

# NOTES FOR A ‘SPIRITUAL HISTORY’ OF FATHER JOHN BOSCO

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

At the 26<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco, each participant received, along with several other books, a copy of Giuseppe Buccellato's *Appunti per una 'storia spirituale' del sacerdote Giò Bosco*. Some books one reads, others one plans to read but never do, while still others are simply ignored. Buccellato's book for me was one that I began reading and found I could not put down. It was for me a fresh look at Don Bosco, and something that touched me deeply. I found myself sharing several insights from it during goodnight talks and retreats. I do not now remember when I began translating the book; surely it has been a labour of at least six years, but not because of the difficulty of the work itself. I am happy that finally I received the grace of completing this work, and that during the recent visit of the relics of Don Bosco to the Holy Land.

Wanting to have a book that would be accessible to all, Father Buccellato has deliberately kept out scholarly apparatus, and I have respected his choice. The few notes found in brackets are translator's additions, and, I hope, will be forgiven as inevitable.

It only remains to thank Father Buccellato for his labour of love, and for his cordiality and graciousness in responding to requests for help with the translation.

His *Notes* are a fitting contribution to the third year in preparation for the Bicentenary of the Birth of Don Bosco, during which we have been invited to concentrate on the spirituality of Don Bosco. May they be for all the sons and daughters of Don Bosco – and for the countless friends and admirers so wonderfully revealed in the worldwide pilgrimage of his relics – a return to his true spirit, a fresh start, one more way in which the Lord touches us and draws us ever to himself.

*Ivo Coelho, SDB*  
Jerusalem, 15 October 2013

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*We must know, deepen and live the spirituality of Don Bosco. A knowledge of the external aspects of Don Bosco's life, activities and method of education is not enough. At the root of all this, as the source of the fecundity of his action and of his continued relevance, there is something that often escapes us: his deep spiritual experience, what we might call his 'familiarity' with God. Maybe it is precisely this that is the best thing he has left us, with which to invoke him, imitate him, and set ourselves to follow him so as to encounter Christ and bring Christ into contact with the young! (Pascual Chavez, "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle," AGC 394)*

I publish these *Notes* in response to the warm and insistent invitations of Father Luigi Bosoni, former Regional of the Salesians, and Father Teresio Bosco, the most efficacious popularizer of the human and spiritual figure of Don Bosco in Italy and in the world. Upon reading my study, *Alla presenza di Dio. Ruolo dell'orazione mentale nel carisma di fondazione di San Giovanni Bosco*, published in 2004 by the Pontifical Gregorian University, each of these confreres advised me to make my research more accessible. Without such an effort, they said, the research ran the risk of remaining the patrimony of a few keen experts.

I have accepted these requests as a duty.

These *Notes for a 'Spiritual History' of Father John Bosco* – Don Bosco liked to sign his letters in a friendly way as "Giò Bosco" – are the first fruits of my effort to highlight some aspects of the interior life of the founder of the Salesians. This is also in keeping with the project of the little *Centro di Studi di Spiritualità Salesiana* (founded in 1999 at Sant'Alfio in the province of Catania, Italy), and the recent insistence by the Rector Major, Father Pascual Chavez, on a better knowledge of and a more significant return to Don Bosco.

Despite the rigorous scientific research lying behind my work, I have decided to deliberately keep citations to the minimum and to completely avoid footnotes, so as to make reading more pleasant and easy. For a more documented study with the necessary references, the reader may go to the volume mentioned above, as well as other articles of mine cited in the little bibliography at the end of the present book, where I have also indicated the edition of the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* that has been used.

My thanks to Father Luigi Bosoni, Father Teresio Bosco and Father Lillo Montanti for having patiently gone through these pages; to the Franciscans of Vittorio Veneto for the hospitality I enjoyed while convalescing after a long illness, during which time the present book was conceived and brought to completion; and to all those who have encouraged me in this little work.

## INTRODUCTION

These *Notes for a 'Spiritual History' of Father John Bosco* are not meant to be a biography of the saint of Piedmont. Given the great quantity of sources and documents available, that would be an undertaking of a very different kind. Our aim is different and, in a certain way, more personal.

Anyone who confronts the lived experience of another human being, even in a historical and scientific way, is usually impressed by some particular aspect or other that, in the eyes of others or from the point of view of the whole, might not appear very significant. Some biographers, for example, dwell at length on the early years of Don Bosco, or on the period of the foundation of the Oratory, or else on his 'fervent activity' and on the expansion of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

However, the life of a man who has wagered on and built his entire life around a spiritual ideal cannot be exhausted in a simple series of happenings, however important they may be. The true history of a believer is marked by the rhythms and movements of a dialogue that, in the ultimate analysis, governs his motivations and gives meaning to his actions.

Already in 1929, the year of the beatification of Don Bosco, Father Eugenio Ceria, in the preface to the first edition of his *Don Bosco con Dio*, had affirmed with great feeling: "Let no one fool himself into thinking that he understands Don Bosco if he does not know him as a man of prayer. Anyone who concentrates only on the biographical details, without seeking to penetrate the intimate movements of his soul, will draw very meagre fruit from his admirable life."<sup>1</sup>

Penetrating into the sanctuary of these *intimate movements*, however, is not an easy task, especially in the case of Don Bosco.

Despite the great mass of writings, published and unpublished, of the saint of Turin, we find nothing that might be considered a sort of *spiritual diary* that might unveil the sanctuary of his inner life. From his writings, even from those that can be classified as autobiographical, or from the thousands of letters that he wrote, it is not possible to find direct evidence regarding his personal life of prayer. Don Bosco tells stories, teaches, cautions, asks help for his works, thanks, blesses; but in all this, he is careful to keep a strict guard over his interior life.

If we are to access the spiritual experience of Don Bosco in a more vivid and personal way, therefore, the only way is to focus on certain elements that reveal to us indirectly the foundations of his spiritual history, the main stages of a journey inspired by an ideal, and the inspirations at the basis of some of his concrete choices.

Not all the events therefore can be accorded the same significance. That is why we have chosen to make some 'notes' on the margins of the life of Father John Bosco. These notes are, in our opinion, helpful in penetrating, to the extent possible, into the sanctuary of his interior life, in order to discover its roots in his formation, its animating principles, and the spiritual traits of the project of Christian and religious life he proposed to the spiritual movement that has its origins in him, a project that manifests itself but does not exhaust itself in the apostolic mission.

It is also important to note that some of the biographical studies of the founder of the Salesians have been concerned more to do away with hagiographic exaggerations and to demythologise the history of the origins than to bring to light the foundational structures of a solid, even if not always completely original, spiritual edifice. We must also note, further, that the study of Don Bosco in the second half of the twentieth century has concentrated, not on the contents and methods of spiritual theology, but almost exclusively on the area of pedagogy or history.

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<sup>1</sup> [See E. Ceria, *Don Bosco with God*, tr. Michael Smyth (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 16. I have adapted the translation.]

From this point of view, the present work is a tiny contribution, a stimulus, towards greater familiarity with the lived spiritual experience of the founder in the context of his life, writings, apostolic experience, and the project of Christian and religious life proposed to his 'family.'

Our notes will begin with the well-known period of the early years and will proceed to the period of formation, particularly the years at the Convitto, years that are decisive for the spiritual and apostolic experience of Don Bosco. From the period of his maturity there will emerge his pedagogy of holiness, the importance given to prayer and to '*ritiratezza*,' the anxieties and the feelings, the projects and their realization, the love given and received, and the precious spiritual heritage handed down by him.

Our hope is to guide the reader towards a better knowledge of certain aspects, not always highlighted, of the 'spiritual history' of the saint of Turin.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE EARLY YEARS

“In the beginning was the mother.” Thus, “with all respect for the sacred book,” begins one of the first biographers of Don Bosco, the Danish writer Johannes Joergensen. There is no doubt that the figure of the mother was fundamental in the education to the faith of the young Johnny Bosco.

Don Bosco always had a clear awareness of this. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales* he would write about his mother, Margaret Occhiena: “Her greatest care was given to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age. When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary. I remember well how she herself prepared me for my first confession. She took me to church, made her own confession first, then presented me to the confessor. Afterwards, she helped me to make my thanksgiving.” (MO 9)<sup>2</sup>

In the *Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco* she is often described as a woman of great virtue and deep piety. “Margaret’s love of neighbour is not surprising when we realize that she was a woman of prayer. On her way to the fields, during her hours of work, and on her way back home, she would repeatedly recite the rosary.” (BM 1:119)<sup>3</sup> “She was a truly admirable woman because she always prayed. Prayer is the source of wisdom to the humble and those who lack human knowledge.” (BM 3:267) “Apart from the prescribed prayers she recited devotedly on her knees, Margaret would continually murmur words of love for God throughout the day, while occupied with the most varied chores.” (BM 1:68)

The religious experience of Don Bosco is, therefore, profoundly rooted in this familiar and daily catechesis, built upon testimony and example rather than upon the transmission of doctrinal truths.

#### The first catechism

The principal doctrines of the Catholic religion, however, were transmitted in those years by means of certain popular catechisms.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of the dioceses of Piedmont were using a catechism originally prepared for the diocese of Mondovi by Msgr. Michele Casati in 1765. Msgr. Vittorio Gaetano Maria Costa had introduced this catechism into the diocese of Turin. Castelnuovo d’Asti had become part of this diocese in 1817.

The aim of these catechisms was obviously to make Christian doctrine more accessible. Dialogues, simple language and mnemonic devices made them easy to assimilate even in rural settings, where many in those years were still completely illiterate.

The mother of Don Bosco was herself illiterate, as can easily be seen from official documents where, next to her name, there is always the cross prescribed for those who were unable to affix their signatures.

She had learnt Casati’s catechism during her youth, in her home parish of Capriglio. In his biography, *Mamma Margherita: La madre di Don Bosco*, Aldo Fantozzi writes: “Margaret passed on her solid faith

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<sup>2</sup> [MO = *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, trans. David Lyons, notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelvechi and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989).]

<sup>3</sup> [BM = G. B. Lemoyne, A. Amadei, E. Ceria, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, ed. Diego Borgatello, vols. 1-19 (New Rochelle, 1965-2003).]

through this 'family school,' together with the sense of the divine that her sons breathed in through the vastness of nature, the voice of conscience, the splendour of a starry night."

Margaret was therefore Don Bosco's first catechist, also because of fact that her house was far from the Church. Don Bosco himself testifies to this in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "Because we lived far from the parish church, the parish priest did not know me, and my mother had to do almost all the religious instruction. She did not want me to get any older before my admission to that great act of our religion, so she took upon herself the task of preparing me as best she could. She sent me to catechism class every day of Lent. I passed my examination, and the date was fixed. It was the day on which all the children were to make their Easter duty. In the big crowd, it was impossible to avoid distractions. My mother coached me for days and brought me to confession three times during that Lent. 'My dear John,' she would say, 'God is going to give you a wonderful gift. Make sure you prepare well for it. Go to confession and don't keep anything back. Tell all your sins to the priest, be sorry for them all, and promise God to do better in the future.' I promised all that. God alone knows whether I have been faithful to my resolution. At home, she saw to it that I said my prayers and read good books; and she always came up with the advice which a diligent mother knows how to give her children." (MO 32)

At the age of eleven John was admitted to first communion. "On the morning of my first communion," he recounts, "my mother did not permit me to speak to anyone. She accompanied me to the altar and together we made our preparation and thanksgiving. These were led by Father Sismondi, the vicar forane, in a loud voice, alternating responses with everyone. It was my mother's wish for that day that I should refrain from manual work. Instead, she kept me occupied reading and praying." (MO 32)

### **The omnipresence of God**

In the pages of these catechisms, therefore, it is possible to find the sources of the spiritual experience of Don Bosco, his conception of God, his religiosity. It is not, therefore, of secondary importance to know the contents of these simple compendiums of Christian doctrine. Many years later, Don Bosco himself decided to compile one of these *vade mecums* of the good Christian which, however, remained unpublished: *Breve catechismo pei fanciulli ad uso della Diocesi di Torino. Preceduto dalle Preghiere del mattino e della sera, da un compendio di Storia Sacra e da un Sunto di catechismo per quelli che dispongono a ricevere il Sacramento della cresima, della confessione e comunione*.<sup>4</sup>

These simple texts of education to the faith reveal, first of all, the centrality of the idea of God as *creator* and as *omnipresent*.

From the religious education given by his mother, therefore, little John picked up a vision of life and of divine providence that gave him the ability to read the events of daily life in the light of the mystery of a God who is constantly present in the history of human beings. The Salesian historian Father Pietro Stella affirms in the first volume of his *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*: "To little John, God was the One for whom his mother had the utmost respect. . . . Her confidence in God was unlimited and unquestioned because he was the good and provident father who gave people their daily bread and everything they needed."<sup>5</sup>

This vision of life, strongly centred on the continuous and loving *presence* of God, is the presupposition, the essential condition, for the germination of a contemplative *habitus*, an attitude of living constantly in union of feeling and will with the Absolute; it is because of this that we have decided to dedicate the opening chapter of our *Notes* to this early period in the life of Don Bosco, despite the fact of its being well-known and constantly enriched by the rich 'colours' of a certain type of devotional hagiography.

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<sup>4</sup> [Little catechism for children in the Diocese of Turin. With morning and evening prayers, a compendium of Sacred History, and a Summary catechism for those who wish to receive the Sacrament of confirmation, confession, and communion.]

<sup>5</sup> [P. Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Salesiana Publishers, 2005), 6.]

The 'spiritual history' of Don Bosco certainly has its origins in his childhood years. Don Bosco is not a 'convert,' and in this he is not like other great figures in the history of spirituality. His sun does not appear to have known any eclipse, but instead shines constantly until the end of his life. Further, his spiritual experience is characterized, from the very beginning, by a particular *intensity* or *emotional resonance*. Very early in his life, the *religious value* is seen as *absolute*, and, imposing itself, it organizes the whole universe of meanings and of motivations, giving orientation already from childhood to the first fundamental choices of life.

### **Work and prayer: the first nucleus of a vital synthesis**

The years of childhood and adolescence were, for Don Bosco, years of work and fatigue, as they probably were for many other boys of his own age born into the farming families of Asti.

We know from the biographers that, forced to leave home at the age of twelve because of certain differences with his step-brother Anthony, John had to work as a farm hand for the Moglia family of Moncucco, some eight kilometres from Becchi. Having arrived in February 1828, he lived there about twenty months.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* contain no mention of this long period passed at the Moglia farm, and we have no way of establishing the reasons for this silence. Some testimonies at the process of his beatification, however, allow us to see, already in the adolescent John Bosco, the capacity to combine work and prayer in a vital manner.

Giorgio Moglia, son of Luigi Moglia, John Bosco's employer, testifies, for example: "From my aunt Anna I learned that the young Bosco was intent on prayer, even when he was watching the sheep in the fields. I remember that, when the young Bosco was already a cleric, I went to his house and remained there about three months, sleeping in the same room. Before sleeping he would make me pray and would give me good advice." "Giovanni Moglia," confirms Father Lemoyne in a testimony at the process of Don Bosco's canonization, "brother-in-law of the lady of the house, came across him one day kneeling in the hot sun, in the middle of a meadow, quite still, with his face raised to heaven and eyes closed, so full of grace that he was struck with wonder. He called out his name several times, but seeing that he did not move, struck him. – Why are you sleeping in the sun? – John rose up all confused and replied: – I was not sleeping. – He was, in fact, holding in his hands a devotional book." "I remember further," goes on Giorgio Moglia, "having heard in the family that my grand-uncle Giuseppe once came to the house at midday tired and weary, with his spade on his shoulders, and saw the boy Bosco kneeling on the first step of a ladder; seeing this my grand-uncle exclaimed: 'Oh look, I am so tired that I cannot take another step, and you are there praying, saying the midday prayer.' The boy replied promptly: 'Perhaps I have gained more with my two-minute prayer than you did working the whole morning'."

### **First signs of a contemplative vocation**

The solitude enforced by the life of a farm hand and by the profession of shepherd seems to have been therefore, for the young Bosco, a privileged occasion for recollection.

Father Secondo Marchisio, Salesian, gave his testimony in 1891 (he was 35 years old at the time) at the diocesan process. Native of Castelnuovo d'Asti, he enriched his personal testimony with memories gathered from his family. After the death of Don Bosco, in fact, he went around the villages near Becchi, visiting those who had known him or had heard things about him in the family, gathering news, memories and anecdotes to be used in his biography (cf BM 18:492). "My grandfather Matta Secondo," Father Marchisio narrates at the process, "would always tell me, even on his deathbed, that their mothers would give them John Bosco as an example, especially of prayer and obedience." "He would retire to the shade of the hedges and the willows," we read in another part of his testimony, "to read, pray and study. This was told me by my cousin Rosa Cagliero, born at Febraro, neighbour of the servant of God. She would be asked to keep an eye on his cows, so that he could remain recollected in prayer or study."

It is certainly quite possible that these memories of Father Marchisio's childhood might have been enriched over the years, thanks also to the increasing popularity of Don Bosco, with certain narrative or

'mythical' elements. This much is quite certain, however, that the adolescent Bosco was different from other farm hands of his time. His spirit of piety, the taste for reading, an openly manifest inclination towards the ecclesiastical state, all these justify the permission, obtained by him from the Moglia family, to go alone on Sunday mornings to the first Mass in the church of Moncucco, where the parish priest Father Francesco Cottino urged him to weekly frequentation of the sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist. They also explain the privilege given him of leading the rosary that the Moglia family would recite every day before a picture of Our Lady of Sorrows.

Important years, therefore, in which the spiritual experience matures and sends down deep roots. The historian Pietro Stella describes them in a beautiful synthesis: "This period of time, then, was not a useless hiatus for John. His sense of God and prayerful contemplation took deeper root as he conversed with God amid the solitude of his labours in the field. It was a period of expectant waiting, focused on God and human beings and filled with meditation and supplication. It may well have been the most contemplative period of his youthful life, opening wide his spirit to the gifts of the mystical life that flowed from an attitude of hope and prayerfulness."<sup>6</sup>

Were these the contemplative experiences that enabled Don Bosco, many years later, to identify the signs of mystical experience in the long raptures of Savio who, as he himself affirms in the *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, used to remain "in prayer, or better, in contemplation of the divine goodness"? We are not in a position to know for certain.

The fact remains that Don Bosco manifested throughout his life the ability to recognize anything that revealed a detachment from creatures, a state of perfection, an absorption in God. Once again Don Stella emphasizes: "Admittedly he does not tell us his own personal experiences of 'recollection' and unitive prayer, nor does he offer us any theory about unitive prayer and contemplation. But he is quite ready to see loving colloquy and union in certain stages of the spiritual life lived by people he was personally involved with."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Works*, 16-17.]

<sup>7</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Salesiana Publishers, 1996), 491.]

## CHAPTER 2

### ADOLESCENCE AND YOUTH: THE SEASON OF CHOICES

From the age of sixteen up to the age of twenty-six, Don Bosco lived in the town of Chieri, some sixteen kilometres from Turin, first as a student in the public school, and then, from 1835, as a cleric and seminarian.

Religious education in the school of Chieri was governed by the royal regulations promulgated by King Carlo Felice on 23 July 1822. Secondo Caselle, in his *Giovanni Bosco a Chieri*, describes thus the intense spiritual life of the students: “Every morning the students would hear Holy Mass, and every one of them had to be equipped with a book of prayer and read it devoutly. At the beginning of school they would recite the *Actiones* with the *Ave Maria*, and after school they would recite the *Agimus* and once again the *Ave Maria*. On Saturdays all had to recite the catechism lesson assigned by the spiritual director, and at the end of school honour Mary most holy with the *Litanies*. On festive days, the students would all gather in the church of the Congregation. While the young people were entering, there would be a spiritual reading, followed by the singing of the Office of the Madonna; after that, the Mass; and then the explanation of the gospel. In the evening there would be catechism, with every student obliged to respond to the questions put by the spiritual director; then vespers, and an instruction. Everyone had to approach the Sacraments; and to make sure that there was no neglect of these important duties, they were obliged to bring, once a month, a note certifying they had been to Confession and at Easter, a similar note regarding Holy Communion. Those who did not fulfil these obligations were not admitted to the examinations at the end of the year, even if they were the best in study. Those who were dismissed from the Congregation by the spiritual director because of disobedience or because of ignorance of the catechism were also expelled from the schools. A triduum of preparation was obligatory for the feast of Christmas, during which they would attend two sermons every day, participate in the Holy Mass, recite the Office of the Blessed Virgin and the prayers of the novena. During Lent, the students would have to attend catechism on every school day, before classes began. Every year, for five days, from the so-called Friday of the Passion up to Holy Thursday, all would gather for the Spiritual Exercises, with two meditations and two instructions every day; this spiritual recollection would end with the Easter Communion. Each student had to obtain a declaration attesting that he had attended these exercises regularly.”

The period of adolescence and of youth preceding his entry into the seminary was for Don Bosco a period of discernment, of intense search for his own project of life.

Some significant friendships played a fundamental role in this phase of the human and spiritual experience of John Bosco, and certainly influenced his growth and his choices.

#### **Spiritual friendships at Chieri**

The period from 1831 to 1835 is largely serene, marked by scholastic success, the esteem of the professors, and the friendship of many good companions. With regard to the first two years at Chieri, Don Bosco remembers in particular two of these friends: Guglielmo Garigliano and Vittorio Braje. “They were always ready for some good recreation,” Don Bosco recounts in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, “but only after they had done their homework. Both were reserved and pious, and they gave me plenty of good advice. On feast days, after the practices of piety in common at the college, we used to go along to St Anthony's Church, where the Jesuits gave marvelous catechetical instructions with plenty of stories that I still recall. During the week, the Society for a Good Time used to meet at the home of one of the members to talk about religious matters. Anyone was welcome to come to these gatherings. Garigliano and Braje

were amongst the most conscientious. We entertained ourselves with some pleasant recreation, with discussions on religious topics, spiritual reading, and prayer. We exchanged good advice, and if there were any personal corrections we felt we should hand out to each other, whether these were our own personal observations or criticisms we had heard others make, we did that.” (MO 71)

*Società dell'Allegria* is the name of the little association founded by John Bosco among his companions, when he was just 16. The intuition of “the necessity of unity in doing good” is a sort of persistent theme, a charismatic constant in the apostolic action of John Bosco. “It is a fact,” he will write more than forty years later, in a draft of the regulations for the lay *Associates of the Congregation of St Francis de Sales*, “that the men of this world associate themselves for their temporal affairs; they associate themselves for the diffusion of bad literature, for spreading evil in the world, for spreading erroneous teachings, for diffusing false principles among innocent young people, and they succeed marvellously! And should Catholics remain idle or separate from one another in such a way that their works are paralysed by the evil ones? Never. Let us unite ourselves under the rules of the Salesian Congregation, let us form one heart and one soul with the extern associates, we are true brothers all of us. Let the good of one be the good of all, and let the misfortunes of one be faced like the misfortunes of all.”

The “marvellous catechism” to which the *Memoirs* refer was held in the afternoons of festive days by Father Isaja Carminati, a Jesuit from Bergamo; the influence of and esteem for the Jesuits will be another constant in the personal and educative experience of Don Bosco.

Two other important friendships in the immediately following years were those with the Jewish young man Jonah and with Luigi Comollo, who would be John Bosco’s companion also in the seminary of Chieri up to 1839, the year of his premature death. Don Bosco would, at the age of about 29, write the biography of Comollo, though he would at first publish it anonymously.

Don Bosco’s youth at Chieri, at school first and later in the seminary, is marked by these deep friendships. He surrounds himself with young people who love prayer and virtue. “These devout and virtuous companions,” the Salesian Father Francis Desramaut writes in his *Don Bosco en son temps*, “would shower on John Bosco counsel, encouragement and good example. The affection he had for them led him to listen to them, admire them and imitate them. The friendships of the cleric Bosco were authentically spiritual.”

### **The choice of a state of life and entry into the seminary**

Don Bosco preserved good memories of this recollected and edifying environment: “I would like to note something about the college at Chieri that certainly exemplifies the spirit of piety that flourished there. During my four years as a student in the college, I do not remember ever hearing any talk, not even a word, that could be considered impolite or irreligious. At the end of rhetoric course, of the 25 students, 21 embraced the clerical state.” (MO 111-112) This final remark of Don Bosco, writing the *Memoirs* in his adulthood, some time before the definitive approval of the Constitutions, reveals the preoccupation of the founder for the care of vocations to the ecclesiastical state, a concern that became, from the Constitutions of 1860, one of the apostolic aims of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

During this period we see John Bosco becoming more and more aware of the importance of the choice of vocation, though this awareness is marked also by a certain anxiety because of fear for his eternal destiny. “The conviction that God prearranges one’s proper state in life was commonplace. It could be found in any number of books that John might have read.... The conviction itself had its roots in ancient Christian thinking. In the Middle Ages it was framed in objectivist terms, which held that every human choice entailed conforming the individual or group to the divine plan. In more modern times the issue became somewhat fraught with anxiety because one’s state in life had to be freely chosen as proof of one’s fidelity to God. It became a question of merit and salvation on the one hand, and guilt and eternal damnation on the other.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* reveal the extent to which this difficult period remained alive in the adult Don Bosco, a period marked by a certain anxiety, but also by a particular fervour and suppliant prayer. In

<sup>8</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, 28-29.]

this spiritual climate there matured the decision to embrace the ecclesiastical state and to enter the seminary of Chieri, but also the decision to put aside the possibility of joining the religious life. The decision to share his doubts with his friend Luigi Comollo appears decisive in this regard. Don Bosco himself recounts: "He advised me to make a novena. Meanwhile he would write to his uncle the provost. On the last day of my novena, I went to confession and communion with this incomparable friend. I attended one Mass and served another at the altar of Our Lady of Grace in the cathedral. Then we went home and found a letter from Fr Comollo which went something like this: 'Having given careful consideration to what you wrote me, I advise your friend not to enter a monastery at this time. Let him don the clerical habit. As he goes on with his studies he will better understand what God wants him to do. He must not fear to lose his vocation because aloofness from the world and earnest piety will help him overcome every obstacle.'" (MO 111)

Is Don Bosco here giving a faithful account of what actually happened? Here as in other parts of his *Memoirs*, we are not in a position to ascertain the chronicle of events on the basis of his reading of them in his adult years. Despite this, however, his memories, written explicitly for the internal use of the growing Salesian congregation, always allow us to understand his 'feeling' and his characteristic pedagogy of holiness. In this last case, for example, Don Bosco conveys to us his conviction that the choice (or the 'election,' as he preferred to say, under the influence of the Ignatian tradition) of the state of life calls for a particular climate of prayer that favours discernment, as well as the authoritative opinion of a spiritual person.

The advice of Father Comollo was confirmed also by that of a young priest, student of the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin, who Don Bosco had come to know some years before: Father Giuseppe Cafasso. Himself also a native of Castelnuovo d'Asti, born on 15 January 1811, Father Cafasso had been ordained on 21 September 1833, when he was less than 23 years of age. His gifts of discernment would be decisive at several moments in the life of his more well-known countryman.

### **Clerical vestition and project of life**

Having entered the seminary on 30 October 1835 when he was 20 years old, John Bosco prepares with prayer and recollection for the clerical vestition. "Having made up my mind to enter the seminary," he tells us, "I took the prescribed examination. I prepared carefully for that most important day because I was convinced that one's eternal salvation or eternal perdition ordinarily depends on the choice of a state in life. I asked my friends to pray for me. I made a novena, and on the feast of St Michael (October 1834) I approached the holy sacraments. Before the solemn high Mass Doctor Cinzano, the provost and vicar forane of my region, blessed my cassock and vested me as a cleric." (MO 121)

Among the seven resolutions he took in those days, which he has passed on to us in his *Memoirs*, the first five in particular reveal him adverting to the necessity of a more stable and virtuous tenor of life, marked by greater recollection and temperance. In the sixth resolution Don Bosco promises: "Besides the ordinary practices of piety, I will never neglect to make a little meditation daily and a little spiritual reading." The last, finally, projects 'outward' into a daily apostolate: "Every day I will relate some story or some maxim advantageous to the souls of others." (MO 123)

This self-transcending and markedly apostolic perspective appears constantly in the human and spiritual experience of the young Bosco.

Psychological studies of the religious and priestly life have shown how perseverance in and the efficacy of these states of life are in fact linked to the motivations at the basis of the choice made. In particular, the gift of self, in order to be authentic, demands that one begin not from one's own needs but from the capacity to think of one's life as a response to a need that goes beyond one's own interior universe. Only then does the synthesis of the dynamic factors of the personality that guide an action towards a goal help the person grow in all dimensions, especially in those that give life to a transcendent meaning. A man, a woman, can then become aware of the need to give sense to the whole of one's existence and to unify in a single goal the different ends to which particular behaviours tend.

In great part, Don Bosco fully understood and realized his vocation only when the distressful situation of so many youngsters, seen as an urgency that could not be set aside, contributed to organize his interior

universe and his human resources into a life unified by the profound need to make of life itself a gift and to give new and creative responses to the demands that, implicitly or explicitly, were coming to him from the youth of Turin.



## CHAPTER 3

### IN THE SEMINARY

In October 1835, therefore, John Bosco stepped into the doors of the seminary of Chieri. The seminary had been opened a few years earlier by Msgr. Colombano Chiaverotti, Camaldolese monk and archbishop of Turin, in the buildings of a former Oratorian convent. It was meant to be, in the intentions of the archbishop, the 'secure refuge' long demanded by parish priests and ecclesiastics who had still too often to provide personally for the formation of the numerous clerics.

The day after his entry John Bosco began the triduum of Spiritual Exercises required by the Constitutions of the seminary, which concluded with the resolution to fulfil faithfully one's duty, above all through faithful observance of the rules of the seminary (cf MO 127-128).

The most important point of reference for the seminaries of Turin in that period was the Constitutions promulgated by Msgr. Colombano Chiaverotti in 1819. Besides this text we still have a *Regolamento del Seminario di Chieri*, attributed to Dr Lorenzo Prialis, a text that is difficult to date, and the only known copy of which is in the writing of Canon Sebastiano Mottura, rector of the seminary of Chieri from 1829 to 1860.

A perusal of these regulations reveals a rather austere vision of life in the seminary, and the norms laid down do not always appear to be sustained by adequate motivations. Their overall aim is the formation of the attitudes of the future ecclesiastic in the direction of a certain gravity and composure.

A knowledge of some of the habits of the prayer life of the seminarian Bosco and his companions might help us better understand his growth and the maturation of his spiritual experience.

