piety in honour of Mary during the month.”*

The other theme, inherited from an entirely devout tradition, is the connection between Marian devotion and eternal salvation: “Since the most beautiful ornament of Christianity is the Mother of the Saviour, Mary Most Holy, so I turn to you, O most merciful Virgin Mary, sure of acquiring the grace of God, the right to Paradise, that is,of regaining my lost dignity, if you will pray for me: Auxilium christianorum, ora pro nobis.” Don Bosco is convinced that Mary intervenes as a very effective advocate and a very powerful mediator with God.

Ten years later (1868), for the opening of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, the saint wrote and distributed a file entitled *Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians*. This work emphasises the ecclesial dimension, on which Don Bosco’s gaze is increasingly opened and by which his missionary and educational concerns are oriented.

The title *Immaculate* and *Helper* in the ecclesial context of the time evoke struggles and triumphs, the “great clash” between Church and liberal society. A religious reading of political and social events is made, along the lines of the Catholic reaction to disbelief, liberalism, de-Christianisation.

However, Don Bosco, for his boys and his Salesians, continues to emphasise the ascetic, spiritual and apostolic dimension of Marian piety. In fact, the practice of the month of Mary and the various devotions aimed at getting young people to make a decision for greater commitment to their duty, practising virtues, zeal for mortifications in honour of Mary, active charity in a generous apostolic activity among their companions.

In other words, Don Bosco tended to assign a specific role in the work of education and formation to the Immaculate and the Helper, and, given the Marian climate of the time, he valued virtuous exercises and devout practices leading to a life of purification from sin and any liking for it, and encouraged complete gift of self to God.

Therefore: struggle against sin and orientation to God, sanctification of self and one’s neighbour, service of charity, strength in carrying the cross and missionary commitment. These are the salient features of a Marian devotion that has very little of the devotional and sentimental about it (despite the climate of the time and the popular tastes that, in any case, Don Bosco still valued).

What a jurney for Don Bosco and for Don Bosco the man of faith! And among the many things you must be holding in your heart I would like to stress something: I too, we too must make this journey in devotion. We cannot stand still, since if we don’t go forwards we go backwards...and no one can do it for me!

## 2. Mary in the life of Don Bosco, daily expressions of Don Bosco’s and our devotion

### 1. The sense of a presence

In Don Bosco’s life Mary was a perceived, loved, active and stimulating presence; aimed at the great affair of eternal salvation and holiness. He felt that she was close to him and he entrusted himself to her, letting himself be guided and led on the paths of his vocation (he dreamed of her, he ‘saw’ her).

In Nizza Monferrato in June 1885, Don Bosco was talking to the sister members of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians Chapter, his voice tenuous, tired. They asked him to leave them a final memento. “Now you want me to say something to you all. How many things I would have to say were I able to talk! But I am old and decrepit, as you see for yourselves. I even find it difficult to talk. All I wish to say is that Our Lady loves you very, very much, And you know that she is here among you all!” Then Father John Bonetti, seeing that he was deeply moved, interrupted him and began to talk, only to divert his attention. “Ah! Yes, that’s
the way it is! That's the way it is! Don Bosco means to say that Our Lady is your Mother and she is watching over you and protecting you!”

* “No, no,” the saint said. “I meant that Our Lady is actually here in the house and that she is happy with you all, and that if you continue with the
spirit that you have now, which is the one Our Lady wants ....” The loving father became more and more moved and again Father John Bonetti interrupted him. “Yes, that is it exactly! Don Bosco means to say that if you are always good, Our Lady will be pleased with you.”
* “But no, no,” Don Bosco said with difficulty trying to control his own emotion. “I mean that Our Lady actually is here, right in the midst of you! Our Lady moves around this house and covers it under her mantle.” As he spoke, he held out his arm, raising his tear-filled eyes as if he wished to convince the sisters that he really could see Our Lady moving around here and there, as if she were in her own home, and that the entire house was under her protection..”[[2]](#footnote-3)

*Hers is an active presence: someone who accompanies, supports, guides, encourages; She who was given to him: “I will give you a Teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her all wisdom is foolishness.”[[3]](#footnote-4) A presence that urges us to live consciously in the presence of God with a sense of complete devotion: “When thinking of God’s presence / may our lips, heart, mind / follow the path of virtue / like the great Virgin Mary. / Sac. Gio Bosco” (prayer written by the saint beneath one of his photographs).*

Splendid and essential: what is not a living presence in my life is absence! The sense of Presence, of God’s Providence, of Mary’s action. A continuous journey for each of us and for all of us together, the Salesian Family.

### 2. The energy of the mission

Don Bosco closely connects Mary with his vocation and his ministry. Here it is good to take up Don Bosco’s presentation of the dream he had when he was nine years old: “She took me kindly by the hand and said, ‘Look... This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic, and what you see happening to these animals at this moment, you will have to do for my children.’”[[4]](#footnote-5)It is the mission of salvation/transformation/formation of young people, through prevention, education, instruction, evangelisation, and a solid set of virtues in the educator.