#### **Practices of piety at the seminary of Chieri**

In the second part of the Constitutions of the seminary, in the first paragraph of the first chapter, under the title *Piety and Service of the Church* we read: "Piety, therefore, and the fear of God should be the first qualities of those who wish to live in our seminary, so that, casting deep roots in their tender hearts, they may in good time produce the sweet fruits of virtue to the edification of all in this our diocese."

In the same regulation we find also the *Spirituality of Presence*, of continuous prayer, of union with God, marked by traces of an ancient pedagogy: "At the sign for rising," runs the second paragraph, "every student will rise immediately from his bed and, having elevated his heart to God, will dress silently and modestly, and after a quarter of an hour will recite, upon a sign given by the Prefect and together with the others, the Angelus, and, after the half hour reserved for rising, will, in the good season go to the chapel, or to his table if it be winter, to recite there the prayers in common, as printed for the use of the seminary, with recollection and devotion, on his knees with his face turned towards the sacred picture found in the dormitory."

The seminarian's day was characterized by a multiplicity of prayers and devotions, where mind and heart were expected to come together in a single harmony of praise: "The Prefect will recite the vocal prayers slowly and clearly," we read in the same regulations, "while the rest of the students, sotto voce, will accompany him with attention and heartfelt devotion.... The prayers having been recited in the chapel when the season allows it, the Prefect of the chapel will read the meditation clearly and with the necessary pauses; all will then assist at Mass with the greatest possible devotion both interior and exterior.... In the evening after supper, at the end of recreation and before going to rest, the same Prefect will recite the vocal prayers accompanied in silence and sotto voce by all the others in the chapel."

"Vocal prayer without the mental is like a body without a soul," Don Bosco will write on notes that can be dated around the end of the seventies, and used for the preaching of the first Spiritual Exercises of the new Salesian congregation. The necessity of interior attention to vocal prayer recited *clearly*,

*devoutly, distinctly* will be found also in the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales. It may be interesting to note that this call to a pious and attentive recital of the office does not appear in the other constitutional texts (Oblates of the Virgin Mary, the Congregation of the Cavanis Brothers, Jesuits) that Don Bosco made use of to compose his own rules.

As for meditation, which was introduced into the regulations of the seminaries already at the end of the sixteenth century by the archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, it was to be read *in a clear voice and with the necessary pauses*, according to the customs of the time.

Besides the emphasis on the necessity of accompanying vocal prayer *with attention and with heartfelt devotion*, we may note in these texts the importance given to interior recollection. The seminarian was thus learning to build in himself an authentic model of the priest at prayer, in study and in silence, a silence that in reality would accompany the greater part of his day.

Don Bosco would remember well this climate of prayer: “The practices of piety were well conducted. Each morning we had Mass, meditation, and rosary; edifying books were read during meals” (MO 132); but he would also remember his desire, made difficult by the daily timetable, of participating more frequently in the Eucharistic sacrifice: “We could only receive holy communion, however, on Sundays and on special feasts. We did receive communion sometimes on weekdays, but doing so meant that we had to act contrary to obedience. It was necessary to slip out, usually at breakfast time, to St Philip's Church next door, receive holy communion, and then join our companions as they were going into the study hall or to class. This infraction of the timetable was prohibited. But the superiors gave tacit consent to it – they knew it was going on and sometimes observed it without saying anything to the contrary. In this way, I was able to receive holy communion much more frequently, and I can rightly say it was the most efficacious support of my vocation.” (MO 132)

Among the other lasting contributions to the spirituality of the young seminarian Bosco may be considered also the devotion to the Immaculate, to St Francis de Sales and to St Aloysius that he learned at the seminary of Chieri and that he would transmit, from the very beginning, to the *spiritual movement* originating from him, comprising of youth, Salesians and collaborators.

### **The ‘discovery’ of the *Imitation of Christ***

Among the readings that accompanied his spiritual formation, Don Bosco remembers one in particular, the *Imitation of Christ*. The discovery of this ‘golden book’ is of particular significance in his experience as a student and as a believer. In the immediately preceding period, in fact, he had become accustomed to the reading of the Latin classics, with the result that he had lost his taste for ascetic and spiritual writings and even for the works of the Fathers of the Church.

When he returns in memory to the time of this discovery, Don Bosco, already sixty years old, places it at the beginning of the second year of philosophy. But let us listen, once again, to his own account: “At the beginning of my second year of philosophy, I paid a visit to the Blessed Sacrament one day. I had no prayer book with me, so I began to read *The Imitation of Christ*. I went through some chapters dealing with the Blessed Sacrament. I was so struck by the profound thoughts expressed, and the clear and orderly way these great truths were clothed in fine language that I began to say to myself: ‘The author of this book was a learned man.’ Again and again, I went back to that golden little work. It was gradually borne in on me that even one verse from it contained so much doctrine and morality that I would never have found in the great volumes of the ancient classics. To this book I owe my decision to lay aside profane literature.” (MO 159)

Father Pietro Stella observes: “From what Don Bosco himself tells us, it seems that his shift from ‘profane’ tastes to a rigorously religious outlook took place during his philosophy years. It reached its climax around the beginning of 1837 when he read the *Imitation of Christ*. Some of the main aspects of his inner life are also discernable. Awareness of being called by God to the priesthood took deeper and deeper root inside him. Conscious of the holiness that was specifically demanded of one approaching the

altar, John Bosco was driven to detach himself from habits and attitudes that seemed to him to be incompatible with the priestly state.”<sup>9</sup>

The ascetic rigor that Don Bosco imposes upon himself and that, more or less directly, he indicates to his Salesians as the necessary presupposition of a serene religious life, is here seen in terms of taking a distance from profane literature. This seems to have been the intention of Don Bosco in recounting his interest in the well-known booklet, at a distance of so many years from the event.

His love and esteem for this book is seen also elsewhere. The *Imitation of Christ* will remain among the books recommended for daily spiritual reading in *The Companion of Youth*, the widely diffused manual of prayer for young people edited for the first time by Don Bosco in 1847, and which saw 120 editions and reprints up to the year 1888. The same recommendation is to be found also in the 1885 text of the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: “In the quarter of an hour assigned to spiritual reading they will make use of those books that will be indicated to them by the superiors. Most highly recommended are *The Imitation of Christ*, the *Monaca Santa* and the *Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* by St Alphonsus; the *Philotea* of St Francis de Sales adapted for youth, Rodriguez, and the lives of those saints who dedicated their lives to the education of youth.”

### The seminarian Luigi Comollo

Even at a distance of years, some shadows persist in the memories of Don Bosco about his seminary years. Apart from the presence of certain companions not suited to the environment of the seminary, Don Bosco expresses regret also about the distance maintained between superiors and seminarians. The young seminarian chose, however, to surround himself with “some who were well known as models of virtue. These were Guglielmo Garigliano, Giovanni Giacomelli of Avigliana and, later, Luigi Comollo. For me, these three friends were a treasure.” (MO 132)

The friendship with Comollo was certainly the most important one in these years.

Luigi Comollo was born on 7 April 1817 at Caselle. He was Don Bosco’s companion in the school of Chieri and then in the seminary, from 1833 to 1839, the year of his premature death. Don Bosco collected notes on the life of this exemplary young man right from 1839, the year of his death. In 1844 Don Bosco, now a priest, published anonymously, for the seminarians of Chieri, booklet entitled *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo. Morto nel seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolare virtù. Scritti da un suo collega*, with the aim of encouraging them to imitate the young man, who had been for Don Bosco himself a model of Christian virtue. We have here Don Bosco’s first work, emergin, in the words of the Salesian Father Alberto Caviglia, editor of the *Opere e scritti editi ed inediti di Don Bosco*, “not so much from the pen as from the heart of the saint, not yet thirty years of age.”

This booklet of less than a hundred pages appeared anonymously in its first edition, but was republished in 1854 and several other times, up to a few years from the death of Don Bosco. It reveals the special communion of ideas and of life that had been established between the two young men, and enables us to complete the information that Don Bosco himself supplies us about this spiritual friendship in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*. “Comollo often interrupted my recreation time, leading me by the sleeve of my cassock and telling me to come along with him to the chapel; there we would make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament for the dying, saying the rosary: the Little Office of Our Lady for the souls in purgatory. This marvelous companion was my fortune.” (MO 133-134)

Don Bosco’s judgment about the religious experience of his young friend gives us an indirect indication about his own spiritual life in those years, and, at the same time, about the concrete model of Christian life proposed by him first to seminarians, and then later also to the young people in the oratories and boarding schools. The title of the book, in fact, in the later editions will no longer be *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico...*, but simply *Cenni storici sulla vita del giovane Luigi Comollo*.

Here, clearly, as we will have occasion to say also in relation to the biography of Dominic Savio or other biographies written by the Saint, what is of primary importance from the spiritual and ‘charismatic’ point of view is not so much the historicity of the events narrated as the fact that these events, in the

<sup>9</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Works*, 65-66.]

precise way they are narrated, are being proposed by Don Bosco to the young as examples to be imitated. Let us also remember that in the regulations of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, founded by Dominic Savio among his companions of the Oratory of Valdocco, we read: "Anyone who desires to form part of this Society must first of all cleanse his conscience by means of the Sacrament of Penance, approach the Eucharistic table, give proof of his conduct during a week of novitiate, read attentively the life of Luigi Comollo and these rules, promising to observe them..." And the promise made by this first group of zealous youth began with these words: "We... declare before the altar (of the Immaculate) and our Spiritual Director, that we would like to imitate to the best of our abilities LUIGI COMOLLO. Therefore we commit ourselves..."

We may just note also that, apart from the similarities, it is possible to gather, from the judgment of John Bosco, certain differences in the spiritual experiences of the two young men. Don Bosco himself points out, for example: "In one thing alone I did not even try to emulate him, and that was in mortification. He was a young man of nineteen, yet he fasted rigorously for the whole of Lent and at other times laid down by the Church. In honour of the Blessed Virgin, he fasted every Saturday. Often he went without breakfast." (MO 134)

The fact that Don Bosco does not seem to indicate this particular aspect in the life of his friend for imitation by young people does not authorize us, however, to think that asceticism and renunciation are extraneous to his spirituality and to his pedagogy of holiness. The theme of mortification is often present in his teachings: see, for example, the notes, in his own hand or that of others, of the 'instructions' given by him during the first Spiritual Exercises of the Salesians, at Trofarello, beginning from 1866.

### **Spiritual friendships**

"Spiritual friendship," writes Aelred of Rievaulx, Cistercian monk of the twelfth century in his *De spirituali amicitia*, "occurs between good persons through a similarity in life, habits, aspirations, and a shared feeling in human and divine things, full of benevolence and charity."

The awareness that this extraordinary 'resource' should be made use of in order to proceed more expeditiously on the right way, remains a constant point of reference in Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy. The outlook of the founder of the Salesians is far from considering friendship as a risk; it tends, instead, to regard it as an instrument of sanctification.

"I could only wonder at my companion's charity," Don Bosco writes in his maturity, remembering the years passed with Comollo in the school at Chieri. "I put myself entirely into his hands and let him guide me where and how he wished. By agreement with our friend Garigliano, we went together for confession, communion, meditation, spiritual reading, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and serving Holy Mass." (MO 79-80)

The opinion of Father Alberto Caviglia provides a suggestive interpretation of the pages in which Don Bosco describes the spiritual experience and life of prayer of his friend: "Anyone who reads Comollo," writes Caviglia in 1965, "sees Don Bosco living in another person who reflects him, and what the Saint is saying must be read, like the writings of Leonardo, with mirror in hand, in order to turn them from left to right, so that one sees there the figure of the writer. Certainly the writer did not know that he was describing himself in the figure of Comollo: but that, in fact, is how it is. This was already said when he had, in his letter of 16 April 1843 (a year before the publication of this book [on Comollo]), outlined a profile of the holy cleric Giuseppe Burzio.... But here the similarity approximates to identity, and needs to be understood differently and more profoundly. Apart from some details of little account and the privilege of our Saint's personal and extraordinary vocation, the souls of the two friends present the same physiognomy."

"A similarity that approximates to identity...." In no period of his life does Don Bosco show himself willing to share deeply and intimately, to manifest his own interior life. This is why, for anyone who wishes to access his spiritual experience, the method suggested by Caviglia is indispensable. This method, moreover, finds support in the conclusions of psychology: "certainly the writer did not know that he was describing himself...." It is a question, fundamentally, of formulating reasonable hypotheses on the basis of what Don Bosco says about others, especially those who had an important role in his life.

Let us see, for example, this passage from the *Cenni storici* in which Don Bosco describes some habits and manifestations of the spiritual life of his friend: "He had his timetable for prayer, spiritual reading, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and he would observe it scrupulously. For some reason I had to go, for several months and at a certain hour, to the Cathedral, and this was precisely the hour when Comollo would spend with Jesus. I would like to describe his attitude: situating himself in some corner as near the altar as possible, on his knees with the hands joined and crossed somewhat before him, with his head slightly bowed, eyes lowered, and completely immobile; indifferent to any voice or sound. Not rarely it would happen that I had finished what I had to do, and wanted to invite him to return home with me. I would pass in front of him and make a sign with the head, or cough so that he might move, but he would not, until I actually touched him; and then he would wake up as if from sleep, and reluctantly he would accept my invitation." (*Cenni storici*... 22-23)

We might be allowed to surmise that the mysterious reason to which John Bosco refers, which obliged him to go to the Cathedral, was not very different from that which led his friend to the same place. His ability to recognize certain manifestations of the contemplative experience of Comollo, further, reveals in this young priest (Don Bosco had been ordained about two years before the writing of the *Cenni*) an aptitude that can be found also in many of his later writings.

The models that Don Bosco proposes to himself and to his young people and Salesians reveals his ability to propose an ideal of life where prolonged and affective prayer is, at one and the same time, an indication as well as the goal of a profound interior life.

### **Friendship with Giovanni Francesco Giacomelli**

The friendship with Comollo was certainly the most important in these years.

Less well-known, but in some ways more significant and certainly of a longer duration, is Don Bosco's friendship with another of his seminary companions. "Some [of my companions] were well known as models of virtue," writes Don Bosco, remembering the years passed in Chieri. "These were Guglielmo Garigliano, Giovanni Giacomelli of Avigliana and, later, Luigi Comollo. For me, these three friends were a treasure." (MO 132)

Giovanni Francesco Giacomelli was born at Avigliana in 1820 and entered the seminary of Chieri in 1836. He would be a companion of Don Bosco also at the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin, in the years following his priestly ordination.

In 1849, three years after the Oratory was established in the Pinardi Shed, Father Giacomelli went there to live with Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret, and remained almost two years, helping Don Bosco especially in hearing confessions.

After serving as assistant parish priest outside Turin, he returned to Turin in 1854 as director of the Little Hospital of St Philomena which was part of the work of Marchioness Barolo, who for many years was Don Bosco's benefactor.

The *Biographical Memoirs* tell us that he also accompanied Don Bosco on his autumn walks and for the Spiritual Exercises at Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo. Father Lemoyne, for example, writes thus about the year 1847: "The Spiritual Exercises were being held at Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo, where for several years Don Bosco had been going on foot with Father Giacomelli, covering some 30 kilometres in the space of a single morning...." (BM 3:170)

From the time he entered the Convitto Ecclesiastico in 1841, Don Bosco's ordinary confessor was Father Giuseppe Cafasso, who from 1848 onwards was rector of the Convitto and of the shrine of Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo. At his death in 1860, Don Bosco chose as his confessor Cafasso's successor, Dr Felice Golzio. At the death of Golzio and up to the end of his life, his friend Giacomelli would be the third (and final) ordinary confessor of the founder of the Salesians. Giacomelli in turn would confess to Don Bosco every week.

Having outlived his more famous friend, Giacomelli would testify in April 1892, at the age of 72, at the diocesan process for the beatification and canonization of Don Bosco. "Since the last 38 years I am spiritual director of the Little Hospital of St Philomena that forms part of the Opera Barolo. I can say that I have always been on intimate terms with Don Bosco. I would make my confession to him, and in turn

was his confessor from 1872 up to his death.” “When I knew him in the seminary of Chieri,” he goes on, “I admired in him a great diligence and *love* for study and for *piety*. I never saw him take part in entertainments, even those permitted by the superiors. Instead, during the time of recreation, he would either read or study, or engage in edifying conversation with his companions, or else go to the Church to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.”

When Giacomelli fell gravely ill in 1885, Don Bosco reassured him and predicted that it would be he, instead, who would assist him, Don Bosco, in the last moments of his life – a prediction that came true, as we know from the chronicle of the final days of Don Bosco (cf BM 18:416).

For about 15 years, therefore, the two friends continued to make their confessions to each other, and for more than 50 years looked together “in the same direction.” An extraordinary example of spiritual friendship about which, probably, not enough has been said.

These our *Notes* were intended precisely to shake some of the dust off some forgotten pages, not merely, however, for the sake of discovering new things but rather from the conviction that the past must give direction to the present, and that the charism of a founder demands to be known even in the context of his personal life. The friendship between John Bosco and Giovanni Francesco Giacomelli thus becomes the hermeneutical key for understanding, for example, what the Salesian Constitutions say in article 51 about community life: “In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship we share our joys and sorrows, and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences.”

Don Bosco’s pedagogy of holiness finds in spiritual friendship one of its most extraordinary resources; and this observation can give direction even today to the personal and pastoral project of life of the sons of Don Bosco.

## Sacred orders

In the course of the scholastic year 1839-1840 following the death of Comollo, Don Bosco received the tonsure with the four minor orders and, having studied during the summer holidays, was admitted directly to the final year of theological studies. He could therefore ask officially to be admitted to the sub-diaconate.

Don Bosco understood that this was an important step, and saw himself as unworthy: “Though I wanted to complete my studies,” he tells us in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, “I quaked at the thought of binding myself for life.” (MO 165-166)

It was once again Father Cafasso who encouraged him to go ahead, “trusting his judgment.” After a course of Spiritual Exercises lasting ten days, going by his account, he made a general confession and received the ordination to the sub-diaconate on 19 September 1840.

“Henceforward,” says Don Bosco, recalling the words he had heard a few years before from Dr Giovanni Borel at the conclusion of a course of Spiritual Exercises, “I took the greatest care to practice Doctor Borrelli’s advice: a vocation is preserved and perfected by recollection and frequent communion.” (MO 166)

It is not easy to determine the exact semantic value of the term *ritiratezza*<sup>10</sup> in the mind of Don Bosco. About a year before the writing of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* we find him writing to a lady: “You give much thought to the choice of a state of life and you do well to do so.... Prayer, frequent Communion, *ritiratezza* are the foundations [of such a choice].” (24 March 1872)

The expression is found also in the resolutions made on the occasion of the clerical vestition: “I will love and practice *ritiratezza*.” (MO 123)

The term brings to mind the many renunciations made by Don Bosco of games and profane practices and pastimes, but it seems that it refers above all to the interior life, to a fruitful solitude that is to be cultivated in the secrecy of one’s own room, a solitude that favours recollection and prayer.

In this regard Father Cafasso, Don Bosco’s spiritual director, used to say: “The divine Redeemer, Head and Master of all priests, every time he could find a respite from his continuous labours, would retire to pray, as we read in the Gospel. Recollection [*ritiro*] and prayer, these are the two wings that will

<sup>10</sup> [Translated as ‘a retiring life’ in MO 123.]

lift the priest so high as to render him like a god on earth. Recollection and prayer are qualities that are inseparable: the one derives from the other; I am speaking of a pious and virtuous recollection and not one that is natural and capricious. The recollected man naturally is a lover of prayer; the man who prays withdraws necessarily from the clamour of the world and seeks quiet and solitude. Recollection and prayer are two virtues that suffice, because they carry in themselves and presuppose all that is required for the formation of a worthy and holy priest. It is impossible that one who lives recollected and prays, does not have his heart detached from this world and full of the Spirit of the Lord.” (*pro manuscripto*)

Ordained deacon in March 1841, on 26 May John Bosco began the exercises in preparation for the priestly ordination which took place on 5 June of the same year in the Church of the Immaculate Conception at Turin.

### **Outlines of Father John Bosco’s personal project of life**

The resolutions made on that occasion may be found not in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* but rather in a handwritten notebook whose contents are known to Salesians under the name of Spiritual Testament of Don Bosco, but whose real title, also handwritten, is *Memorie dal 1841 al 1844-5-6 pel Sac. Gio. Bosco a’ suoi figliuoli salesiani*.

We have here another important autobiographical writing of Don Bosco, begun in 1884 and ended on 24 December 1887, a little more than a month before the end of his earthly experience, on which day the diary passed into the hands of his secretary at the time, Father Carlo Viglietti.

At the beginning of this booklet, which consists mainly of a series of provisions, counsels and recommendations for the period that would follow his death, Don Bosco returns to the period of his priestly ordination and to the resolutions made on that occasion. His writing begins with these words:

I began the Spiritual Exercises in the house of the Mission on 26 May, feast of St Philip Neri, 1841. The holy orders were conferred by Msgr. Luigi Fransoni, our archbishop, in his episcopal palace, on 5 June of that year. The first Mass was celebrated in the church of St Francis of Assisi, assisted by my great benefactor Father Giuseppe Cafasso of Castelnuovo d’Asti, on 6 June, Sunday of the Most Holy Trinity. The conclusion of the Exercises made in preparation for the celebration of the first Holy Mass was: The priest does not go alone to heaven, he does not go alone to hell. If he does well he will go to heaven together with the souls saved by him through his good example; if he does evil, if he gives scandal, he will be lost together with the souls damned by his scandal.

Resolutions:

1. Never take walks except in grave necessity – visits to the sick, etc.
2. Occupy time rigorously.
3. Suffer, work, humiliate oneself in everything and always, when it is a question of the salvation of souls.
4. May the charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales be my guide in all things.
5. I will always show myself content with the food set before me, provided it is not damaging to health.
6. I will drink wine watered and only as a remedy: that is to say only when and as much as required by health.
7. Work is a powerful tool against the enemies of the soul. I will therefore not give more than five hours of sleep to my body every night. During the day, especially after lunch, I will not take any rest. I will make an exception in case of sickness.

[8.] I will give some time every day to meditation, to spiritual reading. In the course of the day I will make a brief visit or at least a prayer to the Most Blessed Sacrament. I will make at least a quarter of an hour of preparation, and another quarter of an hour of thanksgiving after Holy Mass.

[9.] I will never engage in conversation with women except in order to hear confessions or in some other spiritual need.

These memories were written in 1841.

There recurs, once again, the proposal to make a daily meditation, always considered, in the writings of Don Bosco, as something quite distinct from personal *spiritual reading*; to this must be added also the decision to dedicate adequate time to the preparation for and thanksgiving after Mass. In this regard, he will write some time later in the same notebook: "Because there are mostly requests to speak or to hear confessions when I reach the sacristy, I will therefore, before leaving my room, ensure that I make a brief preparation for Holy Mass."

This is something that preoccupied Don Bosco all his life, given that the *Spiritual Testament* brings us, in one of its last pages, this request for pardon: "I must, however, ask for pardon if someone has observed that many times I made too brief a preparation for or too brief a thanksgiving after Holy Mass. I was in a certain way constrained to do this by the number of persons who surrounded me in the sacristy and did not allow the possibility of praying before or after Holy Mass."

Again, in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* Don Bosco writes: "My ordination day was the vigil of the feast of the Blessed Trinity. I said my first Mass in the church of St Francis of Assisi where Father Cafasso was dean of the conferences. Though a priest had not said his first Mass in my home place for many a day, and my neighbours were anxiously waiting for me to say mine there, I preferred to say it without fuss in Turin. That was the most wonderful day of my life. At the *Memento* in that unforgettable Mass I remembered devoutly all my teachers, my benefactors spiritual and temporal, and especially the ever-lamented Father Calosso, whom I have always remembered as my great and outstanding benefactor."

The adult Don Bosco reveals to us, through his *Memoirs* of the past, his awareness of the importance of surrounding with silence and recollection the precious gifts of God.



## CHAPTER 4

### AT THE CONVITTO ECCLESIASTICO

The summer following Don Bosco's priestly ordination is once again a time of discernment.

The young priest is offered some 'jobs' or pastoral activities. He himself recounts: "Before I made a final choice, I sought out Father Cafasso in Turin to ask his advice. For several years now he had been my guide in matters both spiritual and temporal. That holy priest listened to everything, the good money offers, the pressures from relatives and friends, my own goodwill to work. Without a moment's hesitation, this is what he said: 'You need to study moral theology and homiletics. For the time being, forget all these offers and come to the Convitto.' I willingly followed his wise advice; on 3 November 1841, I enrolled at the Convitto." (MO 180)

A few months after his priestly ordination, therefore, Don Bosco enters the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin; he will remain there three years. These are, in our opinion, the most important and fertile years of his formation, those with greatest impact on his personal and apostolic life; it is because of this that we will dwell a little longer in this long chapter on the events and persons that might allow us to understand more deeply the spiritual history of the founder of the Salesians.

The Convitto was founded in 1817 under the inspiration of Pio Brunone Lanteri and through the initiative of Dr Luigi Guala in the premises of the former monastery attached to the church of St Francis; Msgr. Chiaverotti's official decree of approval, however, is dated 23 February 1821.

The credit of having conceived and realized the Turin Convitto has been given variously to Guala and to Lanteri. Lanteri was probably the real ideator and inspirer, but it is very likely that motives of prudence prevented him from involving himself directly in the foundation, since for some time he had been under the surveillance of the French police because of the position he had assumed in the affair of Napoleon and Pius VII. Guala, his junior by 15 years, was actually one of his disciples, but after the foundation of the Convitto he became the real support and guarantor of Lanteri's ideas.

Rector of the church of St Francis at Turin in 1808 when he was 33 years old, Luigi Maria Fortunato Guala had been providing accommodation for some years already, in the limited space available to him, to about 10 young priests, with the aim of completing their seminary formation with daily conferences on 'practical' moral theology.

The declared scope of the Convitto was therefore that of providing newly ordained young priests with a more immediate and practical preparation for priestly ministry, particularly in view of preaching and hearing confessions.

The situation of the young clergy of Piedmont in those years is well described in the Regulations of the Convitto Ecclesiastico, compiled by Guala himself.:

Many of these [this is Guala's judgment on the condition of the young priests of Turin] at the end of their theological studies find themselves in a situation where they have few opportunities for earning a living apart from public conferences; they are therefore led to support themselves by means of occupations extraneous to the ecclesiastical ministry, or else to go back to their native places where they usually end up deprived of culture and example. Others are constrained to live in expensive quarters where they are often disturbed in their studies and exposed to danger of losing the ecclesiastical spirit; others, finally, discouraged by the difficulties they encounter in the lengthy period they must dedicate to studies, abandon these studies. From all this follows necessarily:

1. A scarcity of confessors who are able to minister to all sorts of persons, and hence the great difficulty experienced by the faithful in approaching the sacraments.

Loss of the ecclesiastical spirit, because of which very many of the plants cultivated with great difficulty and expense, and which had given great hopes during the period of theology, now become sterile for lack of care.

2. It is impossible to explain how much damage these things cause, and how they are to be lamented when there is so much need of good pastors.

It was in order to remedy at least in part such a great evil that the Convitto was set up in the premises of St Francis, for providing accommodation to ecclesiastics, and for enabling them to apply themselves to such studies and to prepare themselves for the exercise of the holy ministry.

The opening of the Convitto was a momentous event for the church of Piedmont; with the Convitto, in fact, a new 'school of spirituality' was born in Turin, a school of priests with a clear identity, distinct from those formed at the faculty of theology of the Royal University. To mitigate a rigorism in moral theology and a Gallicanism in ecclesiology that was asserting the autonomy, more or less extensively, of the Church of France from the authority of the Papacy, there was opposed a clear choice for a probabilism that proposed a reasonable liberty of conscience in the field of morality and a defence without reserve of the authority of the pope.

This project of priestly life was in harmony with that of the *Amicizia Cristiana* of Nicolaus von Diessbach, of whom Lanteri was a disciple and friend.

Born in 1732, Nicolaus Joseph Albert von Diessbach, after having lost his wife, entered the Society of Jesus in 1759 in the city of Turin, where his thought and work continued to be diffused even after the suppression of the Society in 1773. Friend of the Czech Redemptorist Clement-Marie Hofbauer, he had known Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori and was an enthusiastic Liguorian. Diessbach planned to respond to the propaganda of his opponents by diffusing the works of St Alphonsus and by means of the clandestine union of men of good will. With this aim he founded in Turin, between 1778 and 1780, the *Amicizia cristiana*, a sort of secret society of clerics and laity that, bound by vows and having Christian perfection as their aim, dedicated themselves to the diffusion of good literature, fought against Jansenism, and upheld a convinced support to the pope.

### **Pio Brunone Lanteri**

Pio Brunone Lanteri was born at Cuneo on 12 May 1759. Shifting to Turin, where he frequented the faculty of theology of the Royal University, he had Nicolaus von Diessbach as his spiritual director. Ordained priest in 1782, he also promoted the *Amicizia Cristiana*.

Lanteri understood the importance and characteristics of the cultural upheaval in progress. He understood that the French Revolution was the consequence of a long cultural ferment, protracted over the whole of the eighteenth century, a ferment that was the effect of the Enlightenment and that was changing the mindset of a significant part of the population. Further, the Revolution had found, in France, a Church that was wounded and weakened by divisions and doubts, in the wake of the Jansenist heresy with its moral and sacramental rigorism, accompanied now by Gallicanism and now by jurisdictionalism.

The intention of Brunone was to involve also the laity in the cultural reconquest of society, using as the privileged means of apostolate the diffusion of books in every ambient, through reading, study and reflection, reaching every social class; in particular, he was opposed to the spread of Jansenistic ideas and attitudes within the Catholic world, and found his best means in the propagation of the works of St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, in which he expended prodigious amounts of energy and money.

Dragged into the tragic events of the relationship between Napoleon and Pius VII, he upheld with force the authority and primacy of the pope and was therefore kept under surveillance by the French police. After 1814 he resumed his apostolate, reorganizing the *Amicizia Cristiana* into two different associations, the *Amicizia cattolica* for the laity and the *Amicizia sacerdotale* for priests.

It was in such a social and religious context that there matured the idea of founding the Oblates of the Virgin Mary. In 1816 Lanteri, attentive to the signs of the times and in continuity with the program of the *Amicizia sacerdotale*, founded at Carignano a congregation that had as its scope the diffusion of good literature, struggle against common errors, above all those against the pope and the Holy See, and the formation of good priests and efficacious preachers. The privileged apostolic instrument was the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises according to the method of St Ignatius, the true charismatic nucleus of the new congregation. Even more than the Jesuits, who Lanteri saw were involved in and distracted by

other works of education, the Oblates dedicated themselves to the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises according for the benefit of priests and of laity of all categories and classes, guiding retreats practically during the course of the whole year.

The congregation of the Oblates, dissolved for 4 years because of some misunderstanding with the then Archbishop Msgr. Chiaverotti, was reconstituted in 1826 with papal approbation. Having been in close collaboration with many former Jesuits during the period of the suppression of the Society of Jesus, Lanteri himself, when the Oblates had been dissolved, asked to become a Jesuit in 1824, but was advised not to enter the Society even by Guala himself. Lanteri died at Pinerolo, in Piedmont, in 1830.

### **Don Bosco and the Oblates of the Virgin Mary**

It might be interesting to highlight the fact that in the Constitutions of his new congregation Lanteri had made provisions for the so-called 'extern members.' This concept and terminology would be taken up by Don Bosco, who made ample use of the Constitutions of the Oblates in his redaction of the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales. At any rate, the Lanterian idea of involving the laity in the work of diffusing good books and Christian values would certainly become the common patrimony of the educative project of the Convitto.

The constitutional texts presented by Don Bosco to the ecclesiastical authorities from 1860 to 1873 contain a chapter dedicated to extern members, which carries on the Lanterian inspiration, in particular in relation to the mission entrusted to them of diffusing good books and the apostolate of the Spiritual Exercises. The text of 1864 says, for example: "Any person living in the world, in his own house, with his own family, can belong to our society. He does not make any vows, but will strive to put into practice that part of the regulations that is compatible with his age, state and condition, as for example taking catechism for poor children, spreading good books, promoting triduums, novenas, Spiritual Exercises, and other such works of charity that are specially directed to the spiritual good of youth or of the lower classes." Faced with the strong opposition of the consultors, Don Bosco, who had presented the disputed chapter again and again despite the observations received, had to resign himself to the suppression of the disputed articles in the definitive text of 1874. The following year he would initiate the Associates of the Congregation of St Francis de Sales which, in 1876, would take the definitive name of Salesian Cooperators.

These last considerations and, in particular, the correspondence between the Constitutions of the Oblates and of the Society of St Francis de Sales, justify the choice made in these *Notes* to dedicate so many pages to the figure of Pio Brunone Lanteri, of whom usually very little is said in the many biographies of the saint of Turin.

The influence of the founder of the Oblates, even if indirect, on the formation of Don Bosco in the Convitto, emerges, as we have seen, from different elements. The spirituality of the *Amicizie* and the involvement of the laity, the special appeal to Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori in matters of moral theology, the importance given to the apostolate of the Spiritual Exercises, the diffusion of good books, the love for and defence of the Roman Pontiff: all these elements formed the basic framework of the educative project of the Convitto Ecclesiastico and left an indelible imprint on the spiritual life and apostolic choices of the founder of the Salesians.

In addition, the *Biographical Memoirs* tell us that at the end of his three year stay at the Convitto Don Bosco was in touch with the Oblates of the Virgin Mary and nurtured for a while a desire to join this congregation (cf BM 2:160-163) that had as its apostolic scope, as we have said, the preaching of the Ignatian Exercises.

This is confirmed by a manuscript of the *Cronichetta anteriore* of Father Giulio Barberis, first novice master of the Salesian congregation, who writes: "Here are some details about the life of Don Bosco that he himself narrated to some individuals...: 'At the end of the third year of moral theology I had decided to join the Oblates of the Virgin Mary; I had already arranged everything, I was going to Sant' Ignazio only to do the Spiritual Exercises. When I had finished, I spoke to Father Cafasso so that he might give me a decisive word, and he said I should not go. This reply was for me a terrible blow, but I did not want even to ask why; I returned to the Convitto and continued to study, preach and confess.'" (ACS A 003.01.01)

At the end of his period of formation in the Convitto Don Bosco was almost 29 years old, so his decision was certainly a mature one. It was probably influenced also by the edifying example of one of his seminary companions, the cleric Giuseppe Burzio, who had joined the Oblates and had died in the concept of sanctity at the Sanctuary of the Consolata in 1842. Don Bosco himself would write a testimony about him on 16 April 1843, sending it to the Oblate, Father Felice Giordano, who would use it practically in its entirety, publishing in 1846 the *Cenni istruttivi di perfezione proposti a' giovani desiderosi della medesima nella vita edificante di Giuseppe Burzio*. At any rate, Don Bosco always maintained a great esteem for the mission of the Oblates and for their charism. The proof of this is that the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises always remained, in the Constitutions written by Don Bosco, one of the principal apostolic aims of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

### **The formative project of the Convitto Ecclesiastico**

A study of the formative project of the Convitto will allow us to recognize the decisive contribution of Don Bosco's three year stay at the Convitto to his personal and apostolic project of life, and also to justify the number of pages dedicated in these *Notes* to this period in the life of our founder.

One of our principal sources will be the first *Regulations* composed by Lanteri and Guala themselves.

The young priests usually stayed two years in the Convitto. Colombero, however, tells us that "young [priests] who excelled in piety and study" were allowed to stay on for a third year. John Bosco was one of these model students: he spent three academic years at the Convitto, from 1841 to 1843.

The basic aim of the Convitto was to help young priests in the difficult period immediately following their priestly ordination, preparing them better for the exercise of the ministry of preaching and of reconciliation. From this aim derive the basic lines of its educative project. We can isolate at least six principal aspects of this project:

- the study of 'practical' moral theology;
- the exercise of sacred eloquence;
- the apostolic exercises;
- asceticism and the life of prayer;
- the Spiritual Exercises;
- an ultramontanist ecclesiology.

Let us examine these one by one with the sole aim of highlighting some elements of the spiritual history of the founder of the Salesians.

#### **Study of 'practical' moral theology**

The most immediate objective of the conferences on moral theology was to prepare the young priests for the exercise of the ministry of confession. During their stay at the Convitto the young priests had to undergo only one examination, the one for obtaining the faculty of confession.

The daily timetable normally included two conferences on moral theology, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, that would conclude with a 'practical confession'; Cafasso, who before succeeding Guala as Rector of the Convitto was a tutor of moral theology, would usually simulate being a penitent at the end of the afternoon conference.

The official text used, or rather imposed, on the conferences in Turin was the *Commentaria theologiae moralis* of Antonio Giuseppe Alasia, which was probabiliorist in orientation (from the Latin *probabilior* = more probable). According to this orientation, whenever there was a doubt about the moral licitness of an action, one should always follow the opinion that seems to have the greater degree of probability of being correct. Such an attitude orients the judgment towards a certain rigorism.

The text of Alasia was, however, presented at the Convitto in an Alphonsian sense, that is, with an attitude that was more moderate and more inclined to benevolence.

Guala had, in fact, petitioned the Holy See in 1828 for an official reply declaring sure and convenient the doctrine of Alphonsus de' Liguori, who had been beatified recently in 1816.

Colombero, a former student of the Convitto, in his *Vita del servo di Dio D. Giuseppe Cafasso*, gives us information about the innovative content of those early conferences: “As soon as he was appointed Rector of the church of St Francis in 1808, Guala immediately set about erecting the first foundations of an idea that had already been in the air for some time. He took with him some priests to help him officiate in the church, and when he had about seven or eight, some interns and others externs, he began to give them a brief conference every day, reading *Alasia* which was the recommended text for our schools and consulting St Alphonsus, who he called Our Saint. He used to do this unobtrusively, without too much publicity, taking into consideration the conditions of the time when wanting to modify the opinions of *Alasia* in any way was a task fraught with great peril. This attempt of Guala was in fact something new and unheard of among us, that would certainly have raised up animosity and opposition if it were to have become public, and if it were to reach the ears of the Directors of the institutions of the Archdiocese.”

At any rate, the set up of the Convitto tended to form, as the Salesian Father Pietro Braido has written, pastors of souls who were “benign in doctrine and loving in behaviour.”

The fundamental goal of the moral theology of Alphonsus, is, in fact, that of never discouraging the penitent while never renouncing the role of judge. “As far as the theological system was concerned,” attests Father Reviglio at the process of beatification of Cafasso, “whether he professed probabilism or probabiorism, it is certain that he adopted that which in the circumstances promoted the greater glory of God, the conversion of sinners, and the perfection of the devout, in such a way that, without being bound by an opinion, he declared that he would rather change at every moment his way of seeing if that would procure the good of his penitents.”

Don Bosco was certainly aware of the opportuneness of the Alphonsian perspective, as the *Memoirs of the Oratory* bear witness. “Amongst other topics the most controversial was the question of Probabilism and Probabiliorism,” Don Bosco recounts at the age of almost 60, in relation to the years passed at the Convitto. “Doctor Guala took a strong stance between the two parties; starting from the principle that the charity of Our Lord Jesus Christ should be the inspiration of all systems, he was able to bring the two extremes together. Things came together so well that, thanks to Doctor Guala, St Alphonsus became our theological patron. This was a salutary step, long desired, and now we are reaping its benefit.” (MO 181)

The doctrine and the teachings of St Alphonsus constitute an indelible contribution to the spiritual formation and the apostolic attitude of Don Bosco, in particular in the exercise of the ministry of confession, but also in the very conception of the Christian and religious life. In this connection the inclusion of some letters of St Alphonsus to the Redemptorist congregation in the text of the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales is very significant. These letters, together with a circular written by St Vincent de Paul, are found in the appendix of the 1885 edition of the Italian Constitutions, the last one during the life of Don Bosco.

### **The exercises of Sacred Eloquence**

This is another cardinal element in the formative project of the Convitto, whose Regulations declare that “some exercise and preparation for the pulpit is always considered necessary for young ecclesiastics before they actually find themselves obliged to preach by reason of their office.”

It is not surprising, therefore, to find among the teachers of sacred eloquence the names of some famous Jesuits, such as Minimi, who preached the first Spiritual Exercises in which the young priest John Bosco participated in 1842, at the conclusion of his first year at the Convitto (see BM 2:96), as well as Grossi and Sagrini. Let us not forget that the model of the priest that Lanteri adopted in the formation of the young clergy was derived from the figure of the ‘guide’ of the Ignatian Exercises.

From the testimonies of some past students of the Convitto, it is possible to deduce that it was not a question merely of theoretical lessons, but also of ‘exercises from the pulpit,’ characterized by a scheme that was proposed and then developed in writing and presented for examination by the teachers and, sometimes, also by companions. “A theme used to be assigned for preaching,” writes Colombero, “or a part of a sermon to be composed in fifteen days and then read in public during the Conference.”

In order to understand the importance given to the ministry of preaching by Cafasso, who gradually assumed responsibility also for the school of eloquence, and the contents of his teaching, we have at our disposal an instruction prepared by him for a course of Spiritual Exercises for the clergy, entirely dedicated to this theme. Far from privileging form over content, or considering sacred eloquence as pure Oratory, Cafasso wants that the sermons should not be abstract but practical and close to the life of the listeners. "Let us leave aside that which never or very rarely can happen to our people," he writes in the instruction mentioned above, "and let us stick as often as we can to the virtues, the sins and domestic defects of daily life, to prayer, the sacraments, peace, sufferings in the family...; and treat these points in a suitable and practical way, so that everyone can see in himself the picture drawn by the preacher, recognizing where the evil lies and learning the way to overcome it."

Although there is a clear moralizing tone here, there is not lacking, in this instruction of Cafasso, a certain kindly optimism and the exhortation to encourage the audience, rather than disturbing it by presenting the virtues and sanctity as something unreachable. "I do not know from where it comes," Cafasso continues, "but we preachers tend to speak more often and more willingly of the difficult side of the law of the Lord, and to highlight the difficulty in observing it, rather than trying to smoothen the difficulties that are encountered... and so it is difficult to observe the commandments, difficult to make a good confession, difficult to receive Holy Communion well, difficult even to hear a mass with devotion, difficult to pray as one ought to, difficult above all to arrive at salvation, and there are very few who will be saved; and what comes from so many difficulties, even when not exaggerated, amplified or repeated? The good are disturbed and become discouraged, the wicked lose hope and even give up thinking about it."

We find also here, in reverse as it were, one of the elements most characteristic of the spiritual pedagogy of don Bosco, who always presented to his youth and to his Salesians a sanctity that was attainable, according to the teaching he himself had received at the Convitto.

In this context it seems important to highlight the fact that one of the elements that caused difficulties, for many years, in Don Bosco's relations with the clergy of Turin was, in our opinion, the incurable distance between the two schools of priestly life: the rigorist one of the Turin seminary and the Alphonsian and probabilist one of the Convitto. It seems to us that this aspect of the problem is often not taken seriously enough by some scholars, who, in considering the reasons behind this conflict, attribute it above all to temperament or to a desire for preponderance. We must not forget that the same Msgr. Gastaldi, who claimed for himself and for the seminary of Turin the care of the priestly formation of the Salesian clerics, was also responsible for closing down in 1878 the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin.

Don Bosco, on his part, certainly felt that 'his' Salesians, if formed in an intransigent and rigorist school, would become poorly suited to carrying out their apostolate in favour of young people, according to his spirit and the teachings of St Alphonsus. The contemporary historian Father Giuseppe Tuninetti, in a contribution entitled *Gli archivescovi di Torino e Don Bosco fondatore*, informs us that Don Bosco opposed, in an 1868 letter addressed to the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, the obligation imposed on the Salesian clerics to frequent the seminary as interns. "Among the various reasons cited in the letter against such an obligation," writes Tuninetti, "is included also the unreliability (from the point of view of orthodoxy) of the professors of the seminary in the areas of moral theology, sacred hermeneutics and church history."

### **The apostolic exercises**

Another formative element in the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin is constituted by the opportunities offered to the young priests for 'guided' apostolic experiences in settings that were particularly difficult, experiences that allowed them to augment their human and spiritual baggage and, at the same time, to orient themselves in the choice of an apostolate most suitable to them, in view of a definitive commitment.

This perspective is quite evident already in the first draft written by Lanteri. With respect to the aims of the new congregation of the Oblates it says: "to assist the sick in the hospitals, and those in prison, the lower classes, i.e., the servants, artisans, etc, so that the 5,000 or more people who emerge cured from the

hospitals, having received there the care of the soul with the teaching of the eternal maxims, and cultivating themselves according to these maxims by means of confessions, might become good Christians and useful citizens.”

The echoes in the Salesian tradition are evident. The final expression, in fact, reminds us of the Regulations of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales: “When a young person enters this Oratory,” we read, for example, in the draft of 1852, “he should be convinced that this is a place of religion, which aims at forming good Christians and honest citizens.”

The attention “to those in prison and to the lower classes” characterizes, in continuity with the Lanterian project, the apostolic experiences of the Convitto. Nicolas di Robilant, biographer of Cafasso, testifies: “The theologian Guala was involved also in the ministry of the prisons where, even though not going there personally, he would send every week through his students bread, money and tobacco. He also sometimes assisted those condemned to be shot.”

Better known would be the activity of Cafasso in assisting young prisoners and those condemned to die. Don Bosco recounts: “It was he [Father Cafasso] who first took me into the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads, aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates.” (MO 182)

Cafasso had a double aim: “Besides educating his disciples to the priestly life,” writes Colombero, “our wise master used to apply himself, in the direction of the Convitto, to another important objective, and that was the study of these young priests, of their character, their dispositions, their tendencies, so as to be able to assign them to a convenient place after the two years of conferences.” We discover, also in this case, that the particular discernment that Don Bosco made at the end of his period in the Convitto was ably guided by the formators of the Convitto.

Another initiative promoted or supported by the Convitto was the activity of catechesis and animation of boys and adolescents. Di Robilant, collecting numerous testimonies, affirms “with absolute certainty that [the activity of catechesis] began much before 1841” and, therefore, before that 8 December that the sons of Don Bosco have always considered as the ideal beginning of the work of the Oratory.

### **Ascesis and the life of prayer**

In the ascetical field, the Convitto proposed an austere and recollected life. “Silence is to be observed at all times,” affirms the Regulation, “barring the time of recreation, in which however voices should not be raised too much, taking care not to make noise on the corridors, on the stairs, while entering or leaving the rooms, and especially in the study, where silence must be observed rigorously.”

Detachment from the world, flight from public places, prohibition from participating in shows or visiting public places, these were considered indispensable for preserving the ecclesiastical spirit.

Very revealing are also the meditations and instructions given by Cafasso to the clergy on the theme of solitude. Flavio Accornero, author of *La dottrina spirituale di San Giuseppe Cafasso*, writes: “‘Solitude’ – together with ‘ritiratezza’ – is the term that is most frequently repeated by our author, and the love of solitude is a practice that is recommended, with a stress on its indispensability, to the clergy as to the people, not simply as a flight and subtraction from the world, but as exercise of the presence to God and to one’s conscience.”

Cafasso considered the practice of solitude as an indispensable resource for the life of the priest. “Union with God, purity of conscience, exemplarity of life, all things that are so characteristic of the priest,” he affirms in one of his handwritten instructions, “cannot be found without a recollected life and solitude.”

No material occupation and not even apostolic work can be sufficient motive for dispensing oneself from this search for personal time for study and prayer: “My brothers,” we read in one of his meditations to the clergy, “let us never forget that our life consists more in the spirit than in works; the works derive their value only from the spirit; take away or diminish in an ecclesiastic the interior spirit proper to his state, and you take away and diminish proportionately also the value of the works. If we want that there

reign in us such a spirit, do not diminish, instead, increase, inflame, consider necessary and indispensable a continuous and constant vigilance over ourselves. A place, a time for ourselves, for study, for the examination of our day, are absolutely necessary, otherwise what happens, what are the consequences? One studies, preaches, hears confessions, one takes on a thousand tasks, for this one and for that, without a moment of pause from morning to night, and even with good success, if you wish, but in the meantime what happens inside, what is the use, and what is the state of the heart?"

The first and the chief place that Cafasso indicates for this daily 'retreat' is one's own *room*. "Only in our room," he writes, "will we find that tranquillity, that calm so necessary to form a good priest." It is this 'cell' that the priest must learn to love: "Love for the cell where the air is more pure for the soul, the sky more open, the Lord closer and more familiar."

It was in such a school that the founder of the Salesians was formed.

### **The Spiritual Exercises and the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo**

Another indispensable element for understanding the formative identity of the Convitto is its link with the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio, above the village of Lanzo Torinese.

There is an indispensable presupposition. The periodic practice of the Spiritual Exercises is one of the most interesting characteristics of the spirituality of the nineteenth century. Although already present in Europe in the two preceding centuries, it became diffused and almost universal in the nineteenth century, not merely for religious orders but also for the secular clergy, for devout laypeople, and for the students of public schools.

More exactly, the piety of the laity was sustained and animated by the popular missions, which can be considered an adaptation of the Exercises. Don Bosco himself speaks in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* about "a solemn mission that took place in Buttigliera" in the year 1826. "The preachers were well known and drew people from everywhere. I went with many others. We had an instruction and a meditation in the evening, after which we were free to return home." (MO 33). The annual retreats, closed or open, were instead obligatory in religious houses and in seminaries starting from the end of the seventeenth century, according to the orders of Clement XI and Benedict XV.

In Piedmont, after the Restoration, the work of the Exercises was diffused thanks to some enthusiastic propagators of the method of St Ignatius.

Among these must be cited first of all Father Roothaan, SJ, rector of the college of the province of Turin and later, for 30 years, General of the Society. Another fundamental reference is to the congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary of Pio Brunone Lanteri, whose charism, as we have already said, was precisely the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises according to the method of St Ignatius. Lanteri had been initiated into this work by Diessbach.

The work of Lanteri in favour of the Exercises had its official 'christening' as it were in the diocese of Turin already in 1807 when, together with Guala, he was asked to preach to the priests of the diocese.

Guala and Lanteri decided to restore and dedicate to this scope the quarters adjoining an ancient sanctuary that, after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, had been taken over by the curia of the Archdiocese of Turin and had fallen into a state of almost complete disrepair.

The construction of the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio, at a height of about 920 metres and not far from the village of Lanzo, about 40 kilometres north-west of Turin, was completed in 1727 by the Jesuits, who in 1677 had become owners of a little chapel venerating the Saint, and of the surrounding land.

Discomforts and material difficulties were not lacking in the early years but already in 1808 the house was officially reopened.

In 1814 Dr Luigi Guala, who some years earlier had been nominated Rector of the church of St Francis of Assisi, became administrator of the sanctuary.

This particular circumstance linked the fate of the sanctuary to that of the Convitto Ecclesiastico and enriched the formative project of the Convitto with great concreteness. The apostolate of the Exercises is like a constantly present horizon and a 'synthetic proposal' that gathered all the efforts relating to the formative process of the Convitto and to the model of priesthood at its basis.



Further, the Regulation of the Convitto provided that every scholastic year ended with the Exercises at the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio.

The Convitto and the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio thus acquired a central role in the theological formation and in the spiritual life of the Piedmontese clergy of the nineteenth century. Sant' Ignazio, in particular, became in a sense the pulsating heart of the whole diocese of Turin during the difficult years of the Italian *Risorgimento*.

At the death of Guala it was Cafasso, who had been giving the Exercises at the sanctuary for many years already, who took over also the administration.

Our *Notes* will dedicate a whole chapter to the theme of the Exercises in the spiritual and apostolic life of Don Bosco. Let us say here only that, beginning from 1841, Don Bosco made assiduous use of the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo, attached as it was to the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin. He went there, in fact, without interruption every year up to 1874, often taking with him some of his young clerics. The only exceptions were the years 1848 and 1849, when, because of the political movements for the unification of Italy, the Exercises were not held at Sant' Ignazio.

### **'Ultramontanist' ecclesiology**

In the field of ecclesiology the ideas of the Convitto were marked by the ultramontanism that had been in vogue when the *Amicizie* were born. The authority and the prestige of the pope were defended against the 'enemies of the primacy' and misleading doctrines, but also, consequently, against every opening to 'modernity.'

Some factors concomitant with the French Revolution had contributed to the creation of this climate of fervour with regard to the Pope. First of all Gallicanism, which had highlighted the peculiarity of the French church in opposition to that of Rome, had led to a cooling of mutual relations; secondly there was Jansenism which had shown itself to be opposed to the centralism of the Roman Curia. Diessbach, taking his distance from these attitudes, had founded the *Amicizie* on the basis of a program of 'adhesion without reserve' to the 'Holy Catholic Apostolic Roman Church.'

It was such a climate that nourished the love that Don Bosco would always show to the Holy Father.

In this perspective the appeal to a psychological interpretation – referring to the absence of a paternal figure in the psychic-affective development of Don Bosco, in order to explain his fidelity to the pope – seems forced.

Such an interpretation risks appearing superficial in the measure that it does not take into account the complexity of the universe of forces that motivated Don Bosco, and of the indelible contribution of the formation he received at the Convitto.

The life of the Convitto had been thus described by Tullio Goffi, in his *La spiritualità dell'Ottocento*: "The spirituality of the Convitto was founded on the doctrine of St Francis de Sales and of St Alphonsus de' Liguori. It does not aim at sanctity for the sake of sanctity as in a monastic community; it does not educate to a mystical experience; it does not invite to the abandonment of everyone and everything in order to be able to see oneself only of God and in God. It limits itself to making the young priests conscious of living in a world that is spiritually convulsed; it observes that from the Christian side there is much to be done; it qualifies the priest members for an incessant action in favour of souls to be saved, offering them the comfort of an apostolic and charitable welcome. The Convitto seeks to convince the priests that what they propose to and demand from the faithful (orthodoxy of doctrine, spirit of prayer and of mortification, ethical and canonical observance) must necessarily be matched by the testimony of their lives. The Convitto does not propose any new spiritual doctrine, but only an ascetic and virtuous voluntarism within a faithful practice of piety."

### **Don Bosco on the experience of the Convitto**

We have tried, in the preceding paragraph, to highlight the decisive role of the Convitto in the spiritual and apostolic formation of Don Bosco. But was he conscious of this? What was his judgment about the Convitto in his mature years? Let us read what he says in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "The Convitto Ecclesiastico," he writes, "completed, you might say, the study of theology. In the seminary we studied

only dogmatic and speculative theology, and in moral theology only controversial issues. Here, instead, one learnt to be a priest. Meditation, spiritual reading, two conferences a day, lessons in preaching, a secluded life, every convenience for study, reading good authors – these were the areas of learning to which we had to apply ourselves. At that time, two prominent men were in charge of this most useful institution: Doctor Luigi Guala and Father Giuseppe Caffasso. Doctor Guala was the founder of the work. Detached, rich in knowledge, prudent and fearless, he was all things to all people in the days of the regime of Napoleon I. He founded that extraordinary seedbed where young priests fresh from their seminary courses could learn the practical aspects of their sacred ministry. This proved very valuable to the Church, especially as a means of eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that still persisted in our midst.” “Doctor Guala’s right-hand man,” continues Don Bosco, “was Father Caffasso. . . . Doctor Felice Golzio, a hidden gold mine amongst the Turinese clergy, was also at the Convitto. With his modest life-style he was hardly noticeable. But he was a tireless worker, humble and knowledgeable; he was a real support or better, Guala and Caffasso’s right-hand man. The prisons, hospitals, pulpits, charitable institutes, the sick in their homes, the cities, the villages, and we might add, the mansions of the rich and the hovels of the poor felt the salutary effects of the zeal of these three luminaries of the clergy of Turin. These were the three models placed in my path by Divine Providence. It was just up to me to follow their example, their teaching, their virtues.” (MO 181)

This decisively positive judgment pronounced by Don Bosco in the year of the definitive approval of the Constitutions (1874) and of the consolidation of the congregation founded by him, reveals indirectly a sort of programmatic indication on how “one learns to be a priest”: meditation, reading, two conferences a day, exercises of preaching, a recollected life. . . .

Again, a re-reading of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* at this particular chronological level, that is, as a historical document that allows us to recognize the project of priestly life proposed in his mature years to the congregation founded by him, allows us to know the judgment of Don Bosco about a ‘successful’ formative program and, in particular, about the role assigned to meditation and to the life of prayer.

It might also be interesting to read an older testimony of Don Bosco, written in the very period we are considering. This consists of some memories recorded by him on 16 April 1843 about a seminary companion at Chieri, Giuseppe Burzio, about whom we have already spoken in these *Notes*.

Giuseppe Burzio (1822-1842) arrived at the seminary of Chieri at the beginning of the last year of theology of the cleric John Bosco, in November 1840. Don Bosco, ordained sub-deacon in September of that year, had been nominated ‘prefect of the dormitory’ and had immediately struck a good spiritual friendship with Burzio. In September of 1841 Burzio entered Lanteri’s congregation. He died of a serious illness a year later.

In the written testimony about this “perfect model of a cleric,” found in the first volume of the *Epistolario* edited by Francesco Motto, Don Bosco affirms: “But even greater was his commitment to piety, in which he was truly singular. I can make reference only to that which happened under the eyes of all; but those who knew the sincerity of this cleric, and his constancy in doing good, could easily divine the true nature of the hidden acts of his interior virtue. He never participated in religious practices with an air of indifference or out of mere habit; on the contrary, he was admirable for the peace and eagerness that he manifested. In fact, as soon as some sacred function began, or a usual exercise, for example, of prayer or of meditation, or even simply if he had to put his foot into the chapel, all his senses would immediately be invaded by a holy fear, and by his devout behaviour everyone could see his heart and the spirit of faith that moved it. Whether the superiors were present or not, the pious behaviour of Burzio was invariably the same, and so it can be well said of him that he *walked before God*. . . . Beyond the religious practices that were common to all and performed by him with great fervour, I could realize, from his words and deeds, that he was most devoted to Jesus in the blessed Sacrament and to the Madonna, and he would spend any bit of free time offering acts of love and of gratitude. This is how I saw him many times in moments of recreation. And above all on holidays, he would separate himself gently from his companions, enter the church, and spend time in sweet converse with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and with his most holy mother.”

When Don Bosco writes this testimony he is about 28 years old, and is at the end of his experience at the Convitto; the consideration and the esteem that he nourishes for that “spending time in sweet converse” reveals to us his way of feeling, his ideal of Christian and priestly life.

The time of prayer, of personal and silent colloquy with God, will never be considered by him as excessive and inopportune; on the contrary, this favourable judgment will be common to many of the protagonists of his biographies of the young or the not so young that he will continue to present all through his life as authentic models of Christian virtue and of sanctity.

## St Giuseppe Cafasso

The figure of Cafasso and his spiritual doctrine merit special attention because of the role that his saint had, for more than 30 years, in the life of Don Bosco.

Giuseppe Cafasso was born at Castelnuovo d’Asti, the same village as that of Don Bosco, on 11 January 1811; he was, therefore, barely four and a half years older than his most noted disciple.

Physically not impressive, “small of stature, bright-eyed, affable, angelic in appearance” (cf MO 47), Cafasso was one of the first pupils of the new seminary of Chieri in the year 1827.

In 1833, soon after his priestly ordination, he entered the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin where he was first as a student, then tutor and teacher of moral theology, and finally Rector, after the death of Guala in 1848. He kept this job till his death on 22 June 1860.

Besides the teaching of moral theology, he dedicated himself to the ministry of the prisons and of those condemned to death, and to the preaching of the Spiritual Exercises to clergy and laity. This last aspect of his priestly ministry would have consequences on the spiritual and apostolic experience of Don Bosco.

Cafasso carefully collected all his notes in numerous notebooks, but never published anything. One of his nephews, the canon Giuseppe Allamano, who would reopen in 1882 the Convitto that had been shut down a few years earlier by Msgr. Gastaldi, edited, at the beginning of the twentieth century, some volumes of meditations and instructions for the people and the clergy. A new edition of Cafasso’s manuscripts is currently being prepared.

Father Eugenio Valentini, who contributed the entry ‘Joseph Cafasso’ in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, writes: “Giuseppe Cafasso was, at one and the same time, expert in moral and in spiritual theology. His spirituality, which was not traditional at all, is profoundly pastoral. It is because of this that his influence on the clergy and those he directed was great: remember that his greatest disciple was St John Bosco.”