Mary’s Son teaches the method and goal: “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows, but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue.”

The account written in 1873-74 of the ancient inspiring dream is connected to many other stories of inner interventions and inspirations (dreams) in which our saint attributed to Mary a role of animation, guidance, and support of his longing and zeal for the mission to save the young.

What Don Bosco recognises as prodigious interventions of Mary must be placed and interpreted in this context: the ‘graces’ granted to people (spiritual and bodily), her powerful protection over the Oratory and the emerging Salesian Family and their prodigious development for the benefit of souls.

Personal graces, the realisation of the particular presence of God through the intercession of Mary, who providentially guides personal and institutional life. If you do not perceive this Presence, you are at the mercy of chance.

### 3. An incentive to holiness

Don Bosco experienced devotion to Mary as an incentive and support for the pursuit of Christian perfection. From the same perspective, he wisely inculcated it in young people to promote Christian life in them and encourage a desire for holiness in them.

By valuing the sensitivity of his boys and the popular tastes of their piety, Don Bosco was able to transform a devotional tendency, tinged with romantic sentiment, into a powerful tool for spiritual formation (encouraging, correcting, guiding).

Mary never leaves us where she finds us. As at the beginning of the John’s Gospel, the first of the Signs, we know that we must be guided, accompanied... on a specific journey: do what he tells you and you will arrive where I am waiting for you, says Don Bosco. Seeing the invisible

## 3. Salesian identity and devotion to Mary

To conclude, let me share with you simply what we experience as confreres, which is at the heart of our vocation. I really like concluding with this part, because it is the backbone of my and all our lives. If it does so much good for me, for us, it will surely do good for everyone.

**First of all** the *Constitutions,* which outline the characteristic features of our Marian devotion. Article 8 (placed in the first chapter, relating to the elements that ensure the identity of the Salesian Congregation) summarises the meaning of Mary’s presence in our Society: she indicated to Don Bosco his field of action, she constantly guided and supported him, she continues her mission as Mother and Helper among us : we “entrust ourselves to her, the lowly servant in whom the Lord has done great things, that we may become witnesses to the young of her Son’s boundless love.”

Article 92 presents the role of Mary in the life and piety of the Salesian: model of prayer and pastoral charity; teacher of wisdom and guide of our family; example of faith, of concern for the needy, of fidelity at the hour of the cross, of spiritual joy; our educator to the fullness of donation to the Lord and to the courageous service of our brothers and sisters. This results in a strong and filial devotion which is expressed through prayer (daily rosary and celebration of her feasts) and through devoted personal imitation.

**The best summary, however, is found, in my opinion, in the *prayer of entrustment to Our Lady Help of Christians*** said daily in every one of our communities after meditation. It was Fr Rua who wrote it in 1894 as an expression of daily consecration through our commitment of fidelity and generosity. Today it has been revised, but it retains the same layout as the old one and the same contents. Here is the original text:

“Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Help of Christians, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you and promise to work always for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Please turn your merciful gaze upon the Church, its august Head, the Priests and Missionaries, upon the Salesian Family, our relatives and benefactors, and the youth entrusted to our care, upon poor sinners, the dying, and the souls in Purgatory.

Teach us, O most tender Mother, to imitate in ourselves the virtues of our Founder, especially his angelic modesty, profound humility and ardent charity.

Grant, O Mary Help of Christians, that your powerful intercession may make us victorious against the enemies of our soul in life and in death, so that we may come to crown you with Don Bosco in Paradise. Amen.”

As you can see, the current version simply takes up Fr Rua’s text, with some developments. I think it would be good, from time to time, to take it up and meditate on it. It is made up of four parts: promise; intercession; docility, entrustment.

The first part (*Most Holy and Immaculate*) recalls the ultimate goal of our consecration, promising to direct all our action solely to the service of God and the salvation of our neighbour, in fidelity to the essence of the Salesian vocation.

The second part (*We pray*) condenses the ecclesial, Salesian and missionary sense of our consecration, entrusting the Church, the Congregation and the Salesian Family, young people, especially the poorest, all people redeemed by Christ, to Mary’s intercession. Here, the passion that must nourish and characterise Salesian prayer is well outlined: universality, ecclesiality, being sent to the young.

The third part (*Teach us*) focuses on the virtues that characterise the Salesian disciple of Don Bosco: we place ourselves in the school of Mary to grow in union with God, in chastity, humility and poverty, in love for work and temperance, in ardent loving charity (kindness and unlimited gift of self to our brothers and), in fidelity to the Church and its Magisterium.

In the final part (*Grant, O Mary Help of Christians* ) we rely on the intercession of the Virgin Help of Christians to obtain fidelity and generosity in the service of God until death and our admission to the eternal communion of saints.

This excellent summary, which contains a complete program of spiritual life and outlines the features of our identity, can serve as a reference for us today and a concrete guide for spiritual verification and planning. And so may it be for each of us!

1. The *Companion of Youth* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Biographical Memoirs*, XVII: pp. 513-514, (Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Memoirs of the Oratory*, p. 34 (Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Memoirs of the Oratory*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)