The influence of Cafasso’s teaching and pastoral zeal on the clergy of Turin was profound. Despite the fact that the range of his influence might seem limited to the students of the Convitto, he, as Father Flavio Accornero, expert in the spiritual doctrine of Cafasso, affirms, was master of priests and, therefore, he multiplied his influence on the church of Piedmont: “He was a man who was able to oppose evil,” writes Accornero, “and to lead the battle of the Lord, carrying out with indescribable zeal his activity in favour of souls, as priest and as master of priests. Precisely because he worked in a closed and restricted field, that of the confessional, the pulpit and the school of an ecclesiastical institute, he was able to penetrate to the depths, because he worked on those who were able to multiply his work: we could say that he was the inspirer and animator of new paths for the whole clergy of Piedmont. All the directors of souls had him as their director. And his teachings, his words, his ideas passed from priest to priest, from parish to parish, from soul to soul. . . . Among his students are to be numbered founders of religious institutes, initiators of new ascetical and moral tendencies, saints. How much is there of Cafasso in their activities and sanctity? Without a doubt many elements originating in Cafasso are to be found deeply inserted in the life of these men who represent the great spiritual personalities of the Piedmontese century and who in their gigantic spiritual stature reveal the goodness and the force of the seed from which they originated.”

## Father Cafasso and Don Bosco

The influence of Cafasso on Don Bosco, despite the modest difference in age, was decisive; using a term borrowed from the psychology of relations, we could say that their relationship was never 'symmetrical.' Don Bosco himself leaves no doubt in this regard when, in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, after having spoken of the years passed at the Convitto Ecclesiastico and, in particular, of Doctors Luigi Borel, Felice Golzio and Father Cafasso, affirms: "These were the three models placed in my path by Divine Providence. It was just up to me to follow their example, their teaching, their virtues. Father Caffasso, who for six years had been my guide, was also my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life." (MO 181-182) "This is first time," observes Pietro Stella in the first volume of his *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, "that Don Bosco talks about a spiritual director in recalling his life, and the context makes clear what he means. His spiritual director was the person to whom he revealed his conscience in order to get direction for his religious life, the one who heard his confessions, and the one who gave him authoritative counsel in every matter and decision of importance."<sup>11</sup>

The first meeting probably took place in 1829. Don Bosco was clearly aware that in the years that followed, Father Cafasso's guidance and support were decisive in certain situations that demanded discernment. In particular we could mention:

- the decision not to abandon his studies in order to embrace the ecclesiastical state. After the first meeting (MO 47-48), the biographers of Cafasso tell us that Father Cafasso spoke with Canon Francesco Cottino, the parish priest of Moncucco, asking him to give free tuitions to John Bosco;<sup>12</sup>
- the decision not to enter the novitiate of the Madonna degli Angeli of the Franciscan Observants (cf BM 1:227-228);
- the decision to enter the seminary of Chieri (cf BM 1:229);
- the removal of the doubts preceding the clerical visitation and the request for admission to orders (cf MO 165);
- the decision to enter the Convitto Ecclesiastico soon after his priestly ordination (MO 180) and his first mass celebrated in the church of St Francis of Assisi next to the Convitto Ecclesiastico where Cafasso was dean of the conferences (cf MO 166);
- the choice of his first pastoral experiences (cf MO 182, 197, 202-203);
- dissuading him from following through on his decision to leave for the missions and to enter religious life with the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, at the end of a course of Spiritual Exercises (cf BM 2:160-164);
- the choice of some particular projects for the newly born Oratory of St Francis de Sales. From the very beginning Father Cafasso supported the work of Don Bosco not only spiritually but also as a generous benefactor. At his death Cafasso was still owner of a part of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales; he left this to Don Bosco, together with a sum of money and the remission of all debts.

After leaving the Convitto, Don Bosco continued to make his weekly confession to Father Cafasso until the latter's death in 1860. Colombero and Di Robilant, biographers of Cafasso, also testify that for many years Don Bosco would go daily to the Convitto in order to study and reflect in a room specially reserved for him there, and in particular to prepare the *Letture Cattoliche*, for which he had to often make use of the library of the Convitto.

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<sup>11</sup> [P. Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Salesiana Publishers, 2005), 97-98.]

<sup>12</sup> [This sentence has been added in this English text at the recommendation of the author.]

This search for '*ritiratezza*,' the desire to find time for study and recollection, should contribute to dismantling one of the commonplaces that has caused not a little damage, in our opinion, to the spiritual figure of our saint and to the lives of many of his sons. "The Venerable," affirms the biographer Father Lemoyne in connection with the drafting of the manuscript of the *Vita della Beata Maria degli Angeli carmelitana scalza torinese*, published in two different editions in the years 1865 and 1866, "had managed to write this biography between trips and other tasks. Many of his callers, not finding him at the Oratory, had come to know that now and then he would retire a few hours to the Convitto Ecclesiastico in order to work in peace. Naturally they began to flock there and thus forced him to seek other hideouts in the homes of benefactors and friends." (BM 8:140)

Don Bosco's affection, esteem and recognition of his master Father Cafasso are revealed by the acute suffering caused him by his death, and by his desire to preserve and perpetuate his memory.

It is possible, in fact, that Don Bosco had planned to write a true and proper biography of Cafasso (what went to the press under this name is merely a collection of two funeral eulogies): this is the testimony of Cafasso's nephew, the Blessed Giuseppe Allamano, founder of the Missionaries of the Consolata. Towards the end of his life, Don Bosco himself had confided to Allamano that he had not been able to carry out his plans because of the mysterious disappearance of the documents collected by him from a cupboard in the Oratory.

About the relations between the two saints, this is the testimony of the Salesian Giovanni Cagliero, then Archbishop of Sebaste and Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia, at the process of beatification of Cafasso: "Our Venerable Don Bosco had a very special veneration for the Venerable Cafasso. This intimate veneration was suffused by a holy affection that bound him to Cafasso and made him a humble disciple before the goodness and sanctity of his great master. For 20 years he had him as spiritual director and as his only confidant and counsellor. We who have the greatest idea of the goodness and virtue of Don Bosco, united with the greatest affection and deepest veneration for his holiness, formed about his master Father Cafasso an even greater regard for his goodness, his virtue and his holiness. And I myself who had many opportunities to meet the Venerable Cafasso, hear his warm exhortations, was convinced of the truth of what Don Bosco used to tell us."

The same witness testifies again in the *Nova positio super virtutibus*: "It was commonly held by me and my colleagues in the Oratory, that the Venerable [Cafasso] was the model of every priestly virtue. . . . From what I could see in the many circumstances in which I approached him, and what I have heard from the Venerable Don Bosco who was his disciple, enjoyed an intimate familiarity with him, knew his heart and his spirit, and was able to observe the rare celestial gifts with which he was enriched by the Lord. . . . I can give sure testimony that the virtues, whether theological, cardinal or moral, were practiced by the Venerable Cafasso in a heroic manner."

In this connection Eugenio Valentini has written, in the presentation of the re-edition of Don Bosco's *Biografia del Sacerdote Giuseppe Cafasso esposta in due ragionamenti funebri*, published in 1960 on the occasion of the centenary of his [Cafasso's] death: "Humanly speaking, without St Giuseppe Cafasso, we would not have had St John Bosco, and probably not even the Salesian Congregation. It was he who advised Don Bosco, guided him in the choice of a state of life, formed him in the Convitto Ecclesiastico, and then directed, defended and sustained him in the difficult moments of his life. The spirituality of the Master was transfused in great part into the Disciple, and we today, reading these pages at the distance of a century, are able to easily notice the intertwining and, we might say, fusion of these two spiritualities. This is, in fact, the principal characteristic of this documentation. Father Cafasso was for Don Bosco the Master, the Spiritual Director, the Confessor, the Benefactor par excellence. Now this intimate influence, enduring over a period of thirty years, could not but leave an impression – and what an impression! – in the life of the disciple. This is the first reason, an objective reason, because of which the spirituality of Cafasso was transfused into St John Bosco."

These authoritative opinions allow us to affirm decisively that it is not possible to know Don Bosco in depth without making an appeal to the spiritual personality of Cafasso. In particular, the knowledge of Cafasso reveals to us the basic lines of the spiritual edifice which the disciple himself tried to trace in the two funeral eulogies that we have at our disposal.

Father Giuseppe Cafasso died prematurely on 23 June 1860.

Don Bosco, at the time, was about 45 years old. Two weeks later in the church of the Oratory, with a voice breaking with emotion, as Father Ruffino testifies in the *Cronache dell'oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Don Bosco celebrated a mass in suffrage. About two months later, on 30 August, another Eucharist was celebrated in the church of St Francis of Assisi next to the Convitto Ecclesiastico; also in that occasion Don Bosco gave the funeral eulogy.

At the end of the year the two discourses were put together in a single fascicle of the *Letture Cattoliche*, with the title *Biografia del Sacerdote Giuseppe Cafasso esposta in due ragionamenti funebri*. The reading of these pages reveals to us, indirectly, the heart and the life of its author.

### **In the tabernacle of a spiritual experience**

The spiritual experience of a believer remains a mystery about which, on the scientific plane, we can make at most reasonable and documented hypotheses. This consideration becomes even more true when we find ourselves before the experience of a saint, of a man in whom the Church has recognized the extraordinary nature of his theological life.

Nevertheless, it is probably true that saints are endowed with some special 'instrument' for recognizing the way God works in the life of other saints. This explains how the history of spirituality has given us many famous biographies, such as that of St Anthony Abbot written by St Athanasius, that of St Benedict written by St Gregory the Great, or that of St Bonfilio written by St Sylvester.

What strikes us in the two funeral discourses is Don Bosco's ability to capture, in the spiritual experience of Cafasso, that particular synthesis of apostolic charity and of asceticism, of untiring labour and of prayer that constitutes one of the most important characteristics of the spiritual experience of the founder of the Salesians.

About the early life of Cafasso our author notes: "With what assiduity he goes to the church, takes part in the sacred functions, frequents the holy sacraments! It is from here that the marvels begin. He goes to listen to the word of God, and then repeats them to his companions and friends. He works, but his work is mixed with ejaculatory prayers, with acts of patience, with continuous offering of his heart to God."

The heroic charity of Father Cafasso is combined with a profound spirit of prayer: "Father Cafasso dedicates himself untiringly to the study of sacred history, the history of the church, the holy Fathers, of moral, dogmatic, ascetic and mystical theology, of preaching; he prepares cases for the course on parishes, receives confession examinations, and in the meantime I enter this church and I see him kneeling in prayer now before the altar of Mary, now prostrate in adoration before the Most Holy Sacrament, or assisting at the confessional surrounded by long lines of faithful anxious to manifest to him the anguish of their consciences, and to have from him guidelines for good living. Go to the sanctuary of the Consolata, and see Father Cafasso in exercises of devotion; visit the churches where the Forty Hours are being held, and there also, prostrate, he unburdens his sweet affections on his beloved Jesus."

"Even in the bitter winter cold," we read in the first funeral discourse, "even when he was suffering from ailments of stomach, head and teeth, because of which he could barely stand, by four in the morning he was already on his knees to pray, meditate or engage in some work."

What is the secret of this "marvellous number of disparate works" that nevertheless did not distract the Saint from his life of prayer? Don Bosco mentions not one but five:

- his constant tranquillity;
- his long experience combined with a great trust in God;
- the exact and constant use of time;
- his temperance;
- his frugality in rest. In this regard Don Bosco writes: "Father Cafasso saved time by cutting down on his rest. The only rest he allowed his fragile body during the day were the three quarters of an hour after lunch, which he would spend in his room, for the most part in prayer, meditation, or some special practice of piety. In the evening, he was the last to go to bed and in the morning

always the first to rise. His night rest was never more than five hours, and it often became four and sometimes even three. He used to say that a man of the Church should rise only once during the night. These words give us to understand that, if he once awoke, whatever be the hour, he would immediately get out of bed in order to pray, meditate, or engage in some work.”

It might be interesting to note that it is still possible today to visit Cafasso's room at the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio. In front of the monumental bed, a door opens up directly onto the chapel below, exactly in front of the tabernacle....

These secrets, which Cafasso “could not keep sufficiently hidden from the notice of those who admired his holy actions and tried to emulate his rare virtues,” and that evoke the admiring recognition of his disciple, enable us to know more in depth the ‘feeling’ of Don Bosco.

In connection with this *Biografia* and the spiritual affinity between the two saints, Father Valentini writes: “There is another reason... why we found in these pages such marvellous coincidences, and it is this: that when one speaks of others, one also reveals a good part of oneself. We are able to see in others, in fact, only those aspects that strike us, that are within the circle of our interests, that are in part solutions to the problems that preoccupy us.”

This suggestive hypothesis (“that when one speaks of others, one also reveals a good part of oneself”) seems to find confirmation in a significant testimony that the Salesian tradition supplies us.

On 29 September 1926, Father Philip Rinaldi, then Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation, addressed to Cardinal Antonio Vico, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, a letter in which, under oath, he affirmed: “In his final years... [Don Bosco] had the habit of retiring to his room every day from 1400 to 1500 hours, and the Superiors would not allow anyone to disturb him at that time. But since from 1883 up to the death of the Servant of God I was in charge of a house of formation for aspirants to the priesthood, and since he had said that I could meet him anytime I needed to, perhaps indiscreetly but certainly in order to be able to approach him more easily, I interrupted him several times at that very hour, not only in the Oratory but also at Lanzo and at San Benigno, where he used to go often, and at Mathi and in the house of San Giovanni Evangelista in Turin. And always and in every place, I surprised him in meditation, recollected and with his hands joined.”

“The only rest he allowed his fragile body during the day,” Don Bosco had written about Cafasso in 1860, “were the three quarters of an hour after lunch, which he would spend in his room, for the most part in prayer, meditation, or some special practice of piety.”

The correspondence is singular, but, in fact, not really surprising; there is nothing more natural than the disciple assimilating the habits of the master in whose hands he had placed, for many years, “every deliberation, every study, every action of his life.”

Even with regard to the ‘nocturnal habits’ of Cafasso it is possible to discover a correspondence in the life of Don Bosco. Up to the age of 45, in fact, according to a confidence that he himself shared with Father Lemoyne on 5 April 1884, Don Bosco did not spend more than 5 hours in sleep at night, skipping a whole night's rest every week; only later, overcome by sickness, did he mitigate this demanding standard of life.

Yet again, therefore, the study of the writings of the founder is a precious source of indirect knowledge that allows us to formulate well founded and reasonable hypotheses about his spiritual experience.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN THE PERSONAL AND APOSTOLIC EXPERIENCE OF DON BOSCO

In 1842, at the end of his first year at the Convitto, Don Bosco, in the company of Cafasso, went, perhaps for the first time, to the Sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio above the village of Lanzo for his Spiritual Exercises. The Regulation of the Convitto: "The Convitto will re-open every year on 1 November. Since it is not possible to make the Spiritual Exercises during the course of the year, they will be held at the end of the year at the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio. All the students are bound to participate in this retreat." Don Bosco, who had been ordained the previous year, was 27 years old at the time.

From 1842 onwards, as we have already said, Don Bosco was an assiduous visitor to the Sanctuary. He went there almost uninterruptedly for more than 30 years, even after 1866, the year in which he began to have the Exercises separately at Trofarello for the new Society of St Francis de Sales. He often took along with him some young clerics from the Oratory.

After the death of Cafasso, Rector of the Convitto and the sanctuary, canon Eugenio Galletti took over, and then, in 1864, Dr Felice Golzio, Don Bosco's confessor from 1860 to 1873. After the death of these in 1874, Don Bosco still continued making his retreat at the sanctuary; according to Father Lemoyne, the cold reception he received that year convinced him not to return in the following years.

Don Bosco went up to Sant' Ignazio many other times too, first with Cafasso and then with Golzio, in order to help with the Exercises for the laity and as confessor.

This happened for the first time in 1843. In this regard Father Lemoyne writes: "At that time the Spiritual Exercises given to the laity at Sant' Ignazio needed a bit of life. Mindful of this, Father Cafasso was very keen that Don Bosco should attend. To comply with this holy desire and to contribute to the success of a work so pleasing to God, Don Bosco obliged, and henceforward never failed to take part in it, year after year, until 1875. For many years he made the journey on foot, leaving Turin at 0300 in the morning and arriving at Sant' Ignazio at about 1000. Father Cafasso, Doctor Golzio and Father Begliati always put him in full charge at the shrine and retreat house, but did not burden him with preaching. But hardly had he received faculties to hear confessions, nearly all wanted to make their confessions to him, and he made himself available. The good he accomplished is beyond calculation." (BM 2:112-113)

Again, with reference to the summer of 1849 we read: "After these celebrations [of St John the Baptist] Don Bosco prepared himself to go to the Sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio, where Father Cafasso wanted him at all costs. . . . At Sant' Ignazio and with Father Cafasso, Don Bosco felt completely at home. During the Spiritual Exercises he spent time in meditation, heard the confessions of many of the participants, and with his benefactor and spiritual guide took the firm decision to lay the groundwork for his own religious congregation." (BM 3:377)

These last considerations of Father Lemoyne, even though somewhat redundant, strengthen the conviction that, in the little journey that these *Notes* would like to undertake in search of the spiritual history of don Bosco, the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio is an obligatory stop. Its very geographic collocation and the solitude of the place reveal, even today, an aspect of the personality and of the spirituality of Don Bosco that is often forgotten. Despite the importance that this sanctuary had in the life of the saint of Turin, it often fails to appear in pilgrimages to the 'Salesian places.' And in the place where there used to be the room of Don Bosco, we find today . . . a modern and most useful elevator!



## The sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo

The work of Lanteri in favour of the Exercises had its 'official christening' in the diocese of Turin already in 1807, when, together with Dr Luigi Guala, the founder of the Oblates was given the task of preaching to the priests of the diocese.

Guala and Lanteri decided to restore and refurnish for this purpose the spaces surrounding an ancient sanctuary that, after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, had been annexed by the Curia of the Archdiocese of Turin and had fallen in a state of almost complete disrepair.

In 1677 the Jesuits had become owners of a little chapel venerating St Ignatius, and of the surrounding land. About 40 kilometres north-west of Turin, the chapel was situated not far from the village of Lanzo, at a height of about 920 metres. Eventually the Jesuits replaced the chapel with the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio, completing the construction in 1727.

Discomforts and material difficulties were not lacking in the early years but already in 1808 the house was officially re-opened.

In 1814 Dr Luigi Guala, who some years earlier had been nominated Rector of the church of St Francis of Assisi, was also appointed administrator of the sanctuary by the Archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Giacinto Della Torre; this was re-confirmed, in 1836, by Msgr. Frasoni.

This particular circumstance linked to fate of the sanctuary to that of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*. Both thus occupied a central role in the theological formation of the Piedmontese clergy of the nineteenth century. Sant' Ignazio, in particular, was in a sense the pulsating heart of the whole diocese of Turin during the difficult years of the Italian *Risorgimento*.

The formative project of the *Convitto* always maintained, as we have seen, an orientation towards the experience of the Exercises and the ministry of preaching, privileging, in particular, the exercises of sacred eloquence as well as practical moral theology, i.e., preparation for the exercise of the ministry of reconciliation.

The Exercises at Sant' Ignazio had a paradigmatic value; they became, practically, the norm and model for the institution or renewal of the Exercises in many other dioceses.

The sanctuary, thanks to the restorations and expansions promoted by Guala, was able to host about 80 participants.

At the death of Guala it was Cafasso who took over the administration. For many years he had been preaching the Exercises at the sanctuary, and now he undertook to complete certain works, in particular the facilitation of access to the sanctuary by the acquisition of properties and the construction of a road for vehicles. Before this, the only way of reaching the sanctuary was by means of a two hour walk from Lanzo. The regulations for the Spiritual Exercises compiled by Guala had, in fact, made provision that, on the morning of the opening day of the Exercises, there be a good fire at the entrance to the building, "so that those who arrived sweating might spend a moment there before going up to their rooms which are somewhat cool even in the summer months."

About the atmosphere that reigned during these Exercises in the years when they were guided by Father Cafasso, successor of Guala from 1849, Di Robilant, biographer of Cafasso, gives us the following information: "As president of the pious gathering [Cafasso] tried to ensure that everyone was happy and cheerful; but at the same time he was extremely demanding when it came to the exact recitation of the Breviary and the scrupulous observance of silence. 'The Exercises,' he would say, 'are like a divinely ordered machine composed of many little details, vocal prayer, mental prayer, examinations [of conscience], hymns, readings in church, in the room, recreations, silences.' The principal point on which he insisted was, however, silence. 'I dare to say,' he would affirm, 'that the outcome, the fruit of our Exercises will be in direct proportion to the silence that we maintain during these days. If we observe rigorous silence and there reigns among us a true solitude, I hope for everything.'"

This attention to silence and recollection was already present in the regulations drawn up by Guala: "Apart from the hours of recreation, everyone will observe a strict silence, in the corridors, in going and coming from the rooms to the church and the refectory, taking care to avoid even a mutual exchange of

signs or eye contact so as to prevent the least invitation to conversation, and this also at table, where all greetings will be avoided and each one will serve himself.”

The sanctuary of Sant’Ignazio, however, did not conduct retreats only for the clergy. Laity would also go there, people of “every age and condition, with a predominance of youth, from ministers of the state and members of the court up to humble professionals, shopkeepers and artisans.” Apart from some norms which were meant for priests, such as those relating to the celebration of the Eucharist, the timetable and regulations were the same also for these.

### **Don Bosco and the apostolate of the Exercises**

The experience of the Spiritual Exercises in the formative context of the Convitto Ecclesiastico, thanks also to the spiritual proximity of Cafasso, became for Don Bosco an important point of reference not only on the personal plane but also on the apostolic plane. We have already spoken about his desire to join the congregation of Pio Brunone Lanteri, specially dedicated as it was to the preaching of the Ignatian Exercises.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* themselves tell us about Don Bosco’s experiences of preaching soon after the end of his stay at the Convitto: “At that time I began to preach publicly in some churches in Turin, in the Hospital of Charity, in the Hospice of Virtue, in the prisons, and in the College of St Francesca di Paola. I preached triduum, novenas and Spiritual Exercises.” (MO 202) We still have the manuscripts of some of these early experiences, some of them probably composed as exercises of sacred eloquence during the stay at the Convitto.

The practice of the Spiritual Exercises was introduced for the youngsters right from Don Bosco’s early years at Valdocco, beginning from 1846.

The *Biographical Memoirs* contain the following description: “Meanwhile, Don Bosco’s mind was crystallizing another project for the sanctification of a small group of his boys – a spiritual retreat. At that time only four or five boys boarded at the Oratory, and it was they whom he had particularly in mind, although he also planned to include some of the older boys who attended the festive Oratory. A few of these he had already prepared and invited to make the Spiritual Exercises of about a week. The retreat had its problems: inadequate facilities for the accommodation of the retreatants; the inconvenience of a constant supervision which would naturally fall on him; the expected lack of understanding by the boys, due to their youthful restlessness, of the importance of silence and recollection; distractions caused by neighbourhood noise and the coming and going of people in the Pinaridi house; disruption of routine in the boys’ homes and workshops; and also the sizeable expenditure involved. Undaunted by the lack of adequate kitchen utensils, Don Bosco determined to serve the boys a noon-time meal to eliminate their having to go home to eat, with all the distractions this entailed. Convinced, however, that the best was the enemy of the good, he did not wait for the ideal situation to emerge. Therefore, he decided to hold the Spiritual Exercises that very year, 1847; and divine providence sent him a preacher in the person of Doctor Federico Albert.” (BM 3:151-152)

Father Lemoyne continues: “Don Bosco decided to hold a retreat every year, regardless of the sacrifices it entailed, so that genuine conversions and singular fruits of sanctity might continue to increase. For several years he continued to provide lunch during that week, also to the day pupils, even when they were as many as fifty. This gave him a chance to discover their inclinations, to spur the lukewarm to greater effort, to encourage the more fervent, and to probe their vocations, directing toward the priesthood those whom he considered to have the calling... He was deeply pleased to see not a few of these simple youngsters, after the Spiritual Exercises, in the midst of their efforts to learn some humble and laborious trade, strive perseveringly to lead a better life, and indeed to tread a path of sanctity.” (BM 3:152-153)

The *Biographical Memoirs* bear witness that the tradition of the annual retreat became one of the cardinal points of the Salesian work for the education of young people to the faith.

In Don Bosco’s mind, however, the year in which he began the experience of the Exercises at the Oratory was 1848 and not 1847, as is seen in the autograph *Cenno storico dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* of 1854 and in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, which were written, as we know, many years later.

What is essential, however, is the fact that Don Bosco's 're-reading' underlines the importance given to the experience of the Exercises from the very beginning, especially as a privileged instrument for vocational discernment and personal sanctification: "I adopted every means to pursue also my own particular objective, which was to observe, get to know, and choose some individuals who had a suitable inclination to the common life, and to invite them to stay with me. With this aim, in that year (1848) I put it to a test with a little spiritual retreat. About fifty boys gathered at the Oratory house for it. They all ate with me; but because there were not enough beds for all, some had to sleep with their own families and return to the Oratory in the morning. This coming and going to their homes risked almost all the benefit to be reaped from the sermons and instructions which are customary on such occasions. The retreat began on Sunday evening and finished on the following Saturday evening. It succeeded quite well. Many boys for whom I had laboured in vain for a long time really gave themselves to virtuous living. Several entered religious life; others, while continuing in the secular life, became models in their regular attendance at the Oratory." (MO 325)

Don Bosco, therefore, gave great importance to the practice of the Spiritual Exercises. This is confirmed also by one of his first biographers, Father Ceria, who, in his *Don Bosco con Dio*, defines him as "a great admirer of the Ignatian practice." "Don Bosco," continues Ceria, "loved the Spiritual Exercises: he loved them for others, he loved them for himself."

Speaking through the voice of his young friend Luigi Comollo, this is how Don Bosco describes the experience of the Exercises: "During Lent of this year he also made the Spiritual Exercises with feelings of the greatest fervour; having finished these, it was as if he expected nothing more in this world, saying that the greatest favour that the Lord could give him was that of the Spiritual Exercises. 'That is the greatest grace,' he used to say ecstatically to his companions, 'that God can give a Christian, providing him with a means by which to deal with and dispose of the things of his soul with full knowledge, with all leisure, and with the help of such favourable circumstances such as the meditations, instructions, readings, good example. O how good the Lord is to us; and what ingratitude if someone were not to correspond to such goodness of God!'"

### **The model of the Exercises for youth**

At this point it is natural to ask about the model of the Spiritual Exercises that Don Bosco used.

As far as concerns the Spiritual Exercises for youth, and particularly about the quality and modality of the experiences of the early years, it is possible to put down some considerations.

A first and immediate observation regards Don Bosco's care in selecting a sufficiently recollected and suitable place. If we go by the *Biographical Memoirs*, it would seem that already in 1849 the Exercises for the boys of Valdocco took place, in two sessions, at Santa Margherita, on the hill of Moncalieri, in the house of Doctor Giovanni Vola. (BM 3:377)

The next year they took place at the minor seminary of Giaveno, which was later in 1860 entrusted, for some years, to the newly formed Salesian Society. The *Biographical Memoirs* even preserve the complete list of participants (109) with their ages. It might be interesting to note that the average age was a little under 20. In this long list of names we see also those of future Salesians, among whom the 16 year old Michael Rua, first successor of Don Bosco.

About the Exercises of that year the biographer writes: "[Don Bosco's] preaching was animated with ardent concern for the salvation of souls. One day he was so moved that he broke into sobs. Coming down from the pulpit he remarked to the cleric Savio Ascanio, humbly and with some embarrassment: 'I could not control myself.' But the effect on his young listeners was beyond words.... It was Don Rua who remembered this." (BM 4:82)

We do not have information about the timetable and style of these early experiences of 'residential' Exercises, but what Father Lemoyne reports about the beginning of the 1860s provides us with sufficient indications. "The Exercises began on Sunday evening, 19 April [1863]. Don Bosco spoke after night prayers. He recommended rigorous silence outside of recreation periods, and prohibited noisy games, including ball games." (BM 7:250)

Father Lemoyne then reports the timetable of the day:

## MORNING

0530, rising

0600, Prayers. – Prime – *Veni Creator* – Meditation. – *Miserere*. – Mass. – Terce. – Breakfast.0930, Sext. – Instruction. – Sacred praise: *Lodate Maria*. – Reflection in silence.1130, Visit to the Blessed Sacrament with the rosary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. – None. – Examen of conscience. – *Regina Coeli*.

1200, Lunch and recreation.

## EVENING

1400, Litany of Saints. – Recollection with private spiritual reading.

1530, Vespers and Compline. – Instruction. – Sacred praise: *Sufigli cantate*. – Tea and recreation.1730, Matins and Lauds. – Meditation. – *Miserere*. – Rosary. – Reflections. – *Regina Coeli*.

God – Soul – Eternity.

The *Biographical Memoirs* preserve for us also the timetable published in handouts meant for students and artisans in preparation for the Exercises of 1864.

The program for the day is the same as in 1863. At the end of the handout however we read:

Three things to be kept in mind:

1. Rigorous silence except during the times of recreation.

2. Diligence in taking part in the religious practices.

3. Realizing that it is a great grace of the Lord to be able to make the Spiritual Exercises.

God – Soul – Eternity.

*Et haec omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam.*

11 April 1864

Rector Don Bosco Giovanni

The timetable and, above all, the insistence on silence, remind us of the model of the Exercises that Don Bosco had learnt at the sanctuary of Sant' Ignazio and of Guala's regulations, of which we have already spoken. The *Biographical Memoirs* inform us also that some of the youngsters would take a commitment to maintain silence even during the recreations. (cf BM 7:250)

These documents reveal the traits of a spiritual proposal that is demanding and with a very 'clear identity.'

A page from Father Pietro Stella highlighting the Ignatian influence on the model of these early experiences of the Exercises helps us make a tentative synthesis. "The retreat might last three days or six days, even for young people, in the latter case extending from the evening of Friday before Palm Sunday to the morning of Holy Wednesday. The basic components were the same in either case: meditations, instructions, communal vocal prayers of lengthier duration than on ordinary days, and silence. The meditations, pretty much standardized since the eighteenth century, dealt with such themes as the supreme end of the human being, the divine plan of salvation, the saving work of Jesus Christ, and the crucial moments of human life with respect to eternal salvation. The Ignatian derivation was patent."<sup>13</sup>

## The Spiritual Exercises of the Salesians

The first Spiritual Exercises for the Salesians were held in 1866 in the house of Trofarello, a few kilometres from Turin. These Exercises lasted five days and were held in two sessions, in order to enable all to participate.

Gifted by Father Matteo Franco to the Salesian Society that very year, the house of Trofarello was restructured for the Spiritual Exercises and also for convalescing confreres. It was the third house outside Turin of the nascent congregation, after the Minor Seminary of Mirabello (1863) and the Collegio-Convitto of St Philip Neri at Lanzo (1864).

<sup>13</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 338.]

From 1870, however, in order to avoid having a third session, seeing the growing number of Salesians and the modest size of the building, the Exercises began to be held in the college at Lanzo. The house of Trofarello was later sold.

The Central Archives contain many testimonies and documents regarding these first eight courses of Exercises of the Salesian Congregation, which were held in August or September during the scholastic vacations, and which were always preached by Don Bosco.

Because of their content and also the particular context in which they were held, these instructions of Don Bosco have, in our opinion, a great importance for understanding the historical moment that the congregation was living through in those years, and also some traits of the *foundational experience*. In 1858 there had begun, in fact, the process of institutionalization and consolidation of the Society of St Francis de Sales. Don Bosco would remain at the helm of its affairs for another 30 years, the years of full human and spiritual maturity.

The first experiences of the Exercises at Trofarello will remain, in the reflective consciousness of the congregation, a fundamental step in its journey towards consolidation. "We can say," we read in the minutes of the first General Chapter of 1877, which will discuss, among other things, also the theme of the Exercises of the Salesians, "that the Congregation began making marked progress only from the time that we began making the Spiritual Exercises separately, by ourselves."

Later, during the third General Chapter, a true and proper Regulation would be drawn up, based on a sort of inquiry made among the members. This first *Regolamento degli Esercizi Spirituali nelle case della Pia Società di San Francesco di Sales* was prepared by Father Michael Rua. The manuscript consists of thirteen large pages and contains numerous corrections by Don Bosco himself. In the preamble we read: "These Exercises can be called the mainstay of religious congregations and treasure of the members who participate."

### **Silence during the Spiritual Exercises of the Salesians**

With the passage of time, the model of the Exercises would undergo an evolution. About these early experiences of the Exercises the *Biographical Memoirs* recount: "Don Bosco used to announce... that the retreatants were free to converse and stroll about; he wanted that, while they seriously considered their spiritual life, they should also rest and relax, and so he saw to it that appetizers and an extra course were served at lunch. His plans were enthusiastically accepted." (BM 8:199)

Don Bosco clearly wanted to avoid discouraging his young companions. But already in the next year, 1867, there was introduced a period of silence, from 1030 to 1200 in the morning. In 1868 there was added the silence from 1630 to 1730, while "tolerating the infractions of some of the more restless." In 1869 there was adopted the habit of speaking in low tones after breakfast and after supper and noisy games were prohibited. "Towards 1870," Father Lemoyne continues, "the days of the Exercises became six or eight, and were accompanied by that silence and seriousness even during recreations, that with the increasing number of participants are indispensable for obtaining good fruit."

When in 1874 the definitive text of the Constitutions was approved, the days of the Exercises prescribed were ten or at least six; as per the first regulations for the Spiritual Exercises (*Primo regolamento degli Esercizi Spirituali nelle case della Pia Società di San Francesco di Sales*) (cf BM 16:327-328) conserved in the Central Archives, silence was extended to the whole period "excepting the recreations after lunch and supper." (ACG D 579)<sup>14</sup>

About this we read in the minutes of the third General Chapter: "There was a discussion about the convenience of prescribing absolute silence after breakfast (the tradition of speaking in low tones persisted for a long time) or whether to permit a 'moderate' recreation." The Chapter decided to continue as before, with 17 votes in favour and 15 against.

Don Bosco, not satisfied, presented the proposal again to the Superior Council. In an article entitled "Gli esercizi spirituali nella esperienza di Don Bosco," Father Brocardo informs us: "There was a time when there was a discussion in the Congregation about whether to abolish the moderate recreation in the

<sup>14</sup> [This sentence has been modified at the recommendation of the author.]

afternoon and evening during the Exercises. The Chapter [= Superior Council], at which Don Bosco presided, weighed the pros and cons and came to a vote. Six pronounced themselves in favour of the status quo, one for complete silence. It was believed, Father Ceria remarks, that this was the vote of Don Rua. But a note of Father Cartier, which I found in the archives, reads: 'Don Rua told me that the vote in favour of total silence was that of Don Bosco.'"

In the light of the conviction that has gained currency with the passage of years, that the atmosphere of festivity and communion that characterizes the Salesian spirituality is not compatible with an atmosphere of recollection and of silence, this strange fact might be surprising to some. In reality, living contact with the story of the origins contributes, also in this case, to destroy certain common opinions.

In the case of the Exercises of the Salesians, as in other cases, Don Bosco makes use of the necessary principle of graduality. Father Pietro Brocardo observes in this regard: "Also with regard to the Exercises Don Bosco would do, therefore, what was possible: he had a high ideal, but he knew that such a demanding practice had to be developed slowly. His collaborators were still far from understanding the meaning of religious life."

"If today the congregation is what it is," Father Lemoyne said in 1930, "it is because in those times it was satisfied to be what it could be." (BM 11:253) Don Bosco's ability to present his project in a progressive manner is certainly fruit of his pedagogical wisdom. We have to be, therefore, very careful in evaluating some of the affirmations or choices of the early years. We must contextualize them in their proper historical period if we are to avoid certain minimalist interpretations of the intentions of the founder of the Salesians.

This is what happened, for example, with regard to article 3 of the chapter on the practices of piety of the first Salesian Constitutions. The original text read: "Every day there will be not less than half an hour of mental or at least vocal prayer..." In the definitive version, thanks also to the observations of the consultors which, in this case, Don Bosco accepted with joy, this became: "Besides the vocal prayers, everyone will make every day not less than half an hour of mental prayer."

We must remember that these times of prayer were added to those that were already there in order to fulfil "the general duties of a Christian" (morning and evening prayers), the particular duties of clerics (liturgy of the hours, daily Eucharist), the numerous daily or festive or periodic habits and practices prescribed by the different *Regolamenti dell'Oratorio* (ejaculatory prayers, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, rosary in common, vespers of the Madonna, Eucharistic adoration and benediction, the exercise for a happy death, the Forty Hours...). The Constitutions, therefore, as the Salesian Father Carlo Colli observed some years ago in an article entitled "Elementi di spiritualità salesiana," regulated only the *common* practices of piety and not the *private devotions* to which Don Bosco continually exhorted the boys, the Salesians and the laity. "The specification 'in common'," affirms Father Colli, "allows us to see that the many individual practices of piety, with which the devotion of the nineteenth century had constellated the day and the life of every good Christian, were not only not excluded, but were positively encouraged."

### **Preaching the Exercises as aim of the Salesian congregation**

To those who do not realize the fundamental role played by the Spiritual Exercises in the personal and apostolic life of Don Bosco, it might be surprising to note that the first draft of the Constitutions (certainly going back to 1858) does not talk yet about the Spiritual Exercises as a practice of piety for the members of the congregation (who were anyway, for many years, faithful to this practice already 'canonized' by the experience of the Oratory) but does talk about it instead as one of the aims of the nascent society.

Five such aims are in fact indicated. In summary:

1. to unite the members, clerics and lay, in the pursuit of a life of perfection;
2. to perfect themselves with the practice of the internal and external virtues, in imitation of Jesus Christ;
3. to gather poor and abandoned youth in order to instruction them in religion, above all on holidays;

4. to give hospitality to some in boarding houses in order to instruct them or teach them an art or a profession;
5. to give support to the catholic religion also as far as adults of the working classes are concerned by preaching the Spiritual Exercises and diffusing good books.

In reality, therefore, there are only four apostolic areas marked out for the new congregation: oratories, boarding schools, preaching of the Spiritual Exercises, and diffusion of good literature; these last two aims, as we can gather, bear witness to the spiritual inheritance received from the Convitto.

This mention of the Spiritual Exercises will remain substantially unchanged during Don Bosco's life, as can easily be seen from the synoptic perspective in the critical edition edited by Father Francesco Motto.

In the definitive version approved in 1874 and in the Italian translation of 1875, care of ecclesiastical vocations was also included among the aims of the society (as a fifth point); the fifth point of the first draft, regarding the Spiritual Exercises and good literature, was divided into two points, the sixth and the seventh.

In article 6 we read: "The need to support and sustain the Catholic religion is being keenly felt among the Christian people, particularly in the villages; the Salesians will therefore commit themselves with zeal to preach the Spiritual Exercises so as to confirm and direct towards piety those who, moved by the desire of conversion, take part in them."

In keeping with this indication, the Constitutions of Don Bosco prescribe that clerical confreres should compose a course of Exercises at the end of their studies in preparation for the priestly ordination. "Every member," we read in the Italian translation of 1875, "in order to complete his studies, besides the daily conferences of moral theology, should also compose a course of sermons and meditations, primarily for youth, and also suited to the understanding of all Christian faithful."

It is not difficult to verify, in the documents preserved in the Archives of the Generalate, that the praxis of the young congregation matched this indication. Among the courses of Exercises that have been preserved we could cite, for example, those compiled by Father Giovanni Bonetti (ACS B 517), Father Giulio Barberis (ACS B 508), Father Giovanni Cagliero (ACS B 485) and Father Giuseppe Bertello (ACS B 514). Hardly any part of this material has been subjected to study; it might reveal to us much of the spiritual climate of the origins.

This last reference to the original text of the Constitutions reminds us of the statutes of the *Amicizia sacerdotale*, inspired by Diessbach, which, describing the apostolic means to be used by the priest-friends to "bring all the earth under Jesus Christ," said: "In order to spread efficaciously [the holy word of God], everyone of the members will compose with great care a complete course of Missions for his own use, and a set of Spiritual Exercises."

The Constitutions of the Oblates also contained, in that period, an analogous reference in the first article of chapter 2, entitled 'About one's own sanctification': "Further, [the members] will compose a set of meditations and instructions in order to give the Exercises according to the method of St Ignatius."

This indication will remain in the Salesian Constitutions up to 1972. In the text adopted *ad experimentum* after the Special General Chapter of 1971 and in the definitive text of 8 December 1984, both the reference to the preaching of the Exercises as one of the aims of the congregation, and the prescription that each confrere should compose a course of Exercises, will disappear.

At the conclusion of his *Maturare in dialogo fraterno* Father Pietro Brocardo courageously defines the *rendiconto*, the friendly talk that every Salesian is called to have periodically with his superior, as an "indispensable charismatic element," tactfully denouncing those who, too simplistically, justify its abandonment.

"Confronted with the very real temptation," he says in his Introduction, "to regard the *rendiconto* as something outdated, we should not forget that the ideal will always be beyond us as human beings, but that it is more precious than life itself, if it is charism and gift of grace."

At the end of this chapter on the Spiritual Exercises we are led to the same conclusion.

The importance given to the *Exercises*, as a *practice of piety* but above all as *apostolate* in favour of youth and of adults and as an exercise of the *ministry of the Word*, is, according to us, an *indispensable charismatic element* of the *gift* given by God to the Church through the life and spiritual experience of St John Bosco.

It is because of this that we have wanted to dedicate a whole chapter of our *Notes* to this theme.



## CHAPTER 6

### TOWARDS THE FOUNDATION

According to Don Bosco, the journey towards the foundation of the Society of St Francis de Sales began already in 1841, the year of his entry into the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin. He would write in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*: “Hardly had I registered at the Convitto of St Francis, when I met at once a crowd of boys who followed me in the streets and the squares and even into the sacristy of the church attached to the institute.... It was then that I realized that if young lads just released from prison could find someone to befriend them, look after them, be with them on holidays, help them find work with good employers, and visit them during the week, they would soon forget the past and become good Christians and honest citizens. This was the beginning of our Oratory. It was to be blessed by the Lord with growth beyond my imagining at that time.” (MO 187, 190)

In 1874, the year of the definitive approval of the Constitutions of the Society, Don Bosco, in an account sent to the Cardinals of the commission delegated to approve them (see the *Epistolario* edited by Father Ceria) speaks of “having experimented with the Constitutions for 33 years, during which time it was possible to modify, add or delete things in keeping with the proper functioning of the Institute.” “This Society,” he had written in 1867 in a memorandum for the Archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Alessandro Ottaviano Riccardi, “although restricted to a few ecclesiastics, already in 1841 began to gather poor youngsters together on holidays.”

We know, however, that the first permanent base of the Oratory at the Pinar di Novato in the Valdoccò quarter of Turin – the centre from where the educative work of Don Bosco would spread throughout the world – was not established till March 1846 (cf MO 255). The clear decision to give permanence and stability to the work by giving origin to a religious institute, is to be dated, with a certain approximation, to around 1857.

These repeated if not unambiguous allusions of Don Bosco to 1841 as the year of origin of his Society enable us to understand that in his thinking the origins of the Salesian congregation are to be understood as a gradual process of evolution. The beginnings of this process coincide in practice with some decisive events in Don Bosco’s life, in particular with a series of catechism classes for one or two youngsters in a room adjacent to the sacristy of the church of St Francis of Assisi, next to the Convitto Ecclesiastico, that began on 8 December 1841, solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. In fact, we have two different versions of the event coming from Don Bosco himself. The *Memoirs of the Oratory* describe in a detailed and imaginative manner the first encounter of the young priest with a youngster completely ignorant of Christian doctrine called Bartholomew Garelli. The *Cenno storico dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* of 1854 says instead: “This Oratory, or the gathering of boys on holidays, began in the church of St Francis of Assisi. For many years already, Father Cafasso had been in the habit of taking catechism every Sunday during the summer for young bricklayers, in a room next to the sacristy of the church.... I took over from him towards the end of 1841, and began to meet in the same place two young adults who were seriously lacking in religious instruction.”

Men and women of the Spirit learn to hear “the suffering of God.” The voices of many people, the poor and the marginalized, adolescents and disoriented youngsters, recount, for those in tune with the heart of God, his *passion* and his anxiety about the fate of humanity. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain affirmed many years ago: “If people only knew that God suffers with us and much more than us for all the evil that devastates the world, many things would certainly have changed and many souls liberated.”

It is precisely from such *listening* that Don Bosco’s pastoral charity draws its origin. He knew how to find, with the creativity that only great love is capable of, new solutions for the distress and wounds of the

youth of his time. All this, in the life of the saint of Turin, emerges from an encounter that becomes intuition, a call that cannot be disregarded, a vocation. Whether or not the youngster was called Bartholomew, whether there was one boy or two, whether the place really was the sacristy of the church of St Francis of Assisi, none of this is really important. 'Bartholomew Garelli' will always remain in the minds and hearts of the sons of Don Bosco the young person in whom they are called to discover the passion that must be, first, a dream, then a project and finally a reality.

The years that followed the settling in at Valdocco represent, therefore, an important and productive period in which there mature both the awareness of the founder and his desire to discover new ways of responding to the needs and questions of the young. At the same time there is being formed, around him and his project, a group of very young disciples that will constitute the first nucleus of the congregation.

With respect to this period of the beginnings, however, we will try to gather, without attempting to be exhaustive, some elements of continuity between the spiritual experience of Don Bosco and the ideal of life that he transmitted to the Salesian congregation.

### **A simple catechism**

"This society had its origin in a simple catechism lesson," wrote Don Bosco in his *Cenno storico intorno alla Società di S. Francesco di Sales* of 1868.

In the years between 1841 and 1844 Don Bosco, who was residing at the Convitto and exercising his priestly ministry in the prisons, on the streets and in workplaces, continues to gather youngsters in a room adjacent to the sacristy of the church of St Francis of Assisi.

The two years that follow constitute a period of discernment and of wandering, in search of a stable place for his Oratory.

Finally, in April 1846, he rents from Francesco Pinardi a twenty metre long shed on the Via della Giardiniera at Valdocco, and there definitively establishes his work.

In 1847 a hospice for boys is attached to the Oratory with the intention of "removing them from danger, instructing them in religion and preparing them for work." Adjacent to the hospice for artisans, a similar one was soon added for students, who at first attended public schools. Among these latter, Don Bosco took special care of those who showed an inclination towards the ecclesiastical state. After the events of 1848 the civil authorities had ordered the closure of the diocesan seminary.

The years 1847 and 1849 mark the expansion of the work of the Oratory in two other zones on the periphery of Turin: the Oratory of St Aloysius Gonzaga in the Porta Nuova district and the Oratory of the Guardian Angel in the Vanchiglia quarter. In 1852 Don Bosco was officially appointed director of the three oratories by Msgr. Frasoni, Archbishop of Turin.

In 1853 the first schools for artisans and students were begun in the House annexed to the Oratory. In 1854 Don Bosco invited four youngsters "to make, with the help of the Lord and of St Francis de Sales" – words of Father Ceria taken from the *Vita di servo di Dio Don Michele Rua, primo successore di San Giovanni Bosco* – "a practical exercise of charity towards neighbour and later a promise and then, if possible and convenient, a vow to the Lord." Two of these four boys, Michael Rua and John Cagliero, would become respectively the first successor of Don Bosco and the first Salesian bishop. The *Piano di Regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco* dates from the same year; this was drawn up by Don Bosco "to serve as a regulation for this part of the sacred ministry and for the significant number of persons, both ecclesiastical and lay, who were working there with charity and solicitude." Finally, in 1856, "the schools and workshop were finally established in the House of the Oratory." (MO 324)

### **The primacy of religion in 'Bosconian' pedagogy**

The educative experience of Don Bosco is marked, from the very beginning, by a profound conviction about the primacy of religion in the work of prevention and recovery in favour of boys at risk. He himself writes in 1854 in the *Cenni storici intorno all'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*: "The idea of the oratories was born from my experience of visiting the prisons in this city. In these places of spiritual and

temporal misery are to be found many boys.... As soon as they heard the principles of morality and of religion, they experienced in their hearts a joy that they could not explain, but that aroused in them the desire to be better. In fact, many would improve in their behaviour in the prison itself, others on their exit from the prison would change their lives. Thus the facts confirmed that these boys had fallen into trouble because of lack of moral and religious instruction, and that these two means of education could be efficacious in protecting those who were still good, and in helping the bad to improve upon their exit from those places of punishment.”

The preventive system of Don Bosco rests, as the saint himself said in 1877, on reason, religion and loving kindness. The primacy of religion emerges, however, in a section of the famous little treatise: “Frequent confession, frequent communion, daily mass are the columns that should support an educational institute.... Never force the boys to frequent the sacraments, but only encourage them and explain to them to benefits. On the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises, triduum, novenas, preaching, catechism, take the chance to explain the beauty, the greatness, the holiness of such a religion that proposes means that are so easy and useful to civil society, to peace of heart, to the salvation of the soul, as are in fact the sacraments. In such a way the boys will be spontaneously drawn to these practices of piety and will approach them willingly, with pleasure and with fruit.”

The educative model of Don Bosco is, in some way, exclusive: it is characterized by a clear identity. The practice of the Christian life, the life of grace, is the central objective of his priestly work in favour of youth. “Here we deal with souls....”

From the expressions that Father Lemoyne attributes to Don Bosco in the *Biographical Memoirs* there often emerges this radical, and, we might say, without any negative connotation, ‘fundamentalist’ perspective. “To save your souls. This is not only the principal but the only reason for which I came here.” (BM 7:303) “A priest is always a priest, and this is how he must always appear when he speaks. To be a priest means to be duty-bound constantly to further God’s interests, the salvation of souls.” (BM 3:55)

“This,” Stella writes in 1960 in his *Valori spirituali nel ‘Giovane Provveduto’ di San Giovanni Bosco*, “is the declared aim in every speech and every page of his writings. He is always engaged in the business of souls.”

The spiritual quality of those early festive gatherings and the centrality of the religious proposal can be understood already from the simple, concise description of the daily program given by Don Bosco in his *Cenni storici* of 1854: “The religious functions on holidays are as follows: in the morning opportunities for confession; mass followed by a story from sacred history or church history, or the explanation of the gospel of the day; then recreation. In the afternoon, after the usual recreation, catechism class, vespers, a brief instruction from the pulpit, benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. After these religious functions everyone is free to stay on or to go home. At nightfall everyone goes home and the Oratory is closed.”

From the very beginning Don Bosco’s proposal manifests a clear evangelizing intention. This is certainly surprising when one notes that the target group of his educative work was often seasonal immigrant boys or inhabitants of working class areas or of the suburbs, often completely bereft of religious education and instruction.

Perhaps we sometimes give too much emphasis to the difficulty of announcing the gospel in our postmodern society, preferring the interminable mediations or even sometimes confusing the means (schooling, games, the theatre...) for the end. We think it is possible to affirm that the preventive system is not, in itself, a spirituality; all the same, it risks losing its authentically Bosconian horizon when it is not animated by a clear spiritual proposal involving both educators and young people.

Father Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, will write in a circular letter to the Salesians dated 15 May 1911, entitled *Sullo spirito di pietà*: “Don Bosco’s entire educative system is based on piety. If this is not properly practiced, our institutes would lack everything, every prestige, and would become very much inferior to those run by the laity. Now it is not possible to inculcate the spirit of piety in our students, if we ourselves are not abundantly endowed with it.... If the Salesian does not have a solid piety he will never measure up to his task as an educator.”

## Sanctity for all

From the very beginning of his work, therefore, Don Bosco's proposal is clearly meant for everyone, youth, lay collaborators, clerics and religious. Making use of a modern category, we could say that Don Bosco, formed at the Convitto in the doctrine of St Alphonsus and under the protection of Francis de Sales, patron of the Convitto, is conscious of the universal call to sanctity. He proposes to all, big and small, the horizon of a holy and happy life.

Don Bosco writes in the preface to *Il Giovane Provveduto*: "The devil uses two principal deceptions to draw the young away from virtue. The first is to make them convinced that to serve the Lord is to live a life that is sad and devoid of all fun and pleasure. This is not true, dear boys. I want to teach you a way of Christian life that will make you cheerful and happy at the same time, and show you which are the true entertainments and pleasures, so that you can say with the holy prophet David: Let us serve the Lord in holy joy: *Servite Domino in laetitia*. This is precisely the aim of this little book: to teach you to serve the Lord and to stay cheerful."

In point of fact, the chief resource of the Bosconian pedagogy of holiness lies not so much in this very popular manual but in the frequent presentation of some concrete models. Using a happy expression of Father Caviglia we can say that "Don Bosco teaches with facts to produce other facts." It is because of this that the literary genre preferred by him is certainly the biography.

He himself will write in 1859, in the presentation of the *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*: "Begin to draw profit from what will be described for you here, and say in your heart with St Augustine: *Si ille, cur non ego?* If one of my companions, of the same age as me, in the same place, exposed to the same and perhaps greater dangers, nonetheless found the way to remain a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, why not I too? Remember well however that true religion does not consist in mere words; you need to come down to deeds; therefore when you find something worthy of admiration, don't be satisfied with saying: This is beautiful, I like it. Say rather: I want to exert myself to do those things that I have read about these others and that excite my admiration."

Don Bosco's fundamental preoccupation is that all his boys be saved. The characteristically Alphonsian conviction that this is possible and, all said and done, not too difficult, sustains his apostolate.

Don Bosco's spiritual proposal, however, is not satisfied with this minimum, but continually urges boys and collaborators towards a holiness that is demanding but possible, one that we can grasp through a re-reading of the numerous biographies of young boys.

'Modelling' is one of the most secure mechanisms for learning. Proximity, even when only physical, renders more immediate the understanding and acquisition of the contents, attitudes and abilities of the model.

Luigi Comollo, Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, Francesco Besucco are the models that, because of their proximity, make Don Bosco's pedagogy efficacious.

The preface to Don Bosco first little work, the *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo* of 1844, is precious for understanding the formative mindset of Don Bosco. In the edition of 1854 the word *chierico* [cleric] is substituted by *giovane* [young man], with the clear intention of emphasizing that the model of life being proposed is not meant only for seminarians but for every young man of good will. "Since the example of a virtuous life is worth far more than any elegant discourse," writes Don Bosco in the preface to this second edition, "it will be useful to take a brief look at the life of a young man who in a short period of time attained such a practice of virtue as to be capable of being held up as a model to every Christian who desires the salvation of his soul. Here there are no extraordinary things, but everything is done with such perfection that we can apply to Comollo the words of the Holy Spirit: *Qui timet Deum nihil negligit*. ... Here we have many facts and few words, allowing each one to apply to himself what is suitable to his state. ... Read willingly, O Christian reader, and if you stop a while to meditate on what you read, you will certainly find something to delight in and to embark on a life that is truly virtuous. I pray that, going through these pages you will feel moved to follow some of the virtues mentioned, and that you will give glory to God, and while I pray that he bless you in every way, I dedicate these pages completely to him."

## The first generation of Salesians

The first generation of Salesians was formed in this particular spiritual climate. Their ideal of Christian life matured in living contact with these youthful models of sanctity and with their lived knowledge of Don Bosco's re-reading of their short human lives.

Michael Rua, first successor of Don Bosco, Giovanni Cagliero, first Salesian bishop, Giovanni Bonetti, counsellor and spiritual director of the congregation, Celestine Durando, who from 1865 was for 40 years a member of the Superior Council, solemnly made on 8 June 1856, together with Dominic Savio, the promise according to the rule of the Sodality of the Immaculate, "to try and imitate to the best of our ability Luigi Comollo." And Carlo Ghivarello, Secretary General and then Economer General of the congregation, Francis Cerruti, councillor general, and Giovanni Battista Francesia, Spiritual Director and Provincial, who were part of the first group of young men that, in December 1859, gave life to the Salesian Society, had also been companions of Savio, whose *Life* was published for the first time in the same year as the founding of the Society. These and many others among the first Salesians had known Magone and Besucco and had certainly read and reread the *Life* of Savio. Father Giulio Barberis himself, ten years younger than Michael Rua and first master of novices of the Salesian congregation, had joined the Oratory of Valdocco in 1861, the year of the publication of the biography of Michael Magone, and was a companion and admirer of Francesco Besucco.

It is with this first group of young men that Don Bosco would give life to the Society of St Francis de Sales. In his biography of his uncle Giulio, first master of novices, Father Alessio Barberis has observed very keenly: "Truly Don Bosco formed the Salesian Society 'out of nothing.' With a genial intuition he wanted that the foundation stones of his Institute be chosen from those youngsters who, having come to him while still young, had known, so to say, no other family save that of the Oratory. He had thus been able to form them completely according to his spirit, in his own image and likeness. The new institute was founded not with mature and well-formed adults, but almost exclusively with youngsters educated by the founder himself – something new, if I am not mistaken, in the history of the foundation of congregations. It was providentially certain that these youngsters, once they had become priests and religious, would have no other views than those of their Father. They placed absolute trust in him and were thus better able to transmit unchanged his spirit to posterity."

On 18 December 1859, when the act of adhesion to the Society of St Francis de Sales was signed, Don Bosco was 48 years old, Francesco Cerruti was 15 (!), Luigi Chiapale 16, Antonio Rovetto 17. If we set aside Don Bosco and Father Alasonatti, who was already a diocesan priest, the average age of this first group was less than 20.

This is a singular if not exclusive fact in the history of spirituality and of the religious life.

## A reliable model?

Two questions or difficulties could arise with respect to the many biographies written by Don Bosco and, in particular, with respect to these biographies of youngsters written in the two decades between 1844 and 1864.

The first and most immediate one is this: are the events recounted by Don Bosco reliable, or are we dealing here rather with edifying interpretations, given the clearly pedagogical intent?

Together with this question, another one of a more historical and spiritual character could arouse our interest: is it possible to detect, over the years, a substantial evolution in the model proposed?

It seems possible to respond to the latter question without hesitation; as for the former, we will take it up in the next section. As far as the contents of the spiritual life are concerned, we have not been able to notice any significant differences in the proposal made by Don Bosco to his young people over the years of his early existence.

This affirmation seems to be confirmed by the numerous reprints or editions of the biographies, none of which present any substantial differences from the first edition. The biography of Dominic Savio, published in 1859, was re-edited in Italian in 1861, 1866, and 1800; that of Michael Magone, first published in 1861, was re-edited in 1866 and 1800; that of Francesco Besucco, first published in 1864,

was re-edited in 1878 and 1866. The 1844 biography of Comollo itself went through three re-editions, in 1854, 1867 and 1884, four years before the death of Don Bosco. Something similar happened to *Le sei domeniche e la novena di S. Luigi Gonzaga con un cenno sulla vita del santo* of 1846, which underwent nine editions up to 1888, with different additions and variations, and whose central matter was inserted already into the first edition of *Il Giovane Provveduto*.

Basically, then, Don Bosco continues to present the same models or, better, with the necessary qualifications, the same model of youthful sanctity to different generations of young people in different social and cultural contexts. The biographies of Savio, Magone and Besucco would, in the last years of Don Bosco's life (1878-1888), be translated into French, German (Savio) and Spanish (Magone). The biography of another youngster, the French Louis Fleury Antoine Colle, published for the first time in France in 1882 and translated into German five years later, was translated into Italian only in 1961.

Despite the evident biographical differences and certain significant traits that distinguish the personalities of these young people, each of them can be, in some way, 'superimposed' on the other as in a pre-ordained scheme, but one that, however, still allows the highlighting of certain peculiar characteristics. In the biography of Savio, for example, the manifestations of the mystical life emerge in a clearer way, in that of Comollo the asceticism, in that of Magone the exuberance of youth, in that of Besucco the long prayers, even nocturnal. In addition, the biographies of Savio, Magone and Besucco allow us to see the characteristics of the oratorian experience of those years and, therefore, reveal to us in greater measure the apostolic heart of the father and, together with it, a more concrete and particular model of 'oratorian holiness.' Characteristic and recurrent, for example, is the insistence on presenting these youngsters at prayer during the period of *recreation*, an aspect that highlights, once again, the primacy of religion in the educative system of Don Bosco.

An exemplary childhood, flight from sin, careful choice of companions, active apostolate among companions, love of prayer without a care for time, Marian and Eucharistic devotion, frequent confession and communion and, finally, an edifying death: these are the principal elements that recur like a basic structure, one that we find exactly, even if with different emphases, in each of the biographies. From Aloysius Gonzaga to Comollo, from Savio to Magone, from Besucco to Louis Fleury Antoine Colle, the project of youthful sanctity dear to the heart of Don Bosco emerges with clear and characteristic traits.

This exact correspondence between the different lives of youngsters had already been highlighted, many years ago, by Father Alberto Caviglia, editor of the *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*. In the "Nota preliminare ai *Cenni sulla vita di Luigi Comollo*" Father Caviglia wrote: "Allow me to propose an idea that is somewhat peculiar, but useful in order to make myself understood. I would like to have drawn up a comparative table, with as many columns as there are lives of young saints celebrated by Don Bosco (and we can add to these the life of Saccardi, which was entirely his, since the boy was educated in his style by Bonetti, and died in the arms of the Saint). In a first column we could make a list of the virtues and spiritual attitudes and habits of the first, not excluding facts savouring of the supernatural; in the other columns could be indicated, by means of chapter or page numbers, whatever appears to be similar in the other Lives, leaving blank the spaces corresponding to what is special to each. Yet I say that the blanks will be few, just enough to indicate a personality, and almost all the titles (all the essential and indispensable ones, naturally) would find a full and total correspondence and an eloquent parallelism." "Our work would then be," adds the author, "to describe these common, traditional, or fundamental characteristics which can be seen in the Life of the holy youth (Comollo) and which have an echo in Don Bosco, as the pillars of the spiritual heritage of the Saintly Educator. There would emerge a vast and, for the present, disproportionate treatment that would involve precisely that parallelism and genetic history of the spiritual pedagogy of Don Bosco, which ought to be the topic of proper study or organic and systematic exposition."

Let us make our own also the regret and the expectations expressed by Caviglia, who died in 1943, in a note found at the end of the foregoing citation: "A desire or intention of the one carrying out these studies was to conduct a synthetic study, one that would hold in a single grasp and in a single conception the work of Don Bosco educator to holiness: the spiritual Pedagogy of Saint Don Bosco! The essential part and, I might say, the substance, is already contained in the special studies carried out on the Lives of

Savio, Besucco and, in part, Magone: it would be enough to draw from them a systematic exposition, bringing together and ordering that which has already been said in a scattered way, with appropriate references to the other writings and talks of the Saint. Not an easy enterprise, and one that calls for some study; but so much more glorious for Don Bosco, and contributing to the definitive resolution of the many problems that the Person of the 'Patriarch of Christian education' has raised and is still raising among scholars. Knowing that I will have neither the time nor the occasion, I entrust to others the task, hoping that my modest thoughts might be confirmed. A *Sancti Iohannis Bosco Paedagogia Spiritualis* would be a useful work (and why not even necessary?) for the fuller knowledge of Don Bosco and of his personality in the history of the Church."

### **Historical biographies or edifying narratives?**

Let us return now to the question with which we began the previous section, regarding the historicity of the events narrated. What we have said up to now about the similarities between the spiritual experiences of these youngsters will only serve to increase our doubts about the historicity of these biographies and about a possible desire on the part of their author to shape the chronicle of events according to a preconstituted model.

The objection is not recent. It can be seen in the "Nota preliminare" of Father Caviglia that we have been citing, where we can find some polemical considerations with regard to those who, already in those years, had tried to call into question the historical veracity of the events narrated. In the years between the wars, in fact, the Benedictine Henry Quentin had put forward serious doubts about the historical veracity of the biography of Savio and the credibility of Don Bosco himself and of the witnesses at the cause of beatification. Certain variations introduced by Don Bosco in his account of the death of the youngster, which echoed, in some expressions, the biographies of St Aloysius Gonzaga, raised serious doubts; it was said then that the witnesses depended too much on that popular biography.

To these objections Caviglia responded with energy, but such a rigorously apologetic position can no longer be upheld. It is quite possible that some of the events narrated are influenced by the hortatory and spiritual finality of these writings, and that Don Bosco, without any intention of lying or deceiving, might have, in some cases, handled the facts with a certain liberty.

We ask however: is this really the core of the question? Is the *historical criterion* the only one to be invoked here? If our aim is to identify the 'spiritual tastes' of the author of these edifying booklets rather than to construct a barely useful chronicle of happenings, is it important to inquire after the conformity of the events described to the facts?

Paradoxically, it would seem that precisely where one might suspect the non-correspondence of the facts narrated to the historical truth, we could try to search for the most characteristic and personal elements of the model proposed by Don Bosco. It is these elements, these exaggerations that would reveal to us not only the particular spiritual perspective of the author but also his intention to indicate a direction to be followed, even at the cost of 'forcing' the historical datum.

Whether Don Bosco adheres rigorously to the events, or whether he forces them somewhat into a preconstituted model, he always intends to furnish us with the coordinates of the model of youthful sanctity that he proposed, through the entire span of his life, to the youth who frequented his oratories and his works; and at the same time he provides us, indirectly, with some aspects of his own spiritual experience.

At any rate, it can be granted that a certain affinity, in particular between the figures of Comollo, Savio, Magone and Besucco, is connected to the process of imitation that binds these among themselves: we must remember that Savio had decided to choose Comollo as model for himself and for his friends. In his turn, Francesco Besucco makes the Life of Savio his constant point of reference; and Magone, who died without being able to see the publication of this Life, had the joy of reading at least the first chapters. "Among those of you, my dearest young friends, who were anxiously awaiting the publication of the life of Dominic Savio," says Don Bosco at the beginning of the biography of Magone, "was the young Michael Magone.... He was able to read barely a few pages when the Lord, putting an end to his mortal life, called him." "He wanted to know the exact place where Dominic Savio would kneel to pray," writes

Don Bosco in the Life of Francesco Besucco, “before the altar of the Virgin Mary. There he would recollect himself to pray with great consolation of the heart. Oh, he would say, if only I could, stay from morning to night praying in that place, how willingly I would do it! It seems to me that I have Savio himself praying with me, and I think he responds to my prayers, and that his fervour enters into my heart.”

It is very clear that the question of the historicity of the events narrated cannot be used as an argument to lessen the spiritual value of these writings or to regard the indications of the author as lacking in solidity. Quite to the contrary, precisely from the fact of the possible elaboration of certain events there emerges a spiritual heritage handed over to every Salesian educator.

### **The biography of Dominic Savio**

*The Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales* is one of the most immediate and personal writings of Don Bosco. Father Caviglia describes this booklet as “one of the few books of Don Bosco written without books.” “Here,” he clarifies in his long presentation of the booklet in the *Opere Edite*, “there are no books in between; the source is the writer himself, who has seen and often inspired the facts, and the program is that which he wants in order to give flesh to his ideas. Here there is nothing but Don Bosco, wholly and only Don Bosco.”

We are dealing here, probably, with one of the most important among the documents that allow us to capture the spiritual mind of the author and his spiritual pedagogy. *Si ille, cur non ego*, Don Bosco affirms in his preface, citing St Augustine; this exhortation appears all the more surprising when we bear in mind the extraordinary gifts that, according to Savio's spiritual director himself, were bestowed on this young model of virtue.

The role of prayer and of the sacraments, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Virgin Mary, the importance of fraternal and trusting contact with the educator and the confessor, a committed and joyous spiritual life, the personal apostolate among the companions, the beneficial role of the associations, the spiritual combat for the safeguarding of purity, the constantly present horizon of a happy death: all these themes most characteristic of the educative system of Don Bosco, of his *pedagogy of holiness*, are here found harmonized not in a theoretical frame of reference or in an ascetical treatise, but rather in the facts of the life of this youth “contemplated by the Master,” in Father Caviglia's marvellous expression, “with loving wonder.”

“This book surpasses all the others,” this passionate scholar of Don Bosco goes on, “not only for the excellence of the subject (in this regard he is the equal of Cafasso), but principally and truly for the more profound and intimate relationship between the spirit of the writer and that of his spiritual son. It is, to use a technical term, a relation of causality, inasmuch, as I have been saying, as the very facts of the biographical history have been inspired by the idea and spirit of the author and master, and the form of sanctity, incarnated in the saintly educator himself, has become the soul and the form of the sanctity lived by the disciple. The preface to the book leads us to think of this, when the author explains lovingly why, and in a certain way excuses himself if, he has to often speak about himself. This I think explains that dominant tone of tenderness combined with loving wonder by which the soul of Don Bosco is continuously pervaded in the contemplation of the facts of that marvellous life. Like a father and mother, marvelling tenderly at the unexpected revelations that keep unfolding in their children. So moved is he, that he can neither think of nor read his own book without tears. It is this undefined sense of affectionate paternity that makes this book so dear and so enthralling to anyone who reads it.”

The Salesian Father Francesco Cerruti testified thus at the process of beatification of Savio: “I remember further having heard from Father Trione that, finding himself with the Venerable Don Bosco at Albano Laziale while the latter was correcting the proofs of a new edition of the life of the Servant of God, Don Bosco said to him: I can never think of the life of Savio and see to the correction of the proofs without weeping and being moved at the thought of him. I also know that the Venerable Don Bosco wrote the lives of Luigi Comollo, Michael Magone, Francesco Besucco; but the reading of these Lives by those who knew both Savio and the others did not produce the same attraction and esteem that the Life of the



Servant of God did. In Savio they recognized the presence of something extraordinary, while in the others they saw simply good and virtuous youth.”

Among the virtues of this youth there emerges in a very special way the *gift* of prayer. Don Bosco is clearly aware of this when he affirms: “Among the gifts with which God enriched him, most eminent was that of fervour in prayer. His spirit was so accustomed to converse with God that in any place, even in the midst of the noisiest racket, he would recollect his thoughts and with pious affection raise his heart to God.” “For him,” the author affirms yet again, “it was a real delight to be able to pass some hours before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.”

### **Some extraordinary facts**

A whole chapter of the biography of Savio is dedicated to special graces and extraordinary facts. At the beginning of this chapter Don Bosco shows his awareness of the fact that the happenings he is about to recount are not ordinary and “will be subject to some criticism,” but he is convinced that they are in perfect harmony with Sacred Scripture and with the history of spirituality. “Here... I want to expose special graces and some uncommon facts, which will perhaps be subjected to some criticism. This is why I think it good to warn the reader that what I say here has antecedents in the Bible and in the lives of the saints. I refer to things that I have seen with my own eyes, and I assure you that I scrupulously write what is true, entrusting myself, however, entirely to the discretion of the reader. Here then is the account.”

There follows the well known account of the long *ecstasy* of the youngster. “It happened one day that he was missing at breakfast, school and even lunch, and no one knew where he might be; he was not in the study, nor was he in bed. The matter being referred to him, the Director suspected that he might be in the church, since this had already happened several times. He entered the church, went up to the choir, and saw him still as a rock. He was holding one foot before the other, one hand resting on the lectern, the other on his breast, with his gaze fixed and turned towards the tabernacle. He did not move even an eyelid. The Director called out to him, but there was no response. He shook him, and then the boy turned and said: Oh, is the mass already over? See, the Director said showing him the watch, it is already two in the afternoon.”

About seven hours had passed since the end of the Eucharistic celebration. The biographer does not manifest any doubt about the extraordinary nature of the phenomenon described.

This is a typical case that can be subjected to historical criticism. We ask: has Don Bosco enriched his account with edifying particulars, or even, has he wisely constructed the event with the intention to edify?

Let us try to confront, one last time, the two different hypotheses.

Are we dealing here with a historical fact? Did this long ecstasy really take place?

Let us suppose it did. In this case Don Bosco, as happens almost inevitably to anyone who refers to an event, could have coloured the event according to his own sensibility or with edifying intentions. Nevertheless, it would still be clear that he recognizes and holds in great esteem the mystical life and describes the happenings, knowing that these facts “will be subjected to some criticism.”

Let us now construct the contrary hypothesis. Let us suppose, that is, that the fact is completely fruit of the creative imagination of the author, as might have happened also in the case of some of the dreams by means of which Don Bosco loved to exhort the youth to good. In this second case there would emerge even more clearly the esteem that Don Bosco had for the mystical life and the indication given to the spiritual movement that takes its origin from him, in a direction that was decidedly unusual, considering that the mind of the nineteenth century had little familiarity with regard to this and other manifestations of the mystical life.

In reality, apart from the substantial good faith of the writer, there is also the fact that Savio’s companions of those years were certainly witnesses of many of the facts narrated; and none of them ever contested the accounts of Don Bosco.

In this, as in many other writings of the founder of the Salesians (think, for example, of the little known biography of Beata Maria degli Angeli, a Carmelite from Turin, published by Don Bosco in 1865) the protagonists are distinguished most especially for their spirit of prayer, the long adorations and silent prayers, the affective and even mystical manifestations.

## A window on the spiritual experience of Don Bosco

At the death of Savio in 1857, Don Bosco was about 42 years old. When setting out to write the biography, he shows himself capable of recognizing in the spiritual experience of his young pupil the gifts of contemplative prayer. He is not afraid to “call things by their proper name” and to manifest, without any ambiguity, his conviction that he was dealing with supernatural gifts.

“His preparation for communion,” Don Bosco recounts in the *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, “was very edifying. On the previous evening, before going to bed, he would make a prayer in preparation.... In the morning, he would make a sufficient preparation; but his thanksgiving was without end. For the most part, if he was not reminded he would forget breakfast, recreation, and sometimes even school, standing in prayer, or better in contemplation of the divine goodness that in ineffable ways communicates to human beings the treasures of infinite mercy.”

This particular attention to the manifestations of the *mystical life*, something that can be seen also in other biographies written by Don Bosco, is all the more surprising when we consider the fact that the spirituality of nineteenth century Europe, which cannot boast of great mystics comparable to those of the *golden age*, habitually manifests a certain diffidence towards mystical phenomena.

The Carmelite Father Eulogio Pacho, who in his *Storia della Spiritualità moderna* will count Don Bosco among the “great spiritual masters” and among “the greatest mystical personalities” of the nineteenth century, writes: “As is well known, Jansenism and Quietism led to a great discrediting of mysticism. In different ways, sometimes opposed, they created an atmosphere that was hostile to and suspicious about any form of manifestation with a mystical flavour. For almost two centuries there was a certain prejudice against any spiritual phenomenology considered extraordinary. On the other hand rationalism or the Enlightenment tried to discredit such manifestations as symptoms of fanaticism, credulity or superstition. For motives that were very different, the religious climate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appears diffident towards mystical spirituality.”

The supernatural life is certainly a gift of grace. It calls, however, for the active participation of the creature: the moral life, purity of heart, the *desire of heavenly things*, the constant habit of thinking about God, these are the ordinary instruments through which nature and grace cooperate. This awareness is manifested in the biographer when he affirms: “The innocence of life, the love of God, the desire of heavenly things, all these had brought the mind of Dominic to a state that can be described as one of being habitually absorbed in God. Sometimes he would stop during recreation, turn his gaze elsewhere and begin walking by himself. Upon being asked why he was leaving his companions in this way, he would respond: the usual distractions come upon me, and it seems to me that paradise opens to me above my head, and I have to move away from my companions in order not to say things to them that they might perhaps ridicule. This would happen to him in the study, while going to and coming back from school, and in school itself.”

It might be good to stress that the same *desire for heavenly things* is the principal characteristic of the religious experience of Don Bosco during the period of his youth.

It is especially Father Alberto Caviglia who, in his study *Savio Domenico e Don Bosco*, highlights the particular *affinity* that binds these two saints: “This brings us back,” we read at the conclusion of his study, “at the end of this, we hope, not useless examination, which is to say construction, of the spiritual story of the ‘little, rather, great giant of the spirit,’ to the assumption that we have been making throughout our study: that of revealing Don Bosco as reflected in Savio, and of recognizing in Dominic Savio, masterpiece of the educative work of Don Bosco, the impersonation of his own spirit, of the Salesian spirituality.... It is not that Don Bosco made the saint in Dominic Savio; but that the latter made himself a saint impersonating the idea of sanctification that Don Bosco transfused into him, the idea that forms the personality of Don Bosco in the spiritual history of the Church. The one who reads must realize that that sanctity, while being completely particular to Savio, is also the incarnation of that conception that God inspired in Don Bosco and that lived on in his idea for the salvation of youth and for the Christian renewal of modern society.” “Dominic Savio and Don Bosco,” Father Caviglia continues, “are two names that are inseparable. They are the joint expression of a single spiritual phenomenon that has

permeated contemporary society, and that forms the historical originality and the pedestal of the human and Christian glory of the saintly educator: the word of love in the spirituality of education and of life.”

## CHAPTER 7

### THE PERIOD OF THE FOUNDATION

The period about which we want to make some notes in this chapter embraces an arc of about sixteen years, from 1858, probably the date of the first manuscript of the Constitutions in our possession, up to 1874, the year of the definitive approval of the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

These are, for Don Bosco, years of maturity, years in which the project of foundation gradually takes flesh, in a fruitful but not always easy dialogue with those who, in the community of the church, were possessed of the responsibility to receive, discern and confirm his charism as founder.

These are the years in which the seed germinates and the tender plant begins to send out roots, the years of the process of institutionalization and of the first expansions beyond the confines of the city of Turin and of Piedmont, the years in which, despite the innumerable difficulties, the dreams begin to become reality. They are also the years in which are laid the bases of the new foundation in favour of girls, the congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, whose Constitutions will receive diocesan approbation in 1876, and the most productive years of his activity as a writer.

The literary drive of Don Bosco, initiated in the wake of the commitment for the apostolate of the 'good press' that constituted one of the cornerstones of the formative project of the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin, finds in these years its most fertile period. Considering only the first editions and keeping aside the lesser pamphlets and the official documents, we can count about 55 titles, as against the 30 of the preceding period (1844-1857) and the 12 of the following one (1875-1888).

#### Founder

When and how did Don Bosco's awareness of his vocation as founder arise? And further: what developments did the model of religious life proposed by Don Bosco to his Salesians undergo over the years? These questions remain open. In his critical edition (1988) of the *Cenno storico sulla Congregazione* written by Don Bosco in view of the definitive approbation of the Constitutions, Don Pietro Braido says: "Still largely open to research is the whole problem of the genesis and development of Don Bosco's understanding of the religious state, his awareness of his vocation as founder, his growth in knowledge and competence in this area, the evolution of the mental and operative structures that characterize him in the various phases of the conception, organization and consolidation of the Society of St Francis de Sales."

In any case, Don Bosco's understanding of the religious state and the project of life contained in the Constitutions would undergo many changes. Some of these would be the fruit of dialogue with the civil and religious environment of his time, others would be deemed necessary for the canonical approbation of the society, and still others would probably arise from Don Bosco's decision to make known only gradually his plan for the foundation of a religious congregation, lest it appear excessively demanding to the first group of very young collaborators.

This same first group of disciples later became aware of Don Bosco's initial prudence in presenting the demands of the religious state, inspired as he was by respect for the developmental rhythms of the young organization. Very significant in this regard is a page of Father Lemoyne, written probably in 1904, regarding the early years of 1850: "Don Bosco, meanwhile, did not lose sight of the Congregation that he was destined to found. Often, over the years, when pleasantly conversing with some boys or young clerics grouped around him, he would sit on the ground, Indian style, and the others would follow suit. He would then shape his handkerchief into a ball and toss it from one hand to the other. As the boys watched silently, he would suddenly exclaim: 'If I had twelve boys as manageable as this handkerchief, I would spread the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ not only throughout Europe, but far, far into the remotest

lands.' ... Moreover, in his sermons, conferences, or informal talks Don Bosco tried to instil in his boys love for a life totally dedicated to God and the salvation of souls. Occasionally he would speak about the advantages of community life, such as freedom from worry for the future or the daily necessities of life, thanks to the protection by Divine Providence of those who served God. But his approach to this topic was always indirect; he would not specifically allude to the religious life. At times he would recount some edifying episode in the lives of saints who had consecrated their lives to God in monasteries, but he did so in such a way as to make the religious life attractive and to impress upon them that it was a state of perfection, and without at all seeming to recommend it." (BM 4:294)

### **Genesis of the idea of a foundation**

As regards the hypotheses about the genesis of the idea of a foundation, the interpretations range from a psychological reading that seems to leave no space for the supernatural (Don Bosco, according to some, founded the congregation to create a sort of substitute family, given his childhood marked by the absence of a father and presence of a tyrannical half-brother), to the edifying readings of some of the early biographers who highlight and emphasise the supernatural elements, the dreams, the divine interventions. Between these two extremes, we believe it is possible to attempt a historico-critical reading that recovers both natural and supernatural elements, integrating them harmoniously in order to reach coherent hypotheses on the basis of what we know about the way God acts in the history of salvation and, in particular, in the lives of other saintly founders.

There is no doubt, however, that towards the end of his life Don Bosco was convinced that some extraordinary signs had mapped out the entire journey of his life. Referring to the well-known dream at the age of nine he writes at the beginning of the *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "I was never able to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream that I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome." (MO 20-21)

The same conviction animates the following account by Father Lemoyne who, apart from any doubts raised by historical criticism about the historicity of the *Biographical Memoirs*, is certainly expressing the mind of the first generation of Salesians: "[T]he Oratory had a visit from Father Serafino Allievi, a learned, zealous priest and a true apostle of youth who was doing good work as director of the St Aloysius Oratory in Milan. Don Bosco, who had been his guest in 1850, warmly welcomed him, and one evening asked him to give the 'Good Night' to the boys. Father Allievi was planning to open a home for derelict boys and to found a religious congregation to look after them, and so he sought Don Bosco's advice. Well aware of the serious difficulties involved in such an undertaking, Don Bosco asked him – for his own sake – if he had ever experienced anything of a supernatural character that could assure him about the will of God. Father Allievi answered negatively. Thereupon Don Bosco dissuaded him from the attempt, though he encouraged him to continue unflaggingly with his work. Father Allievi was grateful for the advice. However, he did make some attempts toward realizing his plans, but with little success.... Having himself received divine assurances, Don Bosco never bypassed any opportunity of trying to make his pupils worthy of them." (BM 7:36)

"In time you will understand everything," the woman of majestic bearing had said to him in the dream at the age of nine. In fact, at the end of his life Don Bosco was firmly convinced that Providence had guided his personal history and that of the congregation. This is confirmed by the episode of the Mass celebrated on 16 May 1887 at the altar of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, which closes the long parenthesis encompassing the whole life of the founder of the Salesians.

Even if we are not able to ascertain the precise moment in his life when the perception of this particular *vocation* began to come clearly to light, what we can be certain of is that from the very beginning Don Bosco sought to converge around his work the energies of both lay people and

ecclesiastics, and that he soon felt the need of formulating some regulations (the first of which go back to 1853) for the life of the Oratory, clarifying the duties of each individual. These details are probably a prelude to the idea of a religious society dedicated to active apostolate among the young. In any case Don Bosco, in his *Storia Ecclesiastica* and other writings, had already reflected on the role and importance of the religious life in the history of the Church.

### **'External' influences on the project of foundation**

What could be considered the first true 'indication' of the project of a religious congregation? We have in our possession a written testimony of Don Rua, who had gone to live at the Oratory in 1852 at the age of 17, and who was clothed as a cleric a short time afterwards. He speaks, as we know, of a commitment dating back to 1854, containing the outlines of a consecration in view of a *practical exercise of charity*. Don Rua recounts: "The evening of 26 January 1854 we gathered in Don Bosco's room. Present were Don Bosco himself, Rocchietti, Artiglia, Cagliero and Rua. It was proposed that with the help of the Lord and St Francis de Sales, we first undertake a practical exercise of charity towards neighbour, then bind ourselves by a promise, and later, if possible and desirable, make a formal vow to the Lord. From that evening, the name Salesian was given to those who undertook or would undertake such an exercise." (BM 5:8)

That same year there entered into the Oratory Father Vittorio Alasonatti, who would later become the first Prefect General of the new congregation. The following year, according to the account given in the *Biographical Memoirs*, the cleric Rua and Father Alasonatti privately made their annual vows, followed in 1856 by Giovanni Battista Francesia, another of the boys who had grown up in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. Humanist and man of letters, Francesia would be the most prolific author among the early Salesians, producing books and works of a literary and spiritual nature.

It is once again Father Lemoyne who underlines the prudence of Don Bosco and, at the same time, his awareness of his own project in receiving the first profession of the cleric Rua: "In all this Don Bosco saw the motherly protection of the Blessed Virgin; in turn he did his best to meet her expectations. This is the secret reason that made him take a first step toward what was to be his greatest achievement – the founding of his long-desired Salesian Congregation. Thus, after explaining at length in conferences to several of his most trusted young clerics the three religious vows, he one day encouraged the cleric Rua – then in his second year of philosophy – to make these vows for a year. But he did not disclose his grand plan. Rua agreed, thinking that these vows only meant that he was to live with Don Bosco and him with his work at the Oratory." (BM 5:137-138)

The process of *institutionalization* was probably accelerated by certain external interventions. In particular, a talk with the minister Rattazzi in 1857 made Don Bosco see the necessity of giving continuity to his work and the particular juridical form to give to the new congregation, so as to be safe from the measures taken by the government and from every eventual attempt to confiscate ecclesiastical goods. A journey to Rome in 1858 and the audiences given him by Pope Pius IX between 9 March and 6 April of that year contributed to the foundations of the new Society.

Many times, in the course of the difficult dialogue with ecclesiastical authority that would lead to the definitive approbation of the Constitutions, Don Bosco will make reference to these audiences of 1858, in order to highlight the fact that it was the pope himself who had laid the foundations of that *new society*. In the *Cenno storico sulla congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relative schiarimenti*, a document prepared in view of the definitive approbation of 1874, he would write: "This incomparable pope received me with utmost benevolence; he made me recount in great detail the beginnings of this institution, and what had led me to begin it, what was being done and how. Then he said: My dear Don Bosco, you have put many things in motion; but you are a man and if God were to call you, as he calls all human beings, what will happen to all these your undertakings? – Most Holy Father, I responded, this is precisely the purpose of my visit to you, and this is the subject of the letter of my Archbishop: to ask Your Holiness to give me the foundations of an Institution that would be suitable to the times and the places in which we live. – The undertaking is not very difficult. It is a question of living in the world without being of the world. If further you see in this work the hand of God, he will illumine us. Go, pray, and after a few days

come back, and I will tell you my thoughts. After a week I returned to the Holy Father, who upon seeing me immediately began to speak thus: your project can bring much benefit to poor youth. An Association, a Society, or a religious Congregation seems necessary in these difficult times. This must be founded on the following bases: A society with simple vows, because without vows there would not be the necessary bonds between the members and between superiors and subjects. The way of dressing, the practices of piety, should not make it stand out in the midst of society. The rules should be mild and of easy observance. Study the way in which every member might be a religious in the eyes of the Church and a free citizen in the eyes of civil society. – Perhaps it might be better to call it Society rather than Congregation; because under this name it would be less noticeable. Try to adapt your rules along these principles, and when the work is finished give it to Cardinal Gaudi; when he is ready, he will speak to me. Going by the indications given by the Holy Father, and having received his special benediction, I immediately began to adapt the Constitutions that had been written and practised in Turin already for many years, with what had been suggested to me.”

Clearly, it is not possible to know with precision the contents of the audiences given by Pius IX to Don Bosco on 9 March and 6 April 1858. In fact there was no one else present apart from Don Bosco himself, who always tried to show, especially in the critical years of the process of approbation of the Constitutions and the difficult dialogue with his Archbishop, that the existence and nature of his congregation was rooted in an express desire of Pope Pius IX.

In any case, the most ancient manuscript of the Constitutions in our possession can be dated, on the basis of internal criteria, precisely about 1858; the writer is Don Rua, twenty-one years of age at the time, companion of Don Bosco during the journey of that year to Rome. “The persons who make profession of these rules,” the manuscript reads, “are 15: 5 priests, 8 clerics, and 2 lay.”

Thus begins the real process of institutionalization.

In some of his studies, the sociologist Max Weber has shown how such a process is, at a certain point, inevitable for a charismatic group, and that, without it, the group would end up dispersing and disappearing. The growth of a ‘foundational’ community passes through the regulation of the particular ‘gift,’ which thus begins to take also a juridical form; this progressive institutionalization, therefore, belongs to the structure of survival of the charism.

## **The Society of St Francis de Sales**

The period that runs from the journey to Rome of 1858 to the definitive approval of the Constitutions is characterized, therefore, by this tension towards a foundation on which depends, as Don Bosco himself perceived, the future of the work in favour of youth.

The evening of 18 December 1859, in response to a proposal made by Don Bosco some years before, 17 volunteers gathered to give birth to a society or congregation. This is testified by the minutes of the meeting bearing the signatures of all those who were present. Besides Don Bosco, only Vittorio Alasonatti was already a priest. Excluding these, the average age of this first group, as we have already said, was less than 20.

The little assembly also elected a *chapter*: together with Don Bosco and Father Alasonatti, designated *prefect*, this would include Michael Rua (22 years old) as *spiritual director*, Angelo Savio (aged 24) as *economer*, and Giovanni Cagliero, Giovanni Bonetti and Carlo Ghivarello (aged 21, 21 and 24 respectively) as *councillors*.

In that same year the life of Dominic Savio was published, the secondary school within the Oratory was completed, and the Sodality of St Joseph was instituted for the artisans.

The following year, a sorrowful event was celebrated solemnly in the little church of the Oratory, dedicated to St Francis de Sales. On 23 June Father Giuseppe Cafasso, spiritual director and confessor of Don Bosco, died suddenly at the age of 49 years. Two weeks before this, the police had carried out a search of the Convitto Ecclesiastico. This had left Cafasso, who was the Rector at the time, profoundly shaken, aggravating his already delicate state of health.

The Convitto, which he had left more than 15 years ago, had remained for Don Bosco a constant point of reference. As we have said already, the biographers of Cafasso assure us that a room used to be

reserved for the founder of the Salesians, which he continued to use almost every day in order to study, consult the library and carry out his activity as writer.

Even after the death of Cafasso, who was succeeded by Canon Eugenio Galletti, Don Bosco continued to frequent the Convitto which, together with the shrine of Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo, was closed down in 1878 by the archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Gastaldi.

In 1860 a text of the Constitutions was sent to the then archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Luigi Fransoni, in exile in Lyons. The text bore the signatures of 26 members, including that of Don Bosco. In his response Msgr. Fransoni expressed his satisfaction about the text and his wishes for a rapid approval. This would take place, however, as we have already said, only 14 years later. In the meantime, on 29 July 1860 the cleric Michael Rua was ordained priest.

In that same year there took place also the first attempt at expansion of the Salesian work. Five Salesians – a priest and four clerics – were sent, at the request of the archbishop, to help in the minor seminary of Giaveno, where Canon Giovanni Grissino had been appointed rector. This collaboration, however, would come to an end in the course of the following academic year, partly also on account of the death of the archbishop on 26 March 1862. In him Don Bosco lost one of the most enthusiastic supporters of his work.

The evening of 14 May 1862 the first 22 Salesians publicly made their triennial vows. In receiving their vows Don Bosco declared that he himself had also made his vows in front of the crucifix “for all his life, offering myself in sacrifice to the Lord, ready for anything, for his greater glory and the salvation of souls.”

### **The Society expands**

In 1863 the Salesian work experienced its first true expansion beyond the city of Turin. Mirabello was in the diocese of Casale Monferrato, about a hundred kilometres from Turin, and the parish priest there wanted to have a boarding school within his parish. Don Bosco accepted the invitation and the donation of a piece of land, and after having put up a building, sent Father Michael Rua there in the autumn of 1863 to begin a work meant for boys aspiring to the ecclesiastical state. In 1870 this minor seminary would be transferred to Borgo San Martino. In 1864 a new work would also be opened at Lanzo, forty kilometres from Turin, not far from the shrine of Sant' Ignazio. The first director of this work would be the 24 year old Father Domenico Ruffino who had made his vows two years before, on 14 May, as part of the first group of Salesians. He would die the following year, and would be succeeded by Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, barely a year older than him.

On 23 July 1864 the first important step was taken towards the juridical consolidation of the new institute. The *Decretum Laudis* sanctioned the true beginning of the approval of the Society, appointing Don Bosco Rector Major for life and allowing perpetual professions, which began to be made already from the following year. According to the prevailing custom, however, the decree deferred the approval of the Constitutions, the text of which the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars had reserved in order to make some observations.

The most important objections concerned the request for the faculty of admitting to orders, the position of the so-called *extern members*, and some faculties given to the superior general such as that of dispensing from perpetual vows or of commanding ‘under pain of mortal sin.’ One of the observations would regard also the times reserved for prayer.

The year 1866 is marked by another important step in the growth of the young organism: the first two courses of Spiritual Exercises were held separately at Trofarello. Till then the Salesians had made their retreats together with the youth of the Oratory. Many others had also accompanied Don Bosco in his retreats at Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo, among these many of the ‘pillars’ of the new congregation such as Rua, Cagliero, Angelo Savio and Francesca.

In 1868 the great temple of Mary Help of Christians was consecrated at Valdocco, work on which had begun five years earlier. The consecrating archbishop was Msgr. Alessandro Ottaviano dei Conti Riccardi di Netro, successor of Msgr. Fransoni.



In the following year there arrived from the Holy See the official decree of approbation of the Society of St Francis de Sales, which, however, once again deferred the approval of the Constitutions. Among other things, Don Bosco was given the faculty of admitting to orders young men who had entered as pupils in a Salesian house before the age of fourteen. A new foundation was also opened in that same year at Cherasco, in the diocese of Alba. The work consisted of a parish, a school for externs and a boarding school with elementary and secondary classes.

The seventies are marked by the expansion of the congregation outside of Piedmont. Several houses were opened in Liguria: Alassio in 1870, followed by Varazze, Marassi and Sampierdarena in 1871. Sampierdarena was probably the closest, both as structure and in terms of its target group, to the mother house of Valdocco. Its first director was Father Paolo Albera, who had made his triennial vows together with the first group of Salesians on 14 May, when he was barely 17. He would become the second successor of Don Bosco.

The following year, after much hesitation and on the insistence of the new archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Lorenzo Gastaldi, the direction of the college of Valsalice was accepted. In the same year, on 5 August, the first five Daughters of Mary Help of Christians made their first profession at Mornese.

Dr Felice Golzio, Don Bosco's confessor, died in 1873; in the following year, Don Bosco would make his exercises for the last time at Sant'Ignazio.

On 3 April 1874 the long-awaited definitive approval of the Constitutions finally took place. To the *animadversiones* of 1864 were added many other observations by the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, all of which contributed to the reshaping of the text of the Constitutions, despite the strenuous defence made by the founder on certain points that he considered strictly related to the charismatic identity of the new institute.

Despite diplomatic pressure and the long, passionate correspondence of Don Bosco, despite his undoubted prestige in many Roman circles and the friendship that bound him to Pius IX and to the Cardinal Secretary of State, Antonelli, Don Bosco had to accept many changes to the constitutional text. Articles on many topics were thus modified, such as those on civil rights, the vow of poverty, dispensation from vows, the management of seminaries, the practices of piety, the novitiate (which Don Bosco did not want deprived of apostolic activities) and the organization of studies. Totally eliminated was the chapter on the extern members, of Lanterian inspiration, that bound the lay collaborators to the Society within the same constitutional text.

Despite all this Don Bosco was greatly satisfied. On 16 March of that year he had sent out a circular from Rome, declaring a three day fast corresponding to the date on which the decision of the commission was expected, and requesting that "all Salesians pass whatever possible time before the Blessed Sacrament." And on the day following the decree of approbation he wrote to Don Rua: "Our Constitutions have been definitively approved with the faculty of the dimissorial letters. When you know everything you will say that it was truly the fruit of prayer...."

## Spiritual author

This rapid chronological picture provides us with coordinates that allow us to situate the human experience of Don Bosco in a context influenced by events of great relevance.

In 1858, when he begins to compose the first draft of the Constitutions of the Society, Don Bosco is 43 years old; in 1874, year of the definitive approbation, he is almost seventy. These are the years of his maturity, dynamic and creative years in which also his literary output is most abundant.

Don Bosco's commitment in this area, inspired by the formation received at the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin, is twofold: besides being an author, Don Bosco is also a publisher and propagator of *good literature*.

In 1848 Don Bosco had begun a journal entitled *L'amico della gioventù: Giornale politico-religioso*, but publication was ceased the following year. In 1853 Don Bosco became an enthusiastic promoter of the *Letture Cattoliche*, a series of pocket-size volumes that published hagiographies, moral instructions, stories and little apologetic treatises of a popular character. Distributed through subscriptions, together with a sort of annual Almanac entitled *Il Galantuomo*, from 1862 onwards they were printed at the press

of the Oratory. The circulation was large. Going by indications given by the Paravia publishing house, 82,500 volumes were printed in the year 1859. Father Lemoine assures us that in 1860 the subscribers were more than 10,000, and from 1870 onwards between 12,000 and 14,000 (cf BM 4:372).

Among Don Bosco's works we find manuals of prayer and religious instruction and hagiographical accounts, but also drama and comedy, scholastic works, especially in the area of history, apologetic and doctrinal writings, and writings and reports about the history of the congregation.

Two elements seem to run through all of Don Bosco's literary productions. The first is the centrality of religion. As we read in the Constitutions, every effort should be made "to use all those means suggested by industrious charity, so that either orally or through writings there is placed a check on impiety and heresy."

The second is that Don Bosco is not moved to write by literary or artistic intentions. His only aim is to defend the message of the Church in every social ambient. This explains his continuous effort to preserve a style that is immediate and popular and to sacrifice every pretence to erudition and style. See, for example, his advice to the first master of novices, Father Giulio Barberis: "Always keep your sentences short. When possible, break up a long sentence into two or three short ones. A long sentence concluding with a verb is fine for other writers, but we who write for the common people must always avoid such constructions. Some writers keep repeating themselves in different ways. They are amateurs. Once you have said something, go on promptly to another thought." (BM 13:313-314)

Then there is the question of whether Don Bosco can be considered a *spiritual author*. It is impossible to find a speculative intent in his works, or the rigorous argumentation of the theologian. His writings, many of them compilations, do not possess the rigor of a systematic treatise. In an article entitled "Gli scritti di Don Bosco," Father Raffaele Farina wrote some years ago: "In general, we could say that Don Bosco was, by temperament, probably incapable of writing a systematic treatise on any topic. Every time he tried to do so he found himself in difficulty, having to resort to constant rewriting, improvements, changes. His writings, like his concrete achievements, manifest the same quality: he goes ahead in little steps... modifying himself continually... under the pressure of different influences which are not always easy to identify today. One of the reasons was certainly his reaction and immediate response to immediate needs, the needs of the day."

A similar opinion is expressed by Father Joseph Aubry in the introduction to an anthology entitled *Scritti spirituali di Don Bosco*. The author makes reference to the objective difficulties faced in every attempt to approach directly the spiritual experience of the saint: "He has written nothing that can be compared to the *Treatise on the Love of God* and not even to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Even less do we run the risk of encountering in his writings pages similar to the *Racconto di un pellegrino* or to the *Storia di un'anima*. Don Bosco has nothing of the speculative theologian, and spiritual introspection is alien to him. Gifted with an extremely lively intelligence, Don Bosco remains a Piedmontese peasant, more sensitive to experience than to ideas... The locus par excellence of his teaching is his own life and his rich spiritual experience, that of one of the greatest charismatics in the Church. But even here, unfortunately, we are not very fortunate. Regarding his most intimate life, he has revealed almost nothing. And this, either because of his temperament (he experiences, without the preoccupation to later analyse) or by virtue of a natural reserve (he is afraid to focus attention on the instrument instead of on the One who controls)."

There has been much talk about the compilatory character of some of Don Bosco's writings. More than focussing on the literary or scientific value, however, a 'spiritual history' of Don Bosco ought to look at the 'tastes' of the founder, making an effort to discover the *sources* used and bringing to light, in some cases, the originality of the synthesis. The fact that Don Bosco has recourse to an author, sometimes without citing him by name, does not lessen his conviction about the contents of the citation. In any case, the text expresses for us the thought of Don Bosco, especially when there is no dissonance with the wider context of his spiritual experience and with the rest of his literary production. Father Stella has written in the first volume of his *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*: "The writings of Don Bosco are of no little importance, whether they were compiled by himself or other people, whether they contain his own phrases or ones borrowed from others. Indeed I would say that they are essential for any exploration

of his personality and his fortunes, which were not unrelated to his use of language. He sought and managed to use a type of language that would put him in tune with the people and contexts within which he worked.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Towards the formation of good religious**

We have already noted how, from the very beginning of his work in favour of the Christian education of youth, Don Bosco knew how to create around himself a spiritual and apostolic movement that was already, at least in germ, the Society of St Francis de Sales.

This movement, which in a very short time acquires significant size (at the end of 1874, year of the definitive approbation of the Constitutions, the members were already more than 200 if we include also the novices), involves youth, clerics, priests and laity, both consecrated and otherwise, in a single *spiritual current* – a complex and apparently undifferentiated reality that raises not a few questions in the eyes even of the archbishop of Turin, Msgr. Alessandro Riccardi: “It is difficult to understand,” he writes in 1868 towards the end of a letter preserved in the Archives of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome, “what might be the usefulness of a Congregation composed of so many elements that are different and difficult of a unity of end. The boarding school of Turin is already a chaos, with artisans, students, laity, clerics and priests all mixed together. This confusion will only increase as its sphere of action expands.”

This perplexity about the Oratory as a suitable environment for the formation of priests and religious will be shared also by his successor, Msgr. Lorenzo Gastaldi, and by some of the bishops and consultors of the Roman congregation.

In point of fact, however, the spiritual ambient of the Oratory manifests, especially in the first twenty years, a substantial unity of project and of proposal. In 1952 Father Valentini wrote in a volume entitled *La spiritualità di Don Bosco*: “In all his life Don Bosco used only one method, whether in the education of youth or in the formation of confreres. It is a single spirit that pervades his whole work, a single choice of particular means on which he relied for the efficacious formation of his spirituality.”

The greater part of the practices of piety were done together, with all the different elements coming together in an atmosphere that we could define as one of strong spiritual tension. All the resources of Don Bosco’s pedagogical genius contribute to the creation and maintenance of this tension, in particular the sodalities (youth associations), the highlighting of and devout preparation for the numerous religious feasts, the atmosphere of joyful confidence, good literature, the exhortation to the imitation of the *models* of youngsters about which we have already spoken at length, the numerous devotions.

Towards the end of the sixties, however, in our opinion, the project of the founder manifests itself with ever greater clarity and differentiation. Don Bosco gradually abandons all reticence and engages more openly in the formation in his disciples, strengthening in them their religious identity.

One of the first indications of this change seems to be the experience of the first Spiritual Exercises of the new congregation which, as we have said several times, began to be held in common at Trofarello in the year 1866. Don Bosco, in those years, always reserved to himself the afternoon ‘instructions,’ taking up the most characteristic themes of the religious life. Another indication of the founder’s concern about the religious identity consists in the circulars which, from 1867, Don Bosco began to send to all the Salesians.

Yet another significant element is provided by the so-called *general conferences*, which, from 1868 onwards, according to Father Lemoyne (cf BM 9:38-40), Don Bosco would give to all the Directors, with the aim of “rendering homogeneous the spirit of his disciples.” These conferences were conducted exactly like the *general chapters*, during which the problems of each and every foundation would be discussed.

Further, on 15 August 1869, a few months after the decree of approbation, Don Bosco instituted, by means of a circular, the rule of the *monthly chat with the local superior*. “The giving of an account of oneself to one’s superior,” writes Don Bosco, “is the general practice in all religious houses and it has

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<sup>15</sup> [Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Works*, 280.]

great advantages, as I hope it will also among us, especially in order to obtain the necessary peace of mind and serenity of conscience.”

Year after year, therefore, Don Bosco seems to be dedicating himself more and more openly to the spiritual and religious consolidation of the new foundation. His strategy of government, however, continues to be characterized by a great capacity for adaptation to the human and spiritual reality of the members and novices.

Father Ceria writes in the *Biographical Memoirs*: “How patient Don Bosco had to be in creating the proper atmosphere! There was a time when the word *novice* would have irked the strong and terrified the weak. Only in 1874 did Don Bosco risk using it. By 1875 the novices themselves were using it and calling themselves by that name without any fear.” (BM 11:253) “What lack of regularity and discipline in those days!” says Father Ceria again, reporting the contents of a memorandum by the founder, “Conflicts among clerics arguing over literature and theology without regard to time or place; continuous and serious disturbances in the study hall when the boys were not there. Many clerics remained in bed in the morning; others skipped classes without a word to their superiors; no spiritual reading, meditation, or other practices of piety except those performed with the boys. Now instead it is different. Things improved little by little, took root and became established. Nevertheless, though aware of all these disorders, I had to make the best of a bad situation. Had I tried to remedy matters all at once, I would have been forced to close down the Oratory and send all the boys home. The clerics would never have adapted themselves to strict regulations, and all would have gone away. I realized that, thoughtless though they were, many of them worked willingly, were good-hearted and morally sound. I knew that once their youthful exuberance had waned, they would be of great help to me.... We must remember, however, that those times were different; our Congregation could not have been established in the usual manner.” (BM 11:253-254)

### **The affective life of the founder of the Salesians**

Because of the extreme reserve that was one of the most evident characteristics of his temperament, we are not always able, unfortunately, to know much about the feelings and the interior life of Don Bosco.

From his many writings, even from those that we can classify as autobiographical, or from the thousands of letters in our possession, it is not possible to directly discover significant and ‘first hand’ clues about the interior life of Don Bosco. He recounts, teaches, warns, asks for help, thanks, blesses; but about his inner life he is a jealous custodian. Even his rich correspondence manifests this reserve: we find there, as the psychologist Giacomo Dacquino observes in his *La psicologia di Don Bosco*, “a very limited range of emotional reactions.” “As far as what Don Bosco has said or written,” the author goes on, “he very rarely manifests himself with straightforward immediacy. He tends to keep his interior life and his conscious conflicts to himself, and this makes inquiry difficult. Very rarely it is possible to surprise him in his emotional reactions. They surface fleetingly, and mostly in the last years of his life.”

Don Bosco himself confesses, at the beginning of his *Memoirs of the Oratory*: “Many a time I have been urged to write my memoirs concerning the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales. Though I could not readily say no to the authority of the one who advised me to do this, I found it hard actually to set about the task because it meant too often speaking about myself.” (MO 3)

To what can we attribute Don Bosco’s reticence in speaking about his spiritual experience? Is it a question of character, or natural reserve, or environment, or is it rather the result of an asceticism involving detachment from self, as would appear the case from his remarks in the preface to his *Memoirs*? It is difficult to go beyond suppositions. At the very least we can say that the different hypotheses appear convergent rather than opposed.

In this kind of research the early biographers are probably not of much help, preoccupied as they were to present the founder as a man detached from the affairs of this world and wholly turned towards God right from his childhood. We are familiar with the comment of the biographers about the episode of the little blackbird that the ten-year old Johnny had kept as a pet and that had eventually finished in the mouth of a cat. “The young boy,” comments Father Barberis in the *Cronichetta*, “was so emotional that he burst into tears.... In the end he stopped to reflect on the motive of his weeping, on the insignificance of the

thing to which he had been so attached, on the nothingness of the things of this world, and then he took a resolution far in advance of his ten years: he proposed never to attach his heart to the things of this world.”

The perspective of the biographer is clear: Don Bosco takes his distance from every ‘disordinate affection,’ i.e., from every possible attachment that distracts him from the ‘totalizing’ reality of God. Such a perspective would appear today, however, as insufficient.

More than twenty years ago Father Teresio Bosco, in his *Una biografia nuova*, had commented thus on this well-known episode: “It does us good to note that this was a resolution that John Bosco never managed to keep. He also, like us, had a heart of flesh that needed to love things great and small.” And a little later: “The asceticism of the time taught that *it was bad to attach one's heart to creatures*. Better not to take risks, better not to love too much.”

The re-reading of the human and affective experience of the founder is probably something that we have not even begun to do. We have tried in these pages to say something about his capacity for significant spiritual friendships and to live them with serenity.

This much, however, is certain: that it is impossible to think of the mission of Don Bosco and of the foundation and expansion of the congregation without introducing also the affective element as a motivational component.

It would be naive to think that there were no problems of dialogue among the Salesians of the early times. It is enough to think about the feelings, not always positive, that Father Francesia preserved right into his old age about some of his early companions, feelings that emerge in his personal diary written in the last years of his life and never published.

What is certain, however, is that these first Salesians loved Don Bosco; in their letters to one another in Don Bosco’s later years some of them were able to call him simply ‘papa.’ “My dearest Don Lemoyne,” writes Father Bonetti in 1883, inviting the historian of the Society to return soon to Valdocco, “Don Bosco, our most beloved papa, has already made sure that a room has been prepared for you...” “Tiring but happy journey,” we read in a telegram of 1880, “Regards and thanks to papa.”

Don Bosco, on his part, responded with a personal love that was also often expressed. “My dearest son,” he writes on 25 July 1860 to the young Stefano Rossetti, who would later become Rector of the seminary of Chieri, “your letter has made me really happy. Now I know that you understand what I feel towards you. Yes, my dear [son], I love you with all my heart, and my love wants to do all that is possible to make you progress in your studies and in piety and to guide you on the way to heaven. Greet your parents for me; pray to the Lord for me, and as long the Lord keeps you far from me, I pray that he keep you always his until you are once more with us. Affectionately, Father John Bosco.”

To Don Rua, who leaves Valdocco for the first time in 1869 to take charge of Mirabello, at the beginning of what would later become the Circular Letter to Rectors, Don Bosco says: “As I cannot always be at your side to remind you of those things that perhaps you have heard many times and seen practised among us, and that I would like to repeat often to you, I hope it will please you if I write down some counsels that might serve as norms. I speak to you as a tender father who opens his heart to one of his dearest sons. I want to write them down in my own hand so that you have with you a sign of the great affection which I have for you.” And to Father Lemoyne in a note: “My dear Father Lemoyne, love me in the Lord and believe that I am always yours. Your affectionate friend, Father John Bosco.”

Even more clear and touching is the long account of the departure of the first missionaries in 1875. “Towards the end of the discourse,” Father Barberis narrates in his *Cronichetta*, “addressing directly the missionaries to wish them goodbye, the voice of our dear Father, already weak with fatigue, became even more tender, and at a certain point he had to pause a bit, because of the tears that he could not restrain.”

We will return to the tears of Don Bosco in the next chapter. In our *Notes* we think it important, however, to underline, at least in some way, how little has been said, especially by the first biographers, about the role of affectivity in the history of Don Bosco and of his experience as a founder.

If it is true that motivation is, according to a classical definition, that dynamic factor of behaviour that activates and directs human beings towards their goal, and that the affective component undergirds not only our knowing, deciding, and our ability to enter into social relationships and make significant

judgments, we have to admit that affectivity is a very significant part of the history of the first group of youngsters who, *monks or no monks*, decided to remain forever with Don Bosco.

### Man of prayer?

At the conclusion of this chapter, in which we tried to put down some *Notes* on the period of foundation and maturity, we thought it opportune to try to penetrate more courageously into the sanctuary of the spiritual experience of the founder of the Salesians.

We are probably familiar with the difficulties and objections that were raised during the cause of the beatification in relation to Don Bosco's life of prayer and also with the slogan that synthesizes the overcoming of the *animadversiones*, the objections made by some consultors: "We should not ask when Don Bosco prayed, but rather when Don Bosco did *not* pray."

It might, however, be more interesting to know the contents of the final phase of the apostolic process of beatification, when a new advocate, Msgr. Giovanni Della Cioppa, was charged with drawing up the final *Responsio*. He tried to organize the matter in a rigorous manner. He did not, therefore, as was sometimes done, limit himself to a simple repetition of some of the testimonies on the topic, but tried what, in contemporary terms, we might call a proper analysis of the religious experience of the saint, with the help of elements of classical ascetical theology and some reputed authors.

The testimonies were therefore organized and, so to say, situated in a broad and effective doctrinal framework, a sort of little compendium of spiritual theology.

Against this background, Msgr. Della Cioppa arrived at the conclusion that the quality of Don Bosco's life, the supernatural gifts, the external acts, the perfect correspondence to the divine will, the excellence of his charity, all these testify to the gift of *infused* or *passive contemplation* and the achievement of *mystical union with God*.

Beyond the patient labour of the advocates, however, it would not be wrong to regret the absence of any spiritual diary, any intimate confidence that might enable us to remove the veil from the spiritual experience of Don Bosco.

However, we should not overlook certain important indices of the esteem and love that Don Bosco had for prayer in his mature years. We have already said something about the contemplative life and its manifestations. Let us now gather some indications about another singular topic, that of *nocturnal prayer*.

Up to the age of 45, according to a confidence shared by Don Bosco himself with Father Lemoyne on 5 April 1884 and reported by the latter in the so-called *Ricordi di gabinetto*, Don Bosco did not sleep more than five hours a night, and once a week he would not sleep at all; only later, overcome by illness, he mitigated this demanding standard of life. Father Lemoyne writes: "The fervour of incessant prayer kept Don Bosco always united with God. Savio Ascanio was convinced that Don Bosco would keep awake many hours in the night, and sometimes the whole night, deep in prayer." (BM 3:414)

Hagiographical exaggerations? Perhaps. Once again, however, Don Bosco's thoughts in this regard, culled from his many writings, can help us understand his model of Christian life.

That *frugality in sleeping* that he himself had indicated as one of the secrets of the spiritual life of his master, Cafasso, who, *once awake, at whatever hour, would immediately rise in order to pray*, represents, in our opinion, a sufficient argument to maintain that Don Bosco did not make a distinction between love of God and intimacy with him from the ordinary apostolate in favour of youth.

Talking about the night that preceded the conversion of the young Michael Magone, Don Bosco writes in 1861: "It is difficult," Magone used to say, "to express the feelings that occupied my poor heart that memorable night. I passed almost the whole night without sleep... When I reached halfway through the time assigned for sleep, I was so full of happiness, so moved and full of different feelings, that in order to give myself some outlet I rose and fell on my knees." Three years later Don Bosco describes the nights that preceded every confession of the young Francesco Besucco: "He would pass the whole night praying or examining himself in order to better dispose himself, although his life itself was a continuous preparation. In the morning, without speaking to anyone, he would go to the church, where with great recollection he would prepare himself for the great sacrament." "Filled with happiness," Don Bosco goes on in the biography of Besucco, "he could not close his eyes that night, which he passed in continuous

prayer and union with God.” His intention to arouse in his readers the desire to emulate the life of this little shepherd boy appears even more explicit when he writes, in relation to the period passed by this boy at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales: “More than once I had to go after dinner to the church for some work, while the boys of the house were having a cheerful and noisy recreation in the playground. Not having a candle in my hand, I bumped into something that seemed like a sack of com, and I was on the point of falling heavily. How surprised I was when I realized that I had bumped into the devoted Besucco, who in a little place hidden behind the altar was praying, in the darkness, to his beloved Jesus for the grace of heavenly light to know the truth, to become even better, to become a saint.” “The innocence of life,” he writes in the biography of Savio, “the love of God, the desire of heavenly things, had transported the mind of Dominic to such a state that he could be said to be habitually absorbed in God.”

The same thing can be said, in Don Bosco’s account, also about the Blessed Maria degli Angeli: “when the others were in deepest sleep, she would rise, and on her knees on the hard floor would enjoy with her Jesus a sweeter and more salutary rest.” She “would spend part of the night in prayer, and in the morning her first desire was for her Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.”

The feeling of the first Salesians could not have been very different, if Father Bonetti, in his introduction to *Il cattolico provveduto* – revised, corrected and signed by Don Bosco himself, who thus assumed responsibility for the manual – could write: “The saints of all times lamented having to pass a large part of their lives in such occupations without being able to keep their thoughts and affections always fixed on God. They therefore preferred to pass whole nights or at least the greater part of these in prayer, than to abandon themselves to sleep and to cease thinking of God. We read in the Sacred Scriptures that King David would rise from his bed in the middle of the night in order to pray, regretting having to pass much time with the mind not occupied with God. We read in the lives of the saints that St Anthony the Abbot used to pass whole nights in prayer and contemplation, and when it was day, he would complain to the sun for having disturbed him. St Aloysius Gonzaga, son of a prince, when still a boy would rise from his bed in the middle of the night, even in the cold season, and kneeling on the bare ground would pass many hours in prayer.”

In the mortuary letter of Giacomo Vigliocco, whom Don Bosco “loved tenderly” (BM 12:314) and who he calls a “precious cleric” in a letter addressed to Father Giovanni Cagliari, we read: “During his adolescence he was found several times praying during the night and even for long hours.”

These texts reveal, at the very least, the mind of Don Bosco and of his young congregation.

The charism of the founder of the Salesians and the project proposed by him to the Society of St Francis de Sales, and, in general, to the spiritual movement to which he gave rise, does not oppose the active life and the contemplative life, but, rather, brings the two together as different manifestations of the same love of God that Don Bosco himself, according to what the Church has declared in canonizing him, lived in a heroic manner. There is nothing surprising in this if one holds together, in a single glance, the teachings received from his spiritual director Father Cafasso, the educative proposal made to the boys of the Oratory of Valdocco, his literary production, the characteristic traits of his own spiritual experience, and the later the teaching of his first disciples. Everything seems to come together in a coherent unity.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION

The definitive approbation of the Constitutions of the Society, sanctioned by a pontifical decree of 3 April 1874, marks a fundamental moment in the history of the congregation and in the personal history of its founder, who would soon reach the age of 59.

Two weeks later Don Bosco, who together with his secretary Father Gioachino Berto had remained in Rome since the end of December of the previous year, returned satisfied to Turin, despite the revisions that the consultors had imposed on the text. By the express wish of the founder, however, that return and the important recognition was not immediately celebrated because of the death, a few days earlier, of Father Francesco Provera, one of the oldest among those who had signed the constitutive act of the Salesian Society in 1859. In 1874 Father Provera was not yet 38 years old.

The recognition was solemnly celebrated later in the month, on 19 April, with the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the *Te Deum*. Some time later Don Bosco, with the help of an expert, Prof. Lanfranchi, began to work at the first Latin edition of the text, which was published the same year. In the following year the first Italian edition of the text was published. At the same time, given the definitive abolition of the chapter of the Constitutions on the so-called extern members, Don Bosco tried to work out the broad outlines of the project of a lay association, to which he at first gave the name Union of St Francis de Sales, but which two years later was recognized by a Brief of Pius IX dated 9 May 1876 under the name Union of Salesian Cooperators. Its first regulation declared: "To the Salesian Co-operators is proposed the same mission as the Congregation of St Francis de Sales with which they intend to associate. 1. To promote novenas, triduums, Spiritual Exercises and catechisms, above all in those places where material and moral means are lacking. 2. Since in these times there is a great lack of vocations to the ecclesiastical state, those who are able to will take special care of those boys and also of adults who, given the necessary moral qualities and aptitude to study, give signs of being called. 3. To oppose the irreligious press through the apostolate of the press, through the diffusion of good books, reports and all kinds of pamphlets in those places and among those families where it seems prudent to do so. 4. Finally, charity towards children in danger, gathering them to instruct them in the faith, introduce them to the sacred liturgy, counsel them in moments of difficulty, direct them to where they can be instructed in religion, this is the other mission of the Salesian Cooperators."<sup>16</sup>

It may be surprising to note that *Spiritual Exercises*, *vocations* and the *good press* precede, in this regulation, *charity towards children in danger*. And still, as Don Bosco specifies, it is a question of the same mission as that of the Congregation.

#### Some events

From the moment of the definitive approbation of the Constitutions begins what we might call the final period in the history of the founding, the period of consolidation and further expansion. In our opinion, this period is the most important (and perhaps the least studied) for understanding the characteristics of the project of religious life that had matured in Don Bosco, and that he was manifesting ever more openly to his disciples.

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<sup>16</sup> [Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche del Beato Giovanni Bosco. 1875* (Torino: SEI, 1930), 11:542. The reference is to an appendix of documents not present in BM 11.]



The expansion of the congregation, in these last fourteen years in the life of the founder, can be considered gradual and constant. At the death of the founder, the Salesians were about a thousand, between professed and novices.

Despite the rapid growth, or perhaps precisely because of this, problems, defections and difficulties regarding the formation of new Salesians are not lacking in this period.

From 1874 onwards the novitiate takes on a more regular form, and new foundations in Italy grow at the rate of two a year. In December, Don Bosco goes to Nice in France, at the invitation of the bishop Msgr. Pietro Sola and the local conference of St Vincent, to prepare the ground for the first French foundation, which would be inaugurated less than a year later. After France, two other European nations, Spain (in 1881) and England (in 1887) would receive the new congregation during the life of the founder.

In November 1875 the first missionary expedition leaves for Latin America; two years later the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would also begin their American adventure. There would be eleven Salesian expeditions before 1888, all directed towards South America.

That first expedition to Patagonia, at the behest of the Argentine consul at Savona, Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, was led by the then 37 year old Father Giovanni Cagliero, who had formed part of the 'constituent assembly' of 1859. On 7 December 1884, nine years after his departure for America, Cagliero would be ordained bishop in the basilica of Mary Help of Christians, becoming titular of the Vicariate Apostolic of Patagonia.

From 1877, the *Annuario Pontificio* would mention an 'American province.' Only in 1879, however, would there take place a proper erection of four provinces: the Piedmontese, the Ligurian (with Nice), the Roman and the American.

Already in 1876, as Father Barberis tells us, a novitiate was opened in Buenos Aires, followed in 1879 by that of Las Piedras in Uruguay, those of Marseilles and Sarrià (Barcelona) in 1883, and Foglizzo in Italy in 1886. In the meantime the novitiate of Valdocco was shifted, in 1879, from the mother house of Turin to a more suitable house, that of San Benigno. After the opening of Foglizzo, this became the novitiate for the lay brothers. The last novitiate opened during the life of Don Bosco was that of Valsalice in 1887.

The first general chapters played a key role in the work of organization and consolidation of the new foundation. As per the Constitutions, they were initially celebrated every three years, the first being held in 1877.

In 1884 there arrived the final act of official recognition of the congregation, granting it a status similar to other older religious institutes. Pope Leo XIII granted to the Salesians the privileges and canonical faculties enjoyed by the Redemptorists and the Oblates of the Virgin Mary of Lanteri, both congregations of pontifical right, and in particular, the faculty given to the superior the full privilege of issuing dimissorial letters. Msgr. Gastaldi, archbishop of Turin, had died on 25 March of the preceding year, and he was succeeded by the more benevolent Msgr. Gaetano Alimonda, great admirer of the Salesian work.

In the autumn of that same year, given the poor state of his health and at the express request of the pope, Don Bosco secretly nominated as his vicar general and successor Father Michael Rua, who had just turned 47. The matter would be made public only at the end of the following year.

The final Italian edition of the Salesian Constitutions in Don Bosco's lifetime came out in 1885, as also the final edition of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, whose superior general, after the death of the co-foundress Maria Domenica Mazzarello in 1881, was now Mother Catherine Daghero.

In 1886 Don Bosco opened the last of the four general chapters presided by him. The following year, on 14 May 1887, the temple dedicated to the Sacred Heart was consecrated in Rome. This was the last of Don Bosco's voyages outside Turin.

These, then, are the principal events marking the experience of Don Bosco. Once again, in keeping with our *Notes*, we draw inspiration from some of these events to make some observations that would supply us with some aspects of the experience of the founder of the Salesians.

## The Italian editions of Don Bosco's Constitutions

The first Italian edition of the constitutional text was sent to the press in 1875.

During one of the general conferences which periodically brought together the members of the Superior Council and the directors of the works, it was decided to prepare at the earliest an Italian translation, much awaited by the confreres, equipping it with a preface by Don Bosco. This is the origin of the first draft of the introduction to the Constitutions, bearing the title "Ai Soci Salesiani." The first manuscript, a substantial notebook with fourteen pages written and corrected by Don Bosco himself, bears the date 24 May 1875. This first draft, together with some additions that we still have on separate pages, once again in Don Bosco's own hand, was recopied by the secretary Father Gioachino Berto and then corrected by Don Bosco and Don Rua, and then sent to the press together with the first Italian translation of the approved Constitutions. We must note that certain modifications were introduced into the constitutional text, either revising certain norms that had been approved, or reinserting dispositions that had been substituted in the process of approval, always on the strength of the concessions that Don Bosco held to have received from Pius IX. As the definitive date, Don Bosco chose once again a Marian feast: *Feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1875*.

Apart from a few corrections made by Don Rua, "Ai Soci Salesiani" is entirely written by Don Bosco. The text, which constitutes a sort of spiritual directory, reveals the intention of the founder to form in his disciples the consciousness of being religious. Even in this case, therefore, Don Bosco's purpose is eminently practical. It is not his intention to write a treatise on the theology of religious life, but rather to exhort paternally, encourage the observance of the rules, motivate, admonish and advise.

The second Italian edition of the Constitutions came out in 1877. The introduction "Ai Soci Salesiani" was enriched, thanks also to the intervention of the young Father Barberis, master of novices for three years already (born in 1847, he was therefore barely 30 years old when Don Bosco, 62, entrusted him with this task).

In this edition Don Bosco decided to add a letter of St Vincent de Paul, founder of the Congregation of the Missions, addressed to his religious.

"To be placed after the Introduction and before the text of the Rules," writes Don Bosco in his own hand on the copy for the press prepared by a copyist. A little introduction, in the hand of Barberis, was cancelled and the title that was originally affixed, "Sul levarsi tutti alla stessa ora del mattino," was replaced by Don Bosco with "Lettera di S. Vincenzo de' Paoli indirizzata ai suoi religiosi sul levarsi tutti all'ora medesima," and that is what we see in the printed copy.

The letter, therefore, is found in a strategic position, very visible, precisely between the introduction "Ai Soci Salesiani" and the beginning of the text of the Constitutions. The contents of the long letter, which goes back to 15 January 1650, are surprising: our vocation depends on the morning meditation, and this depends on rising on time in order to perform this practice of piety together with the confreres. "The neglect of this," writes St Vincent at a certain point, "has led to the departure of many, who, not being able to sleep as long as they pleased, could not love their state of life either. What is the use of going willingly to prayer, if one rises only very unwillingly? How to meditate willingly when one is only half present in church, and that too only out of convenience? On the other hand, those who love to rise in the morning, ordinarily persevere, do not 'relax', and make rapid progress. The grace of vocation is tied to prayer, and the grace of prayer to that of rising. If we are faithful to this first act, if we find ourselves together and before Our Lord, and together we present ourselves to him, as the first Christians did, he will in turn give himself to us, he will enlighten us, he will himself do in us and for us the good that we have to do in his church, and finally he will give us the grace of reaching the perfection that he desires of us, so as to possess it one day fully in eternity."

A particular circumstance confers greater importance on this letter.

In 1848 Don Bosco had published anonymously a booklet entitled *Il cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli*. In 1876, at a distance of 30 years, this booklet was republished by the printing press of the Oratory, this time with the name of the author. In 1877, the

very year of the publication of the second Italian edition of the Constitutions, preparations were made also for the reprinting of this edition.

Is this double publication of *Il cristiano guidato...*, coinciding with the addition of the letter of the saint to the Salesian Constitutions, merely a casual happening? Or, perhaps, did Don Bosco, at this particular moment of spiritual consolidation of his congregation, see in St Vincent de Paul, in his spiritual experience and in the congregation founded by him, a particular model to be held up to his religious?

In any case, in the Turin of the time, St Vincent was the true prototype of untiring charity, of service to the humble and needy, of zeal for souls, of the *active* religious life. And yet Don Bosco, who had just recently republished the life, decides to invoke the authority of this saint to speak to his Salesians, not of love for the poor or zeal for souls, but rather of the importance of prayer and of the morning meditation. This kind of contrast, as well as the singular collocation of the letter, confer on it a particular importance.

The letter will continue, for about 30 years, to accompany the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

In the 1885 edition it was moved to the end of the text of the Constitutions, where it precedes six letters of St Alphonsus which here make their first appearance. These seven letters are preceded by an introduction: "It was found opportune to have these rules followed by a letter of St Vincent de Paul and several others by St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, the former founder of the Congregation of the Missions, the latter of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. From them the Salesians can learn the importance of being faithful to the rules, and of being attentive to small things, living as good religious and persevering in their vocation. Let us therefore read them from time to time, keeping in mind that these are two saints who are speaking to us."

1877 is the year of the first General Chapter, which will conclude in early October; it is the year of the consolidation of the new institution. Father Desramaut writes in his biography *Don Bosco en son temps*: "The year 1877, year of the spiritual and structural consolidation of the Salesian congregation in the manner that he wanted, was decisive in the life of Don Bosco. After the foundation of the Society he had watched over its structures and had infused a spirit that was, in the final analysis, his own. The structures sketched out in his original Constitutions had grown gradually in stability under the critical eye of the Roman congregations. Simultaneously, through example and exhortation, he was transmitting to his sons a spirituality."

### **A constant point of reference: St Ignatius and the Society of Jesus**

In 1877 the Society of St Francis de Sales, as prescribed by the Constitutions approved three years earlier, celebrates its General Chapter, the first of four that would be held during the life of Don Bosco.

In this first General Chapter, apart from members by right with deliberative vote and some other Salesian *invitati*, there were only two guests. These were two priests of the Society of Jesus, Father Secondo Franco and Father Giovanni Battista Rostagno. "[Don Bosco] had held several meetings with these Jesuits before the chapter began," writes Father Ceria in the *Biographical Memoirs*, "so as to plan things in conformity with Church law and the customs of religious congregations." (BM 13:185)

Father Secondo Franco was born in Turin on 22 January 1817. Well known preacher and author of works mostly of a pastoral and spiritual character, this zealous Jesuit knew Don Bosco for almost a decade. He had preached the Spiritual Exercises at the Oratory and, since 1869, had even published some of his works in the *Lecture Cattolice*. On many occasions Don Bosco had turned to him for counsel. The other Jesuit present at the Chapter was Father Giovanni Battista Rostagno, also from Turin and of the same age as Father Franco. Professor of canon law at the University of Louvain in Belgium and of Vercell in France, he had been invited either by Don Bosco himself or by his own confrere Father Franco as consultant for juridical problems.

Father Barberis, in the first notebook of the *Verballi delle Conf. Tenute pel primo Capitolo Generale Salesiano*, reports the contents of an intervention made by Father Franco during the chapter *conference* (assembly): "I must begin by thanking you for your goodness in inviting me to this first Salesian general chapter. I consider myself fortunate, because from the moment that the Lord, seeing the difficulties of our times, sent Don Bosco to his church, I have always taken interest, to the extent possible to me, in his

work. I never expected to be taken into so much consideration by him. This congregation, which meets a need in our times, cannot say that it has not been sent by the Lord. Its rapid growth, further, leads one to say that *digitus Dei est hic*. I, therefore, in my own name and in that of all my confreres, extend my heartfelt wishes to all of you and to the whole Congregation.... We want to tell you that in whatever way I and my confreres, in whose name I say these things, can be of help, you can always count on us.”

Don Bosco's reply is eloquent and reveals the cordiality of the relations established with the Society of Jesus and with some Jesuits in particular. In 1866 Don Bosco had offered hospitality to some of them, following a notice of eviction by the government (cf BM 8:185). “At this point Don Bosco began to speak,” writes Father Barberis in the minutes of the chapter, “thanking the priest and the Society on his own behalf and on that of the whole congregation. We were born yesterday and are therefore inexperienced; we have already had recourse, many times, to the help and advice of the Fathers of the Society; now, seeing such goodness, we will do so with even greater frequency and we will certainly have to disturb them often. We and the whole Congregation will consider them always as models of religious life and ourselves as younger brothers, ready to do anything within our means to execute their commands. We hope that, thus united, we will act with great profit towards the greater glory of God.”

We can say that there is no document of the Society of St Francis de Sales, in those years, that does not conclude with this *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. The first formula of profession itself, which appears already in the Constitutions of 1860, run thus: “In full recognition of the fragility and instability of my will, desiring for the future to constantly act *for the greater glory of God* and to the advantage of souls, I, N.N., place myself in your presence, omnipotent and eternal God, and although unworthy in your eyes, still, trusting in your goodness and infinite mercy, moved solely by the desire to love you and serve you, in the presence of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, of St Francis de Sales and all the saints of Paradise, I make the vow of chastity, poverty and obedience to God and to you my Superior for the space of three years, begging you humbly to command me without reserve in those things that might be *for the greater glory of God* and the advantage of souls.”

It is not difficult to hear in this formula echoes of the Ignatian Constitutions. Don Bosco himself, in a page attached to the request for approbation of the Society addressed to the Holy Father on 12 February 1864, reveals the principal sources used for his Constitutions: “In as much the contents of the rule are concerned,” he says in this memorandum entitled *Cose da notarsi intorno alle costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, “I have consulted and followed, where suitable, the statutes of the Opera Cavanis of Venice, the Constitutions of the Rosminians, the statutes of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary – all corporations or religious societies approved by the Holy See. Chapters 5, 6 and 7, which regard the matter of the vows, were almost entirely taken from the Constitutions of the Redemptorists. The formula for the vows was taken from that of the Jesuits.”

There are many other points of contact between the ‘Bosconian’ spirituality and the Ignatian. Not all are of the same importance, but let us try to make a rapid list of some of them:

- the formative ambient of the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin bore the indirect influence of the Jesuit Nicolaus Joseph Albert von Diessbach and the direct influence of his disciple Pio Brunone Lanteri. In particular, the *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*, of which Diessbach, Lanteri, Guala and Cafasso were convinced promoters, occupy an important place in the *formative project* of the Convitto;
- at the age of 29, at the end of his three years at the Convitto, Don Bosco, as we have already said, decided to ‘enter into religion’ with the Oblates, whose sole mission was that of conducting the exercises according to the method of St Ignatius;
- for 30 years Don Bosco made his annual Spiritual Exercises at the shrine of Sant’ Ignazio sopra Lanzo. This practice of his continued even after the beginning of the ‘self-managed’ exercises for the new congregation. He also had the habit of taking with him some cleric;
- some practices and devotions originating from the spirituality of the Society of Jesus would constitute the principal points of reference of the early Salesian life of piety. In particular we mention the Month of May and the Exercise for a Happy Death, which is nothing but a derivation

- from the Ignatian exercises. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the promoter of the Pious Exercise for a Happy Death in Turin was the Jesuit Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni;
- all the early Salesians learned to meditate with the Ignatian method, as can be verified from the notebooks of the conferences of Father Barberis from the year 1875 onwards. Among the first texts used as aids for meditation, the first General Chapter recommends that of the Jesuit Luis de la Puente, the introduction to which, say the minutes, “should be read a hundred times and committed to memory, because it is worth its weight in gold.” This introduction explains at length and with great detail the traditional method taught by St Ignatius, which involves one by one the *faculties* of the soul (intellect, memory, affection, will, imagination...);
  - the very esteem that Don Bosco constantly had for the apostolate of the Exercises. The preaching of the Spiritual Exercises appears also among the principal aims of the congregation in all the different versions of the Constitutions, up to the death of Don Bosco, and the diffusion of the practice of the Exercises is warmly recommended to the Cooperators and to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians;
  - the choice of St Aloysius Gonzaga as patron of the Salesian congregation, together with St Francis de Sales, can be read as converging in the same direction.

Of greater importance is the correspondence between the ‘Bosconian’ conception of the *rendiconto*, which can be understood particularly from the introduction to the Constitutions, and the Ignatian conception of religious life, a correspondence that has been amply demonstrated in the volume of Father Brocardo, *Maturare in dialogo fraterno*. From the nature and contents of the *rendiconto*, in fact, emerges the conception of a religious life where the role of the superior and the confidence he establishes with each one remains the best means for building communion, for guaranteeing the quality of the spiritual life of the individual, and for making the apostolic mission more efficacious.

It could be asked how it is that, despite the numerous elements listed in this section, explicit references to St Ignatius and to the spirituality of the Society are so few in the Salesian literature of the origins.

Our hypothesis is that the diffidence with regard to the Society of Jesus in certain circles, even clerical, in nineteenth century Piedmont might have led Don Bosco to prudently avoid such references. For an idea of the ‘feeling’ of the times, it is enough to recall that the municipality of Turin, on the occasion of the construction of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, had refused financial help for the sole reason that the title smacked of ‘Jesuitism,’ or to read the work published by Gioberti in 1848, entitled *Il gesuita moderno*.

Despite this, the *Biographical Memoirs* give us a very explicit text from a conference given by Don Bosco to his Salesians on 12 January 1873: “Though I most dearly wish our Congregation to grow and its apostles to increase in numbers,” Don Bosco said, “my first and most fervent wish is that these Salesians become zealous ministers, worthy sons of St Francis de Sales as Jesuits are of the valiant St Ignatius of Loyola. The whole world – particularly the evil men who with satanic hatred would like to see this holy seed die out – is astonished. Persecutions, even the most horrible blood-baths, do not deter these brave souls. So scattered abroad are they that they no longer know each other’s whereabouts; yet, separation notwithstanding, they faithfully observe the rules given by their first superior as though they were still living in community. Wherever you find a Jesuit, there, I say, is a model of virtue, an exemplar of holiness. They preach, hear confessions, and proclaim the Gospel. What more? When evil men think they have done away with them, it is precisely then that their numbers increase all the more, and the good done to souls is greater.” (BM 10:464)

## Don Bosco weeps

Many are familiar with Father Luigi Chiavarino's *Don Bosco che ride*,<sup>17</sup> the little anecdotal biography that can boast of such a large number of editions and reprints. The first Salesians insisted very much on this affable and smiling aspect of Don Bosco, a Don Bosco who was not disturbed even by great problems in his life as founder.

Paraphrasing the title of this famous booklet, we would like to make a *Note* on an aspect of the human and spiritual experience of the saint of youth that is perhaps not as well known and valued: the tears of Don Bosco.

On 6 May 1887, the day after the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, Don Bosco celebrated the Eucharist at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, assisted by his secretary at the time, Father Carlo Viglietti. Many times during the celebration he was moved to tears. A little plaque to the left of the altar still commemorates this fact, narrated by Father Eugenio Ceria in the *Biographical Memoirs* (cf BM 18:288). "Who would not want to know the cause of so much emotion?" writes Father Ceria. "When Father Viglietti realized that Don Bosco had regained his usual calm, made bold, in fact, to ask him what had happened. He replied: 'I saw before my eyes the scene when at the age of ten I dreamt of the Congregation. I could actually see and hear my mother and brothers, as they argued about the dream....' At that time the Madonna had said to him: 'In due time you will understand everything.' Almost 62 years had passed since that day, years full of toil, sacrifices, struggles. A sudden illumination had revealed to him, in the erection of the church of the Sacred Heart at Rome, the crowning point of the mission mysteriously foreshadowed at the beginning of his life. From Becchi of Castelnuovo to the See of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, how long and arduous the climb had been! He felt at that point that his personal activity was coming to an end, and he blessed Divine Providence with tears in his eyes, and raised his gaze trustfully to his imminent rest in the eternal peace within the bosom of God." (BM 18:289)

This fact is particularly dear to the Salesian tradition, and yet one of the most recent biographers of the saint has regarded this episode as a manifestation of the progressive deterioration of his brain cells.

The psychologist Giacomo Dacquino is instead of a diametrically opposite opinion. In his book, *La psicologia di Don Bosco*, he affirms: "Many witnesses remember his tears when, already old, he celebrated his first mass in Rome, in the church of the Sacred Heart. Even otherwise, in the final years of his old age, the Masses of Don Bosco were bathed in tears and interrupted by sobs. These tears should not be taken as a symptom of senile involution, much less as signs of weakness. The adult normally avoids weeping because he considers it an expression of fragility, femininity or infantilism. But one who is not able to give way to tears, that is, to sorrow, is not able either to abandon himself to the smile, that is, to serenity. Apart from this, both weeping and laughing have the function of releasing tension."

Don Bosco himself, in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, is not afraid to recount his discomfort when faced with the difficulty of finding a shelter for his boys: "While all this was going on, we came to the last Sunday on which I was allowed to keep the Oratory in the field (15 March 1846). I said nothing at all, but everybody knew how troubled and worried I was. On that evening as I ran my eyes over the crowd of children playing, I thought of the rich harvest awaiting my priestly ministry. But I had no one to help me, my energy was gone, my health undermined, and I had no idea where I could gather my boys in the future. I became extremely emotional." (MO 255)

The intensity of feelings and this tendency to be moved to tears probably marked not only the last years but the whole of Don Bosco's life. Thus, for example, his friend Giovanni Giacomelli testifies in relation to the period during which he lived at Valdocco in the early years of the Oratory: "If someone had committed some grave error he would be saddened, something that would not happen with regard to any other disgrace that befell him, and full of sorrow he would say to the guilty ones: – Why do you treat so badly the God who loves you so much? – and sometimes I saw him weep." Then there is Don Rua who testifies, with regard to a course of Spiritual Exercises preached in 1850 at the minor seminary of

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<sup>17</sup> [J. L. Chiavarino, *Smiling Don Bosco Anecdotes and Episodes from the life of St John Bosco*, trans. Lillian M. Gallo (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2004).]

Giaveno: “[Don Bosco’s] preaching was animated with ardent concern for the salvation of souls. One day he was so moved that he broke into sobs.” (BM 4:82)

“I will never be able to forget,” writes Father Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, in one of his circular letters, “the impression he made upon me in the act of giving the benediction of Mary Help of Christians to the sick. While saying the Ave Maria and the words of blessing, you could say that his face was transformed; his eyes would fill with tears and his lips would tremble. For me they were signs that *virtus de illo exibat* [power was going out of him]; so I was not surprised at the miraculous effects that would follow, when, for example, the afflicted would be consoled and the sick healed.”

Don Bosco wept copiously also at the unexpected death of his master. “Don Bosco,” writes Father Lemoyne, “was told to hurry up to see Father Cafasso who was at the point of death. He went immediately with the young Francesco Cerruti and reached a few moments after Cafasso had breathed his last. Throwing himself down on his knees at the side of the bed, he burst into tears.”

How are we to interpret these tears? They are certainly the expression of a sensitive, passionate, soul capable of feeling human realities as well as supernatural ones in an intimate and profound manner.

Some of his disciples, among them Father Ceria, have also made reference to the mystical gift of tears.

Father Agostino Poulain, in his *Delle grazie di orazione*, has written: “Someone may be said to have the gift of tears when certain devout thoughts make him weep often and abundantly, and when this faculty can only be attributed to the divine action.” “The qualification with which the definition ends,” adds the author, “is very important. The tears could arise also from other causes.... Very often they can be said to be the effect either of an excessively sensitive nature... or of a neurotic state. In the actual state of research, it is difficult to determine the role that temperament plays in this phenomenon.”

Can we affirm that Don Bosco had the *mystical gift* of tears? Let us examine some testimonies at the cause of beatification and comment on them briefly.

“As far as faith was concerned,” runs the testimony of Father Carlo Viglietti in 1915, secretary of Don Bosco in the final years of his life, “the fervour and rapture with which he would celebrate Holy Mass is well known. Celebrating in the Church of Mary Help of Christians or elsewhere, it was usual, in the last years of his life, to see him with both hands on the altar, weeping his heart out.”

“Sometimes,” we read in the *Informatio* of 1925, “he appeared to be rapt in ecstasy during the celebration of the sacred mysteries; at other times he was seen ‘weeping so much that the corporal would be wet with his tears’ as testified by the witness Rua, who also speaks ‘of a kind of holy tremor that would overtake him at the solemn moment of the Consecration.’” And further: “He was so devoted to the passion of Jesus Christ that he would be moved to the point of tears whenever he had to preach on this topic.”

It is once again Father Barberis who reports: “Especially during journeys I often saw him raising his gaze towards heaven and sighing. He knew how to make use of every little occasion to glorify the wisdom or the power or the goodness of God. I saw him also weeping with emotion when speaking of the goodness of God towards us.” And Don Rua says in the *Positio super virtutibus* of the cause of beatification: “He would turn to Mary... in his spiritual and temporal necessities... it would often happen that, speaking of her, he would be moved to the point of tears, causing most of those hearing him to be also moved.”

Despite his hesitation with regard to any visible manifestation of the interior life, Don Bosco was therefore seen weeping many times by his Salesians, especially during the celebration of the Eucharist.

These, then, are the *facts*. Attempting to *interpret* them is not so easy.

It seems possible to say that, whether we find ourselves before a mystical gift linked directly to a divine initiative, or whether these tears are the sensible expression of a passionate temperament and of that love of God that animated the spiritual and apostolic life of the saint of Turin, the figure and personality of Don Bosco appears to us, in the light of what we have tried to say, richer in humanity and closer to the ‘model’ of a God who did not disdain to water our earth with his own tears.

## The last years

The last decade of the life of Don Bosco is marked, as we have said, by the celebration of the first four general chapters of the congregation, which are a sign of the consolidation of the foundation. The minutes in our possession reveal to us the preoccupations, projects, hopes and decisions of this young congregation and constitute therefore a precious patrimony.

Once the difficulties relating to the approbation of the society were overcome, and relationships with the Curia of Turin improved with the death of Msgr. Gastaldi in 1883, the preoccupations of the founder were directed towards the spiritual and moral consolidation of the religious life.

The most constant and severe criticisms of the Turin Curia concerned the recruitment and formation of the young Salesians. Don Bosco's energies now seem to concentrate precisely on these areas.

Even some of Don Bosco's long dreams, recounted *ad ammastramento della Pia Società Salesiana*, reveal this formative preoccupation. Among these, the dream of the *Ten Diamonds* is particularly significant. The same preoccupation runs through the *Letter from Rome* of 1884.

The years after 1884 are years of physical decline. From January of that year, Don Bosco begins, in his own hand, the composition of the notebook that we have already had occasion to mention, the cover of which bears the title *Memorie dal 1841 to 1884-5-6 pel Sac. Gio Bosco a' suoi figliuoli salesiani*, but whose contents are better known to the sons of Don Bosco under the name *Testamento Spirituale*. Don Bosco's final entry on this notebook will be 24 December 1887, just a little more than a month before his death.

In the first part Don Bosco puts down some memories of the first years of his priestly life, some advice for his Salesians, and the resolutions taken in relation to the life of prayer: "Every day I will set aside some time for meditation and for spiritual reading." "I will spend at least a quarter of an hour in preparation for Holy Mass, and another quarter of an hour in thanksgiving." "I will recite the Breviary devoutly and preferably in church, so that it serves as a visit to the Blessed Sacrament."

After these first pages there begins the Spiritual Testament proper, with the guidelines for dealing with benefactors, recommendations for the period after his death, for vocations, for the communities and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and requests for suffrage; finally, a profession of faith, an exhortation to poverty, sacrifice and apostolic zeal, and a request for pardon. "I humbly ask God pardon for all my sins," Don Bosco writes, probably towards the end of 1886. "I must, however, seek pardon if anyone has seen that many times I made too brief a preparation for or too short a thanksgiving after Holy Mass." "Our congregation," he says after a while, "has a happy future prepared for it by divine providence, and its glory will endure as long as the rules are faithfully observed."

A personal memory of Blessed Philip Rinaldi, who in 1879 had formed part of the first group of novices in the first proper novitiate house at San Benigno Canavese and who, as Rector at Turin from 1883, had enjoyed a relationship of close spiritual proximity with Don Bosco during the last years of his life, provides us with another confirmation of Don Bosco's deep desire to insist with the young congregation, which had probably grown too rapidly, on the necessity of a "solid piety."

Father Rinaldi became Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation in 1922. Ten years later he wrote a reserved circular letter that begins with the words "Dear Masters of Novices." To the novice masters Father Rinaldi confides one of his personal memories of a meeting with Don Bosco, who was reaching the end of his life. "I had gone to visit our dear Father in the last year of his life," he writes, "or rather, in the last months of his life. Wanting to once more make my confession to him, I asked him to listen to me. I knew well that it had been forbidden to ask Don Bosco to hear confessions; but I thought that I would not violate this order provided I acted in a certain way. 'You should not tire yourself,' I said to Don Bosco. 'You need not speak. I will speak, and then you can say just one word to me. Please listen to me, just one word.' The good Father, after having heard me, said one word to me, just one word. Do you know what that was? *Meditation!* He did not add anything else, no explanation or comment. Just one word: *Meditation!* But that word meant more to me than a long discourse. And after many years I can still see our Father in that attitude of holy and calm surrender to God's will and hear him say: *Meditation!*"



Surrounded by his Salesians, Don Bosco received the Anointing of the Sick on 24 December 1887, at the hands of Msgr. Giovanni Cagliero, who had come from America upon hearing of his poor condition.

On 31 January 1888, at 0445 in the morning, Don Bosco dies, at the age of 72. A few days before dying he says, with an act of faith in his Salesians: “The congregation has nothing to fear: it has men who are well prepared.”

The February issue of the *Bollettino Salesiano* is already in the press; that of March 1888, lined in black, makes the moving announcement thus: “DON BOSCO!!! How many marvelous works, how many deep feelings, how many dear hopes are contained in that name! And now Don Bosco is no longer on this earth, Don Bosco has gone from our midst! – Don Bosco is dead! – This is the word that was murmured between sobs at 4.45 in the morning of 31 January around his poor bed, that was repeated in subdued tones in the dormitories of the boys who were just rising, that spread around Turin like lightning, breaking thousands of hearts. This is the word that on the wings of the telegraph reached every Salesian house in every part of the world with the news: This morning at 0445 hours Don Bosco’s soul went to paradise. The morning of 31 January dissipated the last part of the illusion that was still blinding our eyes. Yes! Love made us blind almost until the last moment. We loved him like one loves the smile of childhood, the hopes of youth, the achievements of maturity. He was for us the greatest, most noble, most lovable person in the world. There was no moment of our life that did not bear some memory of his affection for us. A newspaper that was initially hostile used to call us the so-called sons of Don Bosco. It is true! Our love for him was a hundred times more than the love of a son towards his father, because hundreds and thousands of boys owed him what their parents were not able to give them.”

## Conclusion

Notes, in general, have no need of a conclusion; they are notes, and that is it. Yet I felt that there was still something to say at the end of our little journey.

It is certainly not an easy age that the church as a whole is living through, and in particular religious life. In one of his last magisterial documents, the encyclical *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II says that European culture gives the impression of a 'silent apostasy' on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist.

And yet this age can truly transform itself into a time of grace, a time of renewal and refoundation, a time in which the return to the origins, in the difficult moments of persecution or indifference, can give back to the Church the enthusiasm of prophecy. Besides, the admonishment of the psalmist introduces us to a strategy of death and resurrection that can be considered the hermeneutical key to the period in which we are called to live: "in his riches, man lacks wisdom: he is like the beasts that are destroyed..." (*Ps* 48[49]:20)

For the spiritual family that takes its origins from St John Bosco, this tension towards the future, if it is to be truly full of hope, must transform itself into a renewed attention to the precious spiritual heritage that has been given to it. The knowledge of the spiritual experience of Don Bosco, of his numerous writings, of the history of our origins and of that of his first disciples become, following to the numerous indications of the Church, an obligatory point of passage for giving direction to the future. This is the significance of the much desired *return to Don Bosco*.

If it is true, as Leonardo da Vinci used to say, that great knowledge generates great love, it is also true that only a great love can arouse in us the desire to know Don Bosco better. Truly, the 'castle of sources' is full of many unexplored rooms, not all of which perhaps contain furniture that is original and fashionable. But all of them give us indications of the 'tastes' of the founder of the Salesians and all, therefore, are worthy of being visited with care.

We hope that this little book will have allowed some to know better some angle of this castle, not always included in the traditional 'guided tours,' but above all that it might have aroused in many the desire to know and love a story that has the flavour of things that do not pass away.

